

**Women Reporting Violence in a Time of War
A Forum on Racial and Sexual Violence:
Silenced Voices of the "Race" Election
Thursday November 8th 2001 UTS**

Tape 1

Introduction: We are in for a very interesting few hours this morning. And I think without much further ado... and I'd like to get underway first by introduce someone very special, Auntie Ali Golding, who is going to talk to us in a minute. I'll just tell you a very small bit about Auntie Ali, and she undoubtedly might tell you more. Auntie Ali Golding has been a long time defender of indigenous rights, and of course, of social justice. Mainly around this area I believe. And Auntie Ali Golding is ? of her area and she was one of the founding members of the Redfern Citizens for Reconciliation. And we thank her very much for being here. So, Auntie Ali.

Ali: Thank you, Kim. It's a really nice cool day to be here today. I love these type of days. Not a very hot sun. I'm tanned enough. But it is a pleasure to be here and doing what I like to do. And know, simply the building that this is situated on, this land, is where my ancestors roamed. ?? where he roamed. Where he died, where he protected the women and the children when the invasion took place. So this is a special time for me to say these words and to share these words to each and every one of you. And I do these kind of things all over Sydney now. Really, really getting a bit hectic for me too, you know. It's -- and I was saying to Lily and Lily says sometimes, this is not the first time Lily's asked me to do something. She's asked me to do things before. And she says, you know, Auntie, it's real short notice, I'm sorry to ask you on little short notice. I said,

Lily, I have to be ?? Everready batteries now these days. ??...[inaudible] This is a time now that people, an opportunity for people to listen. The women, the black women, black voices are beginning to be heard now. Which is very ?. And every time I -- I always say this when I'm talking to people, a group of people, it's only about ten to eleven years ago this thing would have never been recognised. Having Aboriginal people doing welcoming to this wonderful land of Australia. And that's not far, it's not far back when you think about it, ten years ago. So reconciliation has just opened up a little, little bit of a doorway, just enough to get the big toe in. But we have a long way to go yet. But while that toe is in the doorway, we got to really try, try and widen that door opening until the door is fully opened. I mightn't be here to see that door fully opened. But my generation will see it. I'll be gone back into Mother Earth and walking with my ancestors when that happens. But it'll happen. Because it's just began.

I said in the Opera House last year in May, my time was to speak, when the other two elders spoke, and I wanted to have that day of thanksgiving day, a moment from me, is to thank the people for organising, who's been there participating Sea of Hands. And those people who put their energy in and their thoughts, and their hearts into signing the Sorry Book. And those people all over Sydney and outside of Sydney formed reconciliation groups. So the Opera House last year filled me with that opportunity to thank the people here in Australia for doing this. Their hearts were in the right places. And I thank you for it. And when ? afternoon I got so many phone calls, from Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania. And they had their phones on the middle of their tables in South Australia, having their dinner. And the whole family was saying thank you very much, Auntie Ali, for saying those words. They were words of encouragement. And we'll keep on doing what we have to do, is to

make reconciliation public and to make it work between black and white.

So as I said, the toe is in the door, but we have a long way to go. Today, I look around, there's a couple of gentlemen here, top women, lovely to be a woman. A woman's so special. A woman from the crown of her head to the sole of her feet, is such a beauty. When I think about the Creator, when he looks at a woman, it's like a gem, she's like a gem in the palm of his hand. So special. And when we look at the world today, all different nationalities of women, we're all one, we're all beautiful, we're all a gem in the palm of the Creator's hand.

When I think about the Creator creating the man, we have black ministers in the church, ? about that, and say woman, you got to be in your place, because you count on me, because the Creator's taken a little bit of rib and made you a wo-man. So you got to be under our feet. Nah, uh, uh. We cannot be that, because that little piece of rib became the biggest and the most powerful backbone of all families. And a woman's special. She just keeps her family together. She is the backbone that little rib grew so large and powerful.

So I want to take this special time, standing in the gap [?] of my ancestors and my Aboriginal people of this land, and the Aboriginal people that are present here. And say to each and every one of you, welcome to this wonderful land, this wonderful area here of the land of Eora people. So welcome each and every one of you. Thank you.

Paula Abood: The next part we decided to do was these women talked about the tragedies that have been happening lately, especially the sinking of the boat a couple of weeks ago, where over 370 women, children and men drowned. And what I suppose provoked people to try and do something was there was no real sympathy about that tragedy. And I suppose we had something to compare it with, was September 11th. Two towers came tumbling

down and there was so much public outpouring of sympathy and empathy, and when I read something a Palestinian wrote, Dr. Vishara [?], about the inequitable distribution of sorrow, it seemed to us that that was a perfect way to describe the difference between the lack of empathy of 370 refugees drowning and the empathy for people who died in those twin towers. And he said something like there's an unfair distinction, Dr. Vishara said there's an unfair distinction between death that merits a camera, death that only merits a few lines, and death that merits no mention at all.

And so today we want to, I guess balance that inequitable distribution of sorrow, and publicly acknowledge the deaths of the refugees, the women, men and children who drowned. And to do that we're going to light some candles, and we'd like to invite Auntie Ali to **lead the candle lighting, and Rukshana from the Afghan Women's group** and maybe **Rawan** who's a **Palestinian-Australian** woman as well. And then we invite everybody to come and light the candle, because we've got a few. So Auntie Ali, do you want to lead...[rest inaudible]

[List of apologies not transcribed]

April Pham: I'm really loud, so I apologise to people who might find me a little bit too in your face. I was actually launching a refugee project recently and friends of mine were walking along George Street, and this was in Hay Street. And they didn't know where the exhibition was, and then they heard my voice. So it was so embarrassing when they got in and they said, April you were booming on George Street. So my apologies.

I feel really emotional standing here at this point in time, which is something I didn't expect. I thought, as organisers of, you know, a forum like this, we would be very well composed and professional. But it's just really difficult not to be emotionally moved by a process that actually

acknowledges the plight of refugee women. And also women that have experienced any form of sexual and racial violence, which is something that we're going to be looking at analytically today. So firstly, as a refugee Australian woman, I would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land. I think it important to acknowledge that this land was, is and always will be Aboriginal land. This federal election has been carefully orchestrated, exploiting fear and division in the community, to incite racism and hate. And I say that confidently, because the media and the public debates are happening, actually showing evidence of that. During the last four months, Australia has spiralled out of control, with the combination of the refugee crisis being heightened by the Tampa crisis, the Bankstown rapes, and the September 11 event. The issue of race was brought to the forefront of political debate at both the state and federal level, where refugees, Arabs, Muslims and any one of difference -- in particular migrant and refugee women, because they are representations of difference -- were verbally and physically assaulted, their identity and religion questioned, their safety questioned, and their voice silenced in the midst of this national debate of race.

In the hysteria, women's voices are being silenced, where there has been a lack of an alternative voice in the media, and by our politicians, to challenge the racial basis of this election, and the racial vilification and demonising of refugees, Arabs and Muslims. Discussions about sexual and racial violence lost their perspective, with much focus on ethnicity and race, religion and violence. Media and public debate lacked the analysis of the relationship between power and control, and violence, preferring to generate a simplistic view of violence by intrinsically linking it to a race of people, as though some races are predisposed to violence. Of course, such discussions almost always fail to question dominant white society. Where are the voices ? open to refugee women in Australia in this federal

election? Therefore the recognition of the lack of representation of women's experiences of racial and sexual violence and the impact of such events in their lives and their communities, we have organised this forum to give women the space to discuss and critique this escalating violence waged against women, and address the politics of representation, the politics of violence, the politics of silence, and the misrepresentation of sexual and racial violence.

In discussing racism, we acknowledge that our indigenous sisters have been the pioneers in deconstructing racism and as such, we want to gain from their wisdom an analysis of the historical and systemic racism confronted by women of colour in Australia. This forum attempts to redress the balance by hearing from refugee, migrant and indigenous women whose voices are often silenced. So I am joined by four brilliant women, both activists in their own communities, but also as members of the general wider community who want to have a say, who want to express their perspective in this safe space. Firstly I would like to invite Mahboba Cina, who's from the Afghan Women's Group, and has been quite active in giving us an alternative viewpoint of the experiences of refugee women. Mahboba.

Mahboba: I am an Afghan-Australian woman and I speak to you because I ???. The last months have been very difficult for the Afghan community in Australia. We are a small community and many terrible things have happened to us. The two issues that this election is about, the war in Afghanistan and the refugee issue, affect my community directly. We have had war in our country for 20years. ?? Afghanistan because of this ?. We have come to Australia to find peace, to find freedom. It is hard to understand why there is so much hate towards refugees. What is happening to my people at the moment in Afghanistan ?? Australia ???. It breaks my heart as a ?, as a woman who believed in ???. I cannot watch the news any more. To see the babies ???. To see the

women crying because their children have drowned in the sea. To hear about the children's family. It is very hard to speak because I feel the sadness for the tragedy of what I see. In all, it is the women and the children who must pay ? with their blood. I feel very sad about the politics in this election. Refugee has be through too much already. ? their lives ?? and their families. When you chase refugee back to the sea, with the navy boats, we are making their lives worse than before, because we take away the only chance that they have left. We take away their hopes, and we also take away their rights under international law. When we put the children alone in detention, we take away their freedom, the very things that they come here for. In detention, the children don't get education. They only things they learn is that Australia is a prison and Australians don't care. Detention is a frightening experience for many women and children. For the asylum seeker on the boat many have suffered, many have died. We know of a baby who was born in Australian water in one of the leaking boats, and he died three days later because of lack of medical attention. We do not see this mother ? on the newspaper. We only hear from the government that she is a queue jumper and illegal. This language is very dangerous because it turns refugee into something to be hated, to be a threat. We need to change the language because we can see how refugee become easy target for violence. I know that many Australians have a very negative idea about Islam, about refugee and the Afghan people. For Afghan ? in Australia we are aware of the anti-Muslim feeling here. Many Muslim women are afraid to go to the public space. We know women and girls have been attacked and spit at. This violence in Australia ?? . The silence about attack on women and girls must be broken. War on terrorism is no excuse for attacking Muslim communities. Afghan refugees have escaped terror. ? is just another form of terror. I speak today because I'm worried about the future. Do we want our children to grow up to hate, to think that it's moral to

hate. If we silent about the violence of war, the violence of racism, we are part of the same problem. We must speak strong so that our children have a future. Thank you.

April Pham: Thank you for sharing your words with us, Mahboba. Next up I would like to invite Wendy Bacon, who's from the Centre for Independent Journalism.

Wendy Bacon: Thanks very much, April. Well, I'd like to thank you all for inviting the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism to be part of this forum, and it's a privilege for us to be a co-sponsor of the forum. Now I can really only talk about this question as a citizen and as a woman journalist and as a journalism educator. As a citizen I've been just appalled at our media and at the political lack of will to do anything about the racism in our society, which I think I've never in my whole life felt anything as upsetting as the incident that we've been commemorating over here, where people were just left to drown at sea.

Now, our media is racist. I think we have to be quite frank about that. Yes, some windows have opened over the last 30 years, and to some extent the situation of Aboriginal people in this country is better reported than it was 30 years ago. It is still not well reported. But parts of our media are overtly racist, in particular the tabloid media and the talkback radio. Now I want to talk a little bit about this, but not so much to go through a litany of how they are racist, because I think most people in this audience are here because you know and understand that, but to talk a little bit about the people to whom this media is speaking. Now these people by and large, when you look at the demographics of our media, they're by and large lower income people, less educated people, overall they have far less information than other people. And they are not generally privileged in terms of resources. Now they receive these racist

messages in the context of an overall appalling lack of information about our world. Recently I've been doing a study on the way aid development and human rights is covered by the Australian media. We've done a very expensive content analysis. Now I just want to talk about television for a minute, because television is where 80 percent of the Australian population get their information from. Now we did an analysis of all the television I the week the Tampa story -- or it's not just a story, that's a very bad way that journalists tend to think about the world, just as a story -- but when the Tampa boat was stranded there we did an analysis that week of all the television. Now as you all know, the Tampa turned into a dramatic media event and people followed blow by blow. Of course the journalists weren't allowed on to the boat, so it was very much mediated through, and interpreted through, the eyes of journalists, the politicians who were quoted, and so on. Now the rest of the television overseas news that is interesting, now if you wanted to know about Afghanistan, and you happened to be one of the majority of news watchers -- or not the majority -- but the largest slice in market terms, who watch the Channel 9 news, I was informed last week that over the two years before the Tampa incident, or probably about two years, there've probably been about seven stories overall that mentioned Afghanistan. That's including the Australian aid workers who were locked up there, and including a couple of stories, including a 60 Minutes story, so it includes current affairs, which was an interview with bin Laden. In fact, most of the stories had looked at the relationship between the U.S. and bin Laden, probably something not that most of us had our minds on, but was an underlying issue for the U.S. Now, other than that, there is no information that has gone out, or almost none, over Channel 9, over those years, which could have told the Australian people something about the plight of the people, particularly the women, in Afghanistan. And if you're a journalist you look for a story.

And if the story of the situation of the women in Afghanistan is not a story, I don't know what is. Because the situation of the women in Afghanistan, in terms of laws and what they are and are not allowed to do, is certainly the equivalent of black people in South Africa, and the Jewish people in Germany. In 1996, some laws were passed which prevented Afghan women even attending school. Now surely, from our point of view, that would have been a story. But it wasn't a story that the Australian media chose to tell. Or about the devastating effects of war on the people of Afghanistan. And you've already heard about that from someone who is much more qualified to speak than me.

So this media that we've got is, from a journalist's point of view, it is a very poor media. Now, I would like to think of journalism as something more that is about democracy, is about giving a voice to the voiceless. But it's not like in our society. But even if we took this journalism from a very standard straight mainstream journalist's viewpoint it is very poor journalism. It is by and large grossly inaccurate. It promotes ignorance, it doesn't promote knowledge. So just looking at it from a journalist's point of view, it really doesn't in any way meet our ethical guidelines.

Now when the Daily Telegraph published their appalling -- and they do it every few years, we've had a very bad spate of it this year, but we had a bad spate of it in 1998 directed at the Lebanese community. We've had appalling instances around the Gulf War. It's repetitive. It doesn't only happen in this society. It happens -- appalling reporting around the Falklands War and Britain, it happens in Europe. It is not just something that is Australian. But when the media report the situation of crime in Western Sydney and the Tampa crisis the way they reported it in the context of so little information, and then when Muslim women get beaten up, or when something like that happens, I think the media does have blood on their hands.

Now, as a journalist of course, our profession, as a whole, if you take professions as having some sort of an overall responsibility, as opposed to just seeing your own individual career at stake, I think we share by being part of a racist media, we have to share that idea that we have blood on our hands. Now from the point of view of someone who's working in a university as a journalism educator, what can we, what do I think we can do about that. Well, I think we're probably more interested to hear today about what other people think we should do about it. But I thought I'd just mention a few ideas.

We've launched a series of conferences through one of our researchers, Tania Drayer [?]. We had April and others speak at our conference on the public right to know. And we want to put on the table what freedom of expression should mean for all people in Australia, and how the freedom for expression should also mean accountability and the right of all people in Australia to information, and the right of all people to have a voice and not be trampled on. So that's one thing we're trying to do, but also there is another thing we can do and that's do journalism about journalism, from within the university. And if you look at our website, which is www.journalism.uts.edu.au , if you look at our website and see that in 1998 we did an investigation into a Daily Telegraph story that some of you will remember, called Dial-A-Gun. And that, in one single, I think it was 200 or so words in an article in the Daily Telegraph, they used the word Lebanese more than seven times. So in a 200 word article, they used the word Lebanese more than seven times. Now that is completely unnecessary, it is in breach of the AJA's Code of Ethics, and we interviewed the journalist, and we actually put up the story of the story, and I think perhaps there is a role for doing that going out, much as you would do today, is telling the stories from your point of view, is also for us to investigate the media and its racist methods.

People say it worked well to get more journalists into the media who were from non-Anglo backgrounds, and of course, I agree with that. But it is a long term strategy and it does take a critical mass. It isn't just, yes, everyone helps, but I think to change the culture of the media and to be able to operate in a news room, countering the lines of authority and countering the way that the news agenda is formed, you've got to be part of a group and you've got to have some overall backing. But I'd like to think of perhaps, through maybe connections with groups that are here today, we might be able to think of some other strategies which could actually bring some pressure to bear on the media. Because I think all the voices and all the complaints certainly are worth it. But I think in the end we have to think in structural terms. Now one of the things I've thought of is could we do one big joint complaint, not perhaps to the Anti-Discrimination Board, who some people do prefer to complain to them, but to the journalists' union, the MEAA and actually put in a joint complaint and ask them to deal with it in a public way, through a public hearing. Could we, obviously we have to reach out to people in Australia who are reached by this media. We have to try through the education system and other means to turn the racist attitudes around and that can only be done, probably by grass roots methods. And I had another idea. It's a bit of a fantasy and is possibly not even a great idea, but I was thinking about the way the environmental movement has brought some pressure to bear on some big companies. And in the end, the advertisers are what supply the money to the media. The media is carefully niche marketed to particular audiences in the way I was describing earlier. But perhaps we need to look at the people who advertise on talkback radio, and we need to look at the people advertising in Daily Telegraph. And perhaps through consumer power, because there are a lot of power in the communities that we come from, consumer power, maybe we should try to bring some pressure to bear. It's a long term thought,

but I think in the end we have to come out with some very concrete plans to attempt to put pressure back on the media not to promote this divisiveness, scary, racist ideology.

April Pham: Thank you Wendy. I'm glad Wendy provided a critique of the role of the media inciting racism, because the media plays the major role in filtering our truth. To the point that the media is truth. This panel that we've got happening this morning was intended as an introduction to the issues and we had intended for the media to be here. Silly us. Because we thought these stories and voices from women would be newsworthy. But obviously we were on another planet. And I guess women speaking out and expressing their opinions is not valued. And this is a classic example of the silencing that women are not being here to represent women, it is silencing. Although I do acknowledge that there is a few media that is here, and that we were interviewed and we were on television this morning. So I would like to invite Cleonie Quayle, who is the Co-ordinator from the Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Service, to speak.

Cleonie Quayle: I sort of feel quite emotional, because it's been a pretty full on Reclaim the Night, and all the things that are going on in the media at the moment, I feel very sad. And as an Aboriginal woman one of my main concerns is the acceptable environment the government and the media are creating to blithely ignore our obligation to social justice and human rights. Though I don't believe the government should feel obligated, because I always think obligated's one of those funny words, you know. I feel that they should be driven by equality and compassion, you know, that they'd want to make sure that human rights are protected and that we can insure and guarantee those rights.

I just want to give a bit of history about, you know, how Aboriginal people have been ignored and what's happened to them. Since colonisation, the fact that Australia was founded on the abuse, rape and brutality towards indigenous women and children. Just outside of Narrabri is a site that's called Gin's Gap. And it's where an Aboriginal woman was surrounded by non-Aboriginal women, and in fear that she was going to be raped and brutalised, she grabbed her child and jumped over the gap. I think it's quite horrendous that that site to this day is still called Gin's Gap. You know, considering it's a derogatory term, ?? towards Aboriginal woman, and no one knows her name or her child's name, but the site's there. You know, I think a memorial in the future should go up, but it saddens me that there are sites where our women did receive such brutality but there's no recognition of what went on.

Then the parallel I've ? to you today is the recent reporting of refugee women and they're throwing their children overboard. I read Suvendri's [?] article, what drives a woman to do that sort of thing and I've drawn the same parallel where a woman feels so cornered that there's no hope for her child that she carries out such a drastic measure for a mother to do. And I get so annoyed with the way the media has covered it, you know. I unfortunately had the misfortune of getting angry with a cab driver who was listening to 2GB, and of course they were raving on about replaying and replaying this videotape showing the mother, and it was just so dehumanised, and they were criminalising these poor mothers for their actions. So I do, I get so annoyed that women are becoming criminalised and not humanised. ??

I'll just mention three media coverages at the moment that's come up effecting or impacting on women. And it's the Hindmarsh decision, which was all about women, the Stolen Generation, the reason why I'll draw that parallel, because I don't know if people are aware, but the policy was targeted

towards women, and 80 percent of women were removed as opposed to men. And of course, the indigenous violence on Geoff Clarke. As I mentioned, that policy was actually targeted at the majority of Aboriginal women. The reason why was because during colonisation people actually did some in[ter] breeding, and there was becoming such a huge half caste population that white people became quite concerned. I just think it was a pity, we nearly did it, we nearly succeeded. And then we were ? by this policy. So that policy disturbed me that it was about social engineering. It was actually about removing Aboriginal women away from their community to breed with white men. And yet people don't see the great injustice in that policy alone. The fact that the government won't even say sorry. I often think the reason they won't say sorry, is it because they impacted on women, and the only answer I can come up with is yes. The other thing was Hindmarsh decision. You know, the fact that it was about Aboriginal women trying to protect sacred site ??. You know, I was actually horrified that the South Australian media, you know, after the women had lost the case -- and I mean the case was handled badly -- that they were allowed to print Liar, Liar, Liar on the front page of this paper. You know, and of course just recently it came out that ? made a mistake, the women were telling the truth. You know, and that Aboriginal woman said are you now going to write Sorry, Sorry, Sorry. So it's the way the media performed. The other incident I want to mention is the Geoff Clarke case. You know, that was all about media getting Aboriginal people to point the finger at each other, and it pretty much ? that way. I don't want to give a legal verdict on it, and I don't want to make a judgment towards it. I just thought it was funny, because I was actually asked by the media, did I think we should celebrate NAIDOC Week during this time when this was going on. And I said, oh well, get every Australian to stop celebrating Australia Day and we'll all ? the criminals that are in prison, and I just thought what a stupid

question to ask. And I naturally said, look we've got other things to celebrate. We're celebrating our survival as an indigenous people.

So the other thing I want ?? saying, is we are going towards a race election, and it really concerns me that we are. It probably concerns me that it's targeted at every single minority group in Australia. And we are creating an acceptable climate to say yes it's okay to be racist. It's all right. And you know, it's a typical male election, you know, the fact that it's driven around war, and our boys are going off to war and who cares about what's happening to women and children overseas, you know. It's like when I was watching the coverage of the war, I'm getting to a point where I don't want to see it any more, you know, when they thought there were food parcels being dropped and the little children were running out to pick up the food parcels and they were bombs, you know. And these stories, like ?? it appears to me that it's okay to ?? You're still hearing that horrible cry from America and England and Australia, oh, you know, we've got to send them over. We've really got to annihilate these people. So I'm sure everyone in this room will go off to the elections quite conscious of that, but you know, I'm really quite saddened at the moment. So, thank you.

April Pham: I think it's quite interesting that when we talk about -- I guess what clearly highlighted for me was that when discussions about sexual, and in particular sexual violence by non-indigenous, or non-moral men, or white men, are perpetrated against women, in particular women of colour, the question of ethnicity or their race just never comes into play, but as soon as that male perpetrator becomes a person of colour, indigenous, migrant or refugee, we will certainly hear about it. I certainly don't hear about the instances of gang rapes of women of colour by men of -- by ? men basically. So I think it's quite pertinent

that we have these discussions and actually bring race out of the cupboard and let's talk about race. And the media has a major role in that. And our last speaker on this panel will be Lena Nahlous, and after Lena speaks I'll invite the media who is here, and there's only one or two, to feel free to ask a few questions. So Lena.

Lena Nahlous: I'm a community activist, a community worker, and thank you for having me here today. This race election is a culmination of a whole year of racial vilification. We've seen debates about ethnic crime, the appalling scandal around the asylum seekers and refugees, and most recently the warmongering over the so called Afghan terrorism, which has seen dramatic escalation of hostility against Arab and Muslim communities in Australia. This election is about race. Race is the underlying issue for all the candidates, but in this race election, where are the voices of refugees, where are the voices of migrants, where are the voices of indigenous women? We're here today to make sure that those voices are heard, because as voices have been silenced in this election campaign, and yet ironically these people have been the most affected by the race election that we're having.

Public spaces have very seriously been taken away, and public voices, by women, from non-white women, and you can see that because of -- I've got lots of examples. So let me just give you the examples. I have experience working on a community hotline that was set up to kind of field calls or deal with racial attacks arising from the war. And also from my own kind of interactions with different communities, I've heard many, many stories about women who -- there was a story about the Muslim woman who was wearing hijab who was having coffee and a car full of boys got out of a car and dragged her across the road by her scarf and she sustained serious back injuries as a result. There's a story about the many girls who have been

threatened by rape. Schools have had threats of rape. Death threats. These are very real things that are actually forcing Muslim women, Arab women, Afghan women, women who just look different. You know, women who look different to, I suppose a white normal. Forcing them out of public spaces. And there's some good things that have come out of this. The Muslim community have actually been organising self defence classes for women and young girls, because they have the right to be there in public spaces. And I think that as a result of these taking away the public space, and I think just generally the way that this whole race election's been played out, the way in which both the state and the federal government have perpetuated racist myths in order to kind of put people in a crazy frenzy, has really meant that for non-white communities and what communities, they've really lost their faith in any democratic process because we can see that there's no serious attempts to address the crisis from our political leaders. In fact, they're doing quite the opposite. They're capitalising on it, they're feeding it. And people's lives should not be used for cheap political gain. But are 370 refugees lives, are they worth a few swinging votes? But obviously, and very clearly, some people's lives are worth more than others. Some people's lives are worth nothing. I was quite saddened by a recent news item where there was a young boy who was attacked in his sleep. Someone had snuck into his house and I couldn't believe how much time that actually got on the news compared to all the other stuff. And that people could have such overwhelming compassion for one innocent white boy and none for, you know, hundreds and hundreds and thousands of other people. We're not the first here today to openly declare that this is a race election. The front page of today's Sydney Morning Herald has a host of both Labor and Liberal people, ex-Ministers, religious leaders, all kind of very strongly and clearly saying this is a race election and

condemning both the Coalition and the Labor government for running on this race card.

And today, as women, as migrant women, as non-English speaking background women, we speak out because these politics do not and can not speak for us. We speak back because the race election has actively sought to silence and exclude our voices and our stories. And we will not be silenced. We will not be excluded. In speaking today, we break the silence and provide a critical voice about how this election, and the policies of the state and federal government are impacting on our lives, on our realities. We must ask ourselves why, and I'm sure that we all have, some communities are seen to be more desirable than others. I mean it's no coincidence that the so called undesirable communities are from that region called the Middle East, Iran, Palestine, Iraq, Afghan. It is no coincidence when Howard says, we should be able to choose who we let in. What he really means is, yeah, those nice white Zimbabwean farmers who've oppressed millions of black people for years. We should let them in.

Both the state and federal governments' comments, policies, strategies have left the door wide open for racial attacks. Comments have been made, you know, basically saying that refugees are potential agents of terrorism. That crime is ethnically linked, because it's genetic. And in fact, I have a very funny story that I have to share with you. I was watching the news about this apparently young -- there's some training camp going on, supposedly, allegedly a training camp -- it's a Muslim youth group who go away on land, and kind of do you know some rifle shooting stuff. And so they actually had like the news crew out there beating up the story. And they couldn't find any people to interview, but they found some pellets on the ground from the gun, and they also found an empty bag of Lebanese bread. It had Arabic writing on it in fact. ??... So I mean personally, when I heard about the Anita Cobby thing, I

stopped talking to Irish Catholics, when I hear about the Oklahoma bombing thing, I was scared of white men, especially those with the last name Howard. Well, this stuff has seriously left the door open and supported things like the fire bombing of Lebanese mosques or of Muslim mosques, the attacks on churches, Lebanese churches. The threat of rape against girls, the verbal and physical abuse, getting spat at in public, getting your veil ripped off. That very public humiliation. And being told that you don't belong here. Today is an important intervention for non-white women who recognise that our politicians do not speak for us, and cannot act in our names. And to end, I just want to tell you an interesting story that I heard. Apparently one of the Maronite priests was giving a sermon and he was talking about stuff that was actually happening to the community. And he said, you know, apparently Jesus Christ is having a second coming, but he won't be welcome in Australia, because he's of Middle Eastern appearance. So anyway, thank you.

April Pham: I just wanted to make a point in terms of what Lena was saying, that there has been some action -- or the Muslim community has been forced to take responsibility for defending their community. And I guess that is another clear example of the division in the community where it's up to all of us as our own individual communities to look after ourselves. Because we are so different from the white, mainstream, dominant society. And I think that whilst it's important to have self defence classes for young women, because it is empowering, I also think it falls into that trap of who's taking responsibility for protecting women. Why is it that we're not placing the responsibility of violence on men and the perpetrators of the sexual and emotional violence that is happening, by saying this is an issue of violence, an issue of power and control. Women, as women we do not have to go to self defence classes and defend ourselves and live in this heightened

fear. We should be able to walk the streets and feel safe, regardless of what religion, what race, however we look like. So I think that responsibility in this instance has been totally skewered.

I would now like to invite any questions that the media present may have for our speakers, before we have our break. Are there anybody that would like to ask any questions of our speakers. No? Okay. Well, perhaps we will leave to morning tea. I'd like to thank all our speakers. And I just wanted to say this forum has been really important for us to put on, because we've endured quite a lot of difficulties in putting it on, because of this escalating violence and fear for women's safety, we actually have wanted for this forum to happen in October, but because of the escalating violence during that time we felt we had to postpone it for women's safety. So we do apologise if anybody was inconvenienced by that. We have a display outside if you'd like to have a look at that. When we come back we'll hear more from our indigenous and NESB sisters and also we'll hear from young women as well whose voices have been totally missed on this occasion.

End tape 1