



## Kate Galloway

Kate Galloway is a senior law lecturer at James Cook University, and PhD candidate at Melbourne University. She writes regularly on the nature of property and its representations in the law; about issues affecting women; about justice generally; and about legal education.

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# Anglican marriage changes: Why asking wife 'submit' over 'obey' is a dangerous developm

BY KATE GALLOWAY / AUG 27, 2012 9:18AM / PRINT / (8)



The Anglican church in the diocese of Sydney is [changing the wording](#) of its marriage service to provide, optionally for couples who choose it, for the wife to submit to the husband. This replaces the old vow for the woman to 'obey' – made optional in the Anglican rite in 1928.

It is not my place to critique religious rites so long as they occur within a church context between consenting adults. However the [Marriage Act 1961\(Cth\)](#) provides that those who are recognised ministers of religion of a recognised denomination, are empowered to solemnise marriages under the Act.

Because marriage is an institution of law, ministers of religion are in my view effectively agents of the state in terms of solemnisation of marriage. It is concerning therefore that wives may undertake to submit to husbands in a legal process, even one that occurs within a church. This is so for two reasons.

### The Many Faces of Marriage

Contemporary Australian debate around marriage involves a lack of distinction between its romantic, personal and religious aspects, and its legal effect. All these concepts seem to be perceived in the popular imagination within a cohesive whole. Indeed [Christian organisations](#) have been vocal in their conceptualisation of marriage within a Christian construction. (I have [written before](#) on some of the personal and the [legal implications](#) of marriage.)

Use of 'submit' as the foundation for a woman's promise to her husband raises the possibility of this term entering wider contemporary marriage discourse, including in the context of rights and obligations in the context of the law. On the basis that there is blatant widespread [misapprehension](#) of the concept of 'consent' in sexual relations (rape), the danger of validating a wife's obligation to 'submit' to her husband is in my view a real one.

At best, this word and all it implies muddies the waters. At worst, it may be used to justify violence and abuse: if not at law, then within the minds of those who perpetrate such abuse.

### Submission and Sexism

ABC Radio has [reported](#) that the Sydney diocese denies that the obligation on a woman to submit is sexist. In my view this is patently incorrect for two very simple reasons. First, there is no equivalent obligation on men to submit to women. There is no parity in submission as between the parties. Indeed, how could there be? Mutual submission would destroy the power imbalance on which submission depends.

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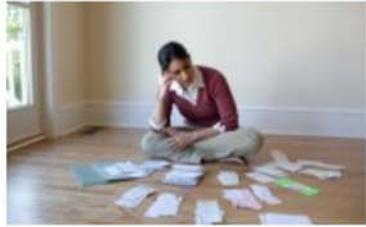
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Closing the knowledge gap:

Furthermore, it is sexist because of this validated power differential in a way that places women as subordinate to men. For more on the loaded nature of submission, see [Tara Moss here](#).

### A Question of Justice

If the Church wants to facilitate a rite in which consenting couples submit to each other, it is free to do so. But when it is acting as the agent of the state to solemnise an institution of the law, it must be held to contemporary standards of justice. Validating women's submission to men fails to meet this standard.

An argument perhaps for the removal of marriage from the law?

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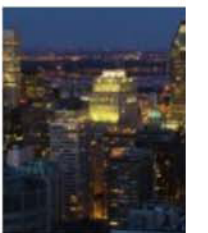
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**KEMMISTAR**  
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There will always be a core group of people who champion such vows, besides the church itself, and either dismiss it's validity on current modern relationships and/or ignore the low standing of women in the church as any real concern. If 'Sarah' the 'Celebrant' who is the first to comment above, is correct in her calculations, people have already given the church thier response and left years ago. Both major Christian churches in Australia - Anglican and Catholic - have never been more irrelevant to most people's modern understanding of a woman. The institutions are run by old men after all, what do we expect? An interesting topic of debate would be to question just why the churches continue to take this path of seeming hardline doctrine, when the logical outcome would be to lose even more parishoners? I see a future, perhaps in 50-100 years when these churches recede back to the main cities of higher populations, and the local churches are run by lay people who hire a 'priest' or trained theologian to perform their services for Catholics or Anglicans, just as independent schools hire teachers.

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**2KOALA\_BEAR**  
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I don't understand the fuss over one silly word. I was married in a church, am a successful business woman & upstanding member of the community, been happily married (to the same bloke) for 15 years, brought up 3 kids and don't remember a single word of my marriage vows!!! Who cares?? What matters is how a couple live their day to day life, not what was said by the priest or celebrant many years ago. I think Kate Galloway is "mistaking the woods for the trees". The word 'submit' can be used in many varying contexts and in this case it has been blown out of context (once again). By simply paying our day to day utilities charges, we are "submitting" to the giant multcorporations terms & conditions, by becoming a member on a blog site we are "submitting" our sometimes intimate details to the greater worldwide network, and the greater Australian public have already 'submitted' to the collective governments' long term plans of how & where we should live and by whoever's governing laws (be they right or wrong).  
Long live Democracy, I say .... but we should stop the 'pickiness' and get on with real issues. Marriage has stood up to the test of time, why change it now?

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**MR TANK**  
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Woman submit? Oh the glories of the missionary position! Yeah right. Anglican Ministers have always exhibited the traits found in the sexually repressed. Just have a laff at these chaps and move on. Oh and also pray for them.

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**Malcolm Smith**  
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This article raises two questions. (1) Why are you concerned about whether it is "sexist"? Where did you get the commandment: Thou shalt not be sexist?  
(2) Why are you trying to submit a religious vow to some trendy secular standard? It would be more reasonable to judge the secular standard by whether it is consistent with the Bible.

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