

# Curl

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## Terror: abstract and embodied



Over the last two days, Australian media have been filled with reports of the execution of search warrants in a number of locations in Brisbane and Sydney. Two have already been charged with terrorism-related offences as a result, and investigations continue. Security at Parliament House in Canberra has been 'ramped up' after 'chatter' revealed a security threat. These events follow the upgrading (downgrading??) of Australia's security status to 'high risk'. For all the talk of terror plots, security experts say that 'lone wolves' pose the greatest threat to our safety.

The public has been told to be alert, but reassured of our safety. The Queensland Premier has gone as far as to proclaim Queensland as the 'safest place in the world'. These reassurances only seem to me to feed into an alarmism surrounding these so-called terror threats. I note also that these events and political responses to them are proximate to the introduction of 'sweeping new powers' for Australian security agencies under the National Security Legislation Amendment Bill. Of some concern, these powers,

according to Senator David Leyonhjelm will 'open the door' to torture.

In the face of the wall-to-wall coverage of these recent events, I am left unable to assess either the nature or the extent of the risk of the types of crimes described by authorities. That is principally, random acts of violence. I realise that these possible crimes are truly awful, and that the police and authorities must take action to protect the community. I cannot, however, seem to stem a skepticism about the reality of the so-called 'threat'. I think my skepticism is borne out of seeing how police so frequently fail to respond to actual and reported threats of violence against women.

### What constitutes a threat of violence?

It is true that in the last two decades, laws in Australia have finally recognised the incidence of violence in the home. That is not to say that violence has stopped. Indeed one in three Australian women has experienced violence at the hands of someone known to them.

While the law now provides an avenue for women to report family violence, there are other types of violence, harassment and intimidatory behaviours that are harder to bring to the attention of authorities. I know for example, of one young woman who was organising a rally against violence against women. In the lead up to the event, the organisers set up a Facebook page. Through this page they received explicit, persistent threats of rape and other violence.

### About Me



Kate Galloway

I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about 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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Distressed and concerned for her safety, the organiser went to the police and reported the threats. She was told: 'What do you expect from a site like that? It's best that you stop using Facebook.'

Still receiving threats, her mother accompanied her to a different police station - thinking that perhaps a different officer would take her concerns seriously. She was met with an almost identical response.

Many women will be able to [share similar stories](#) particularly in the [online context](#). Interestingly while the Australian government has announced it will establish the office of an 'E-Safety Commissioner' for children, there is little official discussion of safety for women despite the well-known issue of online threats.

Online threats to women are actual threats. Yet when reported to authorities apparently are not taken seriously. They take place against a broader context of actual physical violence against women, not to mention harassment and other anti-social behaviours. In contrast, security agencies devote huge resources to analysing internet 'chatter' and intercepting communications to assess the possibility of a threat. In the recent raids, some [800 officers were deployed to 25 locations](#) resulting so far in two being charged. Public safety is important in all instances. So why the disparity in response?

### Women as the subject of law

In pondering the different responses, I am reminded of the work of Australian feminist legal scholar [Ngairu Naffine](#). Naffine writes about the way in which the law constructs the woman as subject. She points out that:

The law fails women because it has never had to deal with them as women (even though it has always constituted them as such).

The subject of law is indeed an abstract person and this construction of the legal subject is part of the way in which the law proclaims its neutrality and universality. Yet gender-neutrality is a myth. In fact the default standard of the 'abstracted' personhood of the legal subject is an affluent white able-bodied man. For women, the reality of their embodied lives is not contemplated by the law. Part of women's embodied (vs abstract) experience is fear of violence. Women live with this daily, including in their homes but this is not part of the narrative of how society and the law talks about violence. In contrast, the *abstract* risk of a 'terrorist' act fits the way in which the law constructs violence. It is believed to happen to a legal subject that is itself an *abstract* individual.

After all it is far easier to understand the perpetrator of violence as an evil outsider than as one who walks amongst us. Women however, tend to know those who commit violence against them.

In a world that has not yet accepted the embodied and subjective nature of woman and her experience of violence, the abstract possibility of 'terrorism' is far more tangible than actual threats of personal safety. I wonder though: if authorities took seriously women's concerns about threats of violence and their fears for personal safety, might women like me might be less skeptical about 'threats' of 'terrorism'?

\*Image from <http://www.pinterest.com/lin149/cowgirls/>

Posted by Kate Galloway at 09:33

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