
Human Rights Law and Indigenous Women

Irene Watson*

What the things are which make us human and how that is determined, are concerns which drive my research. Who defines our humanness: ourselves, our communities, other communities, the state? The question of what it is to be human is significant; humanity is a fractured space, fractured into many frames. One space I occupy is Aboriginal - indigenous, one of the first peoples, colonised, dispossessed and resisting assimilation, resisting genocide. Another space is *mimini*: woman, also resisting assimilation and the death of the *mimini*.

To some extent, who it is that has the power to determine questions of humanity and the rights to be human, holds the power to either enable or disable humanity. They hold power to construct and measure human values and their worth. Human rights jurisprudence would have us believe that all people are accorded the same rights; there should be no discrimination on any grounds - including ethnicity, race and sex - against anybody.

However, these 'rights' are experienced differently by different people. It happens that the difference can be measured and scaled according to how close one is located to centres of power and privilege. Indigenous women of Australia suffer from multiple disadvantages linked to race and gender and the experiences of an historical and continuing colonialism. It's a potent mix of disadvantage. The capacity for human rights laws to redress power imbalance is the concern of my research.

* Associate Professor in Aboriginal Studies, David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia. Irene.Watson@unisa.edu.au.