

UN Women National Committee Aotearoa NZ

International Women's Day

Breakfast on the Shore

Milford Cruising Club

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Social policy issues that affect women

I am honoured to have been asked to speak today on International Women's day as many groups like us are gathering around the world.

The focus of today is not just about promoting equality for women but it is about the message that more equality for women **is good for everyone**, especially men and children, and will free us **as a society** to act for good. In fact it may be the **best chance** mankind has.

I imagine you are finding as I am that the daily news is very depressing. Nightly on TV we are made aware that women in too many countries in the 21st century are living under nightmarish and evil circumstances. The damage to their children is incalculable and future costs to the world from the building rage is unimaginable.

On top of man's inhumanity to man, there is the imminent threat of catastrophic climate change with our seeming inability to make the changes the world so desperately needs. Unfettered capitalism is producing a runaway and seriously destabilising inequality. Women and children are bearing the costs of seemingly unstoppable and menacing global forces.

Male aggression is everywhere, in alienated youth, in extremist activity, in domestic violence, in an excessive emphasis on sport. Male energy is terrific, where would we be without it, but what we don't see is the proper balancing of male energy with the complimentary equal female energy and values that heal and nurture, not maim and kill.

For many of us world tragedies, wars and crises can seem a long way away. Nothing bad ever happens safe old insular New Zealand? Right? Many women are busy and may feel there is nothing they can do, so why even waste time to even think about it. Some might give a bit to Oxfam and World Vision or chuck some money at KidsCan after being a bit shocked by a Campbell live programme. But NZ is OK isn't it? After all we have had a female Prime Minister, a Governor General, Chief Justice, various mayors from time to time and stand-out young women like Lydia Ko and Eleanor Catton and even some female professors in universities. We have more women than ever in parliament and more women completing degrees. So we don't need feminism anymore. Yeah right...

We are deluding ourselves if we think all is well with our rockstar economy and our society.

I grew up a post war-period of an early feminist awakening, when I left school (a girls grammar school with strong role models) I believed that girls can do anything. In my day girls did not get offered subjects like physics, (regarded as not ladylike), so my father organised a male teacher from a boys' school to take 3 of us on Saturday mornings and after school. We went off to university to do science degrees with the privileged boys from Auckland Boys Grammar and Kings College with no sense of inferiority or limitation. We could be famous, we could change the world. We would have stable marriages and children perhaps, or not, our choice, and we could have careers that never stopped and not suffer the fate we saw our mothers endure as they performed a thankless domestic service role confined to the home.

I was part of that generation who thought not just that girls can do anything but they can have it all. For me it has been a slow realisation how it is actually not like this at all except for the lucky few that don't have any children (or at least not too many), a supportive partner or none at all, have their own independent money, perhaps finding a secure toehold in male world of commerce and paid work. Such a woman can be free of the need to partner for financial reasons and can live a fulfilling life.

Zonta International has set out a vision: "a world in which women's rights are recognised as human rights and every woman is able to achieve her full potential. In such a world, women have access to all resources and are represented in decision making positions on equal basis with men. In such a world, no woman lives in fear of violence."

But domestic violence remains pervasive with serious physical, psychological and economic effects. Around 20,000 women and children (86% of the children are under the age of 10) annually need the help of Women's Refuge with the average length of stay in a safe house increasing all the time. These desperate families are just the tip of the iceberg.

There are real dangers to women of all ages in forming relationships as Lesley Elliot's brave account of her daughter's death at the hands of a narcissistic male economist describes¹. Apparently about one third of us will experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner in our lifetime. Many women face a bleak choice of either staying in a violent relationship or bringing up children alone in a very punitive demoralising culture.

Respectfully, I suggest we have to stop thinking it is just about getting more women on boards of major NZ companies, or more women into parliament, the judiciary, or local government. And at the risk of offending some women I think pushing for a few more weeks of paid parental leave is just a diversion. These things may be good in themselves but if we let them be the sole focus of our energies **not one thing** will change for the better for the many NZ women and children who are left out and excluded.

¹ http://www.sophieelliottfoundation.co.nz/Sophies_Story.php

Women's inequality is systemic, with its origins in the traditional 20 century assumption of dependence of women on men, the invisibility of the women's work not just of reproduction, but of nurturing others and stitching together the social fabric so that men are supported in the 'big important' jobs they do.

I am a founding member of CPAG set up over 20 years ago following the assault on living standards of women and children in the 1991 budget. Sadly after over the last 20 years, all the things that we predicted would result from the 1990s policy changes have come to pass. To date we have been only able to manage to get some of the worst excesses rolled back. We are optimistic that the tide is turning but we need the help of all women to join the groundswell.

Poverty is difficult to measure but one quarter of NZ children now live under a poverty line of 60% of the median household income once housing costs are taken account of. Of these around 205,000 children live under a very stringent 50% line and some fall well below even that. Their lives are bleak and their future prospects stunted. Foodbank usage, unheard of in the 1980s has become institutionalised; our shocking rates of third world diseases in children skyrocketed on the 1990s and remain a horrible indictment of the degree of poverty we have permitted; along with homelessness, school transience, poor educational outcomes; mental health issues and maternal depression.

We are not a poor country. This has been a choice and we are all made poorer for what has happened to our socially inclusive society we were once so proud of.

In CPAG we see how low-income women and particularly sole parents and those coping in the welfare system are so overwhelmed with trying to survive, they have no energy left to fight for anything. These women are largely voiceless. Their lives are a nightmare of navigating the demands of WINZ which appears to them to be an institution to be feared. Some have told us that they left an abusive relationship for their own safety and sanity to be treated in many ways as badly and without respect in the welfare system. This system may seem like the abusive partner; withholding money on a whim, making unreasonable demands on her time, playing mind games, making intrusive checks on her living circumstances while helping foster an attitude of putdowns and negative stereotyping. Let me give you an example of the kind of things I am seeing on a regular basis.

A Sole parent fits 4 hours of work a week at the university between child duties and classes and transport arrangement. This week, just as she began her work, an email arrived from WINZ informing her that her benefit was being cut because she was borrowing on the student loans scheme for her university costs. A very scary prospect of imminent financial catastrophe. The next two hours was spent desperately trying to make an appointment for review of the decision, arguing on the cellphone with an unhelpful WINZ employee who denied her any emergencies appointments, begrudgingly being eventually referred to a

higher authority and finally it got sorted out. Her time was seen to be of no value and it was only her ability to stand up for herself that got it resolved. But at what cost!

One of the crippling systemic source of unequal outcomes is the way in which the key roles of mothering the next generation is so undervalued and invisible. In the male economics world, if it is not sold in a market then it doesn't have value. Social inclusion means being in paid work: women in paid work can have extra tax-funded support for their children and they can have sick pay, employer subsidies for KiwiSaver and their children can have the benefits of paid parental leave. Women in paid work, any work, have value, those doing the difficult unpaid caring work have none. I believe the acquiescence by women to this male model is because they subconsciously buy into it. **But this was not what feminism was supposed to do for us.**

In the few remaining minutes lets take a hard look at some of our social policies that are driven by outmoded ideas of women's dependence on men.

But first! We can hold our heads up in the world when we look at our policies for the retired. One of the policies we have got right for women is New Zealand Superannuation. Everyone is paid the same gross amount. No attachment to the paid workforce is required. (in many countries a contributions to the paid workforce is required). Thus NZ Super implicitly recognises that all contributions are equally important. It is based on an individual entitlement—not a joint payment for couples. It goes with you on divorce or death of a spouse. We have been very successful in containing the growth of poverty among older women that plagues many other countries.

Yet there are injustices and archaic thinking. For example, some women find to their horror that even if they have lived all their lives in NZ they may get a reduced pension or even no pension simply because the person they married has an overseas state pension².

Another issue is that there are higher rates for singles than married that make no sense in the 21st century of fluid relationships. But thankfully there seems to be little appetite in WINZ to peer into the bedrooms of those over 65 to see who is committing relationship fraud.

It is a different story in other parts of welfare system. Two years ago I became aware of the work of two very able barristers who defend low income women accused of relationship fraud.

As we collected case studies and realised the full extent of the problem, a bigger picture began to emerge in which NZ's ugly attitudes to low income women and their relationships was just one part of an overall unchallenged but inappropriate use of relationship status in

² See *Pension injustices tarnish retirees' golden years*
http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11295201

many parts of the welfare system—Recently we published the report [The complexities of 'relationship' in the welfare system and the consequences for children.](#)

Under the last 6 years of welfare reform, the screws have been tightened in unprincipled ways with very little challenge. Low income sole parents are increasingly subjected to surveillance and intrusion on a scale, surely unimaginable in good old, tolerant New Zealand?

Worse still, any children involved may suffer greatly especially if their mother is sent to jail. She can emerge still owing the same debt with repayments that burden the mother for the rest of her life. The resulting hardship further penalises the children.

Who is Solomon and can judge what qualifies as a relationship and when 'dependence' of a mother on a new partner begins in today's complex world? When does a boarder become a de facto partner? When do two sole parents sharing accommodation become more than flatmates? And why should it mean he ought to be responsible financially for her children?

Recent new legislation makes male partners also accountable for so-called 'relationship fraud'. They too can go to jail or face a fine. While it acknowledges that the focus on the sole parent's so-called 'offending' alone can be most unjust, this is also just another step further in the wrong direction. We can expect some very iniquitous outcomes from the expected 700-1000 cases a year.

What if we looked at the world from the viewpoint of the best interests of the child and mother? Almost all social policy would look different and most certainly we would not have a relationship-based welfare system like our current one. We would start by considering what does a child need to thrive? Happy parents who are well-resourced and supported by the wider community might be a primary requirement. If so, you would think we might have policy that **encourages** supportive adult relationships. Instead – and astonishingly, despite rhetoric about strong families, the welfare system operates as if **we hate** relationships whether formal marriage or simply in the nature of marriage according to the written and unwritten definitions. Welfare policy is actually designed to ferret out and punish relationships even when there is no real relationship, or the so called partner is a dead loss providing no financial support, or is abusive, violent and unreliable.

The Herculean task for one parent on their own is that they have to be both mother and father at the same time while society looks down on them and while they are expected to also role model the paid work ethic. Our sole parents suffer from stress, isolation, ill-health depression and poverty of material things and poverty of kindness and understanding from others. Woe betide them if they are so bold as to have a man in their lives, boots at the door... car in the driveway.

The answer does not lie in searching for the magic formula that defines 'relationship' and thus makes 'relationship fraud' a black and white issue. The way forward in the 21st century

is for women to demand the removal of all married and single distinctions in the welfare system.

Last week Professor Guy Standing gave a lecture at AUT in which he described a basic income experiment in India where women were given an unconditional cash allowance and could earn what they could above that. Tellingly he reports that the women themselves liked best that they could choose to say no to the men returning at the end of the week with money in their pockets. We ought to be promoting more equality and empowering women to be strong for their children and **have enough money** to be independent of male favour. That of course would be very, very good for men's evolutionary growth too and is likely to lead to better more respectful relationships.

If we looked at the world from the viewpoint of the best interests of the mother and child we would wrap around the sole mother all the support we could muster. We would recognize that re-partnering well, or being able to call on the support of male friends/ future partners is to be encouraged, not penalized. We would support her to take time and care over re-partnering and support her to get out of violent and unrewarding relationships. We would not reward vindictive ex-partners by criminalising her. Work and Income would not be encouraging dobbing in, spying on, and intrusive investigations into sole parents.

What would the world be like if women **themselves** could determine when a truly equal partnership begins? That might be the point of formal marriage – or it could be the stage when she is entitled to an equal share of the partnership property under the law.

The only possible justification for current policy is that it saves the government money. The faster a relationship can be judged in the nature of marriage the more money the state saves. The more she can be found to be deviant, the more can be saved through penalties and repayments. A woman caught in the bureaucratic nightmare of a WINZ investigation may have little access to proper legal representation and social security review committees do not offer an independent way of reviewing often very unfair decisions.

With more time I would be talking to you about many other policies that adversely affect women such as student loans and allowances policy, how the loss of sole parent assistance at university that is making sole parents an endangered species, and about Working for Families. That iniquitous policy is based on outmoded ideas of what work counts and a requirement to meet minimum hours of paid work every week when the labour market is increasingly casualised.

A final word about Paid Parental Leave. It has the one virtue that it is the same whether you are married or not. This in itself is quite remarkable given how other parts of the system function. What is it for? Do women really appreciate that the way it is structured excludes

around 60% of women³ with new-borns including some who have been in the paid workforce but not fulfilled the narrow rules?

Paid Parental Leave is **tax-funded** and it is paid without any income test right up the income scale. For those that miss out there is a woeful small payment called the Parental Tax Credit if their parents are poor enough and if they meet work-based criteria. About 15,000 of our most vulnerable newborns get no extra assistance at all. Just imagine if we paid the pension to better-off people but nothing to the very poorest? How as women can we applaud that and how can we think that fighting for a few extra weeks of Paid Parental Leave is all that is needed?

The world is in a bad way, but NZ can be a beacon light and show that things can be better for women. We do this with New Zealand Superannuation already.

Let's make sure our voices are not subdued when we see injustice; let's participate in the political process to our utmost abilities; let's use social media to raise our voices; but above let us all change the attitude that we should be asking for more equality. The most powerful idea is to truly believe we are equal to men already so that bad policy based on outmoded thinking is seen as simply ridiculous.

³ See appendix Treasury [Paid Parental Leave Information Release](#)