

## **International Women's Day 2013. A national day of shame.**

Today women all over the world are celebrating International Women's Day. In New Zealand, the first country to give women the vote and to initiate many changes to improve gender equity and the wellbeing of women, we should be celebrating too. But, if we reflect on how quickly we're being driven backwards, in terms of the lack of safety of women and women's position in society, today is a day of shame.

In comparison with 2009 we have fewer women in decision making positions within and out of government, MPs, chief executives, women on boards. Women's pay is still less than men's across nearly all measures and the Pay Equity Unit in Parliament was abandoned. In the past four years, there have been thirteen policy and legislation changes that specifically and adversely affect women's ability to leave abusive relationships and live lives free from violence. This includes changes to Legal Aid, decreased funding to sexual and family violence services and changes to police reporting and responses to domestic violence.

New Zealand has world leading domestic violence legislation, yet increasingly, with these changes to government policy, funding and resource allocation, there is no longer the knowledge, skills and ability to enforce the law as it is written. This means that women and children who live in violent and abusive households are finding themselves at increasing risk of violence and death.

There is a Bill currently before Parliament – the Family Court Proceedings Reform Bill - that will make it even more difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. This is because of the high costs of accessing the family court services and the lack of legal and other support available to women to guide and support them through the system.

A further 15 legislation and policy changes have been made that negatively impact on women's wellbeing, such as the welfare reforms, changes to employment law, cuts to funding for women's organisations and cuts to educational support for disabled children in main-stream schools.

In 2012 New Zealand reported on the countries progress to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This international convention, which New Zealand is a signatory to, requires governments to work towards gender equity. In the official report back to the New Zealand government there were many concerns about the current inequity of the position of women in New Zealand. Disabled women, Maori women, older women and women from ethnic minorities were identified as being particularly vulnerable.

The New Zealand government has been asked by the CEDAW committee to report back on progress in two years in a whole lot of areas. For example, they have been asked to ensure that the welfare reforms don't discriminate against disadvantaged groups of women. That the legal age for marriage is raised and legal processes be put in place to prohibit underage and forced marriage.

Altogether there are 34 recommendations covering education, health, marriage and relationships, employment, gender equity, access to justice and violence against women.

What all of this suggests – the changes to legislation and policy that disadvantage women, the number of areas of concern raised by the CEDAW committee, is that the gains made in equity and wellbeing over the past fifty years are being eroded. New Zealand women are losing their human rights. The right to:

life, liberty and security of person

not be discriminated against for any reason including gender

be equal before the law and, without any discrimination, to equal protection of the law.

free choice of employment, just and favourable conditions of work and protection against unemployment.

equal pay for equal work

a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of herself and her family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond her control. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance and all children, whether born in or out of wedlock, should enjoy the same social protection.

This is no longer happening in New Zealand.

Just to end, on behalf of a coalition of concerned women I have written twice to John Key about this. The first time I sent a letter listing the legislative and policy changes that have harmed women. After receiving no acknowledgment of my letter I wrote again. Then I phoned to ask why neither letter had been acknowledged. I'm still waiting for a reply. What does this silence tell us about this governments concern for the wellbeing of women?

International Women's Day 2013. A national day of shame.

Debbie Hager is a senior tutor and PHD student at the School of Population Health, University of Auckland