

Fifty Years a Feminist

**Fifty
Years a
Feminist**
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MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

This book is dedicated to all the women who were involved in bringing the women's liberation movement and the second wave of feminism to New Zealand.

It is especially dedicated to the core group of women who helped to set up Auckland University women's liberation and the National Organisation for Women (NOW): the late Sharyn Cederman, Kaye Turner, Toni Jeffreys, Hazel Armstrong, Anne Gilbert, Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, Donna Awatere, Beth Patterson, Jocelyn Werry, the late Sonja Davies, the late Caterina de Nave, Mary Sinclair, Deirdre Milne and many others.

It is also dedicated to the women who are following in our footsteps, picking up the feminist torch and helping to bring us closer to our dream of true equality for all women in New Zealand.

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**Up
Against
the
Patriarchy**

This book was born of several realisations. First, the realisation that it is 50 years — half a century — since I first became involved in women's liberation. It makes me feel like an ancient, historic figure.

And, second, the realisation that most people know very little about the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, or indeed the history of feminism in New Zealand, other than the fact that in 1893 we were the first nation on earth to give women the right to vote — an achievement that has given us a somewhat undeserved reputation as a leader in gender equality.

To my surprise, I have found that even some of the impressive young women who are spearheading the present wave of feminist activism have barely heard of the 1970s women's liberation movement. They assume that women have progressed steadily towards equality ever since we won the right to vote, and do not realise how stunted women's lives were for much of the twentieth century. Every now and then I am met with a blank stare when I mention my involvement in women's liberation, a sort of 'What on earth is that?' reaction. Some ask me, politely, whether women's liberation has something to do with

equal pay. It's as if women's liberation is already a footnote in history; something that happened 'way back then', and from which society has since moved on.

This is what motivated me to write a personal account of my involvement in the women's liberation movement — or the second wave of feminism, as it is often called — and the subsequent waves of feminist activism. The past 50 years of feminist activism in New Zealand have benefited all women, whether they identify as feminists or not. So, all women, I believe, should be aware of the rich and vibrant history of feminism, and the far-reaching changes and positive improvements it has brought to our lives. It is also useful for men to learn about the history of feminism. Most men have assumed that the women's movement has nothing to do with them. But men's and women's lives are so intertwined that feminism, and the changes it has brought about in women's lives, have profoundly affected men as well.

Women's liberation has had a huge impact on my life and it has shaped who I am. But when I decided to start a women's liberation group at Auckland University back in 1971, I had no idea that I would still be campaigning for women's equality half a century later, and for many of the issues we thought we had won. I had no idea, in fact, that the campaign for women's equality would turn out to be a lifelong project.

Like most women of my generation, when I set off on my journey all those years ago I had few role models to inspire me or to show me how to live my life as an independent woman in my own right. It was uncharted territory, with no guidelines or signposts along the way. I had to make my own choices, reach my own compromises and experiment every inch of the way.

This memoir examines my life from a feminist perspective. It describes the ups and downs, the mistakes and achievements of a

young woman who became a passionate women's liberationist at the age of 23 and resolved that she would live life on her own terms, rather than those of a man, and would forge her own identity and place in the world.

To understand why it is that there still exists in New Zealand (and the rest of the world) a pervasive, seemingly ineradicable inequality between men and women, despite the recent half-century of feminist activism, we need to travel back in time around 6000 years and put our struggle into historical context.

As we set about creating the women's movement back in 1971 it didn't occur to me, or to my fellow women's liberationists, to do this. Lacking an historical perspective, we naïvely imagined that once we had exposed the deep-seated discrimination women experienced in New Zealand, and had presented our manifesto for change, our battle would be all but won. I had no idea how difficult it would be to change attitudes and behaviours that have been entrenched in society for thousands of years. I had no idea, in fact, that we were up against 6000 years of patriarchy, and a deeply rooted patriarchal mindset that would take generations to dislodge.

The exact origins of patriarchy are unclear, but patriarchal society is generally thought to have emerged around 4000 BCE. The word patriarchy derives from the Greek *patria*, meaning father, and *arches*, meaning rule, and it refers to a system of institutionalised male domination in which men rule women and control almost every aspect of women's lives.

The core belief underpinning patriarchal society is that men are inherently superior to women, who, being physically and mentally less able than men, should be only too happy to spend their lives as a servant class, looking after men and producing offspring. The Greek

philosopher Aristotle, whose doctrines would dominate Western thinking for close to 2000 years, summed up this belief system succinctly when he wrote: 'The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.'¹ A woman's role in a patriarchal society should therefore be confined to producing children and serving the men in the household. A proper wife should be as obedient as a slave, Aristotle is alleged to have said.²

In patriarchal societies, women and men lived highly segregated lives. The public sphere was men's domain, while women's lives were confined to the home. In many parts of the world, women were expected to live in separate areas of the house, and receive no formal education or even leave the house unless accompanied by a male. This strict segregation of the sexes effectively excluded women from having any kind of public or independent life outside the home.

This arrangement was extremely convenient for men. By confining women to the home, they were able to control women's sexuality and reproduction, and be sure of the paternity of their children. Indeed, some suggest that the primary purpose of patriarchy was to provide men with legal heirs. As the Athenian orator Demosthenes put it, 'We have mistresses [*hetaerae*] for our pleasure, concubines for our daily needs, and wives to give us legitimate children and look after the housekeeping.'³

This patriarchal belief system was passed down in most societies and cultures, from generation to generation. It became so much a part of life that it was assumed to be natural and inevitable. Men were taught to see themselves as inherently superior to women and naturally dominant over them, and women were taught to see themselves as inferior to men. Over time, women became habituated to control, abuse and even large-scale degradation by men, which took the form of wife-beating, rape, femicide, foot-binding, female circumcision,

and being accused of witchcraft and burnt at the stake.

Throughout this time, men have come up with all sorts of bizarre and imaginative explanations as to why women are inherently inferior to men and should be kept in a state of dependence on them. Aristotle concluded that women were so defective that they were, in effect, mutilated or failed males.⁴ Around 2000 years later, Charles Darwin claimed that women were biologically inferior and less highly evolved than men. He cited as evidence the fact that women's heads were smaller than men's.⁵ Napoleon Bonaparte convinced himself that women were born to be slaves: 'Nature has made them our slaves . . . they are our property . . . they belong to us, in the same manner as the fruit-tree that bears fruit is the property of the gardener . . . Woman is given to man to bear children to him.'⁶

The eighteenth-century Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued similarly that women were put on earth to please men, and that woman was 'the sex that ought to obey'.⁷ According to Rousseau, 'The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them . . . to make life agreeable and sweet to them — these are the duties of women at all times and should be taught them from their infancy.' He added that 'man must have authority over his wife because it is essential for him to know that the children she bears and maintains are his own.'⁸

While women brought up their children and ran their households, men were free to run the world. Men wrote the philosophy and history books, the scientific texts, the poems, the religious books, the medical treatises and the law books, which embedded their patriarchal belief systems in law.

The French Napoleonic Code of 1804 stated explicitly that women were inferior to men, and this notion laid the legal foundation for gender inequality and the assumption that men owned women, and

women belonged to men. Under Napoleonic law, wives owed obedience to their husbands and a woman was 'obliged to live with her husband, and to follow him to every place where he may judge it convenient to reside'. Women had no civil or political rights and were barred from professions. Their husbands could acquire their property and earnings if they divorced, depriving their children of all their rights.⁹

English common law, which was exported to the new colony of New Zealand, was much the same. Once married, a woman's legal status was suspended. She ceased to exist as a legal person and became the property of her husband, much like a table or a chair. She lost her rights to own property, make contracts, or even keep her own wages, and so she was left in a position of complete economic dependence on her husband. The law at the time was clear: 'That which a man hath is his own; that which the wife hath, is the husband's.'

Men were trained to see themselves as the naturally dominant gender, and some used sex or violence as a way of exerting their dominance over women. Access to a wife's body with or without her consent was considered a man's prerogative, his 'conjugal right', and refusing sex to a husband was grounds for the annulment of a marriage. Domestic violence was common and was also seen as a man's prerogative.

While men could divorce their wives easily, divorce was virtually impossible for women, and child custody laws stipulated that any children of a marriage belonged to the husband, along with any property or money. As a result, divorced women were left impoverished. The age of consent for females was 12, which allowed men to take advantage of girls, and incest was not criminalised until the start of the twentieth century.

This was the situation for Pākehā women in New Zealand, and for women in much of the rest of the world, until the late nineteenth

century. Pre-colonisation, Māori women were accorded more respect, given more independence in their whānau, hapū and iwi, and even kept their own names. Pākehā women, however, were effectively slaves to men. Without the feminist movement in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, they might still be slaves today. For despite the fact that every now and then a brave woman would put her head above the parapet and question why it was thought to be acceptable for half of the human race to be enslaved to the other half, it was only when women got together and began to campaign collectively for women's rights, and feminism was born, that progress began to be made.

The English writer and philosopher Mary Astell was one of the first women to publicly question women's role in society when she authored *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, published anonymously in 1706. Much like the boy who enquired why the emperor had no clothes, Mary asked the penetrating question: If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves? She argued that women's lack of education was at the root of their supposed inferiority, and called for women to be educated in schools and universities separately from men.¹⁰

Her perceptive question was politely ignored, and almost a century passed before another British writer and philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft, argued that women deserved the same fundamental rights as men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792, she claimed that women were not naturally inferior to men but appeared to be so only because they lacked education: 'If women are to rise from their lowly status, it is vital that they receive an education that will train them to be rational beings rather than the mere playthings of men and slaves of fashion.'¹¹

The first woman to publicly question women's role in colonial New

Zealand society was Mary Ann Müller, who, in 1869, under the nom de plume Fémmina, published a 13-page pamphlet titled 'An Appeal to the Men of New Zealand', which advocated for women's right to vote. 'How long are women to remain a wholly unrepresentative body of people?' she asked.

Women are now educated, thinking beings, very different from the females of the darker ages . . . They might have been contented with their lot in those days, but this is not so now . . . we yearn to feel ourselves borne on by the stream of progress. Why, when the broad road of progress is cleared for so many human beings, is the juggernaut car of prejudice still being driven on, crushing the crowds of helpless women beneath its wheels?¹²

Over the centuries a handful of influential men have also questioned women's servile role in society. The nineteenth-century English philosopher and MP John Stuart Mill was a fierce proponent of women's equality, and in 1867 he tried to get legislation passed that would give women the vote.

In his book *The Subjection of Women*, written jointly with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, he likened the status of women to slavery: 'The legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong, and one of the chief hindrances to human improvement . . . It ought to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.' Besides, he argued, a culture of equality would transform the lives of girls and women, liberate their creative potential and make relations between men and women more productive and cooperative.¹³

Such works undoubtedly influenced public opinion at the time, but these were lone voices and they did not bring about any real change in the status of women. They did, however, influence a group of



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American women, who in the mid-nineteenth century began to call themselves feminists and to agitate for equal rights. In 1848, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organised the first known large gathering of feminists, a convention that took place in Seneca Falls, in upstate New York. Three hundred women attended, demanding an end to all discrimination based on sex, and making the revolutionary declaration: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal.'

Ironically, it is a man who is credited with coining the word feminism to describe the advocacy for women's rights. Charles Fourier, a French socialist, is said to have come up with the word *féminisme* in 1837, based on *femme*, or woman, and *isme*, referring to a social movement or ideology. The word feminist first appeared in the English language in 1852, in an article that described women who were fighting for women's rights as 'feminist reformers', and it became used more widely over the following decades as women began to agitate for the right to vote.¹⁴

Following the Seneca Falls Convention a fledgling feminist movement began to develop in the United States. Gradually the movement spread to Britain and its colonies, where it was focused on extending the vote to women and was closely associated with the Women's Christian Temperance movement.

Inspired by similar groups in the United States and Britain, and emboldened, perhaps, by the fact that in 1884 married women were finally given a legal existence, thanks to an amendment to the Marriage Act, a group of New Zealand women got together in 1885 to establish the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The aim of the union was to campaign for women's suffrage and against the evils of the liquor trade. As Kate Sheppard, today the most well known

of the union's leaders, explained, 'We are most of us mothers, and the most rabid amongst us desire nothing more than the privileges freely given to our sons.'¹⁵

Despite these assurances, the *New Zealand Herald* dismissed the suffragists, as they became known, as 'old maids, or wives who are not mothers, or eccentrics'.¹⁶ And opponents of the suffrage, like Member of Parliament Henry Smith Fish, railed against extending the vote to women, convinced it would result in women neglecting their homes and becoming 'unwomanly'. 'We shall presently see the man going home and boiling the tea and frying the chops and washing the babies,' he thundered.¹⁷

The campaigners and suffragists of the WCTU organised public meetings and a series of petitions to Parliament, including a 270-metre-long petition containing nearly 25,000 signatures — a remarkable number given that the population of New Zealand at the time was only 740,000. Sir John Hall, who led the parliamentary campaign for suffrage, unfurled the petition across the parliamentary chamber, to great effect, on 28 July 1893. After a number of attempts, legislation allowing women the right to vote was finally passed and signed into law on 19 September 1893, at a time when no other women in the world were able to vote in national elections.

The New Zealand suffragists were brave, determined women who risked scorn and ridicule, and even their livelihoods, to campaign for the right to vote, and we celebrate their victory every year on Suffrage Day, 19 September. But while their campaign for the vote was extraordinarily successful, it didn't challenge the fundamental inequality in society at the time, or the mechanisms of male control and domination over women. In fact, some suffragists went out of their way to reassure men that the highly segregated and subservient role of women would not change if women were able to vote, and that men's supremacy in the

home and in Parliament would remain unchallenged.

A few years after women won the right to vote, the National Council of Women (NCW) was set up. It held a so-called 'women's parliament' every year until 1905, to campaign for legal equality for women in marriage and employment, raising the age of consent, divorce law reform, improved working conditions for domestic servants, and equal pay for equal work. Kate Sheppard, who became president of the NCW, stated:

We are tired of having a 'sphere' doled out to us, and of being told that anything outside that sphere is 'unwomanly' . . . there is no greater anomaly than the exaltation by men of the vocation of wife and mother, on the one hand, while, on the other hand . . . a wife and mother is regarded not only as a dependent on her husband's bounty, but even the children of her own body are regarded as his legal property.¹⁸

Largely as a result of the efforts of the NCW, improvements were made to women's lives over the following decades. Women were allowed to attend universities and to join professions such as medicine and the law. The age of consent was raised to 16 in 1886. In 1888, the Divorce Act was amended to establish equal grounds for divorce between men and women. In 1900 incest was made a criminal offence, and in 1911 a widow's benefit was introduced for the first time. In 1919, 26 years after the right to vote had been achieved, a law was finally passed allowing women to stand for Parliament.

But these improvements were really just tinkering around the edges. They did not fundamentally change social attitudes towards women or women's role and status in society. As a result, for the first half of the twentieth century, women continued to live out their lives in the domestic sphere, and remained largely invisible in public life. After



ABOVE Women voters going to the polls in Rutland Street, Auckland, on election day, 6 December 1899.

BELOW The first meeting of the National Council of Women took place in Christchurch in April 1896. Kate Sheppard is seated at the centre.

a brief foray into the workplace during the Second World War, when women were needed to run factories and schools, they were elbowed aside and told to return to the kitchen. New Zealand men continued to assume that the privileges they held were simply their natural right, and to treat women as if they were an inferior and menial sex. Women were still expected to subjugate themselves and their lives to men, and they continued to lag behind men in almost every respect, politically, economically and socially.

And so it was left to the women's liberation movement, when it arrived in New Zealand in 1971, to try to overturn the patriarchal attitudes and mechanisms of control that had persisted for more than 6000 years. At the time, we didn't realise what a daunting task we faced. We had no idea how difficult it would be to change attitudes and behaviours, and a patriarchal mindset that is almost embedded, culturally and historically, in our DNA.

Fifty years is less than a drop in the bucket of human history, and with the wisdom of hindsight it is easy to see that we were naïve to imagine that in one or two generations we could overturn attitudes and behaviours that have persisted for millennia, or that we could catch up to men's achievements in a couple of decades. Viewing our campaign for equality for women from this longer sweep of history helps explain why it has been such a long, hard slog; why it is that we have made so much progress in many areas and so little in others; and why our gains still seem to be fragile and may even be faltering in some areas.

It helps explain, too, why there has been such an intense male backlash against feminism and why, instead of embracing equality between men and women as a way of encouraging more positive relationships between the sexes (as John Stuart Mill envisaged all those years ago) many men still fear and resent women's equality and

assume it will disadvantage them.

It helps explain why it is that despite decades of feminist activism no nation on earth has yet achieved gender equality, and why the World Economic Forum predicts it will take another 217 years to close the workplace gender gap in both pay and representation. Who among us is prepared to wait that long?

But while true equality between the sexes remains elusive, feminism has nevertheless achieved an extraordinary amount for women over the last half-century. Thanks to feminism, there is no better time to be a woman. After centuries of subjugation, women are finally coming into their own, and it is our time now.