

Women in politics and decision-making

Women are accorded full opportunity to participate in political life, but remain underrepresented in government. However, the remarkable thing is women hold all the top public positions in this small South Pacific nation. These include Governor-General (Silvia Cartwright), Prime Minister (Helen Clark), Chief Justice (Sian Elias), Attorney-general (Margaret Wilson), and the new mayor of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city (Christine Fletcher).

The "new girl's network," as some have called it, also reaches into commerce - its most notable member being Theresa Gattung, chief executive at Telecom, the country's biggest corporation.

In the 120-member Parliament, 36 seats are held by women. The Executive Council has 26 ministers (20 within the Cabinet and 6 outside the Cabinet) including 11 women. The Cabinet has seven women holding Cabinet portfolios such as Health; Art, Culture and Heritage; Conservation; and Local Government among others.

Women are underrepresented in government in the dependent territories of the Cook Islands, Tokelau, and Niue. Of the 25 members of the Cook Islands Parliament, 2 are women. In Niue, 2 of 20 are women.

New Zealand was the first nation in the world to give women the vote, in 1893, 15 years after it became the first country in the old British Empire to award a bachelor's degree to a female university student.

In 1986, the Labor Party government of the time established the Ministry of Women's Affairs, a state-funded agency responsible for promoting legislation and policies aimed at bettering the lives of women and raising their general status. Although initially derided by many conservatives - one leading National Party MP, Ruth Richardson, declared at the time that she and her colleagues would never accept "that there are a range of issues that can be tagged 'women's issues' and pigeon-holed in a ministry" - the agency today enjoys bipartisan support and is widely credited with having feminized the policymaking process. Its behind-the-scenes influence is said to have played an important role in setting the stage for today's all female cast on New Zealand's top government posts.

Violence against women, trafficking of women and women's rights violations

Violence against women is a problem that affects all socioeconomic groups. A 1997 government-sponsored academic survey indicated that 1 woman in 7 living with a male partner was abused physically or sexually by the partner in the previous 12 months, and 1 in 16 women were likely to be sexually assaulted each year. Publicity about domestic violence increased significantly after government ministers pressured a women's refuge coordinator in August not to publicize statistics about Maori spousal and child abuse rates.

According to a 1994 Public Health Commission study, Maori women between the ages of 15 and 24 were 7 times more likely than non-Maori women to be hospitalized as a result of domestic assault.

According to government statistics in 1998, 5,056 men were prosecuted for domestic assault, and about 1,000 more faced less serious family violence charges. Maori men constituted 41 percent of men convicted of assaulting a woman and 43 percent of men convicted of assaulting a child. Disproportionately high rates of domestic abuse also were documented among Pacific Islander families.

The law penalizes spousal rape. The Government convicted persons on this charge during the year. The National Collective of Rape Crisis groups, a private, nonprofit organization, claimed in 1998 that the majority of cases go unreported each year and that, of the cases that are reported to the police, only 10 to 15 percent result in convictions. The group reported that husbands and boyfriends committed about 25 percent of all sexual assaults.

The 1996 Domestic Violence Act broadened the definition of violence to include psychological abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, and allowing children to witness psychological abuse. It expanded intervention measures, such as the use of protection orders; education programs for men, women, and children; stronger police powers to arrest and detain offenders; improved access to legal services for women eligible for legal aid; and tougher penalties for breach of a protection order. The family court received 22,174 applications for protection orders under the act from 1996 through 1997.

The Government's strategy to prevent family violence included a range of objectives, such as providing victim support, incorporating successful innovations and proven methods from family violence centers into the national family violence programs (that is, the promotion of "best practice"), ensuring safety from violence, and implementing Maori-designed and delivered programs. The Government partially funded women's refuges, rape crisis centers, sexual abuse counseling, family violence networks, and violence prevention services.

Prostitution is legal; however, organizing and recruiting women into prostitution is not. There were reports of abuse and the involuntary detention of women involved in prostitution during the year. There were several credible reports that women were trafficked into the country and forced into prostitution.

While the law prohibits discrimination in employment and in rates of pay for equal or similar work, the Government acknowledged that in practice a gender earnings gap persists. Statistics for the second quarter of the year showed that women earned 86 percent of men's average ordinary hourly wage, up from 84.8 percent in 1999. Only 12 percent are partners in law firms, and 14 percent judges.

Source:

Country Report on Human Rights Practices in New Zealand

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/eap/756.htm>

New Zealand's 'new-girl network' at the top

<http://www.csmonitor.com/atcsmonitor/specials/women/politics/politics090800.html>