

Commentary from the Minister for Women's Affairs

HON RUTH DYSON

I wish to thank the Women's Studies Journal for asking me to share my views regarding women and violence today. This edition gives us the opportunity to explore women's experiences of violence and to reflect on both the achievements of the past and challenges for the future in this area.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour's statement to mark International Women's Day on 8 March this year talked about the widespread tolerance of violence against women that exists in communities. Her statement highlighted that 'it is essential that society, as a whole, recognise its role in fostering respect for human rights.'¹

New Zealand has a strong and proud history of being world leaders in women's rights. However, despite significant advances, there is still work to be done. Violence against women and in particular intimate partner violence has a devastating impact on women in New Zealand today. It affects the health, economic status, social participation and general wellbeing of women and their children.

The New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 2001 found that in 2000, women were more likely than men to be repeat victims of violent victimisations, and to be repeat victims of threats.² More recent research, such as the Auckland University study published in 2004, showed that 33 per cent of women in Auckland and 39 per cent of women in the Waikato had experienced at least one act of physical and/or sexual violence by a partner in their lifetime.³

Reflection

We need to reflect on the achievements of the past to understand the status of women today and to create a future direction that will achieve the vision of an inclusive New Zealand where all people enjoy opportunity to fulfil their potential, prosper and participate in the social, economic, political and cultural life of their communities and nation.

New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women

the right to vote. It is important to acknowledge such achievements and it is worth reflecting that women today have more opportunities than in 1893. We have also come a long way since 1954 when the first Family Planning Clinic was opened in the face of bitter opposition from many doctors.

An increased awareness of the prevalence of violence against women can be attributed to the increased recognition of women's rights in the 1960s through the feminist movement, and subsequently the formation of women's refuges and the establishment of rape crisis centres, and women's health organisations.⁴

Despite significant social and legislative advances, including the passing of the Domestic Violence Act 1995 which aims to prevent violence and recognises violence in all its forms as unacceptable behaviour, New Zealand continues to have a high incidence of family violence. Priority areas for action to address this are discussed below.

Priority Areas

The Government's Action Plan for New Zealand Women launched in 2004 capitalises on progress made and continues work towards improving the circumstances of women in New Zealand today. It is an integrated government approach.

One of the priority areas in the Action Plan for New Zealand Women is to reduce the incidence and impact of violence on women and children through *Te Rito: New Zealand Family Violence Prevention Strategy* and the *Crime Reduction Strategy*.

Opportunity for All New Zealanders (Opportunity for All), a summary statement of the Government's strategies to improve social outcomes, launched in December 2004, has identified family violence as one of five critical social issues. *Opportunity for All* will build upon the work already underway in *Te Rito*, and highlights the seriousness of this issue for government and government's desire to do even more to address family violence.

Complementary to the actions underway in the area of Family Violence, the Safer Communities Action Plan to Reduce Community Violence and Sexual Violence has been developed in the context of the Crime Reduction Strategy, to address identified gaps to reduce sexual violence and community violence in New Zealand. Implementation of this Action Plan is an important step towards a co-ordinated and com-

prehensive approach to reducing community and sexual violence.

Safety is fundamental to our wellbeing, and it is clear that violence has a devastating impact on women's wellbeing outcomes.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs is devoting more resources to identify the complex factors that influence the level of violence and how the current legislation is working. Part of this work is assessing the impact that policies and legislation designed to reduce the incidence and impact of violence are having on women. Domestic violence is predominantly carried out against women, and it is therefore important that gender analysis is used in policy development, implementation and evaluation.

The Government's commitment to addressing violence within New Zealand families will be achieved through:

- high-level leadership;
- a strong focus on monitoring and evaluation against an outcomes-based framework;
- an increased commitment by government agencies to work together; and
- building on the partnership between government and non-government agencies.

Government has a responsibility to develop the right policy, laws, and enforcement but violence is not something that the Government alone can fix. Ultimately every New Zealander has to take more personal responsibility.

Violence against women is an issue for all of us.

HON RUTH DYSON, *Minister for Women's Affairs*

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/view01> last accessed 5/05/2005
- ² New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 2001, Ministry of Justice, 82, 83, 94.
- ³ Fanslow, J., Robinson, E. 'Violence against women in New Zealand: prevalence and health consequences' (26 November 2004) *The New Zealand Medical Journal*, vol. 117, no. 1206.
- ⁴ McMaster, K., Wells, A. (2003). *Innovative Approaches to Stopping Family Violence*. Wellington: Steele Roberts Ltd, p. 8.

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