

Diversity Forum 2007: Young Women, Work and Diversity: Aspirations and Expectations

Background

- 1 The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) held a special topic forum as part of the Human Rights Commission's 2007 New Zealand Diversity Forum. The theme for MWA's forum was 'Young women, work and diversity: aspirations and expectations'. The event was an opportunity for a group of diverse young women from Auckland to discuss issues around career decision-making and how they view work fitting in with other aspects of their life in the future.
- 2 The event was co-facilitated by Parehinetai Stewart, a young woman from Wellington, and Shenagh Gleisner, the Chief Executive of MWA. A panel of six young women from diverse backgrounds led the discussion.¹
- 3 The event attracted approximately 80 participants, the vast majority of whom were senior secondary school students. The participants were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Māori, Pacific, Asian and Pākehā. The audience also included a group of young women from a teen parent unit. There was a small number of adult women who attended, mostly accompanying school students, as well as some representatives from women's organisations, and university students. While there was a diverse range of young women at the forum, an important group of young women who were not included was those who had disengaged from school at an early age.

Discussion – Career decision-making

- 4 The first discussion topic was career decision-making and young women's views of gendered occupational segregation (i.e. the tendency for men and women to do different types of jobs). The first part of the discussion focused on why young women believed that occupational segregation continues to exist, while the second part focused on whether or not they perceived this to be a problem.

Occupational segregation

- 5 The audience outlined a number of factors that they believed contributed to occupational segregation. Some believed that historical ideas about the roles of men and women continue to affect career choices. There was also a suggestion that New Zealand's geographical isolation means that it takes longer to reverse these trends.
- 6 The idea that men and women have inherent preferences for certain jobs, and that women prefer service and caring professions, was also discussed. It was

¹ Aspects of diversity that were covered include Māori, Pacific, Indian and Pākehā ethnic backgrounds, rural and urban locations, young women with disabilities and gay and heterosexual young women.

suggested that this stemmed from the idea that men have historically been hunters or providers and women have been nest guards or nurturers. It was also suggested that these attitudes not only affect the careers people choose, but the way other people react to men and women in non-traditional occupations (e.g. males working in childcare).

- 7 One person cautioned against confusing biological and cultural theories of gender differences. This person also questioned the 'choices' that people have about careers, and whether these are 'real' choices. Another person noted that gender is socially constructed and that people get 'hung up' on the fact that they are defined by their sex.
- 8 It was suggested that men and women want to work in an environment where they feel comfortable and that workplaces may need to change in order for this to happen. One of the panellists talked about how she had experienced this in the construction industry, particularly negotiating what she described as the 'old boys' association'. She believed that the people who make comments about what they think she is able to do wouldn't want their own daughters to be treated in this way.
- 9 There was also discussion around cultural differences and what this meant. One person thought there was a greater acceptance of men working in kohanga reo than there was of men working in mainstream childcare organisations. Another talked about her experiences as an exchange student in Mexico, which she described as being very old fashioned in that women were expected to study to be a teacher or nurse, marry, then stop work. This was likened to the experiences of previous generations of women in New Zealand.
- 10 Another student believed that there are still strong stereotypes about women, and that women need to make a stand against these stereotypes. One person suggested that fundamental changes were needed, in terms of the way women are portrayed in the media, and especially the obsession with beauty.

Does it matter that there is occupational segregation?

- 11 One person believed that occupational segregation meant there was a lack of female support and role models for women wanting to take up non-traditional roles. Some people commented that people shouldn't have to fight to be able to do the job that they want to do and that they would want their own children to be able to choose any job.
- 12 Barriers to overcoming occupational segregation that were identified included:
 - some industries have set standards that implicitly exclude men or women, for example occupations such as firefighting are designed primarily for men (entry standards, equipment) and therefore may not 'fit' women, despite the fact that women may be just as capable in this job
 - technology means that your gender shouldn't matter as much today and that physical strength shouldn't limit people in the way that it may once have

- societal expectations such as the controversy over men sitting next to unaccompanied children on aeroplanes is likely to dissuade men from entering professions that involve caring for children
- people's preferences for jobs that enable people to fit in family and community work, and are well paid.

13 Some of the benefits of overcoming occupational segregation include:

- women can bring a different culture to the workplace
- women bring a different perspective e.g. in architecture women might be more conscious of specific issues such as women walking alone at night or providing child friendly facilities.

Discussion: Can you have it all?

14 The second discussion focused on work-life balance and whether women could 'have it all'. There was some debate about what this actually meant, and whether as humans we can ever be satisfied. There were suggestions that it was possible to 'have it all' but that it was about prioritising and where you choose to put your focus. At some points in time it might be necessary to put more emphasis on family and at other times focus on career. One panellist believed that you need to be extremely organised to manage different roles and also be prepared to make some sacrifices.

15 Some women described how they were choosing careers that would make it easier for them to have it all (e.g. ECE teacher). Another couldn't see how it would be possible for her to have a successful career and a family as this would mean stopping work at the peak of her career.

16 Some specific problems that women identified were:

- a lack of paid paternity leave means that women are more likely to have to take on caring responsibilities and therefore are less able to advance in the workforce in the same way as men can
- the fact that students and fathers are not eligible for paid parental leave meant that for one woman the only option for her was to care for her child while her partner was in paid work
- there are good opportunities for people to study while their children are young but there is a lack of affordable childcare facilities on campus.

17 The group were asked whether they thought that men could 'have it all'. There was some debate about the role of men. Some suggested that men don't have to leave the workforce to have children and they can therefore progress their career, while the woman must compromise her career in order to have children. Others indicated that there is an expectation that either partner will take the day off if a child is sick. Another indicated that she and her partner had negotiated sharing of work, study and childcare so that they could both achieve their career goals and care for their children.

- 18 Attitudes were considered to be an important factor in decisions about how paid work and care is shared. One person suggested that some men think that going to work is the best way to show that they love their children. Another person suggested that attitudes about who takes on paid work and care, particularly amongst men, change as they get older.

Ideas for change

- 19 The audience was asked what could be done to make a difference for young women. The audience put forward the following suggestions:
- look into childcare for people who are studying and in the workplace
 - involve boys in these discussions (e.g. have a joint forum with boys and girls)
 - have youth representatives whom MWA can consult
 - change the portrayal of women in the media and magazines, in particular the emphasis on beauty
 - provide mentoring support for young women
 - get some good stories in the media of young women who are succeeding
 - increase evidence base e.g. through surveys
 - provide scholarships
 - develop networks of young women interested in issues for young women
 - if forums are held in the future have them at a different time of year (e.g. earlier in the year), advertise them more widely and try to get young women who have disengaged from school thinking about careers
 - more discussion in schools about career options (i.e. expand their knowledge of what's available beyond what their parents tell them).

Key issues raised by panellists

- 20 One panellist outlined the difficulties associated with managing various roles, including being a mother, family member, student and tutor. These difficulties included lacking time to study when her baby was young, juggling being a mother with study and work commitments, and living away from home. Financial and emotional support from family was critical at this time and she suggested that her experience would have been made easier if universities offered free childcare during scheduled class times, enabling mothers to breastfeed and spend more time with their children when studying.
- 21 Aspects of diversity such as disability, sexuality or ethnicity are a huge part of a person's life and shapes who they are, but are not always the most important part of who they are. Diversity can create opportunities, as well as presenting barriers. For example, one panellist's disability means that doing things that other young people do requires more planning and resources. Another panellist spoke of the fear that people will judge and criticise her for being gay.

- 22 One panellist spoke about how as an Indian born in Western society she strives to extract the positive aspects of both cultures. She spoke about how culture defines society, fuelling differences and highlighting similarities, and that there is a real need to understand these differences and similarities. Her culture and her parents' values had shaped her decisions when she was younger, including decisions about careers and school subjects. She highlighted changes in cultural expectations: from the expectation that girls would become housewives to a strong emphasis on girls needing to have an education.
- 23 Young women from rural communities have quite different experiences to those in urban environments. Living in a rural area affects the availability of school subjects and the transition to secondary school and tertiary education, with young people having to leave their hometowns for higher education. Tertiary education can be more expensive for young people from rural areas as it is more difficult to save for the cost of tertiary education and in order to undertake tertiary education they are more likely to have to leave home.
- 24 Our panellists considered that it is important to have support and surround yourself with supportive people, including adults who are willing to give you a chance to gain experience. One panellist finished with the quote 'it's possible to be different and still be all right'.