

FOREWORD – KUPU WHAKATAKI

Being a young person from Paengaroa and from a family that was relatively disconnected from the law, the only engagement with it was negative and it felt really inaccessible. Not only was it a language understood by few, it was a tool for those in the ruling class to wield over the poor and the vulnerable.

So, my entry into the legal profession (and later politics) was unconventional. Like many in my whānau, I left school at 16 and spent a few years working in KFC and other odd jobs. My sliding doors moment came while working in a bar in Auckland, when I discovered the regular I had spent hours vigorously debating law, politics, and social inequality was a law professor. Eventually, he brought in an application pack, telling me I should think about doing a law degree. I thought why not! I never looked back.

My first job was as a young law clerk working for the judiciary before going on to private law firms. I enjoyed the intellectual challenge; it was really interesting work, but the wider culture of the legal profession was one where women were objectified and had to deal with lewd remarks and inappropriate behaviour.

We saw a lot of women leave the profession, in part because of that underlying culture crisis and, in part because the profession was structured in a way that made it almost untenable to become a senior, a partner or otherwise - because of the lifestyle associated with it.

There was a lot of alcohol, long hours, working through the night and pressure. Lots, and lots, of pressure.

For me, there were the added “ism’s” which came with also being wahine Māori and from the rainbow community. That inter-section of so many differences meant I not only had to contend with being a woman, but also being the total antithesis of what the legal profession was, and expected you to be. Trying to “fit the mould” was never going to work for me. And that was very hard at times.

We need to reflect on the significant changes the likes of the #MeToo

movement has brought and the brave young lawyers who stood up for themselves, and others. Proof that using your voice, and telling your stories, your honest stories, can always spark change. The year that was 2018 was undeniably a watershed moment for the legal profession and made everyone hold up a mirror up and ask hard questions. It needed to happen. As the author Ursula Le Guin once said:

We are volcanoes. When we women offer our experiences as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains.

I want to commend the work of New Zealand Law Society President Tiana Epati – the first person of Pasifika descent to hold that role – for the work she, and the Law Society, are doing to address toxic workplaces and promote women in discussions about equality. Ms Epati has also been staunch about ensuring the conversation is bigger than sexual harassment, and covers racism and the much more pervasive bullying. It has been a tough mountain to climb.

But through that reckoning, the tide is turning.

Since 2016, the number of women who are lawyers in firms, in-house lawyers, barristers, and practitioners has increased by nearly 20 per cent. In 2020, women accounted for almost 53 per cent of New Zealand-based lawyers.

If the rate of women being admitted as lawyers continues, women will account for about 60 per cent of the profession by 2030.

When the gender of lawyers first began being collected in 1977, just 4.6 per cent of the profession were women.

In 1988, the Rt Hon Helen Winkelmann became the first female partner in her firm's then 117-year history. In 2019, she was sworn in as New Zealand's 13th Chief Justice.

More and more women – particularly under this Government – are smashing the glass ceiling. We are regularly seeing women appointments in the Queens Counsel rounds. More appointments of women and ethnically diverse lawyers are being made to the judiciary than ever before. Dame Cindy Kiro is Aotearoa's first female Māori governor-general. Rebecca Keoghan will be the first woman Chair of the Fire and Emergency New Zealand board. Public sector boards are now made up of over 50 per cent women.

There is also what I would describe as collective consciousness around issues of gender discrimination and discrimination more generally. These issues

were just never even spoken of when I entered the profession. Ever. The fact we now openly discuss it, and call it out, cannot be underestimated.

So, we have to keep going. We did not come this far, to only come this far. My aspiration is that young women from any background can enter the profession and contribute through her unique experience and her knowledge. And bring her whole self. Whether from Paengaroa, or Ruatoria, or Te Kaha. There is a place for you in this profession. My hope is that the 16 year old girl, working in a bar, with dreadlocks and nothing but true grit and big dreams can see her way right through to the apex of Government, if she chooses.

I did, and there is no looking back.

Hon Kiritapu Allan

Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Tūwharetoa

Minister of Conservation, Minister for Emergency Management,

Associate Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage,

Associate Minister for the Environment, Member for East Coast, Labour Party

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