



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Counting for nothing

Rachel Mackintosh © 26 November 2017

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” Audre Lorde

In 2012, a woman called Kristine Bartlett had been working as a carer in the aged care sector for 19 years. Her pay rate was a whisper above the minimum wage. She had this in common with tens of thousands of care workers throughout New Zealand. So far, so ordinary.

She describes herself - in retrospect - as having been a quiet person at the time. She didn't consider that she had too much to say.

Nevertheless, she went to court and she spoke. Her argument before the court was that her work was valuable; that she was a skilled person doing a responsible job; that she had physical skills used to feed, clothe, bathe and move people; that she had medical skills used to administer correct medicines; that she had emotional, social and counselling skills used to relate to the people in her care and to their families; that her work required significant skill, effort and responsibility ... that she had responsibility for some of the most vulnerable people in this country, for members of our families

So her work was valuable.
And it was undervalued.

She also argued that the reason her work was undervalued was that it is predominantly performed by women.

The first court said: “Yes, Kristine. Your work is skilled, responsible and valuable. It has been undervalued and underpaid, and it has been undervalued because it has mostly been done by women. This is a breach of the Equal Pay Act 1972.”

Her employer, Terra Nova, appealed.

The next court said: “Yes, Kristine. Your work is skilled, responsible and valuable. It has been undervalued and underpaid because it is mostly done by women.”

Her employer, Terra Nova, appealed.

The next court said: “Yes, Kristine. Your work is skilled responsible and valuable and you have been underpaid.”

You begin to get the picture. At each point in our court system, Kristine's employer appealed until the Supreme Court – the highest court possible – said: “Yes, Kristine. You have been underpaid because you do work that is mostly done by women. This is a breach of the Equal Pay Act 1972.”

The Supreme Court referred the case back to the Employment Court so that the correct rate could be set for Kristine's work.

At this point the Government – who funds rest homes – approached the employers and the unions in the industry and said they would like to negotiate.

The rest, you could say, is history. Our shorthand for that history is “the equal pay settlement”.

In April this year, that settlement was a negotiated deal in which the government agreed to fund – and the employers agreed to pay – increases of up to 49% over three years to 55,000 working people.

A profile of Kristine Bartlett published on Stuff back then, in April, gives more of a sense of what the settlement means:

“As she cleans up their incontinent mess – while assuring them it happens to her too – they tell her their stories. How they went to war. How they lost husbands to war. How their husbands beat or abused them but they couldn't make money so couldn't leave. How they love her. How they want to die.”

In the same article, Kristine says, “It's not about me.” And she describes how she was simply the first of thousands of people – mostly women – across three unions who joined the case and joined the campaign. Their stories are equally important to understanding the campaign. And over the five years since 2012, many women have added their stories to Kristine's and created a national conversation, without which the settlement would not have happened.

One woman works with elderly clients doing the sort of work that Kristine Bartlett does, but working in clients' homes. She has been working at the whim of an employer constantly changing rosters and varying her hours, because of the changing needs of the clients. At Christmas time, clients often have no need of home support, because that is the time they spend with their families, and their families take over the care work. This particular woman is a solo parent and I heard her, in a room full of people, tell her story very simply, no embellishments: she said that she had had to spend Christmas at home, with no food on the table and no presents to give her daughter, because there was no money.

And when the settlement was announced, the campaigners were able to start looking forward: “It will be so great to be able to pay the bills and send the children to different sports,” said one. Another said, “I do 11-hour shifts three times a week. I won't have to do that any more. I'll have time to spend with my husband.”

These are not extravagant dreams. They are the stuff of ordinary lives, and yet these women had not been able to enjoy the normal markers of ordinary lives.

Mark Twain said, “History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes.”

In 1988 Marilyn Waring, academic, goat farmer and former National Party MP, published a book called “Counting for nothing: what men value and what women are worth”.

In this book, Waring explains:

“While women, children and the environment are counted as nothing, the entire international economic system calls war productive and valuable. The men who rule us are willing to cause and perpetrate wars and mass destruction. The policy propaganda of national income accounting generates a belief that many economic problems — unemployment, underutilisation of capital, lack of growth — are susceptible to improvement through military spending.”

We measure and value what happens when mostly male workers produce weapons, blow things up and then rebuild them. They are doing something that counts. This is production.

Women, at home, holding the traumatised, wiping their tears, cleaning their shit and nursing their spirits, are doing nothing that counts. This is not production.

Waring points out that in the current system of national income accounting, women are considered “non-producers” and as such they cannot expect to gain from the distribution of benefits that flow from production. Issues like .. environmental conservation .. are likewise excluded from the calculation of value in traditional economic theory. As a result, public policy, determined by these same accounting processes, inevitably overlooks the importance of the environment and half the world's population.

“Counting for nothing” has thus laid the groundwork and made arguments for removing the sexist assumptions from how society values the contributions of men and women. Waring made a clear case for valuing wellbeing over markets.

And here is where the rhyme of history can be seen.

It used to make a perfect, twisted sense that when women started doing caring work for money, they should receive low pay for it. After all, caring was only what women naturally did all the time. It could hardly be expected to attract more than basic pay.

Marilyn Waring's work – among centuries of feminist arguments – was part of what swept that view away and made the equal pay settlement possible. The court agreed that what “the men who rule us” had seen as unimportant, inherent skills, were vital, complex and worthy of decent pay.

World economists and the Supreme Court of New Zealand were able to see with clarity that skill and a contribution to society are valuable, and that the skewed view that women's skills and contributions were worth less than men's was pure sexism.

The rhyme of history crops up again when it comes to doing something about it.

In the case of world economic measures, Waring came up against economists who agreed with her basic arguments, but felt that “the stability and longitudinal comparability of statistics in the existing system should not be disturbed.” As she says, “This ensures a continued vicarious and second class relationship of ‘the maintenance of well-being in the community’ to the continued primary importance of ‘winning the war’ and of ‘the market.’ ”

There is work to be done to put this right.

In the case of the equal pay settlement, there are those in this country who believe that it is great to value women's work, but hold that the equal pay deal cannot be implemented, because there are technical issues with the government's distribution of the funding. Thus, there are women who are having their working hours cut and their jobs redefined, to work around the technical issues. Again, this ensures – in Waring's worlds – the continued .. second class relationship of the maintenance of well-being in the community to the continued primary importance of the market.

There is work to be done to put this right.

What does this mean for a Unitarian congregation that has, as a central principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of all people”?

For those women whose stories we have heard, whether women's work counts or not, it remains money that counts. Money is what does or does not enable them to put food on the table, give their children Christmas presents and the chance to play sport, pay the bills and spend time with their loved ones.

We cannot provide the money that counts for those women, but we can support the accounting for women's work and we can support the recounting of women's stories.

There will be other women, other stories and other work that has yet to be properly valued. The Equal Pay Act will be amended to include a straightforward process for equal pay claims for work done mainly by women. In the spirit of those resisting any change to economic income accounting, the previous Government had drafted a law that would have made it harder, not easier, for other women to achieve equal pay. And that matters because now, mental health workers are on the point of a settlement. Midwives, school support staff, and supermarket workers are likely to be next.

I began today by quoting Audre Lorde and I quote her again. She says: “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

We can support the recounting of women's stories, and we can support actions that become necessary to honour those stories and to value those who tell them. We can allow that it will be okay to disturb the stability and longitudinal comparability of statistics. We can argue that cutting a person's hours rather than redistributing the fruits of their caring labour is unacceptable.

These arguments may be uncomfortable, they may make us afraid, but we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

I close with one final thought from Audre Lorde:

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”