



What are we waiting for? — the pitfalls of respectability

Rachel Mackintosh © 8 March 2020

The seeds of International Women's day were sown the year my grandmother was born. In 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter working hours, better pay and the right to vote. It was the Socialist Party of America who declared the first (US) national women's day a year later.

The idea to make the day international came in 1910, at an international socialist conference of working women in Copenhagen. An attendee called Clara Zetkin suggested it and the 100 women present from 17 countries unanimously agreed. The first international celebration was in 1911, in Austria, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland.

The demands of the 15,000 in New York were radical. Women's day marked a radical programme. For women to have decent work, decent pay and an equal voice, we needed a change at the roots of society. Socialist women declaring a day for women showed defiance of the master-servant relationship.

One hundred and ten years later, what are we waiting for? Decent work, equal pay and an equal voice. The master-servant relationship has deep roots.

We don't often talk about the master-servant relationship nowadays, but it still exists. Unions are the only institutions that exist to challenge that unequal power relationship. And Unitarians can be allies in the challenge.

Closer to home, in Aotearoa, Kate Sheppard would not have declared herself a socialist, but what she had been demanding 20 years earlier was equally radical.

Kate Sheppard and her comrades are best known for their hard-fought and successful demand for votes for women. We proudly declare our world-first status and remember that women first voted here in 1893.

Votes for women are not a prize in themselves, but are a proxy for something else. They are a proxy for an equal place in society with men. Kate Sheppard and her comrades had a vision of what that equal place would look like.

Kate Sheppard started the National Council of Women — the oldest women’s organisation in the country — and the National Council of Women had another demand after the success of the campaign for votes: equal pay for women.

What are we waiting for? One hundred and twenty-five years later, we are waiting for the realisation of that part of Kate Sheppard’s vision: equal pay for women.

It is reasonably well known that Kate Sheppard was a founding member in this country of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (the WCTU). The WCTU preceded and motivated the campaign for votes for women. This factoid from herstory is known but less talked about. It’s easy simply to regard the WCTU as a bunch of wowsers (I think the word wowser has changed over the years — I don’t mean wowser, as in wowie! I mean wowser as in killjoy). But the WCTU wasn’t against alcohol because they were against joy. They identified alcohol as a source of poverty and violence. Men, often sole breadwinners and, if not, certainly paid far more than their wives — were drinking away the family income and coming home drunk and violent. The women of that organisation recognised that poverty and violence disproportionately affect women — and many of them would have had the bruises and the rickets to prove it. They identified women’s suffrage as a tool to lift women out of poverty and to free us from violence.

What are we waiting for? We are waiting for the realisation of that part of Kate Sheppard’s vision: a world free from violence and poverty.

Radical stuff.

The subtitle of this talk is, “The pitfalls of respectability”

In 1975, International Women’s Day became a day recognised for the first time by the United Nations. That year was international women’s year — riding the crest of second-wave feminism in the West. That year was also the year of the first united women’s convention in this country. The United Nations held a big conference in Mexico City, and another in Copenhagen in 1980 and another in Nairobi in 1985. Then in 1995, at the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the nations of the world produced the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. The concerns of the socialist women of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had gone mainstream. The United Nations governments would now put resources into realising a world with decent work, equal pay, and an equal voice for women. A world where women were free from poverty and from violence. This would entail attention to women’s economic situation, our health, our education, to our experience of violence, to our portrayal in the media, to the experience of girls, to our human rights.

Women's equality had gone mainstream. Every year since Beijing, the UN member states, non-governmental organisations and trade unions have met to monitor the progress of the *Platform for Action*. This year is Beijing plus 25. As an aside, the gathering in New York, which was due to take place this coming fortnight, has been suspended because of COVID-19.

And yet, what are we waiting for? We are waiting for decent work, for equal pay and for an equal voice. We are waiting to be free from violence and poverty.

How can that be, with all those resources?

In the 1990s, Kate Sheppard appeared on the New Zealand \$10 note, and in 1999, in time for the new millennium, she replaced the Queen on the front. Can't get much more mainstream or respectable than that.

So, what is wrong with being respectable?

When you look up the history of our \$10 note in *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, it tells of our pride at being the first country to grant women the vote. What's wrong with that? Women were not "granted" the right to vote *by* this country. Women fought for the right to vote *in* this country. One in three adult women signed the petition to achieve that. Women, and their male allies, campaigned for years for the right to vote as a means to end poverty and violence.

When the respectable mainstream tells the story, it becomes a respectable story of the powerful granting something to the weak; the challenge to the master-servant relationship disappears from history.

The main angle we see in the mainstream on International Women's Day is that it is a celebration of the achievements of women. I don't condemn that. I don't want always to be bleak. It is good to feel joy and take pleasure in wonder, beauty and achievement.

However, as it has been said, a woman's work is never done or, as Clay said last week, "This is not a once and for all task. The world must be civilised again and again with each new generation."

So while we celebrate, let's not allow the stories to be sanitised, the herstories to be erased, the project to be framed by the powerful, who might feel magnanimous enough to redistribute some resources. Let's not fail to understand the problem of the master-servant relationship.

Last time I spoke in this pulpit, I said we need a radical recalibration of what it is to be human. I was talking about all people having equal value. Truly equal value, not the weak having value bestowed by the powerful. Not the servant having value bestowed by the master.

I spoke about the equal pay case that recognised that women's traditional care work — skilled, responsible, difficult work — had been undervalued because it was mostly done by women. The recognition was momentous; the solution was impressive but temporary: a \$2 billion settlement to increase the pay of 55,000 people. We certainly celebrate that, and feel joy and wonder and a sense of achievement.

But, a woman's work is never done, and that settlement gave no guarantee beyond 2021 that pay in the care sector will continue to rise. We have done some other work, though, in this area. The PSA — the Public Service Association — had raised a claim against the State Services Commission before the equal pay case, claiming the eradication of systematic, embedded unequal pay. I worked with the PSA, other state unions in health and education, and with the State Services Commission and other state agencies to negotiate five Gender Pay Principles. These principles are a guide to the ongoing work of increasing women's pay to the level of men's and keeping it there. These principles address all the things that contribute to women being paid less than men, including the traditional undervaluing of "women's" skills.

The principles contribute to recalibrating what it is to be human:

Principle one: Freedom from bias and discrimination — because the bias of the powerful and their discrimination against women contributes to women being paid less than men.

Principle two: Transparency and accessibility — because secrecy in pay scales and hidden decisions about pay rates have a direct contribution, in combination with discrimination and bias, to women being paid less than men.

Principle three: Relationship between paid and unpaid work — because women do vastly more unpaid work than men do (not in my house, but in general) and that work currently has no economic value. When women take time out from paid work, they are valued less when they return.

Principle four: Sustainability — because this work is not a once-and-for-all task. The world must be civilised again and again with each generation.

Principle five: Engagement — and I call this the union principle, because unless the people doing the work are involved in designing their pay systems and negotiating their rates, the system will always deliver more of what the master wants and less of what the servant needs.

When these principles are implemented, they will provide a method for eradicating and keeping eradicated the pay imbalance between men and women. This will also take money. The world's billionaires (fewer than

2,500 people) own more wealth than 60% of the world's population (4.2 billion). So there is money. I am confident the billionaires don't need it all.

So we have a tool for addressing women's poverty, for achieving decent work and equal pay. We need others too. But this is one.

We also need a tool to address gender-based violence.

Last year, the International Labour Organisation passed the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No 190).

The Convention is the first international instrument to recognise the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment. It is comprehensive and leaves no one behind.

It recognises that different people are at different levels of vulnerability — that one size doesn't fit all people. It recognises that migrant workers, indigenous workers, disabled workers, queer workers, older workers, young workers and women workers are particularly vulnerable to violence and harassment in the world of work.

It recognises that the world of work extends beyond the workplace, and that our home lives are not hermetically sealed from our work lives.

It recognises that all parties — governments, employers and unions — have pieces of the answer, and all can act to eliminate violence and harassment.

Crucially, the convention has a single definition of violence and harassment — harassment is not sealed off as being something lesser. It recognises that violence and harassment are on a continuum, they are a range of behaviours and practices. Harassment counts too. Harassment is part of a culture of violence, as people who harass silence and weaken their victims.

Convention 190 combines three different approaches: a human rights approach, a health and safety approach, and a feminist approach. It does away with the argument about whether violence and harassment are a health and safety issue or a human rights issue. It brings together three strands in a powerful convention that offers practical, tripartite ways to prevent, address and eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work.

This convention is an international law. Countries are beginning to ratify it — Uruguay was the first in January this year. New Zealand had no current plans to do so.

So what are we waiting for?

We are waiting for a world of decent work, equal pay and an equal voice.

And we have some tools. We can read the Gender Pay Principles on the Ministry for Women's Website and think about who in our lives might need to use them. We can urge our government to ratify Convention 190. We can't do everything at once, but we can do these two things. We can be allies in the challenge to unequal power relationships.

If not us, then who? If not now, then when?