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Story: Women's movement

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Cook, M., 2011a

Women's rights and temperance

Women's rights and the temperance movement were intertwined in New Zealand. Large numbers of women joined temperance organisations from the 1870s, motivated by the desire for a secure home, and concern at the damage done by alcohol abuse. Within these organisations women were usually accepted as men's equals, and were able to vote, stand for committees and hold all official posts.

When Mary Clement Leavitt of the United States-based Women's Christian Temperance Union arrived in New Zealand in 1885, her mission was to set up a local equivalent. New Zealand women were enthusiastic at the prospect of their own organisation. Within seven months the first 10 branches of the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) were formed. It was the country's national women's organisation.

... conducted by ...
be in attendance.
Hymns will be used
LADIES ONLY.

Temperance
touring, 1885



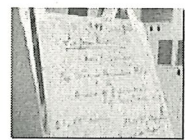
Māori in the
WCTU



Temperance
tearooms



Thanking Kate
Sheppard



1893 suffrage
petition

Women's zeal

Many men in the temperance movement offered the WCTU wholehearted support. '[G]o your ways, work out your own destiny, in faith and love, in earnest zeal and womanly tenderness,' wrote the *Temperance Herald*. Delighted and impressed by what women were achieving, the men conceded that temperance societies run by men 'with all their knowledge and experience of business could [not] show such a good record'.¹

Members

Members included women well-known for activism. Learmonth Dalrymple, advocate for girls' secondary schooling and access to university, labour activist Harriet Morison and kindergarten-movement leader Lavinia Kelsey were all part of the WCTU.

Many members belonged to Baptist, Methodist or Congregationalist churches, which were more committed to the equal status of women than other churches. A number of prominent members of the WCTU were unmarried, or had no or few children. Often reasonably well-to-do, many employed a servant. These factors gave these women time free from domestic responsibilities and allowed them to be politically active. But WCTU leaders' lack of husbands and children was used against them by opponents, who described them disparagingly as 'old maids, or wives who are not mothers, or eccentrics'.²

Good Christian women

Christianity was taken for granted in the WCTU. The union's suffrage leader, Kate Sheppard, wrote that 'we gladly enlist rich and poor, high and low, Priest, Levite or Samaritan ... We are perfectly sure that if our Lord Jesus Christ were here he would not hinder one of His followers from engaging in temperance, or any other good work, because of an error in the theology'.³

In the 1890s many Māori women joined the union. They were concerned at the effect of alcohol on their communities, and its relationship to land sales – some men were getting drunk and signing sales papers, or

selling land to pay debts to tavern owners or to buy alcohol. At the first Māori conference of the WCTU, held in 1911, seven unions were represented.

Activities

The WCTU was concerned with all matters affecting women, not just temperance. Classes were held presenting new ideas about healthy clothing, food, and diets for children and the sick. Pre-school centres, staffed by WCTU volunteers, were set up. Working women's claims for better conditions and pay, and attempts to unionise, were actively supported. 'Fallen women' (those who became pregnant outside marriage, or prostitutes) were helped to find homes and employment.

During the 1880s economic depression the union's branches ran soup kitchens and raised funds for a night shelter for the homeless. 'Prison-gate missions' were set up, which met newly released prisoners (particularly women) and supported them until they found their feet.

The union campaigned persistently over decades for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, which allowed women suspected of working as prostitutes to be forcibly examined and held for treatment. The WCTU also lobbied the government to set up clinics to treat venereal disease.

Temperance was a broad movement, within which the WCTU focused on preventing sale of alcohol to minors (those under 21) and children, ending exploitation of women barmaids and getting women the right to vote in licensing elections.

The vote

From the later 1880s to 1893, the WCTU led the campaign to get women the vote in national elections. Kate Sheppard, leader of the union's franchise department, became the face of that campaign.

During the campaign for the vote, Christianity and at times temperance took a back seat to suffrage.

Bright spark

Suffrage campaigner Lily Kirk travelled New Zealand speaking for the cause. Her appearance on stage prompted 'an outburst of hearty greeting'. Addressing her audiences as 'beloved comrades' or 'sisters', Kirk urged them on. They were crusaders, she said, able to bring about a 'bright and bloodless revolution'. Her bright and racy manner combined with a persuasive earnestness delighted listeners in town and country alike.⁴

Persuading politicians to support women's franchise was critical to the campaign. WCTU members and other women engaged in vigorous lobbying, wrote letters to newspapers, published pamphlets, and held or participated in sometimes rowdy public meetings as the campaign gathered pace.

Petitions were an important element. The final petition was signed by more than 30,000 women over the age of 21 (then the age at which men could vote). It was the largest petition the New Zealand Parliament had ever received.

Footnotes:

1. Bronwyn Dalley and Yvonne Robertson, *'Unsexed women': The nineteenth century women's movement and the background to suffrage in New Zealand*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1994, p. 37.
2. *New Zealand Herald*, 8 March 1887, p. 6.
3. Quoted in Patricia Grimshaw, *Women's suffrage in New Zealand*. Auckland: Auckland University Press; Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 31.
4. Quoted in Frances Porter, 'Atkinson, Lily May 1866–1921'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, (last accessed 1 June 2010).

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