WOMEN
A History of Women's Organisations in New Zealand
Ngā Ropū Wāhine o te Motu
TOGETHER
EDITED BY
Anne Else

HISTORICAL BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS
DAPHNE BRASELL ASSOCIATES PRESS
tried to prevent a proposal to allow medical stu
controlled St Helen’s Hospital in Wellington, they
were initiated by a lobby
spearheaded by women doctors such as Agnes Bennett and Sylvia Chapman, and
supported by many women’s organisations.

Two major inquiries into birth in this period had far-reaching con
sequences for women. In 1923, a Royal Commission investigated the deaths
from puerperal sepsis of five women at an Auckland private hospital, and in
1937 a Committee of Inquiry into Maternity Services heard submissions from
many women’s groups. The 1923 inquiry resulted in the introduction of rigid
techniques for asepsis in public hospitals; the second led to the first Labour
government introducing provisions, via the Social Security Act 1938, for free
antenatal and hospital care under the doctor of a woman’s choice. Women’s
organisations were generally well satisfied with the outcomes of these inquiries,
and felt that for once, women’s wishes had been heard.

Another inquiry, this time into abortion, was held in 1936, occasioned by
the number of women (most of them married) dying from septic abortions during
the Depression years. Women’s groups who made submissions included the
Dominion Federation of Women’s Institutes, Mothers’ Union, NCW, Plunket
Society, WDFU, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Working
Women’s Movement, Women’s Service Guild and Labour Party women’s
groups. While these organisations generally took the same pronatalist line as the
committee of inquiry in condemning abortion, they were also concerned about
the position of individual women, especially overburdened housewives. They
almost universally argued for a motherhood endowment or family allowance
which would enable mothers to have babies without financial strain, and maternity
allowances to cover the costs of confinement. Some supported the establish
ment of birth control clinics for married women so that women could space
their children, stating that this would if anything increase rather than reduce the
population. They argued, perhaps for the first time, for ‘the mother’s right to say
when she will bear children’. In the event, the committee recommended against
any liberalisation of abortion law, gave only lukewarm support for hospital
birth control clinics for married women, and appealed to women to have more
children.

Prompted by the inquiry, some women had already taken the matter of
informing women about birth control into their own hands. New Zealand
women had become so desperate about access to contraception that some had
written to Marie Stopes in Britain for help. In 1936, a group of primarily left
wing women formed the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society (later the
New Zealand Family Planning Association). This lay women’s group uncon
sciously followed the model of the earlier Social Hygiene Society in providing
information and referrals, although without the moralising. The society had
straightforward practical aims, although it described its work in pronatalist
terms. One early brochure proclaimed: ‘New Zealand Needs Babies! ... Women
Want Babies! ... Family Planning Means ... Healthier Mothers. Sturdier
Babies. Happier Homes.’ Until the mid-1970s, it would not usually provide
contraception for single women.

Three other important women’s health organisations were initiated the
following year. The Women’s Health League (WHL), a largely Māori organisation