

Royal
Commissions

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WOMEN

A History of Women's Organisations in New Zealand
Ngā Ropū Wāhine o te Motu

TOGETHER

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tried to prevent a proposal to allow medical students to control St Helen's Hospital in Wellington, they were 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 consequences 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 establishment 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'.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 unconsciously 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.'¹⁵ 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