



THERE IS NO AWAY.

NEW WOMEN

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# REBEL S A L U T E

*As New Zealand celebrates 125  
years of women getting the vote,  
NEXT talks to feminist pioneers of  
the 1970s about fighting for  
our future* BY SARAH CATHERALL

de for \$

Great  
Stride





# 1972

It was the year Germaine Greer, author of bestselling feminist tome *The Female Eunuch*, visited New Zealand and gave a rousing speech at the Auckland Town Hall, further inspiring the local women fighting for their liberation. That same year, the country's first feminist magazine, *Broadsheet*, was launched by a group of women's liberationists in an Auckland living room. The first national Women's Liberation Conference was held in Auckland, and the private sector Equal Pay Act was also passed, helping to ensure female workers were paid the same rates as men.

In 1972, almost 80 years had passed since Kate Sheppard and other suffragists won the right for New Zealand women to go to the polls. However, according to Otago University's Professor Barbara Brookes, not a lot of progress had been made since 1893. "The world was organised to suit men," says Professor Brookes, a women's historian who penned the 2016 book *A History of New Zealand Women*.

From the late 1960s, second-wave feminists had begun to agitate for change. Professor Brookes says that from 1967 to 1977, women's rights were asserted in new and urgent ways. In that pivotal decade,

second-wave feminists fought for many of the changes that women benefit from today. Some of the prominent feminists of that time – such as Paddy Walker, Sonja Davies and Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan – have since passed away.

Award-winning film-maker Gaylene Preston took part in anti-rape street marches in the late 1970s. The writer and director of documentaries and films including *My Year with Helen* and *Ruby and Rata*, 71-year-old Gaylene says many of the things women take for granted today – like abortion and matrimonial property rights – were fought for in the 1970s. "I said to one young woman once, 'How do you think all that was achieved? By everyone being nice? It was achieved by a lot of hard work.'"

## GENDER APARTHEID

Anne Else sits in the living room of her Wellington home lined with bookshelves heaving with tomes. The 74-year-old writer and researcher has been holed up in her office upstairs where she's working on a digital project about women's organisations, which she's editing for the 125-year suffrage celebrations. >>

'Forget glass ceilings. We faced brick walls'



Right: Sue Kedgley with Connie Purdew, launching the National Organisation for Women in 1972.

Centre: Graduate Anne Else in 1966. Far right: The first issue of *Broadsheet*, 1972.

Below: Sue meeting Germaine Greer at Auckland Airport on her visit to New Zealand, with Ngahuia Te Awekotuku dressed up as a witch in the foreground.



Talking about the world she encountered as a young woman in the 60s, she frowns. “Forget glass ceilings. We faced brick walls.”

When Anne left school, it was a given that women would marry and serve their husbands. Anne married her first husband, Chris Else, when she was 19, at a time when she believed the only way to have sex safely was to become someone’s wife. The contraceptive pill was introduced in 1961, but was only available to married women.

It was unusual for women to go to university, but having been named dux of her school, Anne went in 1963 and earned a Bachelor of Arts in English, Latin, French and history. Her lecturers were almost exclusively men. “I did exactly what I did at school because I didn’t know there were other subjects I could study,” she recalls. “The only jobs for the academic girls were teaching, nursing, lab assistant or librarian.”

Anne’s first son, Jonathan, was born in 1965. Her husband had to go to work while she was in labour. “Birth was appalling. You were treated like a naughty schoolgirl. We were sent into a room at National Women’s, our pubic hair was shaved with cold water, and when I rang the bell because I had been in labour for quite a long time, the matron came in and told me off. How dare I be making such a fuss?”

Anne describes public life in the 60s and 70s as “gender apartheid”. Public bodies and businesses were run by men. The only women in any offices were the typists and



Left: Ngahuia Te Awekotuku in 2010, after her investiture as MNZM for services to Māori culture.

Below: Gaylene Preston in 2017, at the premiere of her documentary *My Year With Helen*.



*'Magazines & newspapers were full of remarks putting*

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tea ladies. Until 1975, only 11 women had been in Parliament.

"The magazines and newspapers were full of remarks putting women down – the 'bimbo' and the 'battle axe' and nothing in between. Advertisements were appallingly sexist and racist. That's the world we grew up in. It's really hard to imagine now."

## SPREADING THE WORD

When Anne returned to university to study sociology, which saw her writing papers on feminism, it was 1971 – about the time the women's liberation movement began with a bang. She joined the newly formed Auckland University women's liberation group, then in 1972, got together with Sandra Coney and others to found *Broadsheet*. Sandra wrote in the magazine's first editorial that a group of women were "sitting around wondering what to do. We wanted some action but we were having a spot of bother deciding what it was going to be... We could read, we could write, and hey, someone said, 'we can type'. A newspaper, that's great."

They sold 200 copies of the first 12-page edition. In it and following issues, women's liberationists penned stories about reproductive health, domestic violence, paid work, racism and Māori rights, and published letters and reports on what women's groups were up to.

"We were concerned about everything," says Anne. "It was the expectation that you would get married, have children, and maybe get a job for a bit of pin money – and that was it. You were disregarded as a person who could do something outside that sphere. It was a complete system of keeping women in their place. Dinner parties got ruined very quickly. The three main male responses to women's liberation were incomprehension, hilarity or abuse."

Sandra, 73, who is now a local body politician in Auckland, a feminist writer and women's health activist, co-edited *Broadsheet* for 14 years. "It was an organising tool for the women's

movement," she says. "We were very energetic and we got it out to rural areas too, where it was a lifeline for a lot of women who were isolated."

She also worked as an abortion counsellor at an Auckland abortion clinic, which was burned down by protestors. "My world became a feminist world and it was my whole life. It was also a time of great change, when you had things like the sexual revolution and the Vietnam War, and people were exploring new ideas."

## CHANGING ATTITUDES

Founding the Auckland University women's liberation group set Sue Kedgley's life off on a course of politics and activism. In 1971, she organised a protest in Auckland's Albert Park – a mock funeral for the death of women's rights since the 1893 suffrage. At a capping parade, feminists dressed up as female stereotypes; 'Miss Haere Mai' walked beside a playboy bunny and a stripper.

At the time, there was no childcare for working mums. "If you wanted to leave your violent partner, there was no state help, and women couldn't get matrimonial property," says Sue, 70. "Women were conditioned to get a man and have kids, and live life vicariously through their husband."

Sue organised to bring Germaine Greer to Aotearoa after the feminist toured her groundbreaking book around Australia, and travelled with her around New Zealand. "Rotarians threw condoms at us," recalls Sue. "I was fearless. I stood up and said things like, 'We won't be sandwich makers.'"

Sue's feminism took her overseas. At 22, she went to New York and got a job at the United Nations, where she worked for eight years. She helped organise the first international women's conference there in 1975. "It was early days. Every UN country had to set up a women's secretariat, and it was just all beginning."

At 23, Sue wrote a book, *Sexist Society*, and went on to pen three more over the years. "My main focus back then was changing attitudes and pointing out the incredible discrimination against women in our society. Most of the changes and the opportunities emerged from that time," says the pioneer, who has devoted her life to championing women's issues, and has

also worked as a local body politician, a Green MP, a TV and film-maker, and a food activist.

## A BREAKTHROUGH

Second-wave women's liberation was an international movement that both united and divided women. Many rural women and women in the church revolted against the call for equal rights, launching rival protests to "save our homes". By the end of the decade, the feminist movement had fractured into groups, with socialist and lesbian feminists refusing to join mainstream groups.

Fern Mercier was a radical socialist feminist who lived with her former husband and 11 other adults in an eight-bedroom house that functioned as a commune in Auckland's Freemans Bay. The 71-year-old Aucklander is now a tarot card reader and astrologist.

In 1970, Fern helped to set up the first women's liberation group in New Zealand, Women for Equality. Men were involved too, and together they plastered lampposts with posters and handed out pamphlets arguing for things like abortion on demand, equal work and equal pay. Protesting at Miss New Zealand contests, Women for Equality also included lesbian women and Māori feminists before those women had their own activist groups.

Fern says that one of their breakthrough moments was getting Auckland's Great Northern Hotel to finally open its doors to women. She and other feminists stormed into the bar on Friday nights, staging sits-ins until it overturned its male-only policy.

Fern's mother, Edith Mercier, was an active feminist in the Dunedin Collective for Women, and Fern spent time down south championing women's rights. She lived in the Freemans Bay commune for 14 years and raised two children there. "I'm so grateful that I was born on that historical wave of change, and we had the opportunity to fight for change at such an important time," she says.

## IT NEVER STOPS

Throughout the 1970s and beyond, Māori feminists began to battle for equality of both gender and race. One of those was >>

women down'





Left: Sue Kedgley at the 1971 protest at Auckland's Albert Park.  
Below: Sandra Coney at her desk at the *Broadsheet* office.



Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, of Ngāti Whakaue descent, who was raised by a whanau of strong women in Ohinemutu, Rotorua. Now 69 and an emeritus professor at the University of Waikato (the first Māori woman to be awarded the title), Ngahuia is also a lesbian, so she was also fighting against homophobia.

In the late 1960s, she was studying at university and living on Auckland's Grafton Road, the hub of student activist culture. Her feminism was born when she became angry that women in the anti-Vietnam and anti-apartheid protests were "doing the shit work and making cups of tea. When it came to the fun part, the men put themselves forward and we thought, 'Stuff it. We've had enough.'"

Ngahuia won a student fellowship to the US in 1972, but when immigration officials discovered she was gay, she was banned

from entering the country. "That was when lesbianism was still criminal and pathological there," she says. "I went to the US consul and he brought out their immigration act, which said I could be excluded on the grounds of being a 'sexual deviant.'"

Then a member of the Auckland University women's liberation group, she says, "I was absolutely gutted. I couldn't believe what had happened. It was open-mic day in the university quad and I grabbed the microphone and yelled out what had happened. I said, 'Let's start a revolution!' About 12 people turned up in the coffee bar. That was the beginning of homosexual law reform."

In 1972, Ngahuia became increasingly involved in the Ngā Tamatoa Māori activist group. "There was a lot of elitism and class, and a lack of consciousness about the

exclusion of Māori and Pacific Island women," she says. "When I look back, I think, 'It was fun. We had fun.' We could, because we lived in a different economic environment too."

Ngahuia hasn't mellowed with age. A scholar, curator and award-winning author, she has never stopped pushing for women's rights, along with equality for Māori and indigenous people. In May, she was out with a banner protesting the blockade of the Gaza Strip. "You never stop. You look around now and shit is still happening."

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

From the 1980s, women began filling university lecture theatres; in 1980, 44% of tertiary students were female, and by 1989, slightly more women than men were enrolled in tertiary education. Women increasingly entered Parliament and stood

*'We haven't made it, and that's why we need to*

for local council. The government raved that “girls can do anything”, and the idea that women could only be teachers, nurses or secretaries became a thing of the past.

According to Anne, feminism effectively died in the next couple of decades. She says there was a sense among the next generation of women – many of whose mothers had fought the establishment – that the battle had been won.

Says Sue: “There was a retrenchment in the 1990s, when Jenny Shipley came in and feminism seemed to shut down.”

From sexual harassment and sexual violence, to domestic violence and unequal pay, today it's clear there's a lot of unfinished business. Referring to the recent Russell McVeagh sexual harassment case and the #MeToo campaign, Anne says: “There has always been sexual harassment, but it used to be the woman on the factory floor, or the secretaries. Now within workplaces, there are women who are a threat to men, and that's what has changed.”

“It's an ongoing battle and a war,” says Ngahua. “The #MeToo movement has exposed a lot of the sexist behaviours that men have got away with for centuries. Domestic violence in Aotearoa is diabolical. When you look at those two issues, you realise we haven't made it, and that's why we need to keep fighting.”

## IT'S STILL HAPPENING

Professor Brookes says that a failure of 70s feminism was that women demanded to be part of the workforce with the same rights and same opportunities as men. Yes, they won that, but they didn't challenge the structure of the nine-to-five working day.

Fern is concerned that women are still not receiving equal pay and are forced to work full-time alongside their partners or husbands to make ends meet, while also assuming most of the responsibility for domestic work and childcare. “We didn't envisage that,” she says. “I feel concerned that very young children are spending long hours in care.”

Sandra agrees that women have been forced to conform to the male workforce. “We have got a slice of the pie, but women have been made to fit into a workforce pattern that has not changed to suit them.”

Adds Anne: “The working day and the whole idea of a career are still designed for someone with a wife at home.” ✱

*keep fighting'*

## \* Key moments in second-wave feminism

by New Zealand historian Professor Barbara Brookes

1967

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women is adopted.

1968

Dr Fraser McDonald says women are “the Negroes of New Zealand society”.

1969

The Status of Children Act abolishes the concept of ‘illegitimacy’ and makes all children of equal status.

1970

Formation of university-based women's liberation groups.

Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan is the first sitting MP to give birth during a parliamentary session and is absent for six working days.

1972

Germaine Greer visits New Zealand.

**Broadsheet** is launched

The first national Women's Liberation conference is held in Auckland.

The private sector Equal Pay Act is passed.

1973

The first United Women's Convention is held (followed by one in 1975 and another in 1977).

The Labour Government appoints a select committee on women's rights with a wide brief to investigate the extent of discrimination against women in New Zealand.

The Social Security Amendment Act is passed and introduces the Domestic Purposes Benefit.

The first women's refuge is set up in Christchurch.

1975

The first United Nations International Women's Year.

The Royal Commission of Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion is carried out and is followed in 1977 with an act of the same name that tightens access to abortion. Sisters Overseas Service (SOS) continues to help many women travel to Australia for abortions.

Branches of the Women's Electoral Lobby are formed.

1976

The Matrimonial Property Act declares marriage to be a partnership.

1977

The Human Rights Commission Act aims to abolish discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status, race, colour, ethnic or national origins, and religious or ethical beliefs, and leads to the creation of the Equal Opportunities Tribunal.

1985

The newly established Ministry of Women's Affairs is defined as a separate department.