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# The Political Legacy of Māori Women and Beyond

THERE ONCE LIVED A YOUNG MĀORI GIRL BY THE NAME of *Wairaka*. She was the daughter of Chief Toroa, head of the Ngati Awa tribe and captain of the Mataatua *waka*.<sup>1</sup> Chief Toroa, alongside his daughter and people, traveled across the Pacific Ocean to the land of *Aotearoa*.<sup>2</sup> Eager to investigate, the men left to explore the land, while the women remained on board. While the men were away, the *waka* began to drift away. The women feared being lost at sea but they dared not touch the paddles, for the paddles were *tapu*<sup>3</sup> to women. Young *Wairaka* defied such traditions, took the paddles and shouted to the ancestors, “*Me whakatāne au i ahau!*—I must act like a man!” She paddled with all her might, inspired the other women to join her, and saved the canoe. Because of *Wairaka*, her tribe was saved and preserved. *Wairaka* is remembered as a courageous and powerful leader, and stands as an inspiring example of *mana wāhine*—a woman of power.<sup>4</sup> Her legacy continues to be honored and imitated by modern day Māori women.

Many Māori women have stood at the forefront of their tribes, leading their people in times of trouble, as well as during times of great prosperity. Although possessing such innate influence, colonization and modernization has dulled the political power of Māori women. As a result, Māori women have had to fight with the same courage and vigor as their foremothers to reclaim their rightful position in the public

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1 *Waka* translates to canoe.

2 *Aotearoa* is New Zealand.

3 *Tapu* translates to taboo or sacred.

4 See “The Story of *Wairaka*,” *Living Heritage*, n.d., <http://www.livingheritage.org.nz/Schools-Stories/Owairaka-School-pepeha/The-Story-of-Wairaka>; Also Sonja Gardien. “The Meaning of Whakatane,” YouTube, October 24, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wp9foOnmbyo>.

sphere. Such vigor is evident in the stories of Māori women who propelled New Zealand's suffrage movement to success, demanded land ownership rights, and fought for political representation in parliament. In this paper, I will discuss how Māori women's participation political movements was their attempt to reclaim their privilege and *mana* (power) to be represented and heard in the public sphere. By outlining such participation, young Māori women can learn from their foremothers as they confront the social issues of their time.

## Interdependence: the Māori (Feminist) Worldview

The Māori worldview presumes that the tribe members are a part of a collectivist and interdependent social system. Based on this pre-colonial worldview, Māori women were valued and considered sovereign citizens of their tribes. As Annie Mikaere describes,

The very survival of the whole was absolutely dependent upon everyone who made it up, and therefore each and every person within the group had his or her own intrinsic value. They were all a part of the collective; it was therefore a collective responsibility to see that their respective roles were valued and protected.

Māori women were not considered objects to be possessed by men, nor were they confined to the private sphere to solely rear children and tend to housekeeping. Rather, “the Māori woman was part of a community. The home unit was part of the whole kainga.”<sup>5</sup> Such interdependent structure was evident in how Māori tribes organized familial responsibilities.

For Māori, the definition of *whanau*<sup>6</sup> extended beyond the Western nuclear structure and embraced all tribe members—mother, father, aunt, uncle, cousin, grandfather, grandmother, sibling, alike. In such a system, the voices of men, women, and children were equally valued.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the interdependent nature of Māori society offered “a degree of flexibility . . . [enabling] women to perform a wide range of roles, including leadership roles.”<sup>8</sup> As depicted in oral histories, Māori women, alongside men, occupied leadership positions of military, spiritual and political

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5 Annie Mikaere. “Māori Women: Caught in the Contradictions of a Colonised Reality,” *Waikato Law Review*, 1994, <http://www.nzlii.org/nz/journals/WkoLawRw/1994/6.html>.

6 *Whanau* means family.

7 Leonie Hayden. “Let’s Not Forget That Māori Women Had the Vote Long before Europeans Arrived,” *The Spinoff*, September 19, 2018, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/19-09-2018/lets-not-forget-that-Māori-women-had-the-vote-long-before-europeans-arrived/>.

8 Mikaere, “Māori Women.”

significance (with Wairaka epitomizing the power of Māori female leaders). Women were critical to the development of Māori society but such influence was dimmed.

## Colonization: The Arrival of Sexism

“Have you ever thought that maybe sexism is a western concept?” With the arrival of European settlers came the dissemination of sexist ideas. Māori women were disregarded and disempowered, evident in their exclusion of the Treaty of Waitangi and their removal from Māori myths and legends.<sup>10</sup> When the Māori were in discussions about land rights, the Crown never approached Māori female leaders, as Kahu Kutia claims, “because for them, a Māori woman could not be conceivably a leader.”<sup>11</sup> Only seventeen women were represented among the five-hundred-and-fifty signatories. Emma Espiner asserts, “the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi marks the point at which Māori women began to be written out of history.”<sup>12</sup> To exacerbate such exclusion, settlers retold Māori myths and legends incorrectly and according to their misogynistic worldviews. The settlers exclusively approached Māori men to be informants, and assumed that the use of gender-neutral pronouns in stories (characteristic of the Māori language) referred to men. In turn, Western re-tellings of Māori cosmology shifted “away from the powerful female influence in the stories and towards the male characters.”<sup>13</sup> As Mikaere claims, “Māori women find their *mana wahine* destroyed.”<sup>14</sup> The Crown’s misogynistic ideas about women began to infiltrate the Māori worldview.

Unlike pre-colonial times, Māori women were reduced to Western gender roles of wives and mothers, and were conditioned to remain

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9 Leonie, “Let’s Not Forget That Māori Women Had the Vote Long Before Europeans Arrived.”

10 The Treaty of Waitangi is a treaty which was signed between the Crown and Māori leaders, on 6 February 1840. It led to the establishment of a British Governor of New Zealand, and it outlined and recognized Māori ownership of land. It is significant to Māori people as it ensured that Māori rights would not be ignored. But due to translation confusions, both the Crown and the Māori understood the treaty differently. This has led to ongoing challenges between the government and the Māori people

11 Kahu Kutia. “Remembering the Legacy of Aotearoa’s Māori Suffragettes,” *VICE*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/yw9e9w/has-aotearoa-lived-up-to-the-vision-of-its-M%C4%81ori-suffragettes>.

12 Emma Espiner. “The Treaty of Waitangi Was Forged to Exclude Māori Women—We Must Right That Wrong.” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2020.

13 Mikaere, “Māori Women.”

14 Mikaere, “Māori Women.”

within the domestic space. Any sign of a Māori woman occupying sovereign status was considered immoral and disobedient. Māori men adopted sexist ideas that led to the subjugation of Māori women. Māori women began to be viewed as objects to be owned by Māori men and/or sexually and economically exploited by white men. As Espiner notes, “Māori men . . . used the *Pākehā*<sup>15</sup> system to unfairly leverage themselves above Māori women.”<sup>16</sup> Such leverage was evident during the nineteenth century when women were denied enfranchisement by the Upper House (New Zealand’s Legislative Council) at the hand of two Māori members who objected to the suffragettes’ demands.<sup>17</sup> I cannot assume that these two Māori men were inactive in upholding Māori traditions. However, it is difficult to believe that they would deny women the vote had they not believed in the collectivist ideals of the Māori worldview. To counter the dissemination of sexist ideas, Māori women have emerged as prominent leaders in major political movements.

## Reclaiming *Mana*: Part One—The Nineteenth Century Suffrage Movement

Māori women’s participation in the nineteenth century suffrage movement was their attempt to challenge the foreign idea of sexism. Māori women had been dispossessed of their land, their voice and their mana, and they were determined to reclaim their power and authority to act in the public sphere, equal with men.

Māori efforts in the suffrage movement were led by *Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia*. Unlike *pākehā* women, *Mangakāhia* not only appealed for Māori women to be given the vote, but she also fought for the right to sit in the Māori Parliament (*Te Kotahitanga*).<sup>18</sup> Demands for female representation were based on the reality that Māori women had no male relatives to preside over their family affairs, or in other cases, the women were more competent than the men. *Mangakāhia* argued that since Māori women

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<sup>15</sup> *Pākehā* refers to individuals of European descent.

<sup>16</sup> Espiner, Emma. “The Treaty of Waitangi Was Forged to Exclude Māori Women – We Must Right That Wrong,” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/feb/05/the-treaty-of-waitangi-was-forged-to-exclude-māori-women-we-must-right-that-wrong>.

<sup>17</sup> Grimshaw, Patricia, *Women’s Suffrage in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1972), 69. 16

<sup>18</sup> See Kahu Kutia, “Remembering the Legacy of Aotearoa’s Māori Suffragettes”; also “Māori Women and the Vote,” Ministry for Women, August 5, 2019, <https://women.govt.nz/about/new-zealand-women/history/m%C4%81ori-women-and-vote>.

owned land they should have the right to be represented in parliament. Additionally, *Mangakāhia* believed that Queen Victoria would be more responsive to female Māori representatives. Despite resistance from *pākeha* and Māori men, the women prevailed. On December 20, 1893, four thousand Māori women voted for the first time. Māori women had reclaimed the power to contribute to public and political affairs but this was just the beginning.

## Reclaiming *Mana*: Part Two—Twentieth Century Examples

Since 1893, Māori women have continued to be active in political affairs, continually fighting for the empowerment of the Māori people. Māori women have focused their efforts on addressing welfare, urbanization, health, education, and land-loss issues.

In 1949, Iriaka Rātana became the first Māori woman to be elected as a member of parliament. Despite being burdened with domestic duties, the premature loss of her husband, and disapproval from other prominent Māori leaders, she secured “9,069 votes, 6,317 ahead of her nearest rival.”<sup>19</sup> She served as a member of parliament for twenty years focusing her efforts on the welfare of the Māori people.

In 1951, Māori women joined together to form the Māori Women’s Welfare League, an organization focused on empowering the Māori people. These women sought to address the lifestyle changes attached to urbanization afflicting the Māori community. The organization focused their efforts on improving the position of Māori in terms of health, education, and welfare. The organization was led by Dame Whina Cooper, a prolific Māori activist.<sup>20</sup>

In 1975, Dame Whina Cooper led a march of 5,000 protesters to Parliament who were upset with the continuing loss of Māori land.<sup>21</sup> Despite the 1000 km walk, Cooper, at the age of seventy-nine, stood at the front of the march leading the mass. She presented a petition to the Prime Minister signed by 60,000 people, demanding control over Māori land.

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19 Angela Ballara, “Rātana, Iriaka Matiu,” *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2000, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/517/ratana-iriaka-matiu>.

20 “Who We Are,” Māori Women’s Welfare League, n.d., <http://mwwl.org.nz/who-we-are/>.

21 “Whina Cooper Leads Land March to Parliament,” New Zealand History. Ministry for Culture and Heritage, n.d., <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/whina-cooper-led-land-march-te-ropu-o-te-matakite-reaches-parliament>.

In 1993, the Māori Women’s Welfare League filed a claim, known as the *Mana Wahine Claim*, alleging the Crown had discriminated against Māori women. They believed the Crown had “deprived [Māori women] of [their] spiritual, cultural, social, and economic well-being which is protected by the Treaty of Waitangi.”<sup>22</sup>

In 2018, the government made belated, yet concrete efforts to address the *Mana Wahine Claim*. The New Zealand government announced the allocation of funds to form a “specialist team” who would work with the Waitangi Tribunal to investigate and rectify the obstacles affecting Māori women. While many of the original draftees have passed on, Māori women have continued to fight.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the drawbacks of being both female and indigenous, these Māori women have persevered to reclaim their sovereignty. They have made major contributions and stood at the forefront of political movements fighting for suffrage, reclaiming land, and the improvement of Māori health and welfare. These modern women have resurrected and imitated the legacies of their ancient foremothers by also being an active and unapologetic voice in the public sphere. Young Māori women should look to their foremothers’ examples, and should likewise continue the legacy of *mana wahine*, for there is still much to do.

## Reclaiming Mana: Part Three—Twenty-first Century Women Continuing the Legacy

Even in the twenty-first century, Māori women remain disadvantaged. Māori women lie well above the national unemployment rate of 4.9 percent, at 12.0 percent (2017),<sup>24</sup> Māori women make-up 64 percent of the female prison population (2019),<sup>25</sup> up to 80 percent of “Māori women are

22 Kerensa Johnston, “Discrimination, the State and Māori Women. An Analysis of International Human Rights Law and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,” *New Zealand Yearbook of New Zealand Jurisprudence*, 2005, <http://www.nzlii.org/nz/journals/NZYbkNZJur/2005/>.

23 “Government Challenge to *Mana Wahine*,” Māori Women’s Welfare League, January 28, 2020, <http://mwvl.org.nz/government-challenge-to-mana-wahine/>.

24 “Māori Labour Market Trends.” Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, n.d. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/employment-and-skills/labour-market-reports-data-and-analysis/other-labour-market-reports/Māori-labour-market-trends/>.

25 See “Annual Remand Prisoner Population for the Latest Calendar Years (ANZSOC).” Stats NZ, n.d. <http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLECODE7323>; Also, “Crime and Punishment.” stuff, n.d. <https://interactives.stuff.co.nz/2018/05/prisons/crime.html>.

likely to experience family violence” and are “three times more likely to be killed by a partner than non-Māori,”<sup>26</sup> and Māori women are still fighting for the respect of Māori land.<sup>27</sup> Māori women are still affected by the long-term consequences of colonization, and so younger generations must continue the fight to restore mana wahine.

Young Māori women can turn to the examples of their foremothers for strength and guidance as they empower and lead their communities. By looking to the stories of Wairaka, Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia, Dame Whina Cooper, and many other Māori female leaders, young women can be inspired to lead future generations. They can remember that they come from a long line of powerful female leaders who were unafraid in the face of opposition and difficulty. They can remember the collectivist values of the Māori society. And ultimately, they can feel the support of their foremothers beyond the veil. Echoing Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku’s counsel, young Māori women can imagine the words of their foremothers, as if Wairaka was shouting across the sea, “*Never give up, never, never give up . . . even though you can’t see us we are there for you.*”<sup>28</sup>

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26 Leigh-Marama McLachlan. “Every Day I Was Beaten’—Māori Women Three Times More Likely to Be Killed by Partner.” RNZ, March 1, 2020. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihī/410738/every-day-i-was-beaten-M%C4%81ori-women-three-times-more-likely-to-be-killed-by-partner>.

27 Charlotte Greenfield, and Praveen Menon. “In New Zealand, Young Māori Women Lead the Battle for Indigenous Rights.” Reuters, August 11, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-newzealand-politics-M%C4%81ori/in-new-zealand-young-mori-women-lead-the-battle-for-indigenous-rights-idUSKCN1V1049>.

28 He Tohu. “Hopes for the Future of New Zealand Women.” YouTube, June 5, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51Td5w\\_nXuw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51Td5w_nXuw).

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