



Māori wāhine used as economic “shock absorbers” for too long – report

Authors say New Zealand needs to stop rewarding the rich and punishing the poor

“Miriamā” grew up poor. She got a job early – the work was casual and insecure, and it prevented her getting qualifications for more secure and higher-paid employment. Now a sole parent, she is one of the poorest “precariat”, living in caravans, cars, social housing and refuges.

“You can’t imagine how it must feel. Out of your car, get your kids dressed in a public toilet,” says one whānau advocate, in “[Precariat Māori Households Today](#)”, the recent report outlining Miriamā’s story.

The Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga report challenges the government to stop using Māori – mostly Māori women – as the economy’s “shock absorbers”. It notes that widening inequality over the past 40 years is not only cruel, it is hindering the economy (see stats box). This is linked to centuries of colonisation: Māori were early-colonial economic powerhouses until forced off their own land and into casual, seasonal work.

Precariat Stats

- Aotearoa’s economy is the fifth most unequal in the OECD.
- NZ’s rich–poor divide has shaved a third off economic growth over a 20-year period.
- Three out of every ten working-age Māori, and one in six working-age non-Māori, are in the “precariat” (temporary employees, jobless and/or receiving benefits).
- Of the 130,000 precariat Māori, 3 out of 5 are women.
- Unlike public spending on defence and bank bailouts, public investment in health, education and social protection generates up to \$3 for every dollar invested.

Numbers from “[Precariat Māori Households Today](#)”

Now, the report says, successive governments hit our poorest hardest during bad times while rewarding the rich during good times. For example, prioritising low inflation requires increasing unemployment to suppress wages; it also increases job insecurity.

And so whānau are regularly left without food, toothpaste, toilet paper or heating. Their only option: using high-interest moneylenders.

“People end up thinking ‘my environment is crappy, therefore I must be a crappy person’,” states the report.

AWC board member Rewa Grimsdale, of Te Āti Awa, Te Arawa, Ngāti Toa, and Ngāti Raukawa and Tūwharetoa descent says inter-generational trauma has compounded the issues: “Colonisation dripped through our genes.”

Regarding uncaring government agencies, the report quotes another whānau advocate: “A lot of our wāhine traverse this minefield and do not come out okay. The tamariki do not come out okay.” Yet the report also finds that many whānau have stories of “resistance, resilience, strength and survival”, often drawing on Māori culture.

The authors point out that achieving better outcomes requires both individuals and collectives to change their attitudes, behaviour and policies towards precariat whānau.

What Aotearoa-NZ needs

Māori principles recommended by the report for government policy and services:

- Manaakitanga (caring relationships)
- Whanaungatanga (engaged relationships)
- Kotahitanga (unity through consensus)
- Whakaiti (service to others with humility)
- Hūmārie (act with gentleness and kindness)

These principles should be significant in every person's life but they're not significant at Work & Income. Everyone should know there's a place nearby to go for awahi.

- Auckland Women's Centre board member Rewa Grimsdale ■



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