

# Mana Wahine Forum

A large audience enjoyed and discussed the kōrero of four dynamic women at this #Suffrage 125 event on the 9th of October.

By Jenny Rankine

**Leonie Pihama** (Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Māhanga, Ngā Māhanga a Tairi), who directs Te Kotahi Research Institute at the University of Waikato, crowdsourced her 10 minute talk on mana wahine by asking online friends to finish the sentence “Mana wahine is...” Their replies illustrate the diversity of Māori women’s thinking.



Left to right: Laura, Khylee, Mihingarangi and Leonie

One said it is “theorising over burgers and fries with your soul sisters”. To another it is “where I learned strategy, vision, resistance and heart, from my maternal grandmother, my mother and my daughter”. To another it is “the power and prestige of the universe and the land, it is elemental, fertile, powerful”. See Leonie’s [full talk on her blog](#).

Later she described the colonial invasion of Parihaka as one source of her motivation for change. Parihaka prophet Te Whiti o Rongomai said when soldiers were removing all the able-bodied men to imprisonment without trial: “E tū tamawāhine i te wā o te kore - women will take the lead in all things while men are not here”, which is what happened.



Charmaine Pountney, Khylee, and Tanya Cumberland

**Khylee Quince** (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou), a law lecturer at AUT, talked about her experience often being the “only Māori in the building - would you like a pōwhiri with that?” she joked. For her, mana wahine meant “being comfortable in your own skin”, knowing you don’t have to

“be everything”. It also meant to “act in ways that are tika (just), pono (genuine), demonstrate aroha and manākitanga from the heart”.

When asked by moderator and broadcaster Mihingarangi Forbes (Ngāti Paoa, Ngāti Maniapoto) about whether feminism and mana wahine were the same, Leonie (who wrote her PhD thesis about mana wahine) said their cultural groundings were different. A central difference was the individualism of Western feminism and the collective understandings of mana wahine.

**Khylee later added: “We can be feminists and practice mana wahine – they’re not mutually exclusive.”**

Leonie said that Pākehā gender perspectives don’t translate; “wāhine is much more than the Western notion of women. Wā means time and space and hine is a feminine essence”. She described mana wahine as role-based rather than gender-based.



Three generations enjoying the forum

**Leonie saw mana wahine as a “rebalancing of the imbalance of colonial gender ideas.**

The status and mana of our tupuna wāhine was deliberately denied and needs to be deliberately restored.”

Khylee said that Suffrage 125 was not a celebration for mana wahine. Women getting the vote was a small step “in claiming back where we were, not a significant step”. Leonie added that suffrage is celebrated “on the basis that Western democracy works for women, but it hasn’t worked for Māori women”.

**Laura O’Connell Rapira** (Te Āti Awa, Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa) Director at ActionStation pointed out that despite 125 years of women’s suffrage, women in prison don’t get to vote. Eighty percent of Māori who responded to an ActionStation survey about the justice system thought they should.

## The injustice system

A major focus of discussion was what one speaker called the injustice system.

**Leonie said that the biggest single change since 1988 was that then only 15 percent of incarcerated women were Māori, and now they make up 63 percent!**

In response to a question, Khylee said that all women arrested for failing to protect their children from dying were Māori, amounting to “a criminalisation of Māori motherhood - this is a racist construction of what good parenting looks like.” She pointed out that a number of Māori women facing these prosecutions were fleeing violence.



*Robyn Lambourne and Sara-lea O'Neill*

**Leonie added that “Oranga Tamariki is not there for the wellbeing of our children – it’s a removal agency”.**

She suggested that iwi tell the state that it “will not take one more child in our territory”, and instead involve whānau ora navigators with whānau in trouble. “More than 60 percent of the children stolen by CYFS are Māori – we should all be appalled by that.”

Khylee reminded the audience that “tonight 5,000 Māori will be living in a cage” and 3,500 Māori children will be in state care. She said that Māori in prison now are more culturally connected than in 1988, but they come from structural systemic poverty and racism, without the “equality of participation and citizenship” guaranteed under Article 3 of the Treaty.



*Forum participants*

**Laura said that “Māori incarceration is a result of 178 years of stripping Māori assets and an imported justice system. The government spends more on prisons in two years than on all Treaty settlements.”**

She pointed to lots of reports about racism embedded in the justice system, and a “need to dream bigger – what does a world without prisons look like? We’re small and connected enough to do that,” she said.

Laura also talked about how news media frame reporting about justice. Headlines ask “Why do so many Māori end up in prison, rather than: Why does the Crown lock up so many Māori?”

**Leonie said that “the country continues to accept the violence on which it was founded. Colonisation is not a singular event, it’s systemic and ongoing and we deal with it every day.”**

Tactics for change were another recurring topic; Khylee quoting Moana Maniapoto’s metaphors of the flame thrower attacking systems from outside and the stealth bomber changing them from the inside. Khylee said that she goes back and forth from one to the other – “they’re not mutually exclusive”.

**Laura said that “one of the myths is that the government leads change”, but instead change comes from communities. She described ActionStation’s job as shifting the political windows of opportunity to enable the changes communities want.**



*Forum participants*

Sexual and domestic violence (DV) was another recurring topic, including inadequate funding for services. An audience member working in the sector talked about Western feminist attitudes to whānau painting men as the problem, when they have to be part of the solution to violence.

Leonie agreed that while “we do sometimes need to remove ourselves and children for safety, empowering only women has been quite detrimental. If we don’t heal the whānau, we won’t heal domestic violence or transform sexual violence.”

**Leonie pointed to Mereana Pitman’s work with men who have been violent, and Mereana’s insistence that colonial masculinity has to change. “It’s a collective responsibility, making men accountable to their community for their behaviour.”**

Mihingarangi Forbes, as the moderator, set a warm and inclusive tone and ensured the evening was lively, engaging and meaningful.



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