

Progress arises when opportunities can be seen

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Treating all people equally in an unequal society can only intensify inequality. That seems obvious to me. But it is not an easy proposition to get many people to accept. We tend to think that it is “fair” to ignore inequality and vulnerability in our actions. But that only looks “fair” amongst peers or looking from a position of advantage, privilege or power. It does not look like or feel like that from below.

It is clear to me that one of the impacts of the pandemic and our response to it so far will be to make gender equality tougher. This is despite the fact that the value of female work has had higher recognition whether that be in e.g., nursing, aged care

or supermarket work with high female representation. Where there is a skill shortage expect relative earnings to improve for a time but elsewhere just watch lockdown heroes crash back to their former status. Our society has not become more equal or kind from the lockdown. If anything my guess and the commentary from community activists is that stress has exacerbated many negative aspects from domestic violence to accessing food, clothing and warmth.

What can the women meeting these pressures on themselves and their families do about this other than what they have always done? Coping as best they can is the full-time occupation for those facing this challenge. Government agencies have increased support from wage subsidy to benefit levels – essential but in no way transformative. Community organisations have with variable effectiveness channelled physical support but activists at that level already see emotional and mental stress rising amongst disadvantaged women and children on top of a prolonged and enervating struggle to make ends meet in a diminished economy. There will be an immediate and lasting need for more support just to maintain the pre-pandemic level of wellbeing. History is not supportive of the view that societies transform when life is hardest but rather tells us that progress arises when opportunities can be seen.

Within the workplace we have seen some progress made on equality for women. But let's be frank. The great majority of that progress has been made by government direction

whether that be in legislation, targets or quotas on representation at higher levels in government organisations, or outcomes driven by union-based pay equity claims. The ratio of genuine progress to self-awarded accolades, glossy pamphlets, and human resource programmes in private business has been minimal. Perhaps the actual outcomes to noise ratio - to put it another way - has only been matched by climate crisis business policies.

As I write this, I recognise that it reads as a bleak view. I wanted to be more positive and optimistic. But genuine optimism as opposed to wishful thinking is grounded in what is and requires a clear view of what could or should be. You have to summon that up if you want change. For my part, workplace gender equality has a strong social dividend. Spending on that, alongside support for our mokopuna and rangatahi to grow and learn regardless of their class position, and on the low-emission future technologies is what we should be doing as a country to meet the pandemic issues. They all provide a better way forward than elite ideas about old economy infrastructure projects, rich migrant or tourist schemes and emergency funding which entrenches unequal workplace and community structures.