

# Unpaid work - the ultimate form of love and servant leadership - A Māori woman's perspective

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5 February 2020

For as long as I can remember, the women in my family have engaged in what society calls “unpaid work”.

When I ponder the term “unpaid work” and consider the generations of women in my whānau that have engaged in this, it would indicate that – for our whānau – we consider unpaid work as the highest form of servant leadership, contribution and love.

I come from a long line of women who have engaged in unpaid work.

My mother, Gladys Vercoe (nee Nepia) was the secretary of Pounamunui Marae Committee for 13 years at a time when we were fortunate to have our Paepae full of true Rangatira. My parents ran our Marae fundraisers, predominantly wharewhare (Housie), every week for many years.

My mum was always working in the back of the Marae cooking, cleaning and serving. She has been coach, manager and administrator for the various sports teams my siblings and I were involved in. She was a member of the Māori Women's Health League and a volunteer for Victim Support.

When I asked her why she did all of this, her response was that she was simply carrying on the legacy that her mother and grandmothers set for her. That this was her way of showing us she loved us, but also to honour her Kuia who had also served our hapu and Iwi.

My kuia on my mother's side was Hera Ngamihi Nepia (nee Tahuriorangi). She was a member of the Māori Women's health league, a founding member of the Ohau Kapa Haka group, Kaikaranga for our Iwi, a strong advocate for Te Reo and a staunch member of Waiatuhi Marae committee (Ngāti Paruahanui).

Following the passing of her own mother, my kuia left school to help her dad raise her siblings. My beautiful, amazing grandmother left school at the age of 9 years old, yes 9, to care for her siblings. I don't know that my grandmother would have called her sacrifice “unpaid work”, but simply an act of love for her Dad and her siblings.

My mother was raised by her Koroua Pirimi Whata and Kuia, Margaret Tawhito Ariki Whata (nee Morehu) on the beautiful shores of Lake Rotoiti, within the hapu of Ngāti Tamateatūtahi, Ngāti Kāwiti. Our Kuia Margaret was actively engaged in a multitude of unpaid roles for our Ngāti Tamateatūtahi, Ngāti Kāwiti, Ngāti Mākinu, Ngāti Rongomai and Ngāti Pīkiao whānau.

At a recent whānau reunion, my mum shared her experiences of living with her Kuia and described her service as her way of ensuring her people were cared for, that they were thriving and that they prospered in a manner that our Tūpuna would have wanted. Again, the term unpaid work doesn't quite fit the context of Kuia Margaret's service.

On my dad's side, our Vercoe whānau, I have been blessed with many female role models of unpaid work. My Vercoe Kuia, Mere Morehu (nee Vercoe) and her sister Ngahuia Pururu (nee Vercoe) were both founding members of the Māori Women's Health League. At the peak of the Health League's existence, they achieved outstanding community outcomes which, in today's terms, would be termed reductions in homelessness and poverty, and an increase in education and whānau resilience etc.

Our Kuia were instrumental in the establishment of our land trust and incorporation, Whangamoā Trust. They supported their brother, Major Te Reiwhati Vercoe, to sell whānau land in Pukehina in order to purchase the land where our Marae is currently situated at Otaramarae, Okere Falls in Rotorua, and to set up leasehold properties to ensure long term revenue of our Trust.

The benefits of that decision have produced four generations of financial benefit, whereby today in 2020, we still own and administer those properties and receive annual rents. Again, unpaid work inadequately describes, nor acknowledges, the underlying motivations to participate in these activities.

When I consider my own unpaid work roles, these started at high school with the organising of our senior basketball team, and continued in my twenties to include sports coaching, sports administration and event management. This then evolved into committee membership, Board roles and now formalised governance roles.

The term "unpaid work" is a shallow description for this contribution – it is simply about my own desire to uphold my whānau legacy of service.

I have been fortunate to have experienced sport at the highest level, so when I think of my unpaid work in the sport sector, my motivation has been to use sport as the catalyst to develop discipline, health, high performance, team work, team development, excellence, achievement and personal resilience. In a nutshell, I volunteer in sport and coaching because I want to support women to be all that they can be, using sport as the vehicle.

I have served within the not for profit sector, giving back to the kaupapa of that sector and those organisations using my own experience of working in the not for profit world. Not for profits are amazing, resilient organisations who often don't have adequate resources, so they develop and employ innovative, "no. 8 wire" solutions to solve problems. Serving in this sector fulfils my love and passion to edify and esteem the kaupapa of these organisations, so the world can see the positive impact they make for their clients, whānau and wider communities.

My work within Iwi has been a labour of love and legacy, because I truly love our people.

When I consider the impact of colonisation, the forceful theft of our lands, the violence and death inflicted on our men, women and children and the continual racism we face, I feel pouri (sad) and riri (angry). Then, in a heartbeat, I turn up at the Marae for a hui or tangi and see our whānau all sitting around the table peeling potatoes and preparing kai, laughing and joking. In that moment, my sadness

and anger is lost as I think to myself, what a magnificent, resilient people we are; that despite all things we are still alive, proud of our culture and still here serving.

In that moment, all is right in the world and I am motivated to go out and do it all again.

Servant leadership, contribution to legacy, and love for our people all seem far better descriptions for the four generations of unpaid work in my whānau to date. But this legacy does not stop here.

In 2018, my eldest child, Hinemihi Naoma Ariki Taylor Vercoe was chosen as a volunteer mentor for Te Wero Pakihi, the Māori Women's Development Incorporation programme to support rangatahi Māori into business.

My heart quietly sang, as I knew that the legacy of service and the legacy of love in our whānau will continue.