

# Maria Ngawati



**Ko wai koe? Who are you, please introduce yourself and your background.**

Ko tōku ingoa ko Maria Ngawati. Ko ōku tātai whakaheke nō Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine me Ngāti Porou.

I have whakapapa ties to Ngāti Whakaue as well as Ireland. My Tāne and I have 7 tamariki and bonus tamariki, and we currently reside in Rotorua. I have many mahi hats, but my passion has always been in Māori education, Māori health, Te Reo Māori and Māori development - the kaupapa that is holding my focus right now is that of workforce development.

**He aha te whāinga matua mō tō mahi? What is the main goal for your work?**

Last year I started my Edu-tech (education-technology) company called Akomaiway. I launched this during COVID, and the business focuses on my passion for education. It looks to bridge some of the gaps between secondary education and Wharekura, and tertiary education and what this looks like. Akomaiway was set up to help students to transition from NCEA/secondary study to tertiary education, and currently there is no other pathway like it- it's the first one like this in Aotearoa. Akomaiway is a bilingual platform so you can search qualifications using Te Reo Māori and uses recognisable terms for career pathway progression, as well as valuing the place of Te Reo Māori across all of our work sectors.

What drove me to finally do something and get into this kaupapa, was my frustration. There are so many issues in our higher education system and so many barriers for students participating in it. Yet at the same time, there are so many sectors crying out for workers, especially Māori workers. So as Te Reo Māori and everything Māori become more popular, it is a great time to elevate our uniqueness.

Every sector is crying out for these expertise, yet the barriers haven't changed, in terms of transitioning our tamariki while they're at school and kura and then giving them education opportunities at a higher level. The barriers are still the same, and there aren't enough people working in this space to change the system. Akomaiway is about helping Māori navigate the system until we can get systemic change. I'm a physiotherapist by trade, I did

my postgrad, Masters and am now doing my PhD – but when I started my physio class in the first year there were 60 of us, and there was one Maori girl (me) and another from Rarotonga – that was it. It looks a little different now in the classroom with that progression, but across some professions such as in the sciences and engineering, those inequities still exist.

**He take kia uru atu ai ngā Wāhine Māori ki te Ao Pākihi? Why should Wāhine Māori enter the business world?**

I don't think there are enough Wāhine Māori in business. I'm a small business owner now and I've never done this before, but the strength and knowledge I've gained has been because of incredible Wāhine Māori entrepreneurs that have gone from nothing and have had to navigate what business is. If you go into business as a Māori person, people will tell you to go to Poutama Trust and Te Puni Kōkiri (TPK) and the Regional Business Partner Network for support. That's all fine but they're all institutions with limited resources and large portfolios, so it's confusing and painstakingly slow to navigate. Accessing capital as a Māori business owner is so hard. Because of this, I was privileged to be a part of a team during COVID last year to form IndigiShare, which we are going to launch soon. IndigiShare will be a loan platform that helps you call on your crowd to give a koha to other whānau Māori businesses, to help with the access to capital issue. The idea also came from my own experience of trying to set up a small business. Establishing an Edu-tech business with specific technology is expensive, and I funded most of it myself – but not everyone is in a position to do so, not even with immediate whānau support.

I think from a wāhine Māori entrepreneurship perspective we think differently, our values always gravitate to our whānau, tamariki, Iwi, and Hapū- how we can help our wider community first, which is very different to a purely capitalist point of view. Yes, we may be there to make money but our driver first and foremost is always to fulfil a need that we've found in our wider community and whānau. There are people like Candice Pardy, Ngapera Riley, all these brilliant Wāhine in these spaces pushing the boundaries of what Wāhine Māori business looks like, and what our value set is.

I have always believed that we need Wāhine Māori in all levels of all sectors as they bring this whānau/wider community-focused value set to the forefront of their mahi, and are there for our tamariki and mokopuna.

**He aha te pae tawhiti mō te wāhi ki tō mahi, waihoki, mō Aotearoa whānui? What are your future aspirations for your work and Aotearoa New Zealand as a whole?**

My hope for education first and foremost, is that Te Reo Māori is recognised at all levels of our system by everyone and that Māori is given the space to rebuild our capability first. We need to consolidate our Te Reo amongst our own. We need a huge system change within the universities and polytechs, as the power sits with those who don't understand anything that we're trying to do with our hapū and whānau. This change especially needs to be seen

when engaging with our communities. At present we are expected to hand over our relationships to people making decisions about the future of our kids, and it's not good enough. This needs to change.

In business, I'd like to see IndigiShare and other avenues for Māori start to open up, so we can access capital for start-ups and businesses. The goal as a people are that we build on our resilience and hold onto Tino Rangatiratanga for our future, and this is helped by also having economic sovereignty. Because if I've got a choice to access capital I can start up my business, or if I've got a side or main hustle, then I can help my whānau during a tough time we're going through, ahead of time. I'd like to see that if COVID hits bad again that we have the tools and the mechanisms to navigate our way through it using our indigenous knowledge as our guiding star.

Nau mai ngā hua, e Matariki Ahunga nui.