

LEARNING FOR WOMEN – THERE’S ‘NOTHING MORE PRODUCTIVE OF GOOD TO SOCIETY’

Of the United Nations 17 Social Development Goals, it’s the fifth – gender equality – which is arguably the most closely aligned to the mission of the Sisters of Mercy worldwide. Their founder, Catherine McAuley, wrote in the Congregation’s original rule that no work of mercy “can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor, than the careful instruction of women.” No matter what place in society they occupy, “their example and advice will always possess influence,” she wrote, and it is through their efforts that “peace and good order are generally to be found.”

No one can begin to read the story of Mercy’s founder without soon discovering her deep conviction about the fundamental need and role of women in society, and seeing how so much of her effort was focused on providing opportunities for women and girls to learn skills that could transform their own lives and those of their families. From the day its doors opened in 1827, her first House of Mercy offered classes for young girls whose families could never have afforded to send them to school, and training for women in skills that might provide them with a living. Her work was transformative.

Including this goal among the eight most closely linked to Mercy’s mission, Mercy Global Action has produced a flier devoted to the theme; to view, click this link: www.mercyworld.org/uploads/ckbl/files/2017/MIA_SDGs_5.pdf

The goal has a target of eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking and sexual or labour exploitation. Among the global facts which the flier lists are the following:

- Gender inequality is the most persistent form of human rights abuse.
- 1 in every three women has experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime.
- 70 percent of all victims of human trafficking in the world are women and girls.



The Mercy Global Action flier proposes a range of collective actions, including to work with others in addressing every form of gender inequality, to campaign actively against honour killings, female genital mutilation and child marriage, to treat all children as equal, helping them to value and respect their differences, and to redress the injustices of women having less access to education, training and recruitment.

Among the personal actions recommended by Mercy Global Action are to join campaigns working towards

equal pay for women and men who do the same work, to promote women’s leadership through trade unions, civil society and feminist organisations, to work with community services to promote education and equality for women, and to take steps to be more peace-full persons by being welcoming, honest, non-judgmental and respectful of difference.

To consider or discuss: How does the Mercy ministry with which you are associated help to empower women or girls? How might it do this better?
– Dennis Horton

BENEATH AOTEAROA'S LONG WHITE CLOUD, MANY WOMEN DESERVE TO DO MUCH BETTER

In *The New Zealand Project*, published this year by Bridget Williams Books in Wellington, young Oxford Fellow and former Rhodes Scholar Max Harris argues persuasively for a politics based on values. Among the many points for reflection he raises is the position of women in our society.

There was a high point as Harris was finishing high school in the early 2000s when New Zealand's prime minister, governor-general, chief justice, speaker of the House and CEO of Telecom were all women. All of them, he notes, were Pākehā; and a decade or so on, some of the back-slapping may have eased, as women have lost some of the prominence they had won at the turn of the millennium. Last year, he notes, there was not one woman CEO among New Zealand's top 50 businesses.

Four years ago, 84.2 percent of single-parent families were headed by a woman, with six in 10 of those families being defined as poor. In New Zealand, sexual and family violence against women and girls is endemic, writes Harris. In a chapter entitled 'Justice means more than revenge,' he quotes a 2011 UN report on the status of women, ranking New Zealand as the worst of all OECD countries measured in terms of rates of sexual assault. A survey of secondary school students in New Zealand in 2007 and 2012 showed that 20 percent of young women – one in five – said they had been touched in a sexual way or made to do unwanted sexual things in the previous 12 months.

To address the scandal of sexual and family violence in our country and to tackle aspects of New Zealand masculinity outlined later on in the book, Harris calls for a society-wide conversation of the issues, proper funding for support services – perhaps with money redirected from what is currently spent on prisons, and continued investigation by researchers in the New Zealand-specific causes of sexual and family violence.

Harris' book took shape after he had recovered from open-heart surgery. "Today, I think a different kind of heart needs repairing: the heart of our country," he concludes. "This repair is about all of us. We've stumbled and fallen. Our heart's connective tissue has been weakened. And we need the pulse of our social conscience to start beating harder again. "So what are we waiting for?"

He Inoi: Prayer

Leaving no one behind

*E Te Atua, rapu i te tika,
God, seeker of true justice:
in the breadth of your gaze,
no one is overlooked or ignored.*

*We praise you for all those who work to
see the mana of every woman acknowledged.*

*For Sisters of Mercy whose scholarship
draws wisdom from scripture and theology
to shed light on the role of women in our world.
For their ministry of care for refugees and
migrants, helping them and their families to
find a place and to settle in our land.*

*For Sisters who care for women in prison
and support them when they are released,
we give thanks. For those who work in
community development, with programmes
for victims of domestic abuse and for women
of diverse cultural backgrounds, struggling
to create a home in a new and strange
environment, we praise you.*

*We ask you to bless the principals and staff
of our Mercy colleges, encouraging young
women to strive for excellence and to pursue
their dreams. May their efforts among young
Māori and Pasifika women especially go from
strength to strength.*

*We pray for those who work among peoples
in the South Pacific whose homelands are
suffering from severe climate change and
rising sea levels. May they help to secure
justice for these first victims of a global
ecology in crisis.*

*This month we honour Mary, assumed body
and soul into the fullness of unending glory.
As the woman who with her 'yes' to your call
reveals the path that leads to life, may hers be
the steps we follow in faith, magnifying your
greatness and trusting in the promise that
reaches from one generation to another,
now and forever. Amen*