

Suffrage at Parliament 2011

Speech by Vanisa Dhiru

President of the YWCA of Greater Wellington & Executive Director of Volunteering New Zealand



Ko Ruapehu te maunga.
Ko Manawatu te awa.
Ko India ko Manawatu hoki taku whanau.
Ko 'Avada Falia' te iwi.
Ko Vanisa Dhiru ahau.
Tena kotou, tena kotou, tena kotou katau.

Today we are here to acknowledge the women leaders before us, and amongst us today - I'm scanning the room and seeing leaders today, and those 'up and coming' tomorrow.

We are paying tribute today the 32000 women leaders that helped women 118 years ago. And as Rowena says, let's focus on the future.

Our \$10 poster girl Kate Sheppard actioned for our right to get us votes. She lead a movement that has given Aotearoa the international reputation for being a feisty nation, reputable for women, made us leaders back in 1893 in women's rights.

For the past 7 years just before Suffrage I normally think about my own actions and what I'm doing for others, in particular what I am doing for women. How am I working, talking, suffering, for the good of others... am I someone that is making a real contribution to people, or am I just living my life for myself.

I'm incredibly lucky to have a mother, who celebrates her birthday today, which is why I ask those questions of myself. I asked Mum if she wanted to come along today, but she thought sleeping in might be a 'better present'.

For the 31 years I've been around, Mum has always said to me, "Vanisa, toor jer karawani toor kerege", in other words, "Whatever you want to do, just do it." [Gujarati].

I've mostly taken that advice, throughout my studies, my career, my relationships, my life. About 6 years ago I set what I thought would be the unachievable, and wrote it down. I wanted to be a CEO of a not-for-profit organisation by the time I was 32. I had a road map of steps, a career path, a volunteer career path, mentor... And what I quickly learnt was I needed dedicated support crew around me to ensure I will make a difference.

Two months ago I was placed into the role of managing Volunteering New Zealand, and realised my goal had been achieved and a year ahead of my plan, and so now what I supposed to do...?

Kate Sheppard, the successful leader, was able to surround herself with people that wanted to make a change - they signed a petition, they made a fuss about something that was important to them - to women, to society.

So what I want to do, what's important to me, is basically what is important to women and to society today.

My next seven year plan is coming together over the next few months, I'm re-grouping and letting my intuition again drive the direction. The key change in my thinking is though, It's not just what am I going to do, it's what I am going to do to ensure we are creating some change for the better.

What are we going to do to, what would I like to see:

- To support education for our young women around alcohol, drugs, sex, health, careers, entrepreneurship, good citizenship, volunteering and understanding peer groups and pressure.
- What we going to do to spread the word about safer sex, about things like the female condom, the only form of contraception that protects from HIV, STIs and unwanted pregnancies.
- How are we going to get women on boards across sectors, in decision making positions, and get the next generations of women ready and rearing to go as well.
- What are we all going to ask of (and support!) the people, the politicians that want us to vote for them, what are we going ask them?

Let's ask them what are we going to do to ensure Aotearoa does not feature on the OECD list for youth suicide and we don't have a teen pregnancy problem?

Let's ask how are we going to ensure women has access to the education they want, and improve understanding of their human rights?

Ask how are we going to improve women's income, and align it to be consistent with males income?

There are loads of questions we can ask, and some are in this flyer [YWCA Make it Count flyer] identified by some young women... if you are interested.

I reckon, Kate Sheppard would be expecting a movement of women to come together and create change. Suffrage is about action, about making things happen, and making it happen together.

Kate is probably a bit like my mum, strong willed, high expectations, cuts to the chase - she'll trust us to let us do want we want, and for us to make it happen. She'll be expecting action. Good action comes from good planning, of course, the plans are there, so let's get together and make it happen.

Kia Ora, Namaste, and Happy Birthday Mum.