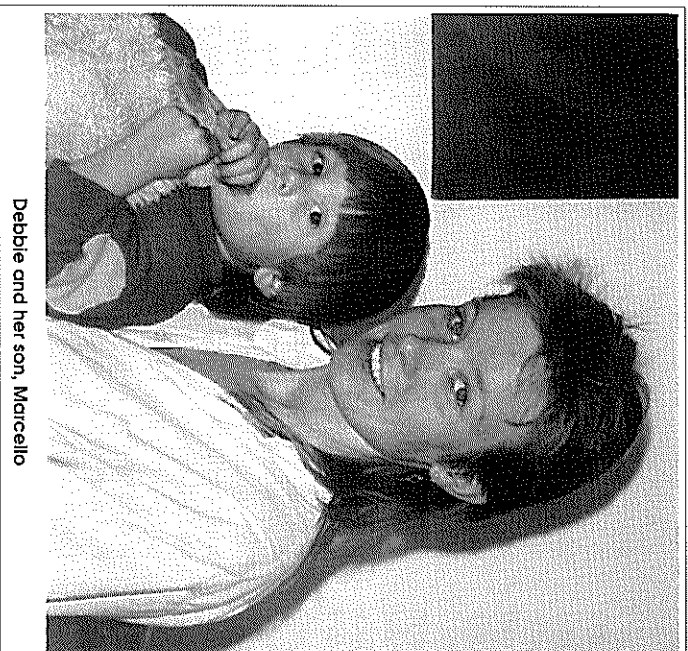


# A QUIET REVOLUTION

*Debbie Ferrere writes about feminists with sons, drawing on information she gathered in a survey carried out for a university paper. This article is a shorter version of a university essay.*



Debbie and her son, Marcello

**I**would like to acknowledge and give thanks to the women who took part in my survey. Without the energy and time they put into their responses my assignment could not have been completed.

My aim was to explore the difficulties, joys and challenges these women face in their roles as both feminists and mothers of male children. I also want to make this largely ignored group of women visible: failure to mention them in feminist herstory or theory has meant their energy, work and challenge has remained largely unrecognised by the feminist movement.

This article does not do justice to the women's stories or fully capture the diversity of lifestyle and experience they represent. The "statistics" offer the minimum of insight into the group of women involved.

The ages of the 28 male children involved ranged from five months to 32 years, with the majority falling between two and 17 years. All but three of the "boys" had female siblings, two were "only children". One household had four boys, two women had sons with different fathers and two of one woman's sons were adopted. One of one woman's sons was mentally handicapped.

Many of the women had visions of how they want their sons to be able to relate in the world that focus on the breaking of the emotional restraints they feel their sons will face as men. The power imbalances evident in society would also not be a factor in these ideal worlds.

Nineteen women responded to my survey, 13 in written form, one by tape and five in an interview setting. Six of the women were lesbian, eight were solo mothers, 11 had live-in partners (nine male, two female). One woman identified herself as Maori (Ngati Porou/Ngati Kahungunu) and four Pakeha women had sons who were part Maori. Two women identified as working class and three stated religious affiliations – one Quaker, one Christian and one unspecified. Four women lived apart from their sons, two of whom lived with their father, one with his mother's parents and two lived independently.

*"It is vital to recognise that the problem is the social construction of being male, not his 'maleness'"*

"My son would be able to relate to men in the same way as I relate to women now – he'd be able to be loving, physical, vulnerable, open, honest..."

"Men would relate on a more feeling level – feel free to be creative, nurturing, soft, sensitive, caring, patient..."

"All people would be equal – no traditional male/female roles."

These issues continued to be the focus for many women, hopes for their sons in the real world. They want them to retain their nurturing and sensitive sides and to achieve respect and equality in their relationships with women.

"My ideal for my sons relating to men is no different from my ideal for my daughters relating to women. I want my sons to be able to feel good about themselves as the people they are. I want them to grow up accepting other people as they are. I would like them not to be pressured into stereotypes. I would like them to be able to relate in a personal relationship where they feel equality and acceptance and room to grow and explore."

"I hope that his being Maori will not be oppressive in the same way that I hope his maleness is not something he uses to oppress. As New Zealand males. I hope they are bicultural and taking an active part in that."

"I would like him to grow up a sensitive, gentle and assertive male, as opposed to an aggressive, chauvinistic pig – he can be both at the moment!"

"I expect him to choose not to take on what society gives him – male power – and that he will grow up a caring man. That if he chooses a relationship with a woman,

## SOUTH AFRICAN DOMESTIC WORKERS

They number more than four million Black women and have launched a nation-wide campaign for a living wage and for protection under the labour laws as legal workers. Domestic workers are challenging a system that has reduced them to the most exploited workers in South Africa. This report comes from The Press Trust of South Africa.

Jane was a domestic worker in the port city of Durban. She had worked for Mr and Mrs Thomas for 17 years. When Mrs Thomas fell ill and became bed-ridden, Jane nursed, fed and cleaned her until she died. Then Mr Thomas dismissed her without notice or pay.

"She sat in this chair you are sitting in now, a grown woman with children and grandchildren and cried", recalls Mary Mkhawanzi, Natal regional co-ordinator and assistant general secretary of the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU). "When we contacted Jane's former employer requesting a pension or at least some compensation for her 17 years, all he was prepared to do was forget about a small loan she had taken from him to rebuild her house after it had been destroyed by floods.

Jane's case is by no means unique. Every day every one of SADWU'S 16 regional offices sees at least one domestic

worker desperately seeking help on issues ranging from unfair dismissals to inadequate wages, poor working conditions and the absence of any sick and maternity leave.

According to SADWU's general secretary, Ms Florie de Villiers, the aim of the "living wage" campaign is two-fold: to demand recognition of domestic workers as a workforce and legislation to protect them as workers. The living wage campaign is being launched against a political background of increasing state repression against labour organisations in the country.

Another demand high on the living wage campaign agenda is maternity and sick leave. Pregnancy and illness are frequently used to dismiss workers without notice. Eunice of East London, for example, worked for her employer for five years. When she got sick and an operation was needed, the doctor said she must take sick leave. But her employer refused and she was fired.

According to Ms Mkhawanzi, the demand for domestic workers to get Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) benefits - which give unemployment, sickness and maternity benefits and worker's compensation rights, is also crucial. "I was dismissed from my job without any pay and because I am not young any more and untrained in my skill, I struggled to find a new job", said Irene, who lives in Umlazi. "My husband has been dead for four years and I have three growing children to support. Because I could not claim from UIF we lived on handouts for many

months until I managed to find work again. At that time I was trying to get the house put into my name but had to pay off a big electricity debt before they would do it. I turned into a very nervous and depressed person."

The living wage campaign will also focus on the need for 21 working days annual leave, one month's notice from either side, all public holidays off and payslips stating hours of work and deductions.

Although it is not a specific demand, the union is also hoping the campaign will make more people aware of the need to make domestic workers independent of their employers. Ms Mkhawanzi, herself a former domestic worker who was once told by an employer "it is not your job to think", said the fact that many workers "lived in" is used by many employers as an excuse for not paying a living wage.

According to Ms Mkhawanzi it is not difficult to explain the Pretoria authorities' obvious reluctance to pass protective legislation for domestic workers. "The employers of domestic workers put the government into power so it has to oblige them. In this way the government is merely responding to the demands of an electorate which is happy to continue exploiting domestic workers. Also we must not forget that the very same minister has a domestic worker back at home. But it is time people realised domestic workers are as much a part of the future of this country and the struggle for a just and democratic South Africa as anyone else, and should be taken seriously. ■

## NEW BOOKSHOP

There was some sadness for members of the Broadsheet collective at the re-opening of Broadsheet Bookshop as The Women's Bookshop, now being run by Carole Ben-Barrington. Carole's enthusiasm and energy for the shop is clear in this photo taken at the opening, which was also the launching of Frances Cherry's novel *Dancing with Strings* in Auckland. We wish Carole every success with the bookshop.

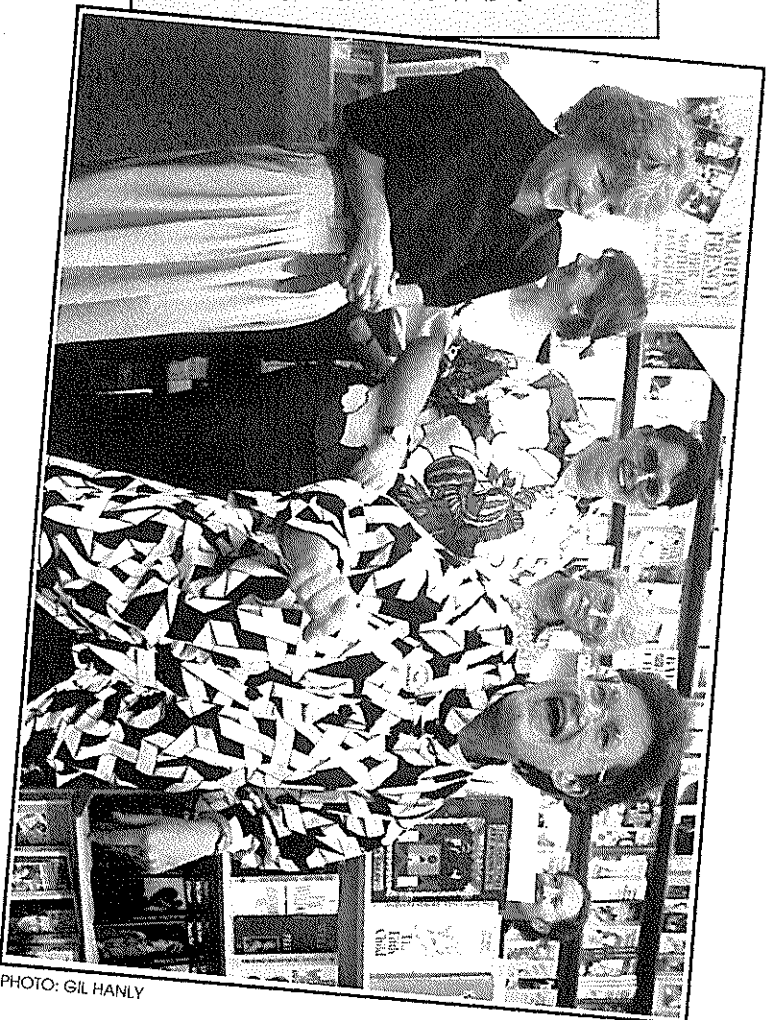


PHOTO: GIL HANLY

he'll be totally in that relationship — share equal responsibility. ... he has every opportunity to be a real shit — as all men do — what strength it would require not to take it on — all that power, privilege and safety."

"Sometimes it seems everything is working against these dreams being realised," was a sentiment expressed by many of the women. Television, school, peer pressure, friends and relatives were commonly mentioned as the things working against their hopes, with some further explaining these as the results of colonisation and the patriarchal society we live in: "I feel the pressure for boys to be boys (men to be *real* men) is greater than that on girls to be girls. It seems to me over a perspective of 20 years as a parent that girls now have more choices but the choices for boys are not there. Girls have a huge variety of role models — even though I accept the 'norm' is still heterosexual and feminine — they have plenty of role models of women who are not conforming to that stereotype. Where are the role models for my sons? If anything there has been a polarisation for men to be macho and violent."

One woman said she felt the patriarchy was strong and well organised so it was unfair to place the expectation on her sons to come through untouched by its values. She believed it was not possible for her sons to avoid being part of the patriarchal game. At one stage she tried to counteract it but decided she didn't want to take it on, other than to live her life with her sons as who she was, believing it more important to work with women to undermine the system.

All the other women, while recognising the difficulties, were actively countering what they saw as the negative influences on their sons. Encouraging their nurturing and sensitive side, exposing them to different life-style and non-traditional role models (male and female), editing of TV, books and toys available to them when they are young and discussion of TV's portrayal of both men and women while it was watched were all seen as countering tactics.

A number of women also mentioned that younger siblings offered a chance for their sons to actively reject the stereotypical male role by encouraging their caring and nurturing side into play. Having both male and female children meant that sexist presents aimed at either child were put in a communal toy box and both shared the pleasures of dolls and building bricks. However, talking about occurrences in their lives, discussing issues and keeping the lines of communication with their sons open were the most common strategies the women used.

"I politicise them and try to involve them in activities where they get self-esteem points for not being stereotypically

*"I expect him to choose not to take on what society gives him."*

male, eg nurturing of younger children or pets, playing non-sexist games with other feminists' kids, constant exposure to woman power in all sorts of areas, like building and mechanics. I encourage my boys to cook and knit — they can do both well."

"Even though I don't provide war toys for my children everyone else seems to — even though they know how I feel. I actively and successfully undermine their importance by talking about TV advertisements and how much the toys cost to produce and how much profit the manufacturer is trying to take off kids."

"I try to present a bi-cultural family life but can only do this from a Pakeha perspective. It is difficult, for their father (who was Maori) is absent (he died eight years ago) and I have a negative relationship with my mother-in-law and so have no idea how much Maorianga is introduced by my in-laws' family."

Strategies were not limited to dealing with the boys themselves:

"I also talk to the teachers a lot about sexism. I am on the local school committee and promote, as much as I can, non-sexism, non-racism and non-violence in the classrooms ... in fact I am as subversive as I can be."

"I try to encourage his father to have the knowledge and understanding of a different idea of role modelling."

"It's an enormous job educating my parents — one of my sons wants to be a ballet dancer when he grows up. His grandmother couldn't cope with the idea, and gave lots of negative messages until I pointed out that he'd at least get a job, as male dancers are in demand. She's okay about it now!"

While school was often quoted as a negative influence, for one woman it was

*"We feminists are at the spearhead of change. Our sons are part of that change. Our daughters too."*

part of her move to counter other societal negatives and also highlighted some success she had had in both her non-sexist and non-racist dreams:

"He has a natural relationship with girls at school. His teacher actively encourages this and has commented to me that she sees him as a good role model for other children ... the school is 50/50 Maori and Pakeha and is bi-cultural — that's why I sent him there it's not just in the classroom but in the total concept. The Head actively counters both racism and sexism."

Success with these strategies for making "different" men included:

"He is aware of all the different issues — all the isms."

"He is mostly supportive and open with me, which I enjoy, he is perhaps one of my closest friends."

One woman pointed out:

"I am not able to say if I have been successful. There are no milestones — at no stage can I sit back and say 'there, I've done it, he is a good man' as my work, raving and challenges will continue all the time — it won't ever end."

The question of success raises the issue of the responsibility feminists may feel to raise "ideal" men. One woman with a young son spoke of this:

"I feel sadness at how vulnerable he is and how his beauty and goodness could be manipulated by society. I feel an enormous responsibility to produce a 'good man'. I don't want society to win."

This is further exposed by a woman with grown up sons. As the person who compiled the survey, I was distressed to read that doing it had made her come to the conclusion, "you can see I fail to qualify as a feminist mother," because, despite her efforts to raise the awareness of her sons, they could both be described as "male chauvinists". As another woman stated:

"I would like to stress that I do not believe women are a hundred percent responsible for the men that they care for as children. I suppose the effect we can have on our sons is to teach them to be aware of the system and how it works — it is up to them to choose whether they take up the fight to change things."

While a number of women stated they saw no disadvantages to being feminists with male children, others did find conflicts additional to the feeling of responsibility in raising future men, such as:

"The constant battle — being aware of the world. I have real conflict of wanting to protect him, but needing to expose him — allowing him to find out for himself."

"Being feminist has made it hard at times, feeling I have to be 'strong' in coping, for example with chores. I have always made a point of working alongside him where I can, of not collapsing in a crumpled heap. Sometimes I think I should have — to make him more aware of my

humanity.”

“It irritates me, or maybe it’s my fear, that he is/will be viewed as a ‘boy’, therefore categorised as such, rather than as a child, by some of my feminist friends. I sometimes find myself wishing he’d be ‘good’ so they won’t judge him as a ‘boy’. This puts unfair pressure on both me and my son.”

“I get extremely annoyed with the anti-male feeling within the feminist movement... such as no boy children allowed at a conference. My son should not be ostracised for being male. Feminism for me is looking at injustices - anti-male is equivalent.”

“Another difficulty is having to put up with the shiteheads non-feminists are raising and trying to counter all the negative behaviour towards females.”

“I am handicapped by looking after a son. It’s damn hard. It looks and feels often like propping up men.”

Four women raised the issue that having a son meant they were not able to be totally and exclusively involved with women. One was undecided as to whether this was an advantage or disadvantage, one felt it was a negative and two saw it as positive. One said:

“If I just had girls I would be a very separatist lesbian feminist and would live somewhere I had no male contact at all (a convent is quite appealing!). My sons have forced me to stay in another world and to broaden my horizons and confront and tolerate many situations I would have just negated. Through my sons I have men friends that I really care about — not at all in a sexual way but in a friendship trusting relationship. I have had to acknowledge the other sex on the planet and in doing so my own male energy and come to accept that also.”

Other advantages in being feminist and having male children were noted:

“Being feminist has helped me cope with solo parenthood, to appreciate the imbalance that is in so many men and not feel guilty that my children did not have a father around.”

“The really neat thing about having sons is doing things you wanted to do as a girl, but couldn’t because you didn’t have brothers — like kicking a ball around, playing with lego, play-fighting.”

“It’s a joy — knowing I can really contribute to the world.”

Two women also mentioned in some ways it was an easier relationship than that of mother/daughter. One related this to an innate mother/son bonding; the other felt it was because her son did not have to establish a “different” sexual identity from her, as his sisters did, because right from the beginning he was different.

Of course there are advantages for their sons in having a feminist mother, was the feeling of most of the women:

*“I feel the pressure  
for boys to be  
boys is greater  
than that on  
girls to be girls.”*

“It means he has had the opportunity to live and grow with an adult who lives and grows; who will listen to him, support him, show him things that aren’t okay or fair and what can be done; who models fair, honest, optimistic ideals; who believes children are people too; who can view children as disadvantaged and stripped



Our scientists are proud to have set a new standard. Enjoy the proven benefits **INSIST ON EPO**

**HIGHER QUALITY**

Available from leading Health Outlets

MANUFACTURED BY GOOD HEALTH PRODUCTS  
PO BOX 65-180, AUCKLAND

of power, who works to change that; who is well enough informed to teach her children who the world really is ...”

“My lads see my life, which is full and interesting and fun and satisfying and their respect for women is increased. They see the contrast between “TV women” and me. They know the TV portrayal of us is

*“I don’t know  
any men that are  
wholly positive  
models.”*

not reality, that women are strong and capable and intelligent.”

Most women also recognised that their sons may feel disadvantaged too:

“Both boys get sick of me pulling TV programmes apart — the girls do too. They just want to watch the crap without me pointing out how politically incorrect it is.”

“With my rape crisis work my son will hear my responses on the phone so will often hear negatives about men. He hears about male violence and its result. These things must have influence on, and be hard for, him as a male.”

“It may limit him socially, he doesn’t bring many friends home as he doesn’t quite know if I’ll say something ‘radical’. It freaks the kids out if I’m open about being lesbian “There’s no-one to help him work out how to be a ‘man’ as he has no positive male role models ... he’s hassled and plied at school and by friends’ fathers for having me as a mother “Sometimes he feels threatened, not personally, but as a male.”

“Strong daughters tend to walk over a gentle son and spend more time with stroppy one ... I sometimes regret encouraging my daughters to be so tough and stand no shit. I had no idea they would turn their strength onto their brother.”

As this last comment also shows, the advice “teach your girls to be strong and stroppy”, teach your boys to be soft and gentle” oversimplifies the complex situation faced by feminists with sons. Another woman commented:

“Always encouraging my son to be gentle and take a peaceful approach to conflict, I found it quite a dilemma that the times he seemed to most blatantly disregard this was when he was with either of two particular friends, who were both stroppy aggressive girls. As, to date, he seems not to differentiate between the sexes of his friends he was not mirroring ‘male behaviour’ but mimicking the aggressive behaviour of two older females!!”

Role models were unanimously agreed to be important for these women’s sons. Most wanted at least some to be male but remarked that either they did not have any or that they were extremely hard to find. Others found partners and men in non-traditional roles provided their sons with positive male images. Positive female role models were also deemed important, with many women seeing themselves as the strongest role for this.

“I feel positive role models are important — but I’m not going to go out and hunt for ‘good’ men. I wish the men he has contact with would put across an alternative, as at the moment he only hears that soft and gentle is okay (for boys), there’s no man to put that across.”

“Role models don’t all have to be male but I feel he needs both and yes he has

some really positive ones.... Things like physical hygiene and body education – I can only give a female perspective – my partner can give the male view .... I feel it needs to be balanced.”

“I don’t know any men that are wholly positive models – due to the patriarchal society – but I feel it’s very important sons get positive female role models so hopefully they’ll grow up to realise women aren’t in the world for the sole purpose of pandering to men and men’s needs.”

The women also raised the need for their sons to have a positive image of themselves as a male:

“I feel it’s important that he feel good about himself, who he is, which among other things will obviously be a man. That the awareness I pass on to him will cause him to be active in the fight to change the present structures of society but not make him walk around feeling guilty. A parallel can be drawn with me as a Pakeha woman – recognition of the privilege I receive being white is vital in the fight against racism. However, ‘white guilt’ does nothing to change the present system.”

“I would like/hope him to be proud and strong in his own identity.... My legacy to him is that I know who I am as a Maori, I am able to pass that on to him. I hope he will be aware that to be anti-Pakeha is not the only way to be Maori .... I have the power to make him hate being male. It is vital to recognise that the problem is the social construction of being male, not his ‘maleness’.”

“If they feel good about themselves they won’t abuse others.”

Many women noted the abundance of negative role models visible to their sons, from the media to men in the community. It was also noted a number of times that “a bad model is worse than no model”. As far as personal support was concerned some women mentioned family and friends as support, with one saying she actively sought support and got it. Most of the others felt they received little or no support in being feminist mothers with sons. It was something they all saw as important and would have liked more of.

Ideas for raising sons came from books, other feminists, observations and reflection on their own childhood, but were mainly their own:

“I guess I get most of my ideas for raising my son from my own observations, reading, dreams, discussions with other like-minded (and opposite) women friends. I get most of my ‘how not to’ ideas from observing society generally.”

“My ideas are 90 percent my own – I think a great deal about how to manage and raise my lads – I talk heaps with them, involve them (after age 10) in decisions. I read heaps, but mostly it’s original decisions and ways of coping and teaching them.”

*“If they feel  
good about themselves  
they won’t abuse  
others.”*

When asked if raising sons was worth the effort, the women responded with a resounding “yes”, although a number questioned just how much social change would be created:

“It is worth the effort. It’s the silent revolution! Thousands of women contributing to the breakdown of the patriarchal hierarchy by undermining the traditional male value system from the inside!”

“Of course it’s worth the effort. We have a big influence on our kids – looking back and seeing how my parents influenced me reinforces that belief. Changes are happening. They’re slow, but they are there – we have to be part of that.”

“We can’t change society solely working with people on an individual level – we need to work at a range of levels – the central part though is individually based. We have potential to influence our kids, but we can’t be sure it will work.”

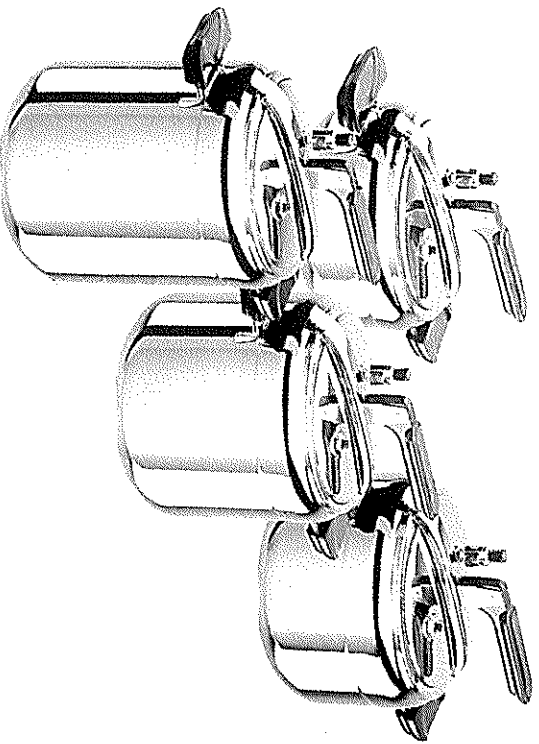
“It is always worth the effort – to give up trying means death.”

“Yes, it’s worth the effort. Yes, we have influence and yes, they’ll be ‘different’ men. Yes, we can change society with our ‘new thinking’ men. Yes, it’s all worth it!!! Let’s keep raising our lads this way – if we don’t it’s leaving it to the men and what an awful job they’d make of it – even the best of them needs a woman’s wisdom to do it right!”

Despite the challenge, difficulties and often lack of support, these women continue to be positive in their dual role as feminists with male children and I feel it is important that the work, energy and effort of these and other feminists with sons be considered worthy of recognition and as playing a vital part in the achievement of the ultimate aims of the feminist movement.

“Of course it’s worth the effort. We feminists are at the spearhead of change. Our sons are part of that change. Our daughters too. It’s exciting, it’s amazing and it is happening. We might seem to go two steps forward and one back, but oh, it’s changing and it’s wonderful. It is painful for our sons, but in the end for them too to be able to be accepted for what they are, live as wonderful human beings and for us as women, to live in a world without fear of men – it’s worth it, a thousand times over. We are the changers. We are changing the world!!!” ■

## PRESSURE COOKERS **LETTERNOMITE** THE ENERGYSAVERS - FOR A FAST AND NUTRITIOUS MEAL.



- Manufactured from 18/10 stainless steel
- Base composed of copper/stainless steel slab to provide quick & even heating.
- The 18/10 stainless steel multi cooker steam basket makes loading and unloading of food simple and easy.

- Capacity 5L, 7L & 9L
- Positive opening and locking of lid
- Steam pressure controlled by automatic weight
- Safety valve positioned under lever cross piece to deflect steam in an emergency
- Rounded corners makes cleaning easy

Pressure Cookers available Mitre 10 & Arthur Barnetts-DIC

# SCHOOL DAZE

*A is for award talks,  
B is for boards of trustees,  
and C is for classrooms.  
Things are not so clear  
though, when it comes to  
spelling out what the  
reforms outlined in  
Tomorrow's Schools  
will mean for students,  
parents or teachers.  
Lisa Sabbage  
goes back to basics and  
talks to Athina Tsoulis  
and Maryan Street.*

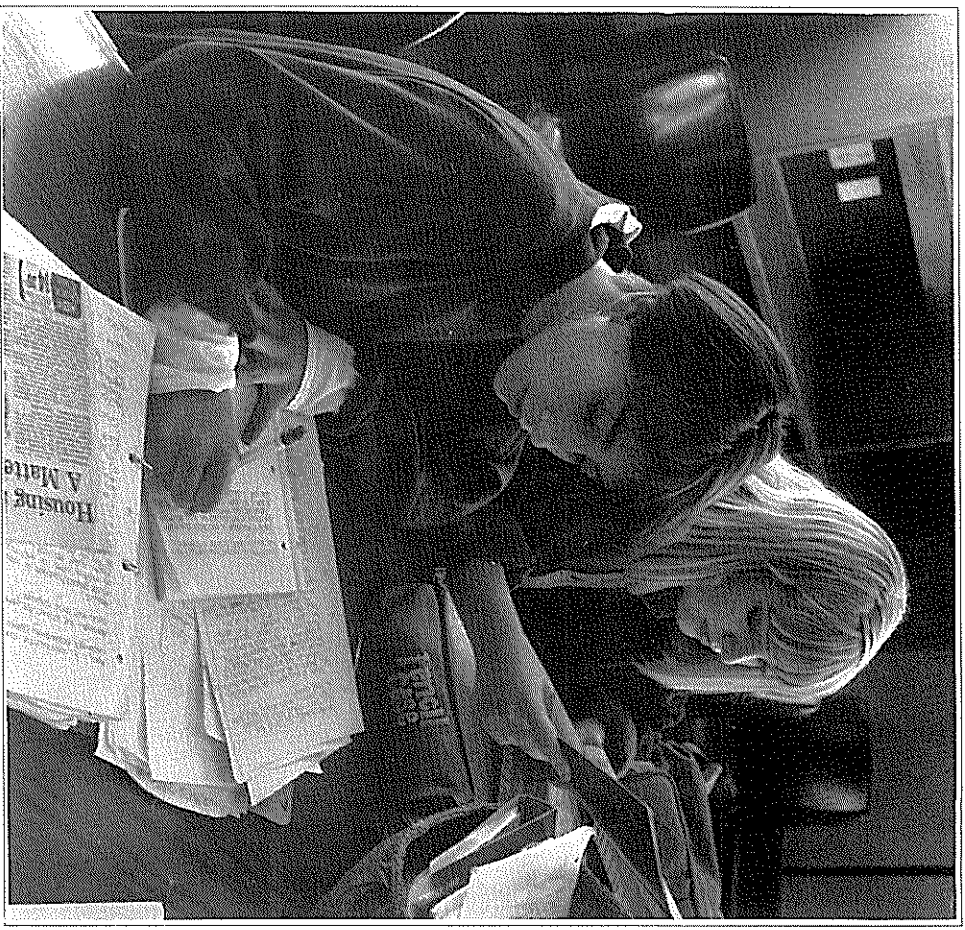


PHOTO: GIL HANLY

**I**n his introduction to the *Tomorrow's Schools* booklet, David Lange boldly states that the government is certain that this education reform "will lead to improved learning opportunities for children in this country". He maintains that the reform will "result in more immediate delivery of resources to schools, more parental and community involvement, and greater teaching responsibility".

While the Minister of Education and his department seem unequivocally certain that these commendable goals will be realised, others are concerned that *Tomorrow's Schools* may prove to be a costly experiment for which teachers and students will pay the price.

Although she had major problems with the Picot Report on which the *Tomorrow's Schools* (TS) policies are based, Athina Tsoulis decided to stand for the board of trustees at her children's primary school. Wary of the way education has been run in the past and the government's motives for rushing in the new system, she still thought it was important to get trustees that weren't simply going to act as financial managers.

Like a lot of parents, Athina felt that the whole education system has been due for an overhaul for a very long time. She

***Tomorrow's Schools*  
may prove to be  
a costly experiment  
for which teachers  
and students  
will pay  
the price**

was always disturbed that the quality of her children's education seemed to depend on the particular teacher they had from year to year. She was also concerned as a former teacher that schools so often destroyed the desire to learn in children. Athina left teaching because she felt it was teaching children to fail and didn't cater for their needs.

"In the past the education system has only provided for middle class children and geared itself to allow only a certain percentage to pass."

This was brought home to Athina as a Greek immigrant in Australia where immigrants were brought out as factory fodder for low skilled jobs. There was

little awareness in schools of the children's special needs, in fact they were given things like IQ tests based on the dominant white cultural beliefs and values. Inevitably immigrant children failed and were classified as stupid or lazy. Historically, much the same has happened with Maori and Pacific Island children in New Zealand schools.

The government claims that opening schools up to local communities will address the inequities that made Athina and other teachers and parents withdraw their support from them. Thus from 1 October, boards of trustees — five elected trustees, a staff rep, and a student rep in secondary schools — will be responsible for broad policy objectives and the efficient running of schools.

However, the concept of "opening up" schools to parents and expecting them in droves is not as easy as the government proposes. Most people have a very negative experience of their past schooling and aren't suddenly going to get involved because they're told things have changed. "There will still be a large unrepresented group who don't feel comfortable in the school institution. These are precisely the people who need to have input because they're the ones the education system has failed. It's naive to believe that after all the damage that has been done you can make