

'She works hard for her money' – the Council of Trade Unions Women's Conference



Caroline Conroy,
MERAS organiser

'She works hard for her money' is the title of a song written and made famous by Donna Summer after she had a conversation with a cleaner in a public toilet. This song

was the anthem for this year's Council of Trade Union (CTU) Women's Conference epitomizing one of the key topics of the conference – pay equity.

This conference, held every two years, brings together women from a range of unions to talk about issues affecting them in the workplace. This year I joined one hundred and eighty union women at the conference coming from unions representing groups as diverse as meat workers, dairy workers, teaching, tramways and health. The 12% pay gap between women and men was highlighted as was the even greater pay difference that exists for Māori and Pasifika women. Speakers also highlighted the difficulties still facing many women when they step outside of traditional female roles in the workplace or seek promotion. Whenever I hear these stories it makes me realise that we are lucky as midwives in a female dominated profession that when we apply for a promotion within midwifery our ability to do the job is not questioned just because of our gender, yet for many women this is still an issue that they face in the workplace.

There were a few sobering figures about union membership and the impact the neoliberal ideology that has dominated political decision making for the last 30 years has had on employment legislation and union membership. More people aged over 30 are union members than those under 30, the majority of union membership being within the public sector and only 9% of workers in the private sector belonging to a union.

We heard women who had worked in low income jobs in both unionised and non-union workplaces and the differences that they experienced. Their stories clearly highlighted the benefits of working within a unionised workplace. We were also reminded of the history of the

SFWU (service and food workers union) in the 1980's and 90's, the growth in membership they experienced amongst women, Māori and Pasifika people, the introduction of the Employment Pay Equity Act and then the rapid repeal of that legislation by an in-coming National government. There was also discussion around the proposed changes to the Pay Equity Act and the impact this will have on future pay equity claims making it more difficult for female dominated work areas to make successful claims.

Since the conference the government has tabled the Employment (Pay Equity and Equal Pay) Bill and its first reading will have happened by the time this article is published. The CTU has serious concerns about the Bill (as noted by Karen Guilliland on page 6).

It is the undervaluing of a female dominated profession that is the area where midwifery experiences discrimination in terms of pay equity. The New Zealand College of Midwives



achieved a great result for self-employed community midwives recently (see Alison Eddy's article on page 10) and MERAS now needs to determine the best approach with which to achieve pay equity for employed midwives. We recognise both the systemic undervaluing of female dominated professions and also the undervaluing of midwifery by continuing to link pay to nurses when the training, scope of practice and responsibilities are quite different.

"What we do, how we do it to win" was a quote attributed to Helen Kelly who was remembered at the conference. Helen who died earlier this year had been CTU President and a well respected unionist. This quote reflected the other key topic for the conference – organising to effect change. Speakers highlighted that union staff, organisers, delegates and representatives cannot succeed on their own and need active members who are willing to participate in campaigns. We were reminded of the importance of a grassroots approach to organising and staying connected with members. Whilst the range of digital tools and social media grows, nothing replaces face-to-face conversations. It is these conversations amongst MERAS members that have helped to grow the union. Respected midwife members in the workplace having conversations with new graduate midwives and other new midwives about why it is important to join MERAS and times when they should seek assistance from the union have been effective in growing membership and raising our profile. Our MERAS workplace representatives are the face of the union and do a great job representing members' concerns to their midwife managers and keeping the MERAS National Representative Council informed of issues.

As MERAS commences its MECA negotiations it is timely to think about the priorities that members have identified in recent surveys and Helen Kelly's quote "how we do it to win".

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Working as a midwife in non-DHB maternity units – your rights

Caroline Conroy

We read lots about the work and pay conditions for self-employed community midwives and the staffing and pay issues for DHB employed midwives, but there is another group of midwives we don't read about much and that is those midwives employed by non-DHB maternity units.

There are a number of primary maternity units around the country that have contracts with DHB's for the delivery of in-patient primary maternity services but these facilities are not owned or operated by the DHB. These facilities have become established over the years as a result of a DHB wanting to exit the provision of a primary maternity unit in a small community or a desire by an operator to establish a primary maternity unit in a community where there wasn't one. Traditionally most of these primary units have been owned or operated by community trusts with local midwives involved in the trust or they have been established by a group with midwives involved, however in recent years new operators with no background in health or maternity have begun to establish primary maternity units around the country.

Midwives applying for positions at these maternity units are quite surprised sometimes to discover that they do not receive the same terms and conditions as they had through the DHB MECA, however they do have a right to join a union and as a result MERAS (Midwifery Employee Representation & Advisory Service) has established a number of Collective

Employment Agreements (CEAs) over the years with the individual maternity units and continues to do this.

There are advantages for both the maternity unit and the midwife in having a CEA in place. MERAS is able to ensure that the pay and conditions are similar to those in the DHB ensuring that the maternity unit is able to recruit midwives and that they are not undervalued compared to their DHB colleagues.

Through a CEA MERAS is able to build a good working relationship with the maternity unit, creating opportunities for the MERAS workplace representatives and other MERAS members to be involved in the decision making within the maternity unit and feel supported by MERAS which is able to provide advice and support to the maternity unit where they are wanting to establish new initiatives.

There are some very small maternity units where a CEA is not in place but midwives can still join MERAS and receive a number of benefits. MERAS can provide advice to these midwives on their individual employment agreement when they are first employed and can also support them when issues arise in the workplace for either an individual midwife or across the unit. Where there are sufficient MERAS members we can seek to establish a Collective Employment Agreement with their employer.

Midwives will get support from NZCOM on professional issues but need to be a member of MERAS to get support on workplace issues covered under

employment legislation. Unfortunately, MERAS has discovered that not all the recent operators have a good understanding of the employment legislation or the terms and conditions that midwives expect when working.

When applying for a position at a non-DHB maternity unit midwives should consider how the employment package might compare to the total package they receive from the DHB compared with the package on offer at the maternity unit. Midwives should also take into account factors such as travel time to work, car parking costs (a number of larger hospitals charge for staff car parking), workload, job satisfaction and the number of staff on a shift (in many of these smaller units you may be the only midwife on duty and have to do on-call).

If you are a midwife working in a non-DHB maternity unit and would like any advice about your employment agreement, workplace issues or other matters you can contact MERAS (ph 03 372 9731) and receive confidential advice. To join MERAS go to meras.co.nz



For MERAS Membership e-mail
merasmembership@meras.co.nz
or call 03 372 9738

Notice of the MERAS Annual General Meeting Wednesday 18 October 2017

It is a requirement of the MERAS rules that members be notified and invited to attend the Annual General Meeting. This year we are holding the AGM in Christchurch.

The AGM is essentially a procedural meeting which we run in conjunction with the regular MERAS National Representative Council meeting. Members are welcome to attend this as well.

Location: New Zealand College of Midwives national office in Christchurch

Address: 376 Manchester St, Richmond, Christchurch 8014

Time: 11.30 am

The AGM will

- (i) Receive and consider the annual report from the regional committees
- (ii) Record minutes
- (iii) Receive and consider the General Manager's report(s)
- (iv) Receive and approve the annual audited accounts for MERAS
- (v) Consider any other such business as the majority of MERAS members present may accept for consideration.