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# **EXCEPTIONAL PIONEERS:**

**Women in Trades, Tertiary Education,  
and Collaborative Research**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education (Adult Education)  
at Massey University, Wellington  
New Zealand**

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores women's experience in trades education in Aotearoa/New Zealand polytechnics in the late 1990s. It highlights issues, which are still affecting women in spite of discourses of equal opportunity. While looking at reasons for attrition, it also celebrates the courage and determination of women pioneers in trades and tertiary education.

Three case studies chosen from 23 research participants emphasise the issues for women in the trades and are used to develop themes for analysis. Interviews were also carried out with staff working in trades education. Current literature and three key advisors assisted in creating a wider perspective of the issues. The two researchers are central to the research process. A collaborative and feminist methodology was used to produce the thesis in a safe, productive and trusting environment, both for the researchers and the participants.

The experience of women in the trades provides a link to compare women's experience in trades education to the experience of women educators in male-dominated educational organisations. The process of collaboration is explored for its usefulness to this post-graduate research.

The incorporation of trades culture into tertiary education culture produced some conflicts in philosophies of education, highlighting inconsistencies in equitable practice. Women's experiences in the trades do not appear to have changed significantly in the last 20 years and centre around issues of gender, sexuality, power and culture. Their experiences represent evidence of women in tertiary education generally and the inequities that still exist. The future for women in educational organisations is dependent upon constructive achievement in the re-culturing of tertiary educational organisations to make equitable practice part of the fabric of those organisations.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION

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We dedicate this thesis to all the exceptional pioneers who have been and who are in the trades and trades education and to the educators who have supported them. All have had to transverse boundaries of gender, culture, sexuality and power. This thesis is for all those women who stand up and make inequities visible.

To our children and our grandchildren – we have fought to make this world more inclusive of diversity, we have said what some did not want to hear, we have made visible what others would like to keep invisible and irrelevant. It has taken courage, wisdom, energy and determination to keep going when we were disillusioned and weary. This is part of your heritage. Take it and be pioneers if you will – strength to you on your journeys.

We acknowledge the courage and strength of the women participants, who allowed their stories to be told so that women’s experience in trades education does not go unheeded. We acknowledge marg gilling, our supervisor, who insisted we be ourselves. We acknowledge Eleanor Gully, Wendy Neale and Kim Hunt, our key advisors, who affirmed our journey and the experiences of the women participants in this research. We acknowledge our partners, Laureen Nation Plimmer and Jim Gray, for their love, understanding, patience and encouragement. We thank Tina Scott and Jill Abigail for their precision and expertise when checking our thesis and our work peers for their listening and encouragement. To Nicola Armstrong - in life and death you inspired us, and so many women to use their courage and strength to bring women’s issues to the attention of academic research.



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**“Me aro ki te hā o Hine-ahu-one”<sup>1</sup>**

Pay heed to the dignity and essence of women

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<sup>1</sup> Maori proverb cited in Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 1999.