

## Book review

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### **ABORTION THEN & NOW. NEW ZEALAND ABORTION STORIES FROM 1940 TO 1980**

**Margaret Sparrow**

**Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2010; 304pp.**

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Abortion as an important and on-going feminist matter in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Margaret Sparrow, the author of *Abortion Then & Now*, has been an untiring advocate of women's reproductive health and it behoves the *Women's Studies Journal* to acknowledge and highlight her noteworthy contribution. A large part of Margaret Sparrow's book is made up of women's stories about their experiences of abortion, which I encourage readers to dip into because they are a fascinating collection of accounts. They give voice to a broad range of women whose personal struggles are political because they point to a sexist social and political system that has made it difficult to avoid or end unwanted pregnancies. This review reiterates some of the noteworthy events discussed in this book.

Feminists have long advocated fertility control as a fundamental women's right. Access to safe, affordable contraception and abortion underpins a fair and just society. Reproductive choice empowers women by ensuring motherhood is an option rather than an inevitability of hetero-sex. This book is a powerful testament to the on-going importance of women's reproductive rights and New Zealand's rather chequered history concerning them. As Margaret Sparrow insightfully notes "Knowledge of our history helps us understand the present so we are better able to protect future generations from indignities of the past" (Sparrow 2010, p. vii).

Margaret Sparrow was president of the Abortion Law Reform Association for 32 years (ALAC 2011). In 2002 she was made a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (DCNZSM) for her service to sexual and reproductive health. The information and stories presented in this book furthers her contribution because it clearly outlines the on-going relevance of abortion as a human rights issue that requires law reform in New Zealand. Furthermore, in recording and disseminating many women's experiences of abortion the book may help lessen the social stigma of termination by highlighting unwanted pregnancy as a very real and widespread problem.

Margaret Sparrow's own abortion experience is modestly presented as part of the penultimate chapter that presents doctors' accounts of their experiences of caring for women who had complications following 'back street' abortions or who were seeking help with unwanted pregnancies. In it she explains that the reduction of unwanted pregnancies was a priority in her medical career. So her abortion advocacy work has been part of a larger personal and professional strategy to make every child a wanted child in New Zealand. Another thread in that strategy was her clinical work, which meant she amassed an impressive record of performing over 1000 vasectomies (ALAC 2011).

The substantive content of the book is the presentation of around 70 personal stories from women who have had abortions. The stories were all collected orally or in writing around the mid-naughties in response to radio and print media invitations. Personal abortion stories are organised into decades that are presented in four chapters covering the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. An introduction to each of these chapters describes significant historical events in that time period and points to some of the most poignant aspects of the stories within their historical period. Three further chapters present stories from the Police, Doctors and Abortion Advocates.

A lasting impression given from the stories of the 1940s and 1950s was that abortions were common, largely committed illegally and contributed to an alarmingly high number of maternal deaths. During those periods New Zealand had one of the highest death rates from abortion in the world. A powerful message gleaned from these two chapters is that neither the illegality of abortion nor the possibility of death from 'back-street' abortions is sufficient to prevent them. Clearly, a reasonable and rational solution to circumvent the need for abortion is the provision of safe and affordable contraception. If contraception fails then providing access to safe and legal abortions is an additional way society can support a gender fair society and save the unnecessary loss of women's lives.

The events reported in the introduction to the 1960s chapter reveals it as a turning point in the history of women's reproductive and sexual health – largely for the better. The last recorded death from an illegal abortionist was in that decade. Medical advances included the increasing availability of the contraceptive pill and the development of instant pregnancy tests, so women had more control of their fertility than ever before. Australia offered legal abortion for those who could afford to travel there. However, abortion in New Zealand remained illegal. Nevertheless, as the decade progressed a falling rate of prosecutions pointed to a sympathetic treatment of women confessing to abortion and support for medical doctors who conducted the operation safely. Police entrapment of lay abortionists meant fewer backstreet, unsafe operations were being performed and a chapter is devoted to personal stories from members of the police.

The 1970s witnessed an up-swell of feminist political activity. Margaret Sparrow rightfully notes that a woman's right to choose became a central matter for feminism in that period. There was an increasing international recognition that the provision of safe, legal abortions was fundamentally a women's health issue and that they should not be punished for contraceptive failures. In New Zealand, the politics of abortion became a defining issue of the decade and attracted intense media coverage. Abortion was decriminalised but a woman had to gain the approval of certifying consultants before been granted access to an abortion (see Smyth 2000). However, laws and a Royal Commission Inquiry Report on abortion were hotly debated throughout this decade. Interviews with and stories from some of the key activists and advocates of abortion are presented in a final chapter.

The stories from the women, police, doctors and advocates document abortion as a very difficult and divisive issue in this country. Margaret Sparrow provides a clear voice of reason when she presents her expert view at the end of the chapter covering the 1970s. She criticises the present system of requiring certifying consultants to endorse the necessity of an abortion as hypocritical and dishonest. Almost all abortions conducted in New Zealand are carried out on the grounds of mental health. It is dishonest because women, in all likelihood, could successfully manage an unwanted child. Furthermore, the pro-choice position is that most women are mentally fit enough to choose whether to end a pregnancy or not, which is undermined by the need for consultants to endorse that need. Another limitation of the current legislation is it fails to address new non-surgical methods of procuring an abortion. In sum, Margaret Sparrow is a

strong advocate for further reform. In all likelihood, feminists will have to mobilise again to ensure that a vocal but minority conservative element does not hamper the further gains that need to be made to ensure women have easy access to safe abortions.

**References**

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