**THE COLONIAL HELPMEET**

**Women's Role and the vote in 19th Century NZ by Raewyn Dalziel**

**BASIC ARGUMENT**

***The widely-held concept of women's place in society (preserving the moral fibre of the nation - guardians of the comforts of the home) combined with the special circumstances of colonial NZ, led to an intense emphasis in 19th Century NZ on women's role within home and family. Furthermore early success of NZ women in gaining the vote was closely related to their achievement as guardians of moral health and welfare. The vote consolidated and reconfirmed their vital interest and mission in life.***

**Compare Dalziel's argument with the conventional**

**view.......................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................**

**1. Wakefield had maintained that women played an all-important part in colonisation - to create and care for house and home. (Freeing men for the real work of production) - her duty was to guard the virtue, morality and gentility of the settlers**

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**2. Charles Hursthouse advised any fellow bachelor contemplating migration to stop for a week (*that long!)* and to ride around the neighbourhood in search of a wife.... Women not viewed as individuals but as wives, mothers, homemakers and housekeepers.**

**3. Indeed the future of many women was indeed in that role because of the imbalance of the sexes. Even by 1891 there were still 105 bachelors to every 100 spinsters (UK had a surplus of women over men) and most women did marry. 1874 census showed 15% of women over 20 were single and 5% over 10. By 1891 occupation of most woman was as a wife. Even the large numbers of domestic servants was seen as a preparation for becoming a true 'help-meet'.**

**4. Important to remember that life within the bounds of home and family was not as frustrating in NZ as for women in Britain. In the colonial context the role provided demands and challenges that held a high degree of personal reward.**

**- satisfaction**

**- sense of purpose**

**- a feeling of usefulness**

**- greater independence**

**She was a true help meet. (from Genesis) particularly in the colonial context eg -**

**- household work (not always servants available)**

**- water had to be carried and boiled before washing**

**- cooking on camp ovens**

**- many contributed economically to households especially farmers' wives**

**Making butter for own consumption and sale.**

**Many cases (1874 = 245) women running farm and sheep station on their own.**

**5. Women's role in bringing up and educating children also important - 1st 20 years is so because there were few schools.**

**6. All these roles performed in a country that had one of the highest standards of living in the world. High degree of material reward to accompany their duties therefore not the need for women to work.**

**7. Work patterns of NZ women reinforced emphasis on home and family. (Only 20% of women over 15 worked outside the home in 1874. 24% in 1891)**

**Why?**

**a) Relatively high wages and high standard of living therefore less necessary.**

**b) Range of jobs was small.**

**Largest category was Domestic Servants, school teaching and the 1880's, work in industry. Even the experience of long hours, low wages and poor working conditions reinforced idea that their proper was in the home. - the kitchen and the nursery not the or shop counter were the proper sphere for women.**

**c) Most could fulfill a role within marriage.**

**8. a) Women charged with maintaining the moral tone of society. Their job to restrain and refine the basic instincts of men. Therefore of numbers of men, women needed to moderate men's tendency to fall into sin and wickedness. (*strewth it was Eve that took up the apple and offered it to Adam!)* eg alcohol, smoking, bad language, gambling and sexual vice.**

**b) Women's purity and virtues were essential to harness man's animal nature.**

**c) Early NZ novels abound with contrasts between rough boorish colonial men and refined gentlemen. Quote P63/64. (Charlotte Godley begged two young bachelors to set up a dummy of a lady in their sitting room and 'to always behave before it as if it were their mother or some other dignified lady' *Mrs McGurkenshaw performs that role within the History Department*).**

**9. Worst of all male vices was alcohol. In 1879 one alcohol licence for every 287 people - affected men by worsening them and causing women and children to suffer.**

**RELATIONSHIP TO SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT**

**Dalziel's argument.**

**This conception of women's role as wife, mother and homemaker and guardian of society's morals closely linked to agitation for suffrage and with early extension of vote to women. Early feminist, activists and pro suffrage males argued from a position based on the family. Political rights were a recognition of the worth of that vocation and a complement to it. Therefore connection with temperance is not surprising because temperance and the vote were seen as safeguarding the morality of the economy and of the family.**

**Evidence:**

**1. Feminist literature eg Mr Mary Muller of Nelson quote P65.**

**2. If women were capable of guiding families and running households, they were capable of voting.**

**3. A fresher purer tone would be infused into politics. Because they were already doing that within the family.**

**4. Supporters in parliament had similar vices - achievements of women and virtues especially connected to it ,would give women that voice in the conduct of public affairs to which they are entitled.**

**5. Opposition Arguments.**

**- Women's vote would destroy happiness and degrade and demean her. (But an unconvincing argument) - particularly when the majority of active suffragists came from WCTU who were dedicated to removing the greatest evil that threatened home and family.**

**- the demon alcohol**

**6. Politicians and suffragists argued that women's vote would**

**- purify politics and increase attention to social problems.**

**- see that the wrong sort of men did not get into parliament**

**-assert women's role within home and family.**