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STRONG IN THEIR SPIRITS

WOMEN MANAGERS

IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,...it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us (Dickens, 1859).

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives (Lorde, 1980: 15).

Social services world-wide is a predominantly female profession with mainly female clients, yet is primarily managed by men. Although internationally there is considerable literature on women in management the main focus has been on how women can adapt to fit in to the male world of management. In Aotearoa New Zealand there has been little research on women in social services management.

This qualitative study examined the experiences and practice of eight pakeha women, mainly middle managers, in a number of social service agencies in Aotearoa New Zealand. The thesis sought, by listening to their voices, to illuminate how they experienced organisational life and how they managed.

The women in management literature was analysed within a framework that combined management theory and feminist theory (Padgett, 1993), management in the social services was explored, and research studies on women in human service management were examined.

In this study the women managers' experiences fell into two distinct areas: their struggles and their strengths. The women felt "out of kilter" with the organisational culture and the current managerial climate. This was partly explained by feminist theory as being the result of the genderedness of organisations within our patriarchal society. The recent organisational changes through the implementation of managerialism in the social services was another significant factor. Juxtaposed to their struggles, were the strengths of the women, their skills, qualities and practices. They were competent managers with distinctive styles of operation.

Drawing from the literature and the findings, four key feminist management practice principles were identified that offered an inclusive, transformational, woman-centred and service-oriented way of managing.

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