



The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

What does the airline seating issue tell us?

It seems that the airline seating issue has struck a nerve. It is, in fact, not new for airlines to have a policy that men should not be seated next to unaccompanied minors. British Airways received publicity for this in 2001 (Phillips M, 2001, "The paedophile bogeyman and the paranoid parents", *The Sunday Times*, 28 March, http://www.lapresrupture.qc.ca/cpa1mar18_MelaniePhillips.html).

However, the significance of the current example of the policy, and people's reaction to it, should not be underestimated.

Over the past thirty years a view of "women good, men bad" has become increasingly common in academic and popular literature. A Google search for "all men are rapists" found 11,600 sites. The suggestion that "all domestic violence is by men against women" has been accepted as a foundation assumption in domestic violence research and as a basis for policy and policy implementation. Supporting evidence often comes from one-sided research looking at only women's victimization.

For example, it is claimed that one-in-three women is a victim of domestic violence some time in their lifetime (Fanslow J and Robinson E (2004) "Violence against women in New Zealand: prevalence and health consequences", *The New Zealand Medical Journal*, Vol.17 No.1206, <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/117-1206/1173/>).

The same research has been conducted in numerous countries and is given authenticity by association with the WHO. A report on those findings (Wilson E, 2005, "'One third' of New Zealand Women Abused", *The Press*, 28 November, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0,2106,3493330a11,00.html>) did not mention that other studies have asked about women's perpetration of violence and found rates higher than their victimization (several studies are described at: <http://www.ejfi.org/DV/dv-41.htm#data>). In other words, women disclosed that they were more likely to be perpetrators than victims. Fanslow's study found that 5 percent of the women were victims in the previous year (as compared to the larger figure which is for a lifetime). This should be compared to the assumption used in a still much publicized study for the Department of Social Welfare conducted in 1994 (Snively

S, 1994, *The New Zealand Economic Cost of Family Violence*, Family Violence Unit, Department of Social Welfare). That study estimated the annual economic cost of family violence at over \$5 billion based on an assumption that 25 percent of women were victimized each year!

There is a widely promoted view that, whatever the issue, it is worse for women (Google found 26,300 sites with "worse for women" and 568 on "worse for men"). A widely accepted view of history has, as its central theme, the claim that the past consisted of patriarchal oppression of women. When talking about the introduction of women's suffrage in 1893 in New Zealand, it is seldom mentioned that universal male suffrage was only introduced in 1879. (See: <http://www.elections.org.nz/study/history/right-to-vote.html>.) In contrast, it is suggested that the present is a period of enlightenment where women are slowly claiming a fair and equal place in society. Unfortunately, as with family violence and votes for women, much of this assessment is based on questionable evidence and dubious interpretation.

We should not be surprised if such an environment fosters ideas and policies that do not withstand close scrutiny. It is a concern, however, that this is a foundation on which people are developing policy proposals, others are deciding to adopt those policies, and yet other people are implementing them. At least with the airline seating policy, the wider public seems to be concerned.

There is a basic flaw in reasoning that splits society into two groups, men and women, and then generalizes about each group. There is great diversity in individual character in addition to differences by age, ethnicity, education and income levels, to name only a few. However, perceptions are shaped through defining groups. It is therefore both inaccurate and dangerous to label all men on the potential actions of a few. Even if someone has offended in some way, that does not mean that the person will offend again at a particular time. US data indicate that the largest group

of physical abusers of children, 36 percent of all perpetrators, is female parents (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/prograMs/cb/pubs/cm99/table3d.htm>). Are they likely to physically abuse their children on airplanes, and should there be a policy that mothers be prevented from sitting with their children on flights?

The signals given by the airline policy are damaging, and associated sentiments have widespread implications. Similar reasoning has been used:

- i) to exclude fathers from their children's lives.
- ii) to justify child support legislation which generally considers the income of only the paying parent, gives no accountability on the use of money paid, and disregards most direct costs born by the paying parent.
- iii) to support changes to relationship property legislation aimed at rapid redistribution from men to women. As recently as 1976, when the Matrimonial Property Act was introduced with its presumption of equal contributions by spouses, the parliamentary debate included concerns that it might equate to "confiscation" of assets. No such reservations are now voiced when redistributing assets after three years in a relationship.
- iv) to contend that "Economic independence is the most important issue for women because it is the necessary condition for social and economic well-being" (Ministry of Women's Affairs Briefing for

the Incoming Minister, 1999). Economic independence is now the first priority of the government's Action Plan for New Zealand Women (<http://www.mwa.govt.nz/news-and-pubs/publications/action-plan/action-plan-nz-women>).

v) by the Women's Consultative Group of the New Zealand Law Society, which has stated, "At the heart of the current law on domestic violence in New Zealand, as embodied in the Domestic Violence Act 1995, lies a very simple concept: domestic violence is about the use of power by men to control their women partners". ([Http://www.lawyers.org.nz/wcg/submissionsdiscussionfiles/battered_defendants.html](http://www.lawyers.org.nz/wcg/submissionsdiscussionfiles/battered_defendants.html)). Yet we are told that the Family Court is not biased.

There are real dangers from such approaches. They are divisive and generate underlying resentment. We should be asking how much confidence we can put in people making and implementing policy in this way. We should also ask whether the media are questioning enough, or if they are supporting and promoting this sort of reasoning. The reaction to the airlines suggests that people are beginning to see that we may have gone too far down the wrong track. Perhaps it is now time to investigate other policies more carefully.

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Regards

Muriel Newman

(founder & director of



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