

## **The Woman Who Helped Change the World for Young Girls Like Me**

The young me finds it hard to believe some of the things that were happening only 130 years ago. For example, women weren't allowed to vote. Can you imagine only men being allowed to vote? Kate Sheppard changed all that. She did so much for New Zealand and the rest of the world. Because of everything she has done we now have a powerful woman leading New Zealand, we have women not afraid to speak their minds, and we have women following in Kate's footsteps leading the way for the rest of the young women and girls of today. She is very inspirational to me.

Kate Sheppard was an incredible woman. She strived for women to have the same rights as men and she did just that when she won women the right to vote. But it definitely wasn't easy. You and I both know that convincing tens of thousands of people to let women vote would be almost impossible. But Kate Sheppard did it. Kate stood up for what SHE thought was right, not what everyone told her was right. Kate Sheppard was a truly exceptional person.

Kate was born on 10 March 1847 in England. She came to New Zealand with her family when she was only 22 arriving in Lyttelton on February 8 1869 on the Matoaka<sup>1</sup>. She then joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1885, a committee that strived to stop people from drinking alcohol. To join the union, you had to pledge not to ever drink alcohol.

She later became the national superintendent of the franchise and legislation department of the union. It is likely that being the national superintendent of that department helped Kate realise that women not having the vote wasn't right. Being a part of the WCTU may also have helped her with public speaking and not being afraid to speak her mind.

Kate decided to create a petition asking parliament if all women including Maori women could vote. Her petition was declined twice. It finally passed the house of representatives in 1893<sup>2</sup>. By the end of the third and final petition it had over 32,000 signatures and over 547 pages! Here is a copy of the telegram Kate received which was published in the newspaper after the petition passed parliament, "Mrs Sheppard, President Women's Franchise League Christchurch. Electoral Bill assented to by his

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<sup>1</sup> <https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/kate-sheppard/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/womens-suffrage>

Excellency The Governor at quarter to twelve this day.'<sup>3</sup> After the petition for women to vote passed parliament it took a further 26 years for women to be allowed to run for a parliament position.

Through my research I found out that my great great great grandmother on my Mum's side actually signed the petition. I am really proud to have a close ancestor who signed the petition, and even though signing the petition is just a small action, it shows that even small actions can have powerful impacts. Also, my great great great grandmother Isabella was an uneducated woman so Kate must have done a fantastic job making women feel motivated enough to go out and sign the petition. She must have also done a great job creating awareness among women to fight for human rights equality. Kate was not afraid to speak her mind and always stood up for what she thought was right.

Kate was also a pioneering cyclist when it was considered scandalous for women to ride bikes. This shows that Kate didn't care what anyone else thought. She was mainly motivated by the idea that, 'All that separates, whether of race, class, creed, or sex, is inhuman, and must be overcome<sup>4</sup>'. This is the quote that Kate is most famous for.

Kate Sheppard had so many strong views on issues that still aren't fixed today. For example, she was concerned about neglected children, and she wanted the Education Department to give schools larger grants to help maintain school buildings in a healthy and safe state.<sup>5</sup> In some places even today this is still not fixed.

After the petition passed parliament, Kate realised that her work was still not done. She then had to convince women to enrol to vote before the next election. This proved to be a huge challenge, but somehow she managed it. Less than two months later, 109,461 women enrolled to vote in the 1893 New Zealand election.<sup>6</sup> This shows that she must have done an amazing job! Kate later went to the UK and continued protesting for women's rights.

In April 1896 Kate established the National Council of Women and continued to argue for women's rights. She mainly campaigned for married women to have control over their own money and freedom from the corset. She was even the editor of the WCTU's

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<sup>3</sup> Press, Volume L, Issue 8592, 20 September 1893, Page 5

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP18930920.2.24>

<sup>4</sup> Brilliant Women, Stories of extraordinary women around the world by Georgia Amson-Bradshaw, 2019

<sup>5</sup> A biography Kate Sheppard The fight for women's votes in New Zealand The life of the women you led the struggle. Judith Devaliant 1992

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.archives.govt.nz/discover-our-stories/womens-suffrage-petition>

newspaper *The White Ribbon* – the first in New Zealand to be owned, managed and published by women. In 1909 she was elected honorary vice-president of the International Council of Women.<sup>7</sup>

Kate helped New Zealand lead the way for the rest of the world by convincing the parliament to let women vote. Looking back on the time that Kate had to live through, I am so thankful that it is in the past and not the present, although today there are still places around the world where women are not allowed to vote. Women are still fighting for justice, women are still fighting for human rights equality, and women are still being treated unfairly no matter how hard we try.

The problem of girls being treated as not equal to boys continues today. There have been times when boys have said things to me about girls being weaker than boys, or just plain unfair and untrue things about girls. For example, 'Why are you playing rugby? Only boys play rugby', or 'Girls do art and fashion and boys do sport, that is just the way it is!' Girls deserve to be treated the exact same way as men and boys. Why wouldn't we? Apart from the obvious, we are almost exactly the same.

After researching Kate Sheppard's story it has really shown me that you can do anything if you put your mind to it. She was just a normal woman, in a small town, but what set her apart from everyone else was that she had a big vision for the women of New Zealand and she never gave up on it. I know people always say 'follow your dreams' and 'never give up', but Kate showed us what happens when you actually do that. Even though you might just be an ordinary person, in an ordinary town, you can do great things, but only if you put in the work. Kate has made such a difference in the world for women and girls like me. I am so grateful for all she has done. It is because of her that New Zealand is the way it is today. Although Kate is gone now, I really hope that her story will continue to be told and inspire other young girls and women like me. Kate Sheppard was an epic asset to New Zealand and remains an inspiration to young girls today.

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