

## **Submission to : The Education and Science Select Committee**

### **Re: Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Bill**

**By: Sophia Blair, National Women's Rights Officer, on behalf of the Tertiary Women's Focus Group.**

**25 March 2010**

**Oral Submission: We would welcome the opportunity to make an oral submission to the committee.**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 This submission is from the Tertiary Education Women's Group (TWFG). TWFG is a network of women students and graduates from universities, institutes of technology, polytechnics and members of Maori student Roopu. TWFG operates at both campus and national level and was formed in 2000 (replacing the Women's Education Coalition Aotearoa).
- 1.2 TWFG exists to fight for barrier free education for all women in Aotearoa/New Zealand. TWFG believes that education is essential for all women and that the different needs and material realities of women must be recognised and addressed through education processes. For these reasons, TWFG is committed to lobbying and campaigning on issues that affect women's participation and involvement in tertiary education, including the implementation of user-pays policies in tertiary education, the quality of education, debt, access to childcare, and safety on campus. TWFG is committed to the promotion of women's perspectives at all times, at all levels and on all issues.
- 1.3 TWFG groups on campuses are co-ordinated by Women's Rights Officers and Women's Portfolio holders from each University or Polytechnic Student Association. At a national level, TWFG is coordinated by the New Zealand Union of Students' Association's National Women's Rights Officer.

#### **2.0 TWFG is opposed to this Bill**

- 2.1 The Bill fails to meet legal, moral or practical tests that would meet the author of the Bill's assertion that it "*does not seek to damage or limit students associations.*"<sup>1</sup>
- 2.2 TWFG is concerned that women students will lose access to services, representation and advocacy as a result of this legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> Explanatory Note, Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Bill

2.3 Furthermore, as TWFG is funded by student associations at a campus and national level, our continued existence is also severely threatened by this bill.

### **3.0 Women's position in tertiary education**

3.1 While women are more likely than men to be enrolled in tertiary education (14.2 percent of women compared to 12.3 percent of men)<sup>2</sup>, there are still significant issues for women in tertiary education that our group works to address. These include:

- Segregation by area of study
- Concentration at lower levels of qualifications (particularly for Maori and Pasifika women)
- Lack of access to better funded trades training
- Lack of access to free/affordable childcare for student parents
- A persistent gender pay gap for graduates less than one year after completion, that grows bigger over time
- Higher levels of joblessness (particularly for Maori and Pasifika women)
- The prevalence of rape, sexual assault, domestic violence and sexual harassment against women

### **4.0 The role of Student 'Associations and TWFG in encouraging and supporting women's participation.**

4.1 Student associations and TWFG are central to addressing all these issues for women students, and are vital to ensuring that women have a voice at all levels within the institutional structures so that their issues are known and addressed. This section briefly overviews what students' associations and the TWFG do to support and encourage women's participation in education and outlines the unique services that each

4.2 TWFG and student associations work with polytechnics and universities to ensure that the guidelines for entry and restriction are as fair and equitable as possible, not just for women students, but students in general.

4.3 Worked to support student parents – through the provision of staff positions dedicated to support student parents, rooms for student parents and facilities for breastfeeding, child friendly events and either providing early childhood education or advocating for the institution to do so.

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2 Ministry of Women's Affairs. p.48

- 4.4 Worked to support students parents – by establishing crèches on campuses, providing additional financial support for student parents and making available safe and private spaces for parents to feed, change and spend time with their children have all been the result of the ongoing advocacy and services that student associations have provided to students on campuses and have only been possible with universal student membership. Student parents are often one of the most invisible groups on campus and can be one of the most vulnerable groups. If this bill passes, if student associations do not collapse, their services are likely to be severely cut and are likely to rationalise their focuses to the detriment of an already disadvantaged groups.
- 4.5 Associations also undertake campus wide research relevant to women. This has taken many forms, including research into the quality and availability of childcare services, safety auditing and course surveys. Such research is often expensive and time consuming and without universal student membership is unlikely to be done. This research is critically important to understanding the educational needs of students and is unique to student associations. Research of this kind is unlikely to be undertaken in a voluntary membership environment and the result would be a lack of information about the educational needs of students and a negative impact on the quality of education and the opportunities available to many disadvantaged groups of students.
- 4.6 Voluntary student membership will have a disproportionately negative impact on women. With lower income and greater family and community responsibilities, women are less able to afford support services and are less likely to have the time required to battle the university or polytechnic on their own, and are probably more likely to be in greater need of the services their student association provides. The services outlined above have been developed over many years and they have worked to better the position and experience of women participating in tertiary education. The impact of voluntary student membership in Australia has highlighted this example – many students of low socio-economic status stopped accessing student association services due to the increase in cost of these services. TWFG is concerned that if this bill is implemented in New Zealand it will have a similar effect on lower socio economic groups and result in groups of students missing out on a quality education and experience.
- 4.7 TWFG also has strong concerns about what VSM would mean for Maori students and in particular, Maori women. With significant questions around retention rates for Maori students, Maori student associations (Roopu) are vital to ensuring that Maori continue to access tertiary education. Members of Roopu around the country work to encourage school leavers to carry on with their education by visiting secondary schools and also provide support for Maori students once they enter tertiary education. Research by Te Puni Kōkiri

suggests that Maori find the tertiary education system an alienating environment meaning that community support and pastoral care on campus is of great importance particularly in relation to retention and completion rates. Roopu serve an important function on campus, providing the whanau and community support for many Maori students. Roopu receive direct funding from student associations are thus dependent on the funding of Students' Association to continue to provide the pastoral care and community atmosphere. Many Roopu are already struggling to achieve their goals with the funding they receive currently and this funding is likely to be further reduced if this Bill goes through. In a post VSM environment, Roopu are likely to either collapse or be reduced to much less viable bodies.

## **5.0 Working to make campuses safe places**

- 5.1 Thursdays in Black is a campaign, introduced to New Zealand by TWFG and has been very successful as a campus campaign in highlighting the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in society and challenging people to examine their attitude and behaviour on the subject of rape and sexual assault.
- 5.2 Thursdays in Black is an important campaign because it is run by students, for students and is entirely funded by the Tertiary Women's Focus Group and individual students' associations, and is co-ordinated by women student representatives. It seeks to make use of the existing networks that student associations have with students on campus and external anti-violence agencies. It is a useful way of disseminating important messages about rape and sexual assault to student on tertiary campuses.
- 5.3 Rape and sexual assault are real issues for women students. Every year there is usually at least one story of rape or attempted rape on campus and many anecdotal stories of unwanted sexual encounters at halls of residences and student flats. Thursdays in Black aims to create a safer space in campus and promote the message that rape and violence is completely unacceptable.
- 5.4 The Thursdays in Black campaign is also complemented by the work that student associations do on in regards to safety on campus. They regularly lobby institutions on the issue of lighting on campus at night and for better security on campus for students who study late. Some student associations, like Victoria University Student Association, offer free walk home services. Other student associations such as the Otago Polytechnic Student Association have provided cheap taxi ride coupons during events like Orientation week. Student associations also conduct campus safety audits on their institution to ensure that their university or polytechnic is promoting a safe space for all students and that their harassment policies are up to date and are effective. During Orientation week and Women's Weeks, student

associations also provide free self defence training for women and available as harassment contact people.

5.5 Thursdays in Black is a popular campaign not just on campus, but in the community and has the support from many non-violence NGOs. As it is funded and co-ordinated by student associations and TWFG, it is unlikely that this campaign will continue to exist in its current form if this bill passes. TWFG would be unable to support this campaign with a dedicated coordinator (the National Women's Rights Officer), or able to fund the campaign materials for it. The student association services and advocacy that complement this campaign are also likely to take a hit and under a tight budget, these services will either be lost, or cut significantly thus undermining their effectiveness. Adding to this, the chance of tertiary institutions picking up campaigns such as Thursdays in Black and the related services and advocacy work is highly unlikely as the Australian experience has shown.

5.6 Thursdays in Black and the services and advocacy work that student associations provide don't just benefit female students, but benefit all students on campus. Many of these services and advocacy cannot be delivered on a voluntary basis and are unlikely to be delivered in a post VSM environment.

## **6.0 Creating healthier campuses**

6.1 Student Associations are often the first stop for students who need information on services and support. They often refer and work in with local health groups to ensure that students are aware of health issues, reproductive rights, and family planning. Student Associations will often run free STI checks during and after Orientation weeks and work with their campus health services to promote student health on campus.

6.2 Student Associations and TWFG also run campaigns around that relate to women's health – such as No Diet Day, campaigns around safer sex and information about reproductive rights. If this Bill is implemented, student associations will no longer have the funds to promote these campaigns on campus and as a result, access to information about women's health will be drastically reduced.

6.3 Student Associations also manage sports clubs on campus and encourage women to take part in recreation and sport. VSM will have a gendered impact on sports for women. The impact of VSM in Australia meant that universities began to mainly fund elite sports, which are traditionally male dominated and as a result, participation by women in sporting clubs and at inter-university sport has fallen by more than is the case for men. A clear

example of this is the level of participation in Australian University Games which is dropped to 40% of all athletes, down from its historic level of 48% and continues to fall.

## **7.0 Working to make sure that government policies are fairer for women students**

- 7.1 Student associations provide an important voice on whether government policies are fair for women students. NZUSA and TWFG (the autonomous women's groups in NZUSA) in 2003 took the NZ Government to the Human Rights Commission on the subject of interest on student loans. TWFG argued that because of the interest bearing student loans, female students ended up paying more for their education because they took longer to pay off their student loans as result of time out of the workforce to have children and the inequitable pay gap in society. The Human Rights Commission accepted this as a legitimate claim and NZUSA and the Government went into mediation. This claim was dropped after the Government in 2006 implemented interest free student loans.
- 7.2 Whether or not one agrees with interest on student loans, the fact that a national body was able to test a human rights claim is important in a democratic society and signifies the important advocacy that student associations, as a collective, do. The success of this campaign has saved hundreds of thousands of women money in terms of the cost of their education. If this bill goes through, NZUSA and TWFG will not have the infrastructure, resources or people to continue this important human rights work.

## **8.0 Smarter Campuses**

- 8.1 Through student media, women students often get the opportunity through special women's magazines, or women's issues of the magazines to inform the student body about issues for women on campus and wider society. Student media is a useful platform for getting these views across on campus and ensures that students in general are better informed about the issues facing them. NZUSA and TWFG also run important research on women's issues such as the needs of student parents on campus and the experiences of women in postgraduate study.
- 8.2 Student media at most campuses are solely funded by their student associations, relying on advertising to make up shortfalls. Student media will be drastically reduced under VSM and will impact on the ability of women to participate in student media and will impact on the ability of student associations to get important messages out to students. It will also severely impact on the ability of student media to be the 'watch dog' of the student association.

8.3 The distribution and dissemination of important student research is also an important function of student media, which is likely to be undermined by this Bill. TWFG carries out and financially supports research into issues facing women students. News and recent research is also monitored at a national and international level for developments in education and/or social policy that is likely to affect women students. This information is passed on to the student associations and from there to the wider student population. Relevant resources are also collected and stored at NZUSA for student associations to use when they undertake their own research, lobbying, campaigning and or training.

## **9.0 Women's leadership and women's representation**

- 9.1 For many female students, student associations are the first opportunity they get to experience taking leadership positions. Student Associations have a long history of female leaders who have gone on to become leaders in New Zealand society. Student Associations value having female students involved and often have a Women's Rights Officer position which demonstrates the value that student associations have on developing women's leadership and ensuring that a women's voice is heard. Women's rights officers often coordinate the campus women's group who are involved in activism and promoting women's issues on campuses.
- 9.2 Under VSM, some student associations will collapse and the overall advocacy and representation that student associations provide will be lost, and with these student associations, the voice of female students will be lost as well. There will be no one to advocate on behalf of female students on issues affecting them and no one to speak up against sexist language in academia, institutional or government policies that have a disproportionate effect on women or anyone to promote safe campuses and campaigns like Thursdays in Black. Many of these functions are unlikely to be picked up by institutions themselves.
- 9.3 Most Student Associations have a Women's Rights Officer or women executive members who are readily contactable and are able to address issues and structures that work against women as individuals or groups. Examples of some of the issues that have been addressed on campuses over the last two years include: raising awareness of safety on campus and in the community and providing a walk home services, provision of space for student parents to feed, changes and study while caring for their children, addressing safety issues for women students who have been abused by flatmates but are trapped in their flat by fixed term leases, highlighting the effect of user pays policies on different groups of women, informing students

about the implications of the cuts to Training Incentive Allowances , encouraging them to vote, highlighting the needs and concerns of student parents on campus and increasing awareness of safe sex practices and 'no means no' at orientation events. Women and men from student associations also continue to be harassment contact people for students who feel uncomfortable talking to a member of the university staff.

9.4 While the TWFG exists to provide a national voice for female students – it also provides a substantial amount of training for student association executives. For instance – TWFG in the past have offered training and education on:

- Understanding the diverse experiences of women in tertiary education
- How to be an effective advocate for women students
- Communication skills
- Understanding the issues in tertiary education
- Working with the local community
- Anti-harassment training
- Issues for student parents on campus

TWFG holds three women's conferences a year – a two day conference in January and then a one day conference in June/July and September/October so these workshops represent a small selection of the workshops and training that we provide

9.5 NZUSA also has a part time National Women's Right's Officer who is responsible for developing programmes to further the position of women within tertiary education. Much of this work is done through supporting and liaising with campus based groups, but the NWRO also works closely with other national bodies representing the concerns of women and women's position in society, including the National Council of Women, Women's Information Network, YWCA, Women's Refuge and Rape Crisis. Work is also done with the Government Ministries such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Te Puni Kokiri, the Ministry of Youth Affairs, and the Ministry of Education among others. Again, if this bill were to be passed NZUSA would be unlikely to be able to continue funding the National Women's Right's Officer Position. This would mean that much of the work that NZUSA does that focuses on improving the position and experiences of women students would disappear.

9.6 NZUSA supports TWFG as part of its efforts to ensure that women's voices are heard at all levels of the student network. TWFG meets as a national group three times a year before the three NZUSA conferences. This ensures that women within NZUSA can help to shape the policy and goals for NZUSA.

9.7 TWFG is unlikely to survive in a post VSM environment as it is reliant on funding from NZUSA, which in turn, is dependent on its member associations for its

income. Under the Douglas Bill, the income of student associations will be drastically reduced and as a result, NZUSA would be unlikely be able to continue to fund TWFG at a national level and tertiary women students will lose a valuable national voice.

- 9.8 Historically there have been massive fluctuations in women's participation in tertiary education and female students do face additional barriers in tertiary education and still face significant inequities such as the gender pay gap once they graduate. As such, the current enrolment figures should be cause for unguarded optimism. Women will still need a strong voice on their university or polytechnic and they will need to be able to challenge their institutions and their contemporaries to ensure a more equitable education for all women. Having an effective voice needs time, money, space, resources, support and long term planning. TWFG believes that these facilities would not be secure without universal student membership.
- 9.9 TWFG further believes that making the membership of Student Associations 'opt-in' will most likely lead to a shift in association's focus from being advocacy and service based to being merely service based and compromised services at best. TWFG does not support this because the services, representation and advocacy that associations provide are vital components of a well rounded quality education.
- 9.10 It is our belief that the need to create and market readily consumable services will lead to the demise of the lobbying, monitoring and advocacy functions of student associations. As outlined in this submission, these functions are vitally important to women students. Much of the advocacy and representation services that associations offer are not 'voluntary' and are intangible goods such as promoting safety on campus. This bill would undermine the work that student associations do in delivering 'intangible goods' to their student members. As outlined previously, student associations in a post VSM environment would have to rationalise their costs and delivering intangible goods would be considered a low priority and are likely to be cut.

## **10.0 Conclusion**

- 10.1 It is clear to TWFG that women are in great need of services within the university, particularly services such as lobbying for more accessible and safe campuses, promoting awareness around women's health and sexual health and creating spaces where women's voices are heard. These services are difficult to market or charge for on a user pays basis and the services that can be charged, women are less likely to have the money to be able to pay for these services.
- 10.2 TWFG does not believe that the services currently being offered for women through the students' associations could be bettered or even equalled in the

proposed new environment. This bill is a total waste of time for students, institutions and Government.

- 10.3 For these reasons and those stated above, we urge the bill be discharged from select committee or returned to the debating chamber and thrown out in its entirety. We would like to thank you for considering this submission and also request the opportunity to present our views to you personally by way of an oral submission.