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THE QUILT PROJECT (2021-22)

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### INTRODUCTION

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights, regardless of their gender. No country in the world has gender equality. It varies from one place to another, yet the same issue exists at a universal level. I believe it is necessary that artistic projects articulate the disgrace behind this social issue. Women are facing gender parity problems at workplaces and in the art world and continue to be under-represented in parliament. In New Zealand, women generally have higher rates of participation in all categories of unpaid work, both within and outside of the household.<sup>1</sup> Among part-time workers, three quarters are women. Across the economy, women's skills are under-used in leadership and women continue to earn less than men, even if they have the same qualifications and similar job descriptions.<sup>2</sup> The Quilt Project is an intervention about gender inequality and discrimination in society.

I initiated the Quilt Project in collaboration with Dunedin's Stitch Kitchen and the Otago Pioneer Women's Memorial Association Inc. Two queen-sized quilts were sewn over several months. The project was a creative community initiative where the public were invited to take part in monthly workshops and explore issues of gender equality through the making and piecing together of two community quilts. The large-scale quilts featured appliqué of basic mathematical symbols, such as the not equal sign, the inequality sign, greater than, less than, and the power sign. This report positions the project as a feminist form of resistance to gender discrimination and outlines how traditional quilting sustains engagement with issues faced by women and gender-diverse people around the world.



### THE PROCESS

Two pilot workshops involving around 100 participants were held at the University of Otago and at Stitch Kitchen in March 2021. The first of these was on International Women's Day, 8 March, when the Ōtepoti Collective Against Sexual Abuse (ŌCASA) collaborated with Stitch Kitchen, Te Whare Tāwharau and myself to run an event where students, staff and migrants could come together to create a quilt which explored themes of gender discrimination, oppression and inequality through the medium of textiles.

A second event was held at Stitch Kitchen Studio as part of the Dunedin Fringe Festival. Many participants had never had the opportunity to use a sewing machine before or been involved in a creative project that linked their personal views on an issue with a visual arts outlet. This raised understanding of how art and crafts can be used for communication. As the project took place in public spaces, it included people of a wide range of ages, and often intergenerational participants, with grandparents and parents involved. Learning and experiencing crafts together was a valuable experience, enhancing community creativity and wellbeing.



During the process of creating quilt panels, workshop attendees had impromptu discussions about the gender inequality in their lives and connections with quilting. Their views varied widely. Six semi-structured interviews were also conducted with participants. Ideas and experiences of quilting, women's identities, gender inequality and personal wellbeing were explored with participants. We discerned a series of benefits arising from the project: an enhanced awareness of gender equality as vital in society; relationships between gender; quilting and sewing; quilts as a metaphor for unity in diversity; and women working creatively together to support a social issue. The project empowered women and created an opportunity to work together; through needlework, to build a non-patriarchal group.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, many of our original scheduled workshops and locations had to be rescheduled or cancelled, leading to extra administration, confusion and difficulty in marketing the workshops. Nonetheless, the main goals of the project were realised, with partnerships being important to its success. Partnering with local organisations with similar gender equality goals enabled access to more resources and reached a wide range of participants. These partnerships included access to networks, technology, distribution outlets, materials and information. Workshops were hosted at various alternative venues including Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, The Valley Project, ŌCASA and the Otago Pioneer Women's Memorial Hall. The project had a sustainable focus with the use of upcycled materials from Stitch Kitchen Pantry; 4.63 kg of materials were diverted from landfill as one of the outcomes of the project.

## CONCLUSION

The Quilt Project culminated in an exhibition held at the Dunedin Community Gallery, which also included quilting demonstrations and talks. The project incorporated best practice in community arts for communication and collaborative processes. With the timing of the project and disruption caused by COVID-19, issues of feminism and gender equality seemed to be low on people's priorities. We failed to attract people to participate in the project whose voices represented the full range of issues and experiences that we originally intended the project to showcase. However, reactions of participants were positive, with excellent learning experiences and creative outcomes achieved, including practical skills, problem solving, mindfulness in remaining focused on the task and social benefits of talking and sharing the experience with immediate family and the wider community.

## Acknowledgements

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Born in India in 1982, **Arati Kushwaha** (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8021-8955>) is a visual artist who completed a Master of Visual Arts at the Dunedin School of Art in 2018. Arati has had international group and solo exhibitions, attended numerous international residences, and directed community projects.

1 Melanie Nolan, "Employment Organisations," *NZ History*, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/women-together/theme/employment-organisations> 2018.

2 Ibid.