Women’s Voices is an oral history project developed by the Christchurch Branch of the National Council of Women with the support of the national organisation. The aim of the project was to record the earthquake stories of women in Christchurch after the cluster of earthquakes that damaged the city in September 2010, December 2010, February 2011, June 2011 and December 2011.

The project adopted a life story approach, interviewing women about their lives before the quakes, their experiences of the quakes and their accounts of what was happening to them, their families, and their neighbourhoods at the time of each interview. Women also spoke about their hopes and fears and commented on emergency responses, earthquake recovery and the ongoing rebuilding of the city. Their stories document how women in Christchurch practised resilience in the hours, days, weeks, months and years after the major quakes.

Forty-four interviewers, most of them volunteers, recorded 150 earthquake stories of women of different ages, family circumstances, ethnicities and religious faiths located in different parts of the city and involved in diverse occupations and community organisations. Summaries of these interviews, audio recordings, photographs, and occasionally video recordings, are available on the NCWNZ Women’s Voices website in the UC CEISMIC Digital Archive, together with profiles of the interviewers and information about the research process. https://quakestudies.canterbury.ac.nz/store/collection/228

NCWNZ Christchurch has worked collaboratively with the Ōtautahi Māori Women’s Welfare League and PACIFICA Christchurch to ensure that the study includes the earthquake stories of Māori and Pasifika women interviewed by Māori and Pasifika women. These organisations were most involved in the project in 2013 and early 2014.

The project was coordinated by the NCWNZ Women’s Voices Research Committee between October 2011 and March 2014. In 2013/4, the focus was on interviewing women with least financial resources and those living in the eastern parts of the city most affected by the many quakes. Movers and Shakers: Women’s stories from the Christchurch earthquakes, a thematic report on the research findings, is available on the NZ Community Research website. http://www.communityresearch.org.nz/research/movers-and-shakers-womens-stories-from-the-christchurch-earthquakes-final-version/

Funding: NCWNZ Christchurch Branch; University of Canterbury; Christchurch City Council; NZ Lottery Community Grants Board; Z Energy; MDS Law; Canterbury Community Trust, Altrusa International, Kidsfirst, Mary Hobbs and other private donations.
Women’s Voices/Ngā Reo O Ngā Wahine: Recording Women’s Stories of the Canterbury Earthquakes

Why?
At the first National Council of Women’s Christchurch Branch meeting after the devastating 22 February 2011 earthquake, members raised questions about the need to record women’s experiences of the quakes and their aftermath. At the time, the media was full of response, recovery, demolition and rebuilding stories, but there was not much about looking after ageing parents, getting children to relocated schools across crumbling roads, or trying to juggle increased family and work responsibilities.

The NCWNZ Christchurch Branch responded to these concerns by setting up a small committee, which came to be known as the Post-Earthquake Strategy Team, or PEST. This committee met a few times, usually on the weekends, and this research project is the largest and most enduring outcome of that group’s work.

The NCWNZ Christchurch Branch Women’s Voices Research Committee took on the task of recording a range of women’s earthquake stories. They were aware of material written about earthquakes during 1800s in the region, but these records, while tantalising, were disappointingly short. They thought that, through recording the earthquake stories of Christchurch women, NCWNZ could create a much more detailed and lasting record of these quakes.

How?
The research committee decided to focus on women’s stories of their quake experiences and conduct qualitative interviews using an open-ended interview schedule. This was not a sample survey, and participants were not chosen using randomised sampling strategies. Instead the selection of participants was purposive with a focus on women of different ages and family circumstances, living in different parts of the city and involved in a range of different occupations. There was considerable interest in interviewing women who were involved in community activities immediately after the quakes that were directed at earthquake disaster responses. Attempts were made to contact women who were involved in organisations that sprung up for the first time after the quakes and also established organisations that were involved in disaster response.

This project was initiated with very little funding. The Christchurch City Council supported the NCWNZ Suffrage Celebration in 2011 and the proceeds from this event were the first source of funding for the project. A few other donations were received and there was sufficient to purchase recording equipment. There were initially no resources for professional transcribing of interviews. A decision was made to invite volunteers to conduct interviews and to write up summaries of the interviews they recorded. This system worked well, but sometimes interviews were written up by other members of the research team or volunteer transcribers. Over the three years of the project, approximately nearly 50 interviewers were involved, many of them only doing one or two interviews.

Who?
At the start of the project the focus was on recording the stories of women in different parts of the city, of different ages, involved in different forms of work, and in different family arrangements. A student researcher interviewed ten younger women, many of them active in organisations that sprung up in response to the quakes. We interviewed politicians, a school principal, an opera singer, the Mayor’s partner, civil defence specialists, a funeral director, a co-founder of the Rangiora Earthquake Express, teachers, a Women’s Refuge Coordinator, GPs, nurses, lawyers, an architect, an engineer, a hairdresser, a factory supervisor, a fitness instructor, small business owners, an artist, a real estate agent, a journalist, the coordinator of
the Christchurch Council of Social Services and many others. They were identified through NCWNZ networks, via snowballing (someone we interviewed suggested someone else) and through people known to interviewers. Sometimes women found out about the project and volunteered to be interviewed.

After completing over 80 interviews between late 2011 and 2012, we decided that we needed to record more of the stories of women living in eastern Christchurch, especially women who were struggling financially, who had children with special needs or children who were stressed as a result of the quakes. This interest in extending the range of women who were interviewed and especially women living in the eastern suburbs most affected by the quakes, led to the second stage of the project – Women’s Unheard Voices. As a result, another 45 earthquake stories were recorded between mid-2013 and early 2014 with women living in social housing, rental accommodation or badly damaged owner-occupier homes in suburbs like New Brighton, Wainoni, Aranui, Avondale, Avonside, Bromley, Bexley, Waltham, Phillipstown and Woolston.

We wanted to record more of the earthquake stories of Māori women as well as more Pasifika women and new immigrants. Ōtautahi Māori Women’s Welfare League and PACIFICA representatives worked with the research team to ensure that this goal was achieved. Immigrant women from Ethiopia and Afghanistan also told their stories. The project became Women’s Voices/ Ngā Reo O Ngā Wahine.

Over the summer of 2013-14, a student researcher interviewed teenage mothers who were attending Karanga Māi Young Parents College in Kaiapoi as well as young women who had attended schools which were closed and then shared space at other schools for significant periods after the 22 February 2011 quake. Their stories added another dimension to the project.

What questions were asked?
Interviews were directed at generating stories from each research participant on the following topics and questions:

- **Before the quakes** – family circumstances; housing; work (paid and unpaid); community involvement; sport/recreation/leisure; period of residence in Christchurch/New Zealand; life stage and life plans.
- **Quake experiences** – experiences of the major quakes and ongoing aftershocks; what narrators did, thought and felt; how contact was made with friends and family; the impact of the quakes on the lives of the narrators and those around them.
- **Post-quake life** – what has changed since the quakes – e.g. housing, work, family members, friends, travel, financial situation, interaction with bureaucracies, and involvement in community initiatives – especially those focused on responses to the quakes, the rebuilding Christchurch, and supporting those most affected by the quakes.
- **Looking forward** – an overview of current life circumstances and hopes and plans for the future, including the rebuilding of Christchurch.

How were interviewers trained?
In the first stage of the project, thirty women volunteered to be trained to interview other women about their quake experiences. These volunteers were drawn largely from NCWNZ members, but also included a range of other women who heard about the project (usually from organisations affiliated to NCWNZ), and were keen to be involved.

At training workshops they became experienced in using the interview schedule through interviewing one another about their earthquake experiences. They later wrote up these stories and returned them to the person they had interviewed. The quake stories of interviewers are available in the NCWNZ Women’s Voices archive on UC CEISMIC as
‘interviewer profiles’. Their earthquake narratives were used on in reports of this research, as well as the stories of the women they interviewed.

Training occurred at a local library and involved a one day training workshop and a follow-up evening meeting. Between 2011 and 2013, three training workshops were held – one in late 2011, one in early 2012, and another in mid-2013. Each interviewer received a detailed Women’s Voices Research Handbook which included information about the aims of the project, the research process, interviewing dynamics, consent documents, information on the writing up of interview summaries, model interview summaries and researcher profiles and instructions about the use of recording equipment.

Volunteer interviewers worked in small groups, each coordinated by a member of the Women’s Voices Research Committee. They usually met before they did any interviewers to review the use of recording equipment and develop processes for sharing equipment and debriefing after interviews. These groups were largely organised on the basis of geographical proximity which facilitated the sharing of audio and video equipment. Interviewers were given the names and contact details of people to interview and often met with them before conducting interviews.

A debriefing workshop was held for the first set of interviewers in February 2012. Assessment of the interview process by interviewers informed the development of training for the next set of interviewers and led to revisions of the handbook for interviewers. Collaboration with the Ōtautahi Māori Women’s Welfare League and PACIFICA in 2013 lead to further refinements of the research documents and the training handbook.

**What happened in the interviews?**

Interviews were usually conducted in the homes of the women who agreed to talk about their earthquake experiences, but some interviews were done in the homes of interviewers, at the University of Canterbury, in rooms available for community use in different parts of the city, and, more rarely, at workplaces or in the rooms occupied by community organisations for which women worked, or for which they were volunteers.

All interviews began with some talk about the personal background of the narrator. Participants talked in more or less detail about their experiences of each of the major quakes that occurred in Canterbury and Christchurch, starting with the 7.1 magnitude quake on 4th September 2010. Every interview also explored the narrator’s circumstances at the time of the interview and their reflections on the rebuilding of Christchurch and the future of the city. Interviewers thanked participants at the end of the interview and discussed a process for the return of the interview summary and opportunities to check it for accuracy and decide on a final version before consent was obtained for the storage of interview material.

**How were the stories recorded?**

The interviews were mainly recorded on Olympus VN-6800PC digital voice recorders and Canon Legria FS46 digital camcorders. Choice of this equipment was determined by the financial resources available and the need to have 4 – 6 recorders, given that many interviewers were involved in the project. Occasionally interviewers used other equipment, sometimes because they owned their own audio recorders, or because the equipment purchased and circulated among the interviewer support groups was not available at the time an interview was scheduled.

Audio and video recordings were downloaded by each interviewer after their interviews. Most interviewers then listened to the recorded earthquake stories and wrote up interview summaries of each interview using a standardised format. The interview recordings and interview summaries where transferred to members of the Women’s Voices Research
Committee via USB memory sticks. The audio and video recordings and interview summaries were then all stored on password protected folder on the University of Canterbury server.

Who decided?
Research participants initially signed a consent form indicating their agreement to be interviewed and have their earthquake stories recorded on a digital audio recorder and sometimes both audio and video recorders. After the recorded interviews had been transcribed and an interview summary was written (usually by the interviewer), this was checked by those who had been interviewed. Research participants could make corrections by marking up a hardcopy, editing a word file, or through talking to the interviewer about their responses to the summary and the changes they wanted to make.

When the participant was satisfied with the corrections made to the interview summary, she was asked to sign another consent form. This consent form provided research participants with the opportunity to specify what could be archived (e.g. the interview summary, audio recording and video recording), and also the conditions under which these items could be used. Participants could decide that the record or records of their interview could be accessed only by researchers, or that they might be available publicly on the UC CEISMIC website. Participants could choose a pseudonym and change the names of family members referred to in their stories. Some narrators chose to use their full names; others to be identified only by their first names.

A similar consent process was used when some research participants were approached by photography students in the College of Arts Internship Programme at University of Canterbury about having portrait photographs taken for the NCWNZ Women’s Voices digital archive. Participants initially agreed to have photos taken and then to the use of a particular photograph on the UC CEISMIC website. Edited videos of interviews were similarly approved by research participants before they were loaded on the website for public viewing.

How were the findings analysed?
The interview summaries produced by each interviewer and edited by the research team were analysed using the software programme NVivo. Thematic nodes identified and were used to select components of stories and quotations from interviews that were used in particular sections of research reports, journal articles and PowerPoint presentations.

In the first stage of the project, 101 interview summaries were analysed and a total of 77 nodes were developed. Twenty-eight interviewer profiles were also analysed using the same nodes. For the second stage of the project, analysed more than a year later, concerns had changed, and some nodes were able to be merged, while some new issues emerged. In that part of the study, the 43 available interviews were organised into 41 nodes. Each node was then published as a list of extracts relating to the particular theme (e.g. February earthquake, liquefaction, water, food), and made available for analysis.

The NVivo analysis and report writing of findings from each stage of the project was completed by Dr Liz Gordon. All members of the Women’s Voices Research Committee were involved in writing various sections of the final report, Movers and Shakers: Women’s Stories from the Christchurch Quakes. Movers and Shakers begins with women’s narratives about each of the major quakes and then explores community responses, health and insurance issues, stories about children and families, and the challenges experienced by schools and churches. It concludes with women’s reflections on their quake experiences and their different views about recovery and the rebuilding of Christchurch.

Practising resilience?
The UC CEISMIC digital archive, the thematic reports and presentations on the research findings are the outcome of time, effort and dedication by many people – interviewers,
researchers, photographers, digital specialists and participants. Women’s Voices both documents the resilience of many women and illustrates how community organisations can creatively respond to a devastating earthquake. Resilience in Christchurch depended on thousands of individual effective actions in the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years when the city rocked and rolled, split, cracked and broke. These actions were most effective when people collaborated, shared expertise, activated personal networks, divided tasks, accessed resources and distributed information, food, water, hugs, blankets, portaloo and chemical toilets. Women’s Voices is based on the same principle – the strategic coordination of many individual acts, interactions, words, sounds and images from different locations that contribute to a product that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Who was involved in the project?
Forty-four interviewers gave their time to this project, nine of them involved in both stages of the project. Members of the Ōtautahi Māori Women’s Welfare League and PACIFICA Inc. Christchurch Branch conducted interviews in 2013. Interviewers’ names are detailed below.

When applications for funding from the University of Canterbury UC CEISMIC Contestable Fund and from the Christchurch City Council were successful, the NCWNZ Women’s Voices Research Committee decided to recruit a research assistant to conduct interviews and assist Rosemary Du Plessis with the processing of the research material and its storage in the University of Canterbury digital earthquake archive. Dr Rosemary Baird (an oral historian who had been a volunteer researcher) worked as researcher on the project from April 2012 to early 2013 and continued to edit some audio recordings before they were loaded on the website. A successful application for funding from the Lottery Community Sector Research Fund enabled the appointment of a second paid researcher in August 2013, Brigid Buckenham, an experienced social researcher who had also been a volunteer interviewer. She identified new research participants, conducted interviews for the second stage of the project and also assisted with the processing of research material.

Two University of Canterbury Summer Research Scholarship students worked on the project and conducted interviews, usually with younger women. Amanda England was involved over the summer of 2011-12 and Elizabeth Ashby worked on the project during the summer of 2013-14. Lucy-Jane Walsh, a member of the UC CEISMIC team at University of Canterbury, liaised with the Women’s Voices researchers and uploaded these earthquake stories, photos, videos and sound recordings into the NCWNZ Women’s Voices digital archive.

In 2013 and 2014 seven students majoring in photography at University of Canterbury took portrait photographs of some of the women who had been interviewed as part of their work for the BA Internship programme. Bayley Corfield, Elise Rutherford, Chrissy Irvine, Abi Keene, Gemma Coutts, Hannah Watkinson, Mitchell Bright were supervised by Glenn Busch, Senior Lecturer in Photography. A cultural studies student, Georgie Tarren-Sweeney, also enrolled in the BA Internship programme, edited several video interviews which are now available on the website.

The Women’s Voices project was coordinated by the NCWNZ Women’s Voices Research Committee - Judith Sutherland (Chair and Project Manager), Rosemary Du Plessis, Liz Gordon, Helen Gibson and Roberta Hill. Roberta Hill left the committee in 2013 after the first stage of the project was completed.

**Interviewers – Women’s Voices Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer</th>
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<tr>
<td>Judith Sutherland</td>
<td>Rosemary Du Plessis</td>
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<td>Liz Gordon</td>
<td>Helen Gibson</td>
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<td>Roberta Hill</td>
<td>Roelien de Jong</td>
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<td>Allie McMillan</td>
<td>Diane Candy</td>
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<td>Lia de Vocht</td>
<td>Myra Kunowski</td>
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Maureen Montgomery  Sara Epperson
Mary McGiven      Rosemary Baird
Linda Creed       Deborah McCormack
Melissa Parsons   Deborah Williams
Helene Mautner    Noreen Wright
Linda Telfer      Raewyn Dawson
Kathryn O’Connell Sutherland Debs Parkinson
Shelley Harford   Petra van Asten
Letitia Meadows   Margaret Arnold
Chris Wilson      Brigid Buckenham
Ange Davidson     Judith McKenzie
Mary Smyth        Cassandra Mudway
Billa Field       Helen McCaul
Beverley Price    Sonya Leach
Amanda England    Elizabeth Ashby
Rikke Betts      Danielle O’Halloran (PACIFICA)
Hikatea Bull and Dora Roimata Langsbury (Ōtautahi Māori Women’s Welfare League)

What did we learn?
A detailed analysis of the research findings is offered in Movers and Shakers. It documents how women responded to each of the quakes and lived in damaged homes during ongoing aftershocks. It weaves together stories about impacts on children and families; life without water, power and sewerage; health issues; struggles with EQC and private insurers; homelessness; involvement in community action and memories of small acts of kindness. This report highlights the significance of whānau/family networks, neighbourhood support and schools and churches as nodes for community connection. It also documents the diverse aspirations women have for the future. A repeated phrase is “there is always someone worse off”. Women were acutely aware that some families have lost people they love or have members who are struggling to rebuild their lives after devastating injuries or the loss of all their possessions as well as their homes and their jobs.

A key finding from this research was the unevenness of the earthquake response. In an ideal world, the amount and nature of assistance provided to people would be proportionate to their need. These women’s stories show that this was not always the case. In the days immediately following the February quake, food was dropped in certain places, the portaloo clustered in certain areas (sometimes one per house, sometimes less than one per street), and water deliveries were sometimes haphazard rather than systematic.

Many of the women interviewed have faced fundamental shake-ups of their lives. Sometimes this was the direct result of the earthquakes, such as workplaces being lost, houses becoming unsafe, or decisions to stay in sub-standard housing because they did not want to leave familiar neighbourhoods. At other times, more fundamental factors have shaped their lives, such as the need to look after family members who were sick, fearful or suffering from anxiety. Occasionally the quakes generated a shift in values, or even a total change of outlook and lifestyle.

Women in Christchurch, especially those in the areas most affected by the quakes, were both victims needing responses from agencies, and also supporters of others in their families and communities, especially of the elderly, the young and those with disabilities. Whether it was older people helping the young, or the younger women helping elderly neighbours, or initiatives to share resources, a large amount of help was provided below the radar of official aid. The stories we have recorded highlight the very different circumstances of different groups of women, particularly the challenges faced by women on low incomes with few financial resources as they attempt to put their homes and lives together after the quakes.
Reports, presentations and other publications
A number of reports, presentations and papers have been produced and further are planned. Most can be accessed online.


Du Plessis, R. (2013) Shocks, Shouts and Survival – Women’s stories of the Canterbury quakes. Gender and Disaster Symposium, Gender and Disaster Network, Joint Centre for Disaster Research, 16 August, Massey University, Wellington.


Women’s earthquake stories published in The Circular, NCWNZ - Te Kaunihera Wahine o Aotearoa Newsletter

Jayne Rattray’s story

Jade Rutherford’s story
The Circular No. 567 October/Whiringa-ā-nuku, 2013, pp. 11-12.

Alia Azfali’s story
The Circular No. 568 November/Whiringa-ā-rangi 2013, pp. 11-12.

Amber Henderson’s story

Susan Mary Barnes’ story