

TELL YOUR STORY: INTERVIEW WITH TERESA POLI

The Women4Climate Tell Your Story campaign aims to champion the role of women as agents of change in the climate space, highlight their climate projects and tell the inspirational stories behind them.

Teresa Poli trained as an environmental engineer and has worked in construction and infrastructure in Australia and Aotearoa (the Māori-language name for “New Zealand”) on a variety of projects. Through her work, Poli noticed the construction sector needed to give more serious consideration to sustainability issues, and she also noticed a lack of inclusivity when it came to indigenous practice and language within the industry.



Women4Climate Auckland mentee Teresa Poli

Poli's interests are in line with many other climate activists, who have, and are consistently advocating for the integration of indigenous knowledge into climate action at the local, national, and international level. Incorporating Māori knowledge (the indigenous peoples of New Zealand) in engineering education is a key concern for Poli, given Māori people see themselves as guardians of our environment and of the land.

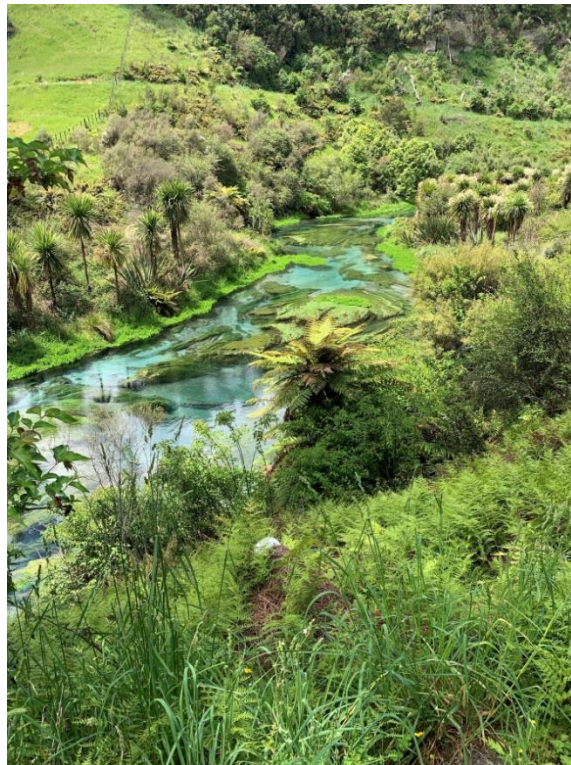
Poli strives to train engineers about the indigenous culture of Aotearoa and to tackle the racism that Poli says is prevalent in the engineering profession



Picture: Side of a construction project, bordered by harakeke plants.

Poli has worked across Aotearoa on a variety of projects, ranging from landfills, water tanks, and petrol chemical containment. She recalls working on a road extension project, where she experienced the unfortunate consequences of construction managers' lack of awareness and attention to sustainability and indigenous culture.

According to the project manager, the road extension project "required" the removal of harakeke plants, which is an important indigenous plant in New Zealand, particularly for indigenous peoples. Although she asked if the plants could not be safely returned to the community or replanted elsewhere, the construction industry's operational practices did not provide for such alternatives. Teresa realised that she could not drive the change she wanted to see in civil construction as an engineer. She thus turned to education, working in vocational training space, where she focuses on integrating Māori perspectives, knowledge and practices into the engineering and vocational training curriculum. As well as supporting the transition to green jobs, Teresa is helping to improve students' sustainability skills to enable more people, particularly those from communities with historically marginalised knowledge, to move into leadership positions and become champions of sustainable infrastructure projects.



Picture: River in a valley in New Zealand.

Teresa's project not only benefits trained engineers, the environment and indigenous communities, but also helps Auckland meet the goals of its [Climate Action Plan](#). This includes just transition targets within the workforce, as well as a broad area of work to reduce construction and demolition waste. Teresa has already noticed real cultural changes associated with policy and legislation in the engineering sector. For example, the water reform taking place has incorporated Māori culture and ensures certain sustainability standards for water sources are met, through the concept of Te Mana o Te Wai established in 2020. While efforts are being made in the political arena, she hopes that more Māori will move into leadership positions to further accelerate the necessary change. Teresa's experience demonstrates how to harness the power of knowledge to improve poor operational practices in the construction sector, thereby enabling engineers and the construction industry to meet the goals of the current Climate Action Plan and raise the ambitions of future plans.



Picture: Poli on a construction project.

When talking about climate justice and an intersectional approach to inclusive climate action, Teresa mentions that women and indigenous peoples tend to not only look at the consequences of a project, with significant effort devoted to trying to prevent those that are most harmful, but also the intersection between systems, people and living things, such that solutions that truly address this complexity can be developed. Teresa's work reflects this approach, grounding her commitment in Māori indigenous knowledge and the politics of care.

Despite her impressive professional background, Teresa is enormously grateful for the leadership, guidance and support she has received from the Women4Climate mentoring programme. Her mentor has opened up her network, giving her access opportunities that were previously out of reach. She also sees the positive impact of mentoring both on her professional life and personal development. She strongly believes that mentoring works in exactly the same way as the powerlifting training she has received for the last four years, stating that she "needs a mentor to become the professional she wants to be".

Teresa is working on the intersection between sustainability and indigenous peoples knowledge - and believes that this intersection is undoubtedly New Zealand's future. At Women4Climate, we believe that beyond New Zealand, Teresa's journey demonstrates and instils the inclusive climate action that all territories and communities need.

Learn more about Poli's work on: [Website](#) or [LinkedIn](#)

[To learn more about gender mainstreaming in inclusive climate action approaches, take the free Women4Climate 4-week online course, "Developing Skills for Women Leadership in Climate Action"](#)

