

# *Haumanu Case Study: Wāhine Ki Toa – Women's Refuge Emerging Leaders Programme*

## **Growing restorative leadership in Women's Refuge**

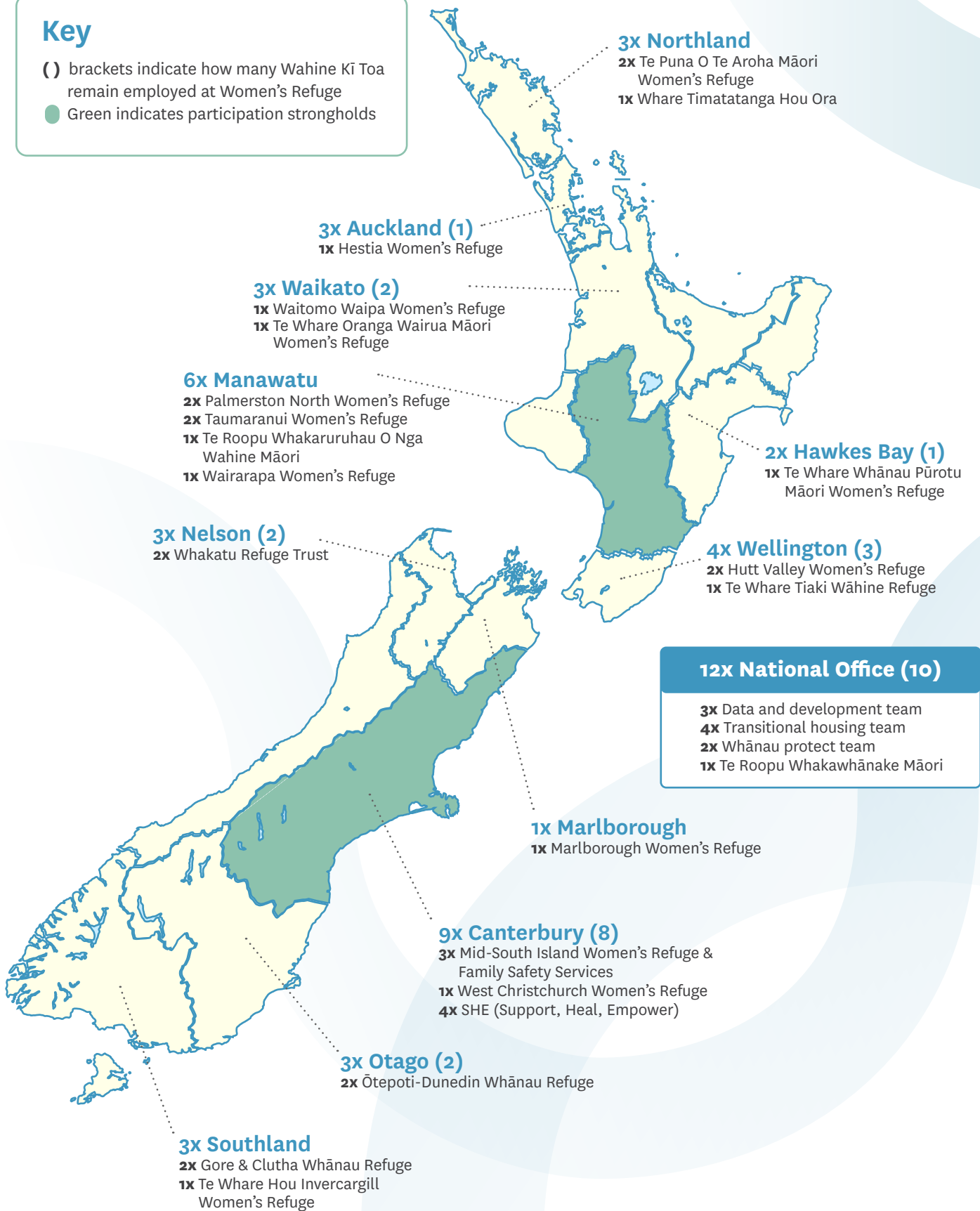
Since 1973, Women's Refuge has supported women experiencing family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand. It now has a network of 41 refuges nationwide and a national office. Each women's refuge is independent with its own governing body, but together they are a movement seeking to shift what are often intergenerational patterns of family trauma.

In 2023, in partnership with the national office, the [Centre for Social Impact](#) began facilitating an annual Wāhine Ki Toa Emerging Leaders Programme, for Women's Refuge kaimahi (staff). The concepts and practices of [Haumanu](#) form the foundation of this programme, which aims to embed a restorative leadership culture within Women's Refuge.

Now in year three, 52 wāhine toa from refuges across Aotearoa have signed up for the programme, with 33 completing it, and the 19 women in the 2025 cohort beginning in March. Areas in green have the highest participation – national office, Canterbury and Manawatu.

## Key

- ( ) brackets indicate how many Wahine Ki Toa remain employed at Women's Refuge
- Green indicates participation strongholds



# The invitation

*The state and the mauri of the leader have the biggest impact on the team.*

How we navigate the complexity of ourselves, our teams, our organisations and our world is critical to the outcomes we achieve. The programme aims to grow capacity for leading restoratively as kaitiaki and kaiwhakatare - guardians and navigators. The approach honours the Women's Refuge commitment to being a Te Tiriti informed organisation and working with Refuge's culture.

The programme nourishes wāhine on many levels, through connection, movement, embodiment, creativity, tools and practices and activation of their own mana motuhake (self-determination) - all working towards mauri ora in the way that they lead in the world.

A premise of the work is that as we change as leaders, so will the organisation we work in. A key aspect of the programme is for wāhine to identify shifts they would like to see in themselves and in the Women's Refuge organisation - and what it will take to bring those into being.

A trauma-informed and healing orientated approach is central. We believe that leaders need to be healers in this time, helping restore health into ourselves and our systems to realise full potential. While challenging, the programme promises a deep adventure to nourish and equip emerging leaders for Women's Refuge.

## The content and process

The programme's content revolves around growing capacities for restorative leadership. These include deep listening, reflection and inquiry, relating and connection, attuning to self and self-

agency, experimentation, working with mauri, visioning and strategising.

Core individual resourcing practices are introduced and experienced. These include nervous system regulation, nature connection, mindfulness and presencing, pausing, grounding, mauri and wellbeing practices, inquiry, experimentation and journalling.

Haumanu models and processes are introduced – see [here](#). Resourcing techniques for teams are shared and practiced, with the invitation to try these in their own teams. In the later stages of the programme, the wāhine are asked to identify systems changes within Women's Refuge they would like to see, and these are presented by the wāhine together at the national Women's Refuge Annual General Meeting.

In terms of process, there are four 2-3 day in-person gatherings and six online 'embedding' sessions. All wāhine are part of a triad – a three-person peer support group which meets regularly to discuss, share and learn together. All wāhine have at least one session with a trained trauma therapist and some have multiple sessions. In-person wānanga include this therapist, a body worker and a specialist in Māori movement and rongoa practices.

Reflection and learning are embedded throughout and an evaluator is part of the team holding this programme. Wāhine are asked to identify personal tohu or signs of progress using [Te Whare Tapa Wha](#), a holistic te ao Māori way to consider and capture changes (see below).

The evaluator interviews each wāhine later in the programme to check in on progress with these personal tohu and what they are gaining and learning. Feedback on how to strengthen the programme is continually sought. In the programme's third year, we are seeing clear areas for system change in the Women's Refuge movement and are mapping these against the [Water of Systems Change framework](#).



# Programme impact

## What are wāhine gaining?

All participants have noted personal changes as a result of the programme, with some of these being very significant. Key changes include more self-care, confidence, feeling more grounded and present, navigating hard things more skilfully, and feeling more connected to self and others. See [here](#) for a four minute video of wāhine talking about their experience of the programme. After two years, here are the main ways that the 33 wāhine who have completed the programme report growing their skills and capacity.

## Connection and support

*Culturally it has been nice to be in a diverse group of wāhine that have been so supportive.*

Connections and friendships with other women in Refuge have been important for participants, including meeting people who have been through similar journeys. The triad groups have been very positive and allowed wāhine to share at deeper levels.

## Self-care and resourcing practices

Wāhine commonly note feeling less anxious, stressed and fearful as a result of the programme. This comes from understanding triggers and past trauma and developing tools and practices to deal with challenging situations.

*I am pulling strength from nature, connecting with Papatūānuku, a lot of that has been embedded.*

*I know how to deal with my anxiety now, it's ok that I'm anxious.*

*Learning to let go of what is out of my control.*

## Personal growth and healing

*It has motivated me to be authentic rather than perfect.*

Some wāhine toa are finding the programme transformational:

*I have done more growth personally and professionally in this last year than in my entire life; it has moved something in me*

## Better communication skills, confidence and assertiveness

Wāhine noted gaining better communication skills at work and in their personal life. This includes being more assertive and direct, not mucking around and getting things done:

*The team has noticed I have been way more assertive.*

Some wāhine noted asking people what they need and asking themselves what they need a lot more. A common theme was

gaining more confidence to speak up and to speak publicly from the programme:

*I am taking on more external presentations and dealing with stakeholders more.*

*Better communication and personal development leads to being more effective at work:*

*My manager said the programme was doing wonders for me: more self-reflection, level headedness, willing to look at perspectives rather than reacting.*

*I am now making team discussions productive, not moan sessions.*

*I can now say when I'm struggling and don't feel like a failure.*

*Speaking in front of a group used to be really hard, now I feel confident to speak in front of people. Others have noticed this in me.*

## Key things being prototyped at work include:

- Self-care and resourcing practices such as having breaks, pausing, breath work, getting out in nature and tuning in to self.
- Speaking up more and having hard conversations.
- Changing communication style to be more constructive, praising and celebrating people more.
- Changing team dynamics and building other people's skills at work.

The wāhine are also applying what they are learning outside of work, in their family relationships, with friends and in their communities.

The most significant impacts are improved relationships with self and others, improved hauora/wellbeing and ability to navigate life, and improved leadership skills and impact at work.

Wāhine are learning the importance of understanding themselves, and tuning into themselves; of taking care of themselves so they can take care of others, about what they need to support others, about the key role of the nervous system and how trauma works, about strategic planning and how to challenge the status quo.

The work at Women's Refuge is challenging, and many wāhine toa come into this programme feeling tired, stressed and anxious. Some have commented that this programme is the only safe space in their lives. The programme has made a significant impact in some way for all of the women involved, both in and out of work:



*My manager is trusting me a lot more, our relationship is moving in a good direction, it's such a relief, I was ready to leave. That and this programme have kept me at Women's Refuge.*

*I feel I can speak up whenever, without feeling self-conscious about that, the imposter syndrome has faded a lot. I feel like I've got something to say and can say it.*

*I was in a space of being negative and stressed, would go in circles, now I preserve energy and choose where I put my energy.*

*It's been massive – I had comments at the start of year that I had lost my bubbly personality, was grumpy, now I've found that again, more energy, people are commenting on my boundary setting in a good way – I'm asking my manager to reassign work, everyone saying 'Whoah look at you, setting boundaries'. This has made other people feel like they can, it has changed the culture of my workplace.*

*I used to be so stressed all the time, now I'm so much calmer.*

The programme has identified clear strategic and systemic issues for Women's Refuge to address as a collective. It is also supporting the ongoing iteration and strengthening of the programme and the Haumanu approach.

