



GWN Wāhine Whetū 2020

GWN was excited to mark Matariki again this year by recognising 9 Wāhine Whetū, rising women stars in the public sector. Join us in celebrating these outstanding women and their achievements.



Ramya Rajendran

Information Systems and Business Support Leader. Kiwi Rail

"Being brave is not about being afraid but rather having the strength to move forward. Tomorrow is always a new day with new thoughts and new opportunities."

Ramya was appointed as the Data and Systems Leader at KiwiRail New Zealand in July 2019. Prior to joining the public sector, she had established a foundation in international leadership roles in the private sector including Information Technology, Banking and Agri-tech. She moved to New Zealand to pursue an MBA and confronted the challenges faced by international student trying to establish a career.

Ramya has a passion to make a difference and to create a positive legacy for future immigrants and she strongly believes the choices she has made in her life have shaped the person she is today. This belief drives the work Ramya does to encourage and mentor women and young immigrants to help them pursue their dreams.



Nicola Ngawati

Kaiwhakahaere matua (Director), Mana Wāhine, Ministry for Women

"Tae atu ki nga purapura whetū, me tae atu ki muri – mauria ētahi atu ki a koe – Reach for the stars, as you reach behind to bring others with you."

Nicola Ngawati (Ngāpuhi, Ngati Hine) took up the role as Director (Kaiwhakahaere Matua) of the Mana Wāhine roopū at the Ministry for Women in November 2019. This followed extensive service as a career diplomat within the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with postings in Belgium and the Cook Islands, and significant experience in the Pacific region and in multilateral and trade sectors. She has a long-held interest in the evolution and application of the Crown/Māori partnership – in particular, within the public service. She is also in

the final stages of completing her PhD and has been appointed to the Diversity Works Board of Trustees.

Nicola is a keen advocate for public service careers and enjoys mentoring and encouraging others to consider a career serving Aotearoa New Zealand.



Erin Gough

Senior Advisor, Office of the Children's Commissioner

"It always seems impossible until it's done" (Nelson Mandela)

Born in South Africa, Erin started her public sector career in Christchurch at Community Law Canterbury before moving to Wellington in 2015. She has built a foundation of advocacy and policy experience through roles at the Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Education.

In her current role as a Senior Advisor at the Office of the Children's Commissioner, Erin provides child-centred policy advice to both government and non-government agencies.

Erin complements her paid role with a robust portfolio of volunteer work. Disabled since birth herself, she is a staunch advocate for systemic change for disabled people – both within and outside of her day job. Erin has contributed her lived experience, knowledge and skills to a range of community organisations, including as a former Trustee of Arts Access Aotearoa and The Lucy Foundation



Safia Afrin

Programme Coordinator, MFAT

"Not everyone is running the same race. Give some of your light to those who are less fortunate so that they can also shine brighter."

Safia migrated to New Zealand in 2005 from Bangladesh and has since primarily worked in New Zealand's public sector. Her formal training is in computer science and software engineering and has earned an MBA in international management. But it is her proven talent, innovation and leadership in project/programme management where Safia truly shines and has been acknowledged by her colleagues. In her current role, she is overseeing the implementation of the MFAT's Diversity and Inclusion programme.

Safia is a staunch advocate for removing the barriers to the success for diverse people in the public sector and is a strong promoter of increasing diverse representation in senior leadership



roles. Being a Muslim herself, she also has a passion for supporting people in ethnic minority groups, especially Muslim women, to thrive in their careers.

In all of her endeavours, Safia lives by her values of courage, empathy and manaakitanga.



Dr Katie Elkin

Deputy Chief Executive, System Leadership, Crown Law

"The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway." (Mother Teresa)

In her DCE role at Crown Law, Katie and her teams work in the System Leadership Group – a new initiative that works across government to further leverage the collective strength of its 1200 lawyers.

Katie's early career was spent in the private sector practicing employment and health law. Prior to joining Crown Law, She was acting DCE Corporate Services at Ara Poutama Department of Corrections. Her public service career has also included roles as Chief Legal Adviser and Associate Commissioner, Legal and Strategic Relations at the Health and Disability Commission. Her experience in these agencies has highlighted for Katie the need to see people as individuals and to understand their stories in order to make a difference.

In addition to her law credentials, Katie has qualifications in neuroscience, and a PhD in Law and Public Health. She also served two years as President of the In-house Lawyers Association and was a member of the NZ Law Society Council.



Kesta Dennison

Supervising Customs Officer, Child Exploitation Operations Team, NZ Customs

"'Prove it privately'... have a vision, make a plan, work on it every single day. Invest your time and energy wisely into things that add value to your life."

Kesta left a career in the private sector to follow her moral compass and pursue work she could feel passionate about.

She joined Customs in 2012 and later earned a Masters degree in International Security and Cybercrime.

Kesta's enforcement career has focused on fighting the exploitation of children and the use of this objectionable material online. Her current role has inspired and motivated her to spend her life contributing to and influencing global enforcement strategies that disrupt and dismantle this type of offending.



Kesta has received the Ria McBride Public Service Leadership award and scholarship (2016), a Comptroller's Legacy Award and Scholarship from NZ Customs (2015), and a commendation from the World Customs Organisation (2014).



Utufaasisili Rosemary Mose

Chief Advisor Pasifika, NZQA

"A fia vave o'o lou va'a, alo na o oe, ae a fia tuli mamao le taunu'uga, tatou 'alo'alo faatasi."

"If you want your canoe to go fast, go alone; if you want to go further, let us go together." (Samoan proverb)

Utufaasisili Rosemary Mose believes in the power of education to transform lives and communities. She is committed to Pacific student success and has worked across secondary and tertiary education in Auckland.

Utufaasisili Rose was appointed Chief Advisor Pacific at the New Zealand Qualification Authority in 2019 and is responsible for leading NZQA's Pacific Strategic Action Plan, Takiala Pasifika 2020 – 2023, which outlines NZQA's commitment to Pacific learner success. Her previous roles have included Pasifika Internal Relations Manager at Manukau Institute of Technology and Senior Advisor Pacific and Student Achievement Practitioner at the Ministry of Education. She holds a Masters degree in Education and has been acknowledged by her colleagues for her educational leadership.

Utufaasisili Rose believes educational success for all can be achieved through schools and providers working in genuine and innovative partnerships with learners, families and communities.



Rebecca Magdalinos

Squadron Leader, Lead – Operation Tangata Kanorau, RNZAF

"To achieve success and diversity for New Zealand we must weave together a network of networks that support our young people. That's what drives me."

Rebecca ('George') is an engineer in the RNZAF and her commitment to diversity and gender equality spans her career and personal pursuits.

George is the leading force behind the School to Skies programme which aims to increase the number of women in the RNZAF. She also created Operation Tangata Kanorau, an outreach initiative designed to inspire younger children into STEM subjects. In addition to these initiatives for youth learning, she is also interested in technical and engineering programmes for young Māori people that focus on their specific culture and learning styles.



As an outspoken advocate for inclusion and diversity, George was also a founding member of the NZDF LGBTI+ support network, OverWatch. In 2019 she was a Women of Influence NZ nominee, and in 2018 George was awarded the Defence Meritorious Service Medal.



Priscilla Wehi

Incoming Co-Director, Te Pūnaha Matatini & Rutherford Discovery Fellow, Landcare Research

"Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time." (Maya Angelou)

Priscilla (Cilla) is a conservation biologist whose research has focused on the links between culture and biodiversity, and ecological restoration. In her work she explores relationships between conservation biology and mātauranga from her lived experience in extended whānau communities of Waikato, Ngāpuhi nui tonu and Tūhoe and her roots as a New Zealand woman with Scottish clan origins.

She is passionate about inclusivity and diversity in science and was part of the 2018 Homeward Bound programme – the largest ever all-female Antarctic expedition with the aim of raising awareness of gender inequality in STEM industries. She is also a member of the Predator-Free 2050 Bioethics Panel and the Kindness in Science Collective.

Cilla contributes to mentoring early career researchers, the development of new pathways for and expressions of scientific leadership, and work on equity issues. Read more about Cilla's work on [her website](#).

