

State of the service: women's participation in the PNG public sector

by Nicole Haley

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Papua New Guinea's new [Public Services \(Management\) Act 2014 \(PSMA\)](#) is one of several important administrative and legislative reforms implemented by the O'Neill/Dion Government in accordance with the [Alotau Accord of 2012](#) [pdf]. Key among the changes is formal consultation with members of parliament (MPs) in relation to the appointment of provincial and district administrators, which in effect gives MPs a formal role in hiring and firing decisions at the subnational level. Seemingly, this is already having a detrimental impact on the gender profile of the public sector, with four of the five most senior women in the Simbu provincial administration already replaced at the recommendation of MPs in the province (Anna Naur, personal communication, 10 March 2015).

Drawing on previously unpublished data, this post offers an analysis of the gender profile of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) public sector as at June 2014, before the implementation of the new PSMA. The analysis reveals that while women are well represented in central government agencies, they are severely underrepresented in senior positions at the subnational level where services are delivered.

Labour force participation and state of the service

[Labour force participation rates](#) in PNG have remained relatively static over the past decade. And despite near to gender parity, women are predominantly concentrated in informal and subsistence sectors ([ILO 2013](#) [pdf], p. 3). They currently account for 38% of all public sector employees. The gender profile of the service is remarkably complex, with some agencies and regions performing considerably better than others. In 2013–14, the PNG Public Service grew by 5%, although the overall proportion of women in the workforce remained essentially static. As at June 2014, 96,986 people were employed in the PNG public service. Of these, 122 individuals (0.1%) were employed at executive level, 1,234 (1.3%) in senior appointments

(Grade PS17 or above), and 4,800 (5%) in middle management (Grade PS13–PS16). Most public servants are teachers (57%), are employed in junior administrative positions (26%), or as health workers (11%). Collectively, the uniformed services, Correctional Institution Services, the PNG Defence Force, and the Royal PNG Constabulary account for 10% of the total public service workforce.

Women in the public service

Women are best represented in the service professions, accounting for 54% of all health workers (doctors, nurses, community health workers, health extension officers and allied health professionals), and 42% of teachers. By contrast, only 24% of administrative positions are held by women. The number of women rapidly diminishes with seniority, such that women occupy 18% of all senior management appointments and 7% of all executive appointments. Although the overall number and proportion of women in the public service rose by 1,878 positions in the 12 months to June 2014, the proportion of women in executive positions effectively remained static, while the number of women in senior management positions dropped from 22 to 18%. On the face of it, then, PNG looks a long way off reaching its goal of 30% of women in public service leadership positions by 2017. However, this is not the case across all agencies; indeed, progress towards the 30% target has been uneven. For example, women currently occupy close to a quarter (23%) of all senior management positions and 31% of middle management positions in PNG's central government agencies.

Moreover, they account for more than 30% of the senior management appointments in several of PNG's larger central government agencies, including the Department of National Planning and Monitoring (52%), the Department of Community Development (50%), the Internal Revenue Commission (47%), Attorney General (35%), Department of Defence (33%), and the Prime Minister's Department (31%). Other agencies, such as the Department of Personnel Management (29%), Treasury (27%), Finance (26%), and the Department of Labour and Industrial Relations (26%), are approaching the 30% target.

By contrast, women fare poorly at the provincial level and in the uniformed services, with very few occupying critical decision-making positions. They currently hold no executive level appointments, only 6% of senior management and 10% of middle management appointments in provincial administrations, and account for only 2% of senior officers and 6% of junior officers in PNG's combined services.

Whereas women are represented at senior levels in all central government agencies, there are only six provinces (East Sepik, Milne Bay, Morobe, New Ireland, Eastern Highlands, and Southern Highlands) with women in senior management

positions, and only eight women in total in senior management positions at provincial levels across the entire country. By contrast, there are 210 women holding senior management positions in PNG's central government agencies.

At the regional level, the New Guinea Islands region out-performs other regions, with 16% of middle management positions held by women. By contrast, the lowest levels of women's representation are found in the Highlands region. Notwithstanding considerable variation — for example, women account for 3% of middle management positions in the Enga and Southern Highlands provincial administrations, and 20% in the Eastern Highlands — women account for less than 6% of all middle management appointments across the Highlands.

Improving women's participation

As part of broader public service reforms, PNG adopted a [Gender Equity and Social Inclusion \(GESI\) policy](#) [pdf] in 2013. The policy provides for the establishment of GESI coordinators within each department, agency and provincial administration. To date, however, these positions have not been funded through the budget. Nonetheless, some agencies, such as the Internal Revenue Commission, which is headed by a woman, have appointed GESI coordinators from within their existing budget, and the 12 months to June 2014 saw improvements to their gender profile. Importantly, key improvements were noted in all central government agencies headed by women or with women in executive positions. Clearly, critical gains can be made when women occupy leadership positions.

Another key factor contributing to women's success are scholarships (see [Zubrinich and Haley 2009](#) [pdf]). Indeed, 90% of those who participated in the 2009 survey had held scholarships for tertiary study abroad. Panellists and participants in the Women in the Public Sector panel at the [PNG Women's Forum](#) [pdf], hosted by the US Embassy in March 2015, also highlighted the importance of scholarships, structured mentoring, the need for women in key decision-making positions, and better reintegration of scholarship recipients. They also called for at least one senior woman to sit on all public service appointments committees.

Looking forward

The Australian Government, through its aid program, has committed to investing strongly in enhancing women's leadership and decision-making. Given this, PNG's renewed focus on decentralised service delivery and the important gains already made in the larger central government agencies, government and donors should now give attention to the gender profile of line agencies and provincial and district administrations. Some of the biggest challenges at the provincial level are the

existing lack of women in leadership positions, and the small pool of suitably qualified women from which to draw. Three ways Australia should respond to these challenges are: offering priority scholarships for women employed at the subnational level, ensuring a suite of courses designed specifically for women in the public sector are offered through the new **Pacific Leadership and Governance Precinct**, and advocating in favour of performance-based budgetary incentives based on successful implementation of the GESI policy.



Nicole Haley is Convenor of the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Program at ANU and co-chief investigator (with Kerry

*Zubrinich) on the Improving Women's Leadership, Political Participation and Decision Making in the Pacific research project. This post was originally published as **SSGM In Brief 2015/60**.*

Author/s:

Nicole Haley

Nicole Haley is a Professor at the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. She is the convenor of the State, Society & Governance in Melanesia program.

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