

Women in New Zealand's RSE scheme: a small but stable workforce



Female I-Kiribati worker pruning fruit trees under the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme
Photo Credit: Richard Bedford

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Since the outset of New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, employers have largely recruited men for horticultural seasonal jobs. The majority are employed for hard, physical tasks, such as harvesting and pruning, in the orchard or in the vineyard. The dominance of men is in part due to restrictions imposed by Immigration New Zealand (INZ) and the Ministry of Social Development on the recruitment of overseas labour for jobs packing fruit and vegetables. Much of the latter work is done by women, and jobs in packhouses have tended to be reserved for New Zealanders, especially in regions with a higher than average unemployment rate. This restriction on packhouse work, coupled with a common belief among RSE employers that work in the field is better suited to men, has limited opportunities for women.

In the year to 30 June 2024, women made up only 9.5% (1,664) of the 17,599 RSE workers who arrived in the country. This was the lowest percentage for a financial year since the scheme began in 2007 (excluding 2020-21 and 2021-22 when recruiting was affected by COVID) (Figure 1).



In terms of actual arrivals, the 1,664 RSE women recruited in 2023-24 in fact represented the second highest number for a financial year since 2007, only exceeded by the number in the previous year (1,738). But as RSE arrivals have increased over time, up from around 4,500 in 2007-08 to over 17,500 in 2023-24, the percentage share of women has declined.

As Figure 1 shows, the number of women recruited for the RSE scheme has remained relatively static over time. Over the 17 years to 30 June 2024, the difference between the maximum and minimum number of women recruited annually has been less than 1,000; in the case of men this difference has been over 12,000.

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While the overall female participation rate is relatively low, there are significant differences by source country. Table 1 shows the number of individuals (rather than annual arrivals) who have been recruited at some stage between 2007 and 2024 by RSE employers for each source country. During the 17 years, 7,628 individual women accounted for a total of 20,795 female RSE arrivals over the same period.

Table 1: RSE worker recruitment during the 17 years to 30 June 2024 by source country

Source country	Women recruited	Total recruited	% Women
Pacific			
Fiji	135	1,954	6.9%
Kiribati	421	1,296	32.5%
Nauru	12	60	20.0%
Papua New Guinea	116	922	12.6%
Samoa	492	10,661	4.6%
Solomon Islands	697	3,131	22.3%
Tonga	995	8,516	11.7%
Tuvalu	195	645	30.2%
Vanuatu	2,605	20,368	12.8%
Sub-total	5,668	47,553	11.9%
Asia			
India	0	131	0.0%
Indonesia	87	928	9.4%
Malaysia	1,118	2,144	52.1%
Philippines	41	168	24.4%
Taiwan	75	126	59.5%
Thailand	639	2,514	25.4%
Sub-total	1,960	6,011	32.6%
Total	7,628	53,564	14.2%

Source: Unpublished MBIE arrivals data • Created with Datawrapper

From the Pacific, Kiribati has had the highest female participation rate over the 17-year period. Almost a third (32.5%) of all I-Kiribati individuals who have participated in the RSE scheme since 2007 are women. Other Pacific countries with high female participation rates include Tuvalu (30%) and Solomon Islands (22%).

For Kiribati and Tuvalu, this can be partly attributed to a concerted effort in the early 2010s by officials in INZ (which administers the RSE scheme) to encourage employers to recruit women from the two central atoll countries. INZ undertook facilitated recruitment drives in both countries to support RSE employers with their worker selection. As a result of these initial recruitment drives, there are now a small number of RSE employers with well-established, long-standing connections with groups of I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan RSE women (and men).

When looking across all RSE source countries, some of the Asian countries have the highest female participation rates. Women have made up about one-third (33%) of the 6,011 seasonal workers recruited from Asia since 2007. This is almost three times the share of women (12%) who have been recruited from the nine Pacific countries over the same period (Table 1). However, there has been **little change in the numbers** of women and men recruited from the six Asian source countries due to New Zealand government caps.

The Pacific country which has consistently had the lowest female participation rate is Samoa. Over the 17 years, less than 5% of the total number of Samoans (10,661) who have been employed under the RSE scheme have been women. Samoan cultural values and practices have played an important role in influencing the participation of women in short-term overseas labour mobility schemes. Samoan women have been much less involved in seasonal labour migration than women from two of their Polynesian neighbours — Tonga (12%) and Tuvalu (30%).

RSE employers who recruit women tend to employ them for specialised tasks (for example grafting rootstock in a fruit tree nursery), for work on particular crops such as picking citrus and berries, for packhouse work and to provide support to other RSE workers in informal pastoral care roles.

But there remain barriers to the participation of women in seasonal work, both in the Pacific and in New Zealand. Traditional customary roles in some Pacific societies may dictate that hard, physical tasks in the orchard or vineyard are only suitable for men, while there is a preference for women to remain at home to raise their families and perform household duties.

Packhouse jobs are largely reserved for New Zealanders. Provision of suitable RSE accommodation can also be a barrier, especially when customary practices dictate

men and women are to be housed in separate accommodation facilities.

RSE policy settings are also a hindrance. In the interests of efficiency, INZ encourages RSE employers to utilise fewer RSE workers but maximise utilisation of them over the full contract period of seven months (up to nine months for Kiribati and Tuvalu). For women, there are not seven months of work available in the packhouse. To get seven months' work, they also need to perform harvesting, pruning and maintenance jobs. Many RSE women prefer shorter contracts (for example, five months) so they can return home to their families and have a longer break between contracts.

Significant advances in packhouse automation have already reduced the need for seasonal workers for packing jobs. Automated systems enable thousands of pieces of fruit to be automatically graded, sorted and packed every day. These technologies operate at high speed and ensure consistent quality. As more packhouse operations across New Zealand incorporate technology into their facilities, demand for people to fill traditional packing roles will continue to fall. Instead, workers with a higher level of skill will be required — to operate and maintain automated systems, in quality assurance and in safety roles.

Looking ahead, without a change to the RSE policy settings to broaden the types of jobs that RSE workers can undertake — away from the traditional work of planting, maintain, harvesting and packing crops — it is likely that women will remain a small, and declining, share of the RSE workforce.

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