

Māori women judges in Aotearoa

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The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between Māori and the Crown, is the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Treaty provides that in exchange for the grant of kawanatanga (governance) to the British Crown, Māori people (the indigenous people of New Zealand) were guaranteed rangatiratanga (autonomy) in relation to their land and other precious resources, as well as the rights of British citizens. Unfortunately the process of colonisation by the British Crown and settlers in New Zealand followed a similar pattern to that in other colonised countries, and in the 19th and 20th centuries Māori became increasingly disadvantaged, with corresponding low socio-economic status. For many years Māori women were unrepresented in the professions, including the legal profession, and it has not been until the last couple of decades that Māori women lawyers have been appointed to the bench.

Currently Aotearoa New Zealand has 11 women judges of Māori ancestry who serve on the High Court, District Court and Māori Land Court. That figure represents about 4.8% of the judiciary. Māori women constitute close to 7.5% of the population, so there is some way to go before the number of Māori women judges reflects the population percentage. While the numbers of Māori women judges have increased in the Māori Land Court and District Court, Justice Lowell Goddard was the first, and so far the only Māori woman to become a Queen's Counsel and judge of the High Court. She is currently the head of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales.

There is a close correlation between the small number of Māori women who become partners in law firms and senior counsel, and the pool of those considered eligible for appointment to the bench. While judges have been chosen from other areas of the profession, these are the exception rather than the rule. Māori women judges have agreed to work with a group of Māori women lawyers to provide networking and mentoring support, so as to encourage young Māori women lawyers to take their careers as far as possible. The aim is to redress the disproportionately small number of Māori women in high positions in the legal profession.

In February 2016 the coram for a sitting of the Māori Appellate Court was, for the first time, made up of Māori women judges, and women registry staff. To celebrate this significant occasion a special evening event was organised where women judges of the Māori Land Court and the District Court talked to Māori women practitioners about their career paths and how they became judges. The practitioners were given a chance to mingle with the judges, to ask questions of them and, just as importantly, to form connections with other women lawyers. It is hoped that this will be the first of a series of such events.



Judge Milroy, Deputy Chief Judge Fox and Judge Reeves.
Photograph courtesy of Kerry Grant.



Māori Appellate Court Judges and Court staff. Photograph
courtesy of Kerry Grant