



Her Story

**A collection of
stories from
resilient
women across
the Pacific**



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WHO WE ARE

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the United Nations' global development network, working across more than 170 countries and territories to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, and build resilience for sustainable development.

As a leader in driving transformative change, UNDP focuses on key areas such as governance, climate action, economic inclusion, and gender equality, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Globally, UNDP's gender equality work is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It seeks to empower women and girls by addressing the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality. This includes promoting women's political participation, strengthening frameworks to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, fostering economic empowerment, and ensuring access to justice. Through an intersectional lens, UNDP also addresses the compounded challenges women face, recognizing that meaningful progress requires tackling inequalities on multiple fronts.

In the Pacific, UNDP's gender work is uniquely tailored to the region's socio-cultural, economic, and environmental context.

A key focus is fostering women's economic empowerment by removing barriers to workforce participation and creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. This includes enhancing access to financial resources, training, and markets, particularly in climate-affected sectors.



HerStory shines a light on the resilience, leadership, and contributions of women across the Pacific, many of whom have long been driving change within their communities. By documenting and sharing these stories, UNDP not only celebrates these women but also fosters inspiration and role modeling for others.

HerStory reflects UNDP's commitment to SDG 5 - Gender Equality - and to amplifying voices that have often been marginalised, creating a richer and more inclusive narrative around gender equality.

This publication is part of the 16 Days of Activism campaign, serving as both a celebration of women's achievements and a call to action to address the systemic barriers women continue to face.

THE EMPOWERED WOMEN IN AUKI



TRANSFORMING LIVES: EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN IN AUKI

AUKI MARKET: A HUB FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

The Solomon Islands' rural markets are more than just places of trade; they are the lifeblood of communities.

The Markets for Change (M4C) project team have continued to support women who sell goods at Auki Market in the Malaita Province of Solomon Islands, where rural women play a crucial role in the economy, providing for their families and contributing to community wealth.

Through the M4C project, these women are not only earning an income but are gaining vital skills to improve their livelihoods and achieve financial independence.

Auki Market is a vibrant centre where more than 300 women vendors sell fresh produce, dried fish, and local goods.

This bustling marketplace provides much-needed economic opportunities for women in the region.

Similar to other markets in rural Solomon Islands, the market is characterised by lively trade, with vendors and buyers exchanging goods that sustain both families and communities.

For these women, the market is a vital space for economic survival and growth.

They spend long hours at their stalls, hoping that their hard work will help improve their families' living standards over time.



Capacity-building training programs offered by M4C are key to empowering these women, equipping them with the skills to increase their earnings, manage their finances, and lift their communities out of poverty.

LUCY'S JOURNEY TO FINANCIAL LITERACY

Lucy Kirimoana, a 37-year-old mother of five from Anoasa in the Highlands of Central Kwara'ae, is one of many women benefiting from M4C's support. Lucy sells vegetables, pork, and cooked taro at Auki Market.

Despite her success in generating income, she struggled with saving money.

"I never knew much about saving. If I had, I would have a substantial amount of savings by now," Lucy admits.

After participating in the Money Minded training, Lucy's perspective on managing her earnings changed.

"The training made me realise how I should manage my market earnings. It opened my eyes to the importance of spending wisely and saving," she says.

Armed with this new knowledge, Lucy is determined to use her earnings more strategically and build a financial future for herself and her family.

CATHY PEARSON: LEARNING TO SAVE AND GROW HER BUSINESS

Cathy Pearson, Vice President of the Malaita Market Vendors Association, also participated in the Money Minded training and found it transformative. Cathy sells plants and cooked food at Auki Market but faced challenges growing her business due to inconsistent sales and difficulties saving.

"The training taught me how to differentiate between needs and wants, and how to save each time I sell at the market," Cathy explains.

Cathy's new understanding of saving was further enhanced when she learned about the YOU Save product, a financial service designed for informal sector workers like market vendors.

"I will continue to save the money I don't need to spend regularly with YOU Save and will use this platform to support my business in the future," Cathy says.





ROSE RARANGIA: OVERCOMING FINANCIAL HURDLES

Rose Rarangia, a 52-year-old single mother, faces different challenges in her clothing business at Auki Market. She shares her stall with other women due to limited space, and competition is fierce, as many vendors sell similar products.

Rose also participated in the Money Minded training and the YOU Save Awareness program. Before the training, she felt her financial management skills were sufficient, but she quickly realised there was room for improvement.

"My spending practices were overwhelming, and my business wasn't growing as I hoped," Rose admits.

However, after the training, Rose gained valuable skills in budgeting, saving, and cash flow management.

She has also become a YOU Save ambassador, helping other women register for the savings scheme.

"I plan to use the knowledge I've gained to better manage my finances and grow my business," Rose says.

THE ROLE OF RURAL WOMEN IN AUKI'S ECONOMY

Women in rural Solomon Islands, including those in Auki, are vital contributors to the economy.

Agriculture and fishing are the primary sources of cash income for many rural women, who sell fish, produce, and other goods to pay for essentials like school fees for their children. Women handle nearly all aspects of marketing, transportation, sales, and money management in these sectors.

Additionally, rural women engage in a variety of other income-generating activities, including small handicrafts and catering. They are responsible not only for selling these goods but also for managing their families' budgets and economic well-being.

SKILLS TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SUCCESS

To improve market vendors' success, the M4C project offers two categories of workshops: stakeholder skills-building sessions and vendor training in the market setting.

These workshops teach vital skills in sales techniques, customer service, and money management, which are essential for increasing vendors' incomes and resilience.

Training programs are designed in collaboration with the Market Vendors Association (MVA), ensuring that the vendors who are selected for training are those most in need of support.

By empowering women with these skills, the project aims to enhance their economic independence and bargaining power.

THE IMPACT OF EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

The empowerment initiatives have had a profound impact on women vendors, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to manage their businesses, make better financial decisions, and even take on leadership roles. In some cases, women have been elected as market managers or market masters, roles traditionally held by men.

The M4C Project has been instrumental in fostering gender equality and empowering women to take on more significant roles in the marketplace.

These initiatives have also improved women's ability to influence family decisions, particularly regarding income allocation. Through better financial management, women are strengthening their families' economic security and improving their overall quality of life.

MARKET VENDOR ASSOCIATIONS: A VOICE FOR WOMEN

The MVAs play a crucial role in advocating for women market vendors. Historically, women have been marginalized in local government decision-making and market management.

However, with the support of the M4C Project, women have gained leadership roles within the MVA and are now better positioned to advocate for their rights and needs.

This is crucial for ensuring that women's voices are heard in decisions that affect their livelihoods and communities.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF EMPOWERMENT

Through these empowerment programs, women vendors have not only gained confidence and leadership skills but have also developed greater financial literacy.

This has had a positive impact on their personal lives and their families. However, long working hours in the market can still limit their time with children and hinder access to formal leadership roles.

The skills and knowledge gained through the project are helping these women build a brighter future for themselves and their families.

CELEBRATING THE STRENGTH OF RURAL WOMEN

The journey of rural women market vendors in Auki is a testament to their resilience and determination. Through the support of the M4C Project, these women are gaining the tools to improve their financial literacy, grow their businesses, and achieve greater economic independence.

As these women continue to transform their lives, they are also contributing to the overall development and prosperity of their communities.

The Markets for Change project, implemented by UN Women and UNDP with funding from the Australian Government, is making a lasting impact on women's empowerment in Auki and other rural areas across the Solomon Islands.

With ongoing support, rural women vendors will continue to break barriers and shape a more inclusive, prosperous future for themselves and their families.



ANNE, THE SUNSHINE



ANNE PAKOA : A BEACON OF RESILIENCE AND CHANGE

ROOTS OF STRENGTH

Anne Pakoa's journey begins in the close-knit village of Tongoa, where she grew up with five brothers and two sisters. Her father, a respected teacher and leader, instilled in her the values of resilience and adaptability, while her mother managed their large family with grace and strength. Anne recalls a childhood where every day was an opportunity to learn new skills, even those usually reserved for boys.

"My parents raised us with a blend of traditional and adaptive values," she says.

"We learned to respect the land, respect each other, and carry forward the values of our ancestors."

Learning to hunt, fish, and embrace challenges side by side with her brothers, Anne's childhood was a foundation in strength and connection to her community's traditions.

THE AWAKENING: STANDING UP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

At 12, Anne left Tongoa for high school in Vila, where she faced a different world shaped by rigid church discipline and societal expectations. For the first time, she saw girls being bullied, treated unfairly, and silenced—a stark contrast to the respectful environment she had known.

"I couldn't stand by and watch girls be mistreated," Anne recalls.

"That was the beginning of my fight for women's rights. I found my purpose in defending those who didn't have a voice."

This inner calling grew over the years, becoming a lifelong commitment to advocating for the rights and dignity of women in her community and beyond.

BREAKING FREE: A JOURNEY THROUGH PAIN AND RENEWAL

Anne's path has been fraught with personal trials. In her early adult years, she entered a violent relationship, separated from her family and isolated from support. For years, she felt trapped, but eventually found the strength to escape with the help of two of her brothers.

"I was broken, yes, but I knew I had to heal myself if I wanted to create a better future," she says.

Just as Anne was finding her footing again, she entered another arranged marriage, this time orchestrated by her church. Despite her efforts, the relationship was full of conflict and quickly became another experience of feeling trapped and without choice.

"I found myself trapped again, this time by an institution I trusted," Anne reflects. "It wasn't love or choice; it was a path laid out for me by others."

After three difficult years, she made the painful decision to leave, choosing her own path once more.

Her mother's words echoed in her heart: "Tomorrow, the sun will still shine."

This support became her anchor, reminding her that each day was a chance to start over.

"It took time, but I picked up the pieces. I was broken, yes, but I knew I had to heal myself before I could help others," she says.

Her resilience led her to found NTM Medical Centre, a clinic she operates to this day. Alongside this achievement, Anne established a nursing school that has since produced professionals who now work for the government and communities, embodying the strength and perseverance she cultivated within herself.

TRANSFORMING TRADITION: WORKING WITH CHIEFS TO COMBAT GBV

Anne's most groundbreaking work has been with traditional chiefs, engaging over 35 community leaders in conversations about gender-based violence (GBV).

Many chiefs were surprised to learn how deeply some cultural norms contributed to cycles of abuse. Anne worked patiently, helping them understand how certain customs perpetuated harm, which led many chiefs to pledge their support for a safer community.

"Some of the chiefs were surprised. They didn't realise how ingrained these harmful norms were. When we explained, they were moved—and they committed to creating change for the safety of our women," she says.

Her programme involves a network of "watchdogs" and peer educators, speaking out against violence and encouraging others to address harmful practices.

In her home island, Anne's initiative has begun to shift long-standing customs that encouraged silent endurance in women, such as waiting in submission for their husbands' return from kava gatherings.

"In our communities, silence was the norm. We taught them that some traditions cause harm, and now those same chiefs have become champions in our fight against GBV," she explained.

Through additional funding and partnerships, Anne expanded her work to over 60 communities across Efate and Santo, training leaders and youth to speak up and advocate against violence.

Today, her network includes 35 community trainers and peer educators who tirelessly reshape attitudes and help build a safer, more inclusive future for all.

"Our goal is prevention. We can't let violence remain a taboo topic," she emphasises. "We need open conversations in every corner of our islands."

A LIFE OF SERVICE: NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF CHARITABLE WORK

Like many in community service, Anne has faced countless challenges in her work. Funding is a constant obstacle, and resources often run thin. There are days when she must operate on faith and resilience, sustaining her work with whatever resources come through.

But despite these hurdles, Anne's dedication remains unwavering.

"Most of the work I do is charitable. We're often living day by day, but I believe that every small step forward is worth it. People need someone they can talk to, someone who will stand by them," she says.

Within her work, Anne also faces internal conflicts and organisational hardships.

"The conflict from within can be one of the hardest things to navigate," she shares.

But these challenges have only strengthened her resolve to build supportive networks and bring more visibility to her cause.



PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHANGE: HOW UNDP AMPLIFIED ANNE'S MISSION

Supported by the UN's Spotlight Initiative, Anne received a grant to expand her work against GBV, conducting outreach in communities often left in the shadows.

"UNDP's support has been invaluable. Through this partnership, we reached communities I never thought possible, educating young and old alike. We're shifting perspectives, one conversation at a time."

With UNDP's help, Anne's work has grown in influence, allowing her to collaborate not only with traditional leaders but also with government officials, building bridges for a safer, more equitable society.

A VISION OF PEACE AND EQUALITY FOR ALL

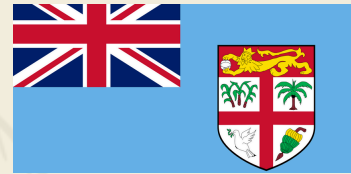
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THE STEADY LAISANI



LAISANI TAGILALA: RESHAPING FIJI'S MARITIME INDUSTRY

BREAKING BARRIERS AT SUVA'S PORT

The early morning sun casts long shadows across Suva's Port as Laisani Tagilala makes her way along the wharf, her fluorescent safety vest a bright spot against the industrial backdrop of cargo containers and towering cranes.

Seven years ago, when she first walked this same path as a newly appointed wharf attendant at Fiji Ports Corporation Limited, those shadows felt heavier, weighted with the sceptical glances and unspoken doubts of her male colleagues.

"I'll never forget walking into that first meeting," Laisani recalls with a slight smile. "A room full of men who thought I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. The stevedores would do double-takes seeing me on the dock. It wasn't that long ago, but it feels like a different era now."

In a country where the maritime industry serves as a critical lifeline - with almost 95 percent of goods entering through seaports - the historically male-dominated sector is gradually transforming.

Fiji's vast ocean territory, ranking as the 26th largest sovereign ocean space globally, has long been the domain of male seafarers and port workers.

But women like Laisani are charting a new course. The numbers tell a stark story of the challenge ahead: women make up only two percent of the world's seafarers and 20 percent of shore-based maritime roles.

In the Pacific, the figures are even more striking, with women comprising just 10 percent of the total maritime workforce - approximately 16,000 individuals across the entire region.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how essential maritime workers were to Fiji's survival.

As borders closed and travel restrictions tightened, the industry's workforce – both men and women – kept vital supply lines open. The popular industry phrase 'no shipping, no shopping' took on new meaning as communities realised just how dependent they were on maritime trade.

OPENING DOORS FOR WOMEN

For newer entrants to the industry, the path is somewhat easier thanks to pioneers like Laisani.

At Fiji Ports, women are increasingly visible in operational roles, moving beyond the traditional confines of administrative positions. They're found operating heavy machinery, coordinating vessel movements, and managing port security – roles that were almost exclusively male domains just a decade ago.

Yet challenges remain. Despite the industry's evolution toward greater inclusion, women remain significantly underrepresented, particularly in senior positions.

The lack of routine data collection on women's participation in the sector makes it difficult to track progress or identify specific barriers to advancement.

But change is happening, driven by companies like Fiji Ports that are actively working to create more inclusive workplaces.

Traditional gender barriers are beginning to crumble, making way for a more equitable future in Fiji's maritime sector.

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

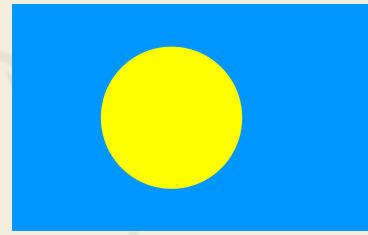
In this complex dance of commerce and logistics, women are increasingly taking the lead, proving that the future of Fiji's maritime industry will be shaped by all its people, regardless of gender.

"The ocean doesn't discriminate," Laisani says.

"It's taught us that success depends on skill, dedication, and resilience. Those aren't male or female traits – they're human ones."



THE GUIDING BILUNG



BILUNG GLORIA SALII: GUARDIAN OF PALAU'S TRADITIONS

THE HEART OF TRADITION: A LIFETIME OF LEADERSHIP

For over 50 years, Bilung Gloria Salii, has been a steadfast protector of her nation's traditions and culture. As the highest-ranking female leader and head of the traditional women leaders in Palau and the Bilung of Koror, she holds a position that serves as the female counterpart to the Ibedul, paramount high chief of Koror and Palau. Bilung's multifaceted role as a leader, businesswoman, women's rights advocate, and cultural preservationist highlights her unwavering dedication to her people.

She is also the founder of Mechesil Belau, a women's organisation that serves as a cornerstone for preserving Palauan heritage and strengthening women's roles in society.

"My title, Bilung, means 'Queen,'" she shares with quiet dignity.

"My role is to work with women—from children to elders—to ensure that our traditions are not only preserved but lived and passed down to future generations."

Her journey began early, shaped by her family's legacy and her deep sense of responsibility. "I became a leader when I was young because my family had few members left.

My uncle passed, and my grandmother, who was the Queen, was aging. I had to step into this role, leaving college in Texas to fulfill my duties," she recalls. "It was hard, but I told myself, if I don't do it, who will?"

PRESERVING CULTURE THROUGH EDUCATION

Bilung's mission centres on ensuring that Palauan culture thrives in a rapidly changing world. She teaches traditional dances, chants, and crafts to children as young as three.

"We start early because we want them to understand and practice our traditions from a young age," she explains.

Her efforts extend beyond classrooms and community events. For over three decades, she has led the Mechesil Belau (Women of Palau) conference, an annual gathering where women from all Palauan states come together to celebrate and preserve their heritage.

"After every conference, we create books documenting our culture, which are sent to all schools—public and private," she says. These books, featuring her dancers and students, have become a cornerstone of cultural education in Palau.

Bilung's advocacy also includes teaching practical skills such as weaving, farming, and cooking traditional foods.

"We want our children to eat healthy, local food—taro, tapioca, and fresh fish—instead of the cereals and sweets that make them sick," she says.

CHALLENGES IN A CHANGING WORLD

While Palauan traditions remain deeply rooted, modern influences pose significant challenges.

"The new system has brought changes to our behavior, diet, and respect for one another," Bilung observes.

"Our children are eating the wrong foods, using drugs, and forgetting the importance of respect—respect for elders, respect for each other."

Another pressing issue is the erosion of traditional roles. Palau's matrilineal system, where women appoint men to leadership positions, is under threat.

"Men now want the final say in our traditions, but that's not how it works. We appoint them to represent us, and they are supposed to work with us—not overrule us," she explains.

"This push to change our system is fueled by democratic ideals, but it goes against our constitution and our way of life."

Despite these challenges, Bilung remains resolute. "We won't let this happen. The women of Palau are united in protecting our traditions," she exclaims.



A LIFETIME OF ADVOCACY

Bilung's leadership has yielded tangible results. Over the 31 years of Mechesil Belau conferences, 44 of their resolutions have been enacted into law, addressing issues such as drug abuse, health insurance, and education.

"These laws protect our people and preserve our way of life," she says with pride.

One of the most significant accomplishments of the conferences is their influence on health policies.

"We recently focused on health because we've seen too many of our people get sick and die from preventable diseases," she shares.

"I even wrote a book on health to help guide our communities to eat better, exercise, and improve their lifestyles."

Her contributions extend to addressing drug abuse, especially among women and children.

Her dedication has not gone unnoticed. Bilung has received honorary degrees from the University of Guam and Southwestern Adventist University in Texas, recognizing her lifetime of work.

"These honours are a blessing. They affirm that what I do for Palau matters."

"I do this not for myself, but for Palau. For its people, its children, and its future."

A VISION FOR PALAU'S FUTURE

Bilung's vision is clear: a Palau where traditions are cherished, and future generations understand their cultural roots.

"We must teach our children to appreciate and defend our traditions. If we lose them, we lose who we are as a nation."

She also calls on international partners to respect Palauan culture when engaging with the community.

"Don't come here and tell us to adopt your ways. Work with us, respect our system, and bring solutions that fit our culture," she advises.

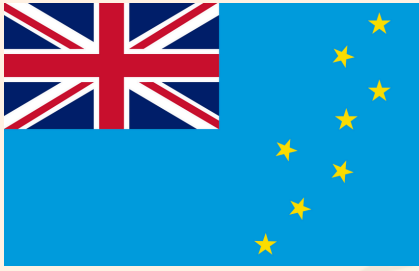
Her vision extends beyond cultural preservation to fostering unity among Palauans. "We are an independent nation, and we must remain strong as a society. That starts with respecting our traditions and working together to solve our challenges," she says.

A MESSAGE TO WOMEN

To the women of Palau and the Pacific, Bilung offers a heartfelt message: "Take care of your children and raise them the right way. Teach them respect, kindness, and the value of our traditions. Believe in God, because faith strengthens us to face challenges. Together, we can preserve our heritage and build a healthy, respectful society."

Reflecting on her decades of leadership, Bilung shares a moment that encapsulates her work: "When I feel tired or sick, I remember the women saying, 'Bilung, don't die, because if you go, we lose our traditions.' That is my motivation. I know that what I do today ensures that Palau's traditions live on tomorrow."

Bilung Gloria Sali's story is a testament to the power of tradition, resilience, and collective action. As the founder of Mechesil Belau and the guardian of Palau's cultural heritage, she exemplifies the strength and wisdom of Palauan women.



THE RESOLUTE TERESA



CLIMATE JUSTICE IS SOCIAL JUSTICE IN TUVALU

A LIFETIME OF ADVOCACY

Teresa Lifuka-Drecala has worked with the Tuvaluan High Commission in Suva; The Ministry of Health and the Office of the Attorney General of the Government of Tuvalu. She was also the Director of the Tuvalu Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (TANGO) and the Tuvalu Family Health Association.

Since she was young, her ambition and passion has been to support the vulnerable and strengthen capacity building at every level of society.

"When we were younger, my mother encouraged me to learn sign language whilst waiting for her to finish work. This opened my eyes to the need to just be kind to everyone and treat everyone fairly, far before I learnt the terms 'sensitisation' or 'inclusion,'" she explained.

In her spare time, Teresa volunteers with various non-governmental organisations such as Fuligafou: a youth-led organisation focusing on coral replanting and backyard gardening for a sustainable future, and the Fusialofa association: the only organisation working with people with disabilities in Tuvalu.

She also actively encourages women and more vulnerable members of society to play sports.

Integrating gender into all aspects of her work has become more important, and today she advocates for connecting issues such as how health challenges women face can be exacerbated by climate change.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Through community-based adaptation projects, Teresa collaborates with other residents and organisations to implement sustainable practices aimed at fortifying coastal defences, preserving natural habitats, and promoting renewable energy initiatives.

"Through my involvement in awareness campaigns and advocacy initiatives, I strive to amplify the voice of our people on the global stage, advocating for urgent action to address the root causes of climate change and secure a sustainable future for Tuvalu and other vulnerable nations."

"As women, we grapple with the harsh realities of climate change on a daily basis," said Teresa.

"Living in a low-lying island nation vulnerable to rising sea levels, intensified cyclones, and coastal erosion, women face numerous challenges exacerbated by environmental degradation.

"Witnessing the encroachment of seawater into once-thriving communities, the loss of arable land, and the depletion of freshwater sources, we must confront the stark consequences of climate change.

Despite these adversities, women in Tuvalu remain resilient and proactive to safeguard our homeland," she added.

SUPPORTING THOSE LEFT BEHIND

Teresa Lifuka-Drecala aims to support the vulnerable, with a passion to strengthen capacity building at every level of society.

Whilst access to education for men and women is becoming fairer for people in Tuvalu, as Teresa notes that most heads of departments are women, it is men who tend to make decisions in Parliament and at higher levels.

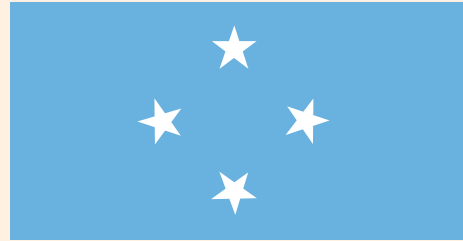
Supporting women to become more educated about climate issues is therefore a first step in tackling injustices caused by climate change.

"Climate justice means providing a safe environment now for people, and for action now and not later. Scientists have predicted Tuvalu will be uninhabitable by 2050. This is why we are advocating for social justice alongside climate justice," she said.

With determination and solidarity, Teresa together with many other Tuvaluans embody the spirit of resilience and hope, standing firm in the face of adversity and working to mitigate the impacts of climate change for themselves, their communities, and the future generations.



THE DETERMINED DANALLY



DANALLY DANIELS: A JOURNEY OF DETERMINATION AND ADVOCACY

Danally Daniels' story is rooted in the values of community, family, and resilience.

Growing up in Pohnpei within a close-knit family, she learned the principles of humanity, respect, and solidarity from her parents—public servants dedicated to their community. Her childhood, shaped by shared family moments, hard work, and mutual respect, instilled in her a deep sense of purpose.

These values continue to guide her as she raises her three children, passing on a legacy of compassion, courage, and resilience.

Danally's journey has led her to become a transformative figure in the fight for justice and women's rights in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).

As a lawyer and advocate for victims of domestic and GBV) she channels her personal values into impactful work.

Her role as the lead attorney at the Micronesian Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) positions her as a defender of rights and an agent of change, raising awareness and preventing violence in communities with limited access to resources.

FINDING PURPOSE THROUGH ADVERSITY

Danally's path to law is deeply inspiring, especially given her initial dream of becoming a teacher.

"Teaching was my dream. I wanted to spend time with children, guide them, and shape futures," she reflects.

Teaching, she believed, was one of the most foundational yet underappreciated professions. Life, however, took her down a different path—one where she discovered new ways to uplift and empower her community.

Her work at MLSC has allowed her to channel her compassion into a mission that extends beyond individual cases. As one of the few sources of free legal aid in FSM, MLSC faces overwhelming demand.

Danally's dedication to serving the most vulnerable reflects her enduring commitment to helping others. By protecting and empowering individuals, she embodies her original dream of shaping lives, but on a broader scale.

In 2020, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic brought new pressures. The MLSC board called for an increase in public awareness efforts focused on GBV.

Initially, Danally resisted.

"I was so busy; our office was overwhelmed," she recalls.

"I was one of the attorneys who opposed the mandate. We were swamped, but deep down, I knew this effort was needed."

Nonetheless when funding opportunities arose to support GBV awareness, Danally seized the moment.



She directed workshops, outreach, and educational programs, particularly for youth and women.

"The first workshop was a revelation. Seeing young people engaged, hearing their stories—it reminded me how necessary this work was."

THE REALITY SHE SEES: VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

Danally's advocacy has exposed her to the staggering prevalence of GBV in FSM.

"At MLSC, we assist victims with protective orders, but we only see three or fewer DV cases a year across all offices. That's not reflective of the truth," she explains.

Research shows that two out of three women in FSM experience some form of violence, yet most cases remain unreported due to stigma and fear.

One encounter stands out vividly in her memory. During an awareness workshop, an elderly woman approached Danally and said:

"Where were you when I was young? It took my husband's death for me to finally be free."

"It's heartbreaking," Danally shares.

"Some women only find liberation after enduring unimaginable suffering or loss."

Her courtroom experiences have revealed the systemic hurdles survivors face. The absence of fully implemented DV laws complicates even basic protections.

“I remember my first DV case after law school,” she recalls. “The survivor was told there wasn’t enough evidence because the violence wasn’t physical enough. It felt like we were sending her back to the violence. That’s when I realized prevention must take precedence over intervention.”

Danally’s perspective is clear: meaningful support for victims requires systemic reform. She advocates for proactive approaches that address root causes and empower communities to break cycles of violence.

CHALLENGES ON THE FRONTLINES

Being a woman advocating for women’s rights in FSM is not without challenges. Danally often encounters resistance, particularly from those who question why men’s perspectives aren’t prioritized in discussions.

“Men don’t see themselves as part of the problem. They don’t understand the impact their actions have from a woman’s perspective,” she explains.

The taboo around discussing domestic violence and GBV further complicates her work. Bringing men and women together for dialogue remains a significant hurdle. Despite these barriers, she continues to push for awareness and education, knowing that change begins with dialogue.

Her advocacy is often a solitary journey. “I haven’t discussed my work fully with my parents,” she admits.

“It’s hard for them to understand the depth of what I do because this kind of work was unimaginable in their time. But I know the struggles I face are worth it if it means even one woman can escape a life of violence.”

THE ROLE OF UNDP IN DANALLY’S JOURNEY

As part of a UNDP pilot project, Danally has taken on the role of project manager, ensuring workshops are well-executed and impactful. “UNDP’s support has been liberating,” she shares.

“Through their partnership, we’ve worked with a GBV expert who trained the entire MLSC team. This training has been invaluable, helping us create workshops that genuinely engage the community.”

“This project has allowed us to provide awareness, services, and legal literacy, but we’re also learning from the communities we serve. We’re creating a dialogue, a space where we can adapt, respond and gain insights from the cultural perspectives of those affected by GBV and DV.”

A MESSAGE OF STRENGTH

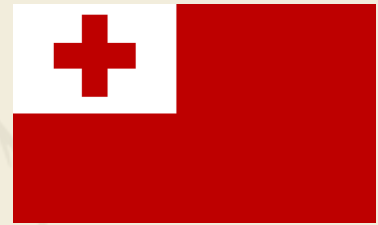
Danally envisions a future where conversations about GBV are no longer taboo. She believes prevention is the key to breaking cycles of violence and empowering future generations.

Her efforts focus on educating youth to recognise and stand against violence while encouraging older generations to confront the harm of silence.

Danally encourages women and girls across the Pacific to never give up, reminding them that their voices matter and their courage can inspire change. She emphasises that every act of standing up makes a difference and that no one is alone in their fight. Through her advocacy, she is working toward a future free of violence, where every woman can live in safety and dignity.

“This isn’t just a women’s issue,” she says. “It’s a human rights issue. Let’s end violence and give everyone the chance to be their best selves.”

THE UNYIELDING VICTORINA



VICTORINA PALU LEGER - BREAKING GROUND

ENGINEERING BEYOND TRADITION

In the Kingdom of Tonga, where traditional roles often define career paths, Victorina Palu Leger stands out as the country's sole female civil engineer.

Her journey into engineering wasn't just a career choice—it was a family legacy, inspired by her father's work in civil construction and road works, and following in the footsteps of her brother, who also chose the civil engineering path.

Victorina, who completed her undergraduate studies in 2017, has spent nearly a decade breaking ground in a male-dominated field. But rather than pursuing conventional engineering projects, she has chosen to focus her expertise on humanitarian engineering, working on projects that directly impact communities' resilience and quality of life.

BUILDING RESILIENCE, ONE DROP AT A TIME

Her current role as a consultant for UNDP exemplifies this commitment. At the Government Middle School in Nuku'alofa, where 775 students and staff depend on reliable water access, Victorina has implemented an innovative water tank project that showcases her ability to think beyond standard engineering solutions.

"At first, I didn't know the whole concept of the project," Victorina recalls.

"I was just approached to help the situation. And when I came in, I kind of had to set up the whole system in place with the support of the UNDP."

This humble beginning belied the innovative solutions she would soon develop.

INNOVATING WITH PURPOSE

Drawing from her experience leading housing resilience and recovery programs at the Ministry of Infrastructure, Victorina approached the school's water security challenge with a unique perspective.

When she began her assessment, she found only five functional tanks of smaller capacity, with maintenance issues plaguing the existing system. Rather than simply installing new tanks, she developed a comprehensive solution that addressed multiple problems simultaneously.

Through careful consultation with the school community, she discovered that students faced flooding issues along their footpaths, particularly during rainy seasons when they waited for pickup.

This insight led her to design a system that not only provided water storage but also solved the flooding problem—diverting rainwater from the school building's roof to the new tanks while implementing proper drainage beneath the footpaths.

The project's distinctiveness lies in its risk-informed approach. Victorina designed protective shelters for the water tanks to shield them from direct sunlight, preventing the common problem of tank shrinkage that typically occurs after 15 years of exposure. She incorporated cyclone tie downs and straps for roof trusses ensuring compliance with AS standards and Tonga Building code and ultimately to withstand Tonga's severe weather events.

Her attention to detail extended beyond technical specifications. Recognizing the importance of sustainability and security, she included fencing around the tanks—a feature that proved unexpectedly significant.

"The fencing... I never thought would make that big of an impact, but they really said it's good to protect from any outsiders' access to use the tap as well as human errors" she explains. This simple addition helped ensure the system's longevity by preventing unauthorized access and potential damage.



Victorina's project management approach was equally innovative. Rather than following suggestions to simply provide materials and oversee labour, she developed a more holistic process for engaging contractors. This included the design documentation, evaluation criteria and procedures for the formal recruitment of these contractors.

Perhaps most notably, Victorina has pioneered the integration of social considerations into engineering projects in Tonga. She implemented contractor training programs addressing gender-based violence and workplace harassment, particularly crucial given the school setting.



"It's not just specifically for adults—it involves exposure to children and women around the area," she explains.

INNOVATING WITH PURPOSE

Looking ahead, Victorina sees opportunities to expand this model across Tonga and potentially throughout the Pacific region.

She's already planning improvements for the project's second phase, including additional occupational health and safety training and standardized designs that can be adapted to different schools' needs. Her careful consideration of maintenance requirements has led her to thoughtfully evaluate potential additions like more economical water filtration systems weighing the benefits against long-term sustainability.

Her work represents more than just an engineering solution—it's about creating sustainable, community-oriented infrastructure that considers both technical and social aspects of development.

As one of very few female engineers in Tonga, Victorina is not just building water systems; she's building a legacy that demonstrates the vital importance of diverse perspectives in engineering and development work.

Through her innovative approaches and dedication to community-centered solutions, Victorina Palu Leger is proving that engineering is not just about constructing infrastructure—it's about building resilience, fostering community engagement, and creating lasting positive change for future generations.

THE UNSHAKEN IRENE



IRENE ABON: WAVES OF STRENGTH IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

A LEGACY OF SURVIVAL: CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF A NUCLEAR HERITAGE

Irene Abon's story is rooted in the Marshall Islands, where the nuclear testing of past generations left lasting scars on both the land and its people.

As a heritage survivor of these tests, Irene grew up with an acute understanding of resilience, adaptation, and the responsibility of carrying her ancestors' legacy forward. Forced to move multiple times due to environmental contamination and displacement, her family adapted to each new home with courage and determination.

"Being part of a nuclear legacy means carrying both the pain of our past and the strength it forged in us," Irene shares.

This legacy fuels Irene's purpose.

Her experiences of displacement and survival taught her to see adversity as a force to be harnessed—a lesson that has defined her commitment to her community and to creating positive change.

"Our ancestors endured so much, and that resilience flows through us. Every challenge I face, I remember the strength that came before me."

STRENGTH AND SACRIFICE: IRENE'S JOURNEY AS A SINGLE MOTHER

As a single mother, Irene has faced personal trials that have shaped her understanding of resilience and self-determination.

Balancing her role as a mother with her professional responsibilities, she has experienced societal judgments and the weight of raising a daughter on her own. These challenges, however, only deepened her commitment to helping other women find their own strength and independence.

"Raising my daughter alone taught me that strength is more than just getting through the day," Irene reflects. "It's about creating a future for her, a future where she and other girls can stand on their own."

Her journey as a single mother has been a source of inspiration, pushing her to advocate for a world where women can thrive, free from societal limitations and expectations.

This determination has influenced every aspect of her work, fueling her desire to help other women in the Marshall Islands and beyond.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES: LEADING THE AQUA PROJECT WITH UNDP

As a coordinator for the ACWA Project, an initiative supported by UNDP, Irene plays a leading role in a program that combines solar energy and agriculture to empower communities in the Marshall Islands and beyond.

Her work isn't limited to her own community; she has traveled to various islands, introducing sustainable energy and agricultural practices, and building paths to economic independence for women in remote regions.

"The ACWA Project isn't just about clean energy or farming. It's about giving women in many communities the tools to sustain themselves, to support their families, and to be proud of what they've accomplished," she explains.

Through her work with UNDP, Irene has brought new opportunities to communities that were previously isolated from such resources, helping women recognise their potential and build self-sufficiency. Many who once struggled to envision a stable future now actively contribute to their communities, fueled by the pride and purpose Irene has helped instill.



SAILING AGAINST THE CURRENT: ADDRESSING WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

Through her involvement in local women's groups, Irene has taken on pressing issues such as domestic violence and drug abuse, which continue to impact women and families in the Marshall Islands.

The wounds of the nuclear testing era are still felt, shaping the social challenges her community faces today. Irene is determined to break the silence around these issues, pushing for open discussions, legislative support, and stronger community engagement.

Yet, uniting women in this work has not been without challenges. Motivating all members to participate actively and securing support for these complex issues has proven difficult.

"I dream of a Marshall Islands where women come together, empowered and unafraid," she says.

"We need every woman's voice. Together, we can bring about the change we need."

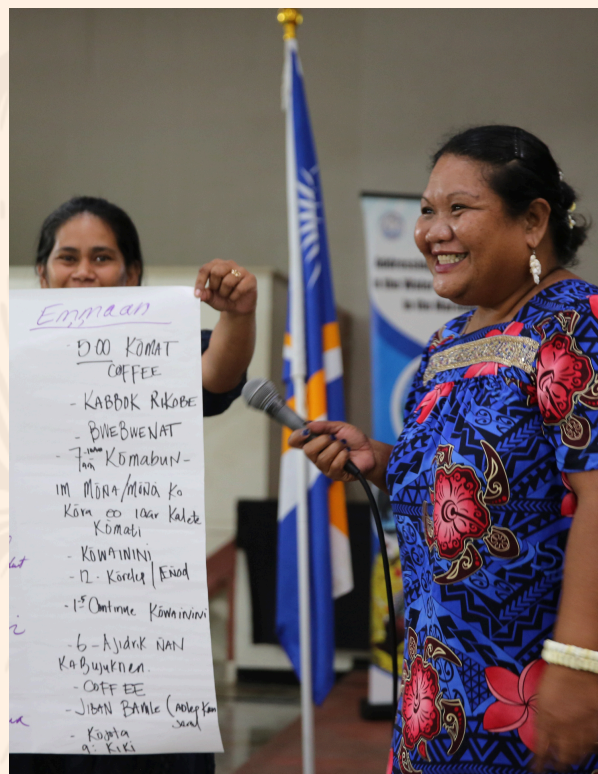
Despite these difficulties, Irene's dedication to building a supportive network of women and creating a safer community remains unwavering.

A VISION OF RETURN: REBUILDING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Through all of her work, Irene has held onto the dream of returning to her home island—a place her family was forced to leave due to the long-lasting effects of nuclear testing.

She envisions a future where her island thrives once more, where families live in harmony with the land, and where her people can find healing.

"Home is where my heart is," she says with determination. "I want to bring what I've learned back to my roots, to help rebuild and strengthen our community."



A CALL FOR UNITY: IRENE'S VISION FOR WOMEN'S STRENGTH

Irene's message to other Pacific women is one of resilience, unity, and self-compassion. She believes that the strength of the islands lies in the strength of its women and that together, they can shape a new path forward.

"To every woman facing hardship, know this: you are stronger than you think, and you're not alone. Build your inner strength, reach out to others, and remember that together, we're unstoppable," she says.

For Irene, the journey is ongoing, but with each challenge she overcomes, she draws closer to her vision of a Marshall Islands where women are united, communities are empowered, and every person has the opportunity to thrive. Her heritage as a survivor of the nuclear era is a testament to her strength and her people's resilience.

She carries this history forward, transforming it into hope and action for future generations.

THE TRAILBLAZING TANGARIKI



WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE PACIFIC - THE STORY OF TANGARIKI REETE

A HISTORIC FIRST FOR KIRIBATI

The Pacific region has long faced challenges in achieving gender parity in political leadership, with some of the world's lowest rates of women's representation in parliament.

Yet, amid these challenges, inspiring stories of breakthrough and transformation emerge, none more compelling than that of Tangariki Reete, who made history as Kiribati's first female Speaker of Parliament in 2020.

In a region where traditional gender roles often restrict women's participation in public life, the Pacific has seen gradual but significant progress in recent years. While countries like New Zealand and Australia have achieved relatively higher representation of women in politics, many Pacific Island nations continue to struggle with gender disparities in political leadership.

Countries like Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands have consistently reported single-digit percentages of women in their parliaments.

Against this backdrop, Kiribati's milestone appointment of Tangariki Reete as Speaker of Parliament represented more than just a personal achievement—it symbolised a shifting tide in Pacific politics.

Her ascension to the role, secured through a 25-19 vote victory over former House Speaker Tebuai Uaai, marked a significant departure from traditional political norms in the island nation.

A LEGACY OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Reete's journey to this historic position was deeply rooted in public service and family legacy. Following her father's footsteps into politics, she first entered the political arena in 2008, representing the constituency that her late father had previously served. However, her path to political leadership began long before her parliamentary career.

After completing her tertiary education, Reete built a strong foundation in public service, starting at the Ministry of Labour Employment and Cooperatives before taking on senior roles at the Kiribati Credit Union and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning.

It was during her time at the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning that Reete discovered her true calling—a passionate desire to serve the people of her constituency in Betio. Her dedication to public service led to successive electoral victories in 2008 and 2012, culminating in her appointment as the Minister of Women, Youth and Social Affairs, where she championed initiatives to enhance women's participation in public life.

The culmination of her political journey came in 2020 with her historic election as Speaker of the 12th Kiribati Parliament (Maneaba ni Maungatabu).

During her four-year tenure, Reete demonstrated not just leadership but a commitment to fostering a new generation of women leaders.

Her approach to leadership emphasized the critical importance of mentorship and peer support networks, recognising that sustainable progress requires more than individual achievements—it demands systematic support for women in politics.

INSPIRING THE PACIFIC'S FUTURE

"We need to be able to reach out to a 'women army' to sustain women's presence in leadership positions and amplify their voices in decision-making processes."

Her emphasis on mentorship and training for young women entering politics acknowledges the unique challenges faced by women in navigating political careers in the Pacific context.

Reete has since stepped down from her role as Speaker, but her legacy extends beyond her historic appointment.

She has helped establish a framework for women's political participation in Kiribati, demonstrating that with persistence, patience, and community support, women can overcome traditional barriers to political leadership.

Her story serves as an inspiration not just for aspiring women politicians in Kiribati but across the Pacific region. It underscores the importance of building support networks, mentoring future leaders, and creating pathways for women's political participation.

As the Pacific continues to push forward toward gender parity in political leadership, stories like Reete's provide both a blueprint for success and hope for continued progress in breaking down gender barriers in politics.



THE TRANSFORMATIVE FORMOSA



FORMOSA SCOTTY: THE HEART OF A PIONEER BUILDING NAURU'S FIRST WOMEN-LED CIVIL SOCIETY

A VISION BORN FROM EXPERIENCE

In Nauru, where traditional structures dominate, and gender equality remains an elusive goal, Formosa Scotty chose to chart a different path. As one of the founders of WENA—the Women's Empowerment Nauru Association, she leads the country's first registered women-led civil society organisation.

"I didn't set out to create history," she reflects.

"I just wanted to create a space where women could find strength in each other, raise their voices, and actively contribute toward development and change in Nauru."

Born into a family shaped by service and diplomacy, Formosa's early life was defined by frequent travelling and relocations

"I was born in Taiwan, where my father served as a diplomat for Nauru, and spent her childhood years in Guam and then Samoa before settling back in Nauru," she shares.

This global perspective fueled her passion for education and equity. Her academic journey, supported by scholarships, eventually led her to Australia and Fiji, where she studied human resource management and psychology.

"I realised that the biggest gap in Nauru was the lack of qualified, and skilled professionals, and a system to nurture them," she explains.

Her studies cemented her belief in education as the cornerstone for sustainable development.

"Education is empowerment, but empowerment needs a platform, and WENA became that platform for Nauru's women," she says.

THE CREATION OF WENA: FROM AN IDEA TO AN INSTITUTION

WENA was born in 2020 out of necessity, driven by the shared passion of its founding members, each from diverse professions but united in their commitment to address areas in need of change.

“We were all new to this space. Nauru’s civil society was almost non-existent, and we had no blueprint to follow. But we knew we had to start somewhere,” she recalls.

Initially focused on youth development, Formosa shifted her attention to women’s empowerment after meeting other Pacific leaders during a women’s leadership training program in Fiji.

“I saw the incredible and impactful work being done in our neighboring countries by women at the grassroots level and realized how much we were missing in Nauru. It wasn’t just about women’s issues—it was about development as a whole nation,” she explains.

For Formosa, WENA’s mission extends beyond empowering women. “Our goal is to help Nauru be the best place to call home, through strong leadership, inclusivity and the elimination of violence, she shares.

*“When we uplift women,
we uplift society. But it’s
not just about women. We
work with men too because
sustainable development
requires everyone’s
participation and
understanding of how we
can all contribute toward
the same goal.”*

A LIFELINE FOR GROWTH: THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS

WENA’s transformation from an idea into a force for change was fueled by its partnership with UNDP. “UNDP didn’t just support us—they believed in our cause and connected us to the wider network of stakeholders,” Formosa says.

“They opened doors we didn’t even know existed.”

Through this collaboration, WENA’s members gained exposure to established civil society organizations across the Pacific, participated in workshops, and learned best practices.

“Seeing how other organizations operated was a turning point. It gave us a roadmap for what was possible,” she says.

This support helped WENA address critical issues like GBV and women’s leadership while fostering networks with donors and regional partners.

“UNDP’s support has been the biggest help for us,” Formosa acknowledges. “It’s given us direction and confidence. Now we know how to move forward, and we’re building something sustainable.”



ADVOCACY IN ACTION: BREAKING BARRIERS

WENA's work has touched on pressing issues like domestic violence, youth drug abuse, and women's leadership.

A pivotal moment came when WENA hosted the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre on the island, enhancing its advocacy efforts against Gender-Based Violence.

"It was a significant milestone," Formosa recalls. "Their expertise and support elevated our work."

WENA's collaboration with the Nauru Electoral Commission has also made waves. Through debates and public discussions, the organization has opened new avenues for dialogue.

"Debating is not just about voicing your opinions—it's about learning to think critically and express yourself effectively," she shares.

CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

Despite its successes, WENA's journey has not been without obstacles.

"We started in a vacuum. There were no established processes, no roadmap. Even registering our organization was a challenge," she says.

The lack of a strong framework for civil society in Nauru means that many people are unfamiliar with the concept of non-governmental organizations.

"Occasionally there's skepticism when we reach out especially from men who feel they are being excluded," she shares.

"But I always explain that empowering women isn't about sidelining men—it's about working together with them to create a better society for everyone."

Balancing her roles as a mother, a wife, a coordinator and facilitator at The University of the South Pacific, and a leader of WENA has also tested her limits. "My days are long, but my passion keeps me going," she says happily.

A VISION FOR NAURU'S FUTURE

Formosa envisions a Nauru where equality is the norm, not the exception. "I look forward to a society where women and men stand side by side, contributing equally to progress," she shares.

WENA's strategic plan includes expanding its reach, fostering leadership among women, and addressing systemic barriers.

But her vision extends beyond advocacy. "We need to include men too," she emphasises.

"Empowerment isn't just for women. Men need to understand and acknowledge the value of our efforts and contributions to the communities, the families, and country, and to learn new ways of leadership, to be able to work with us as equal partners toward a thriving, well-informed, active and violence-free society.

A MESSAGE OF HOPE

To the women of Nauru, Formosa offers a call to action: "Speak up. Your voice matters. When women are silent, society suffers. By raising our voices, we're not just advocating for ourselves—we're advocating for the future of Nauru."

Formosa Scotty's story is a testament to the power of resilience, vision, and collective action. Through WENA, she has created a ripple effect of change, proving that even in the smallest of nations, big dreams can lead to transformative impact.

"This isn't just about women—it's about all of us," she says. "Together, we can build a better Nauru."

If you would like to share
your story with us and the
world please write to:

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**This publication was compiled by the Communications and
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New Story



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