

NATION-BUILDERS

Celebrating Women on Boards & Development Programs



NATION BUILDERS — PROJECT MEMBERS

PROJECT TEAM

Wilson Toa
Mavuku Tokona
Edna Tukor
Telstar Jimmy

WRITERS

Ezra Toara
Nicholas Mwai
Doddy Morris
Adorina Massing

PHOTOGRAPHERS

Daily Post Team

TRANSCRIBERS

Daily Post Team

EDITORS

Anna Gibert
Telstar Jimmy

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Robert (Island Graff)

DESIGN & LAYOUT

Telstar Jimmy

PUBLISHER

Balance of Power

Copyright: Balance of Power, 2025



CONTENT

03	Introduction	29	Jennifer Kausei
04	Foreword	31	Judith I Yanhambath
05	Aileen Huri	33	Larisa Csiba
07	Grace Florie Sese	35	Liku Jimmy
09	Jennifer Kalpokas Doan	37	Lilyrose Welwel
11	Lisa Dinh	39	Maureen Malas
13	Margaret Macfarlane	41	Nancy Wells
15	Dr. Margaret Tarere	43	Nelly Willy Matou
17	Relvie Poilapa	45	Roslyn Arthur David
19	Rosemary Leona Spriggs	47	Sara Mecartney
21	Sereana Moira Marum	49	Shirley Abraham
23	Sherol George	51	Tatavola Matas
25	Emily Temakon	53	Viviane Licht Obed
27	Erinah Malres	55	Yasmine Bjornum Covo

INTRODUCTION

Nation Builders III: Women on Boards and Development Programs in Vanuatu comes after our previous publications in this series, which focused respectively on women leaders in the public sector and the private sector.

Like its precedents, this collection of profiles aims to capture the contributions and achievements of women driving Vanuatu's development, but specifically in leadership roles on governance boards and development cooperation programs; roles that, in many instances, have been habitually dominated by men.

These contributions span across all sectors - banking and finance, media and communications, legal services, advocacy for people with disabilities, just to name a few.

However more than just their achievements, these profiles also tell another story; they reveal the challenges, fears, doubts and hardships that these women have

had to overcome in order to find success and make a lasting impact in their workplaces and wider communities.

They also show us what enabled these women to overcome - the educational opportunities, family support, friendship networks, and, so often, a deep faith in God and His calling in their lives to give back to others and to their country.

Balance of Power in an initiative that seeks to make visible the leadership that is not always the most obvious. Many of the women in this publication have worked for years without any public promotion of their work or positional titles that confer outward status.

However their leadership, often behind the scenes and often focused on elevating others, is a type that is profoundly developmental, playing a significant role in lifting social and economic standards across Vanuatu, and in some cases, even the wider Pacific region.

Our hope is that by reading these stories, more of Vanuatu's citizens will recognise both the necessity and legitimacy of women in leadership positions - across all decision-making spheres, public, private and political.

When both men and women are recognised for their talents and equally valued in governance and decision-making roles, then we will truly see our Pacific Island countries reach their full potential.

Enjoy the book and join me in celebrating these amazing women serving on boards and working the development cooperation space!

Mereani Rokotuibau
co-Executive Director
Balance of Power



FOREWORD

I am honored to be asked to introduce, alongside our ni-Vanuatu partners, Nation Builders III: Women on Boards and Development Programs in Vanuatu.

While working every day on Australia's partnership with Vanuatu, I see how women multiply the impact on development initiatives, as they continue to demonstrate strength and resilience, creativity, compassion and, most of all, courage. We know that gender balance on the boards of organizations improves governance and leads to more informed and stronger decision-making.

The stories featured in this publication are a testament and powerful tribute to the women who are redefining governance, leadership and development across Vanuatu.

From corporate boards to development programs that enhance locally led and contextually grounded initiatives, these women help shape and develop informed decisions that matter. They personify adaptability, vision and deep understanding of the socio-economic and political contexts that holds Vanuatu together.

The Australian High Commission in Vanuatu has a history of supporting women in leadership, both within the High Commission, and in our development assistance programs. Many of these women are alumni of the Australia Awards program – one of the most important programs through which Australia contributes to the growth and development of Vanuatu.

Yet, there is a long road ahead. Despite targeted programs and growing awareness, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. Almost half of the women in Vanuatu report their main activity is caring for the household and family. The recent November 2025 Vanuatu country assessment by the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative found that women account for only 20 per cent of directors in Vanuatu's private sector.

In this volume we celebrate a number of women who chair significant boards in Vanuatu. Their stories, and those of all the women featured here, are an inspiration to all of us, and act as a guiding light for women across Vanuatu demonstrating that it is possible to bridge the gender divide.

Their stories are amplifying the call for more women to be represented in leadership and decision-making roles.

To the women who have shared their stories in this publication, thank you for your courage, your resilience, and your commitment to the development of your country.

And to the women and girls it inspires: you too have a role in building, like the women in these pages, a Vanuatu that reflects the full strength of its people.

God bless Vanuatu.

H.E Max Willis
Australian High Commissioner
Australian High Commission,
Vanuatu



INFLUENCING NATIONAL PRIDE THROUGH SPORTS



AILEEN HURI

Pentecost

PRESIDENT

BOARD: VANUATU NETBALL ASSOCIATION

Aileen Huri, 35, hails from the island of Pentecost and currently resides in Port Vila. A single mother of four, Aileen has dedicated her life to both her family and her career.

She grew up in Port Vila, attending Central Primary School for her early education before completing her secondary studies at Malapoa College from Years 7 to 13.

She is the only daughter in her family, with three brothers, and draws inspiration and strength from her close-knit family.

Aileen is currently employed at Bred Bank Vanuatu Limited, where she works in the International Department. She has been with Bred Bank for nine years.

She thrives in the bank's positive and ethical culture, which emphasizes transparency, trust, and collaboration, and she enjoys the challenges and opportunities for growth that her work provides. Aileen attributes her professional development to hands-on experience, which she finds valuable in shaping her career.

Aileen is passionate about leadership and self-improvement, Aileen creates a motivating environment for her team by encouraging open communication, listening actively, and fostering positivity. She manages stress through self-care, maintaining strong connections with her family, and leaning on her faith when facing personal or professional challenges. Aileen balances her career, personal life, and passions through careful prioritization and the support of her family, who serve as her unwavering foundation.

Beyond her professional work, Aileen is a prominent figure in sports administration. She has represented Vanuatu nationally, regionally, and internationally in netball, including participating as a player and captain in the World Youth Netball Championship and the Pacific Games. Her leadership roles include serving as Secretary and, more recently, President of the Vanuatu Netball Association.

"I am grateful for my work and the family of Sports, both Netball and VASANOC for shaping and molding me into who I am today."

In 2025, she was appointed Chef de Mission for the Palau Pacific Mini Games.

Through these experiences, she has shown that sports can be a platform for leadership, empowerment, and community development.

Her career highlights include participation in the South Pacific Games (2007), the Olympic Youth Camp in Beijing (2008), leading the Vanuatu Netball team as captain (2009, 2015), attending international forums in Athens and Fiji (2012, 2013, 2018), coaching initiatives in Fiji (2014), and her administrative leadership roles in the Vanuatu Netball Association, culminating in her presidency in 2025.

Aileen believes in the importance of women's representation in leadership and governance, citing its impact on corporate performance, decision-making, and nation-building.

She encourages women to believe in themselves, take incremental steps toward their goals, and embrace challenges as opportunities for growth.

She emphasizes humility, resilience, and listening as essential qualities for success.

Her greatest advice to the next generation of women leaders is to act with passion, maintain a positive mindset, and stand firm in their convictions.

Proud of her Vanuatu heritage, Aileen treasures the country's unique culture, friendly people, and vibrant food traditions.

Looking back, she wishes she had advocated even more for women to assume leadership roles, and she continues to inspire young women to pursue excellence across all sectors.

Reflecting on her life and achievements, Aileen shares: "I am grateful for my parents and immediate family for their unwavering support. They have been there for me all this time. I am grateful for my work and the family of Sports, both Netball and VASANOC for shaping and molding me into who I am today. I am grateful for the life I have lived, grateful for being a woman. I am grateful for being me."

Aileen Huri's story is a testament to perseverance and vision, leading to groundbreaking achievement.



STRENGTHENING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY THROUGH EXPERIENCE



GRACE FLORIE SESE

Malekula & Paama

COUNCIL MEMBER

BOARD: VANUATU CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

At 38, Grace Florie Sese is a woman defined by her determination, humility, and quiet confidence.

Born in Malekula with roots in Paama, and raised in Port Vila, Grace now wears many hats: she is a mother of five, a devoted wife, an accomplished administration accounts manager, a business co-founder, and a strong advocate for

women in Vanuatu's private sector.

Grace's journey started modestly. She began her education at Kawenu Primary School and later moved to Onesua Presbyterian College. However, financial challenges forced her to leave school after Year 10.

"I have no education papers," she says. "But only my experience pushed me this far." And indeed, her career

is a testament to what resilience and hard work can achieve. Her first job at Tahos Timber as a salesperson was where she built her foundation in finance and accounts. She later worked at CK Rubbish Removals and Vanwods Microfinance, where she built her career in finance. Grace eventually found her calling at the Vanuatu Association of Sports and National Olympic Committee (VASANOC), where she has served for three years now as the Administration Accounts Manager. She also takes on the role of field officer, overseeing multiple sports federations.

"I love my job at VASANOC," Grace says. "It's very enjoyable and I learn so much."

Despite being part of a small team of just five, she describes the workplace as one of cooperation, comfort, and shared passion. "I'm confident in my work and my team. We support each other."

That confidence has spilled over into another chapter of her life which is entrepreneurship. In 2019, Grace and her husband started Majeoh Construction and Joinery, a business born out of her husband's passion for building and her skills in finance. Without access to loans, they launched the company with pocket money and family support.

*"Women need to support women.
When we share our stories, we help others find strength."*

The first year was tough, with competition from many established local contractors. But 2021 marked a turning point.

That same year, Grace joined a seven-month workshop for women in business hosted by the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI).

Her business plan stood out among the best, earning her a VT1 million grant that gave Majeck Construction the boost it needed.

Running a business and working full-time is not without its challenges. For Grace, the key lies in balance and good management.

"You have to know when to stop," she explains. "After 5PM, it's family time. Weekends are sacred—we don't talk about work. Your body and mind need rest."

Her ability to juggle work, business, and family also comes from a strong support network. "My life coach, Jinny Ruben, is always there for me.

I also have mentors from the VCCI workshop, and I look up to MP Gloria King, a true supporter of women. Women need to support women. When we share our stories, we help others find strength."

Grace now serves as a council member within VCCI, contributing to the development of the building and construction sector.

But she believes more can be done, especially by the government.

"There's a need for stronger government involvement in supporting local businesses. We need to reduce dependence on foreign aid and build our own resilience."

One of the most profound lessons Grace has learned is the power of voice. Once nervous about public

speaking, she now confidently represents women in business and the community.

"Women need to step out of their comfort zones. That's when you grow. That's how I met mentors who changed my life."

From a young girl who left school early to a respected voice in Vanuatu's private sector, Grace Sese's story is proof that experience, passion, and community networks can build a powerful future, through one step, one voice, and one woman at a time.



PAVING LEADERSHIP PATHS IN BOARDS AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS



JENNIFER KALPOKAS DOAN

Lelepa & Nguna

CHAIRPERSON, BOARD: BSP VANUATU LIMITED

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BALANCE OF POWER PROGRAM

Jennifer Kalpokas Doan is a pioneering Ni-Vanuatu leader whose influence spans regional development and corporate governance in the Pacific.

At 45, she holds dual roles of significance: co-Executive Director of the regional development initiative, Balance of Power, and Chairperson of the Board of Bank South Pacific (BSP)

Vanuatu Ltd, making her the first Ni-Vanuatu woman to ever chair a commercial bank board in the country.

Born in Port Vila and proudly of Lelepa and Nguna heritage, Jennifer grew up in Efate and spent her formative years between rural island life and urban education. She completed her secondary education

at Malapoa College before going on to finish Year 13 in New Zealand. She then earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Hawaii, followed by a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Australian National University in Canberra in 2006–2007.

Her professional journey spans over 18 years in the development sector, beginning in government, and on to Australia's AusAID/DFAT. In 2019, she joined Balance of Power, a DFAT-funded regional program aimed at fostering inclusive leadership, with a specific emphasis on empowering women in politics.

As co-Executive Director, Jennifer has led its expansion across Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga, overseeing 22 staff and working in close collaboration with country teams. The first Ni-Vanuatu woman to head a regional DFAT-funded investment, she co-leads the initiative with a counterpart based in Fiji and is instrumental in shaping strategies that challenge entrenched social and cultural norms limiting women's participation in leadership. Jennifer's work in development is marked by deep cultural sensitivity. Rather than pushing for abrupt change, she fosters non-confrontational dialogue that invites women to see themselves as leaders and influencers.

"We can't force women to change, We can simply help them see what's already within them—their value, their capability, their voice."

"We can't force society to change. We can't force women to change," she explains. "we can simply help them see what's already within them—their value, their capability, their voice."

Under her stewardship, Balance of Power has built partnerships with key stakeholders including the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Community (SPC). Her role has taken her across the Pacific—Fiji, Tonga, and beyond—where she works with communities, leaders, and institutions to support transformational change around governance and leadership.

In parallel, Jennifer's ascent in corporate leadership is equally groundbreaking. In 2019, she was appointed as an independent director on the board of BSP Vanuatu Ltd, becoming the first Ni-Vanuatu woman to hold such a position.

By the end of 2023, she was unanimously appointed Chairperson of the Board, overseeing critical financial decisions and legal responsibilities of one of the nation's largest financial institutions.

In 2025, Jennifer has also been appointed to the Board of the Vanuatu Financial Services Commission as the head of its Human Resources Committee, and the Board

of the newly established National Insurance Services Vanuatu Limited.

"My work on the board carries weight—it affects lives and livelihoods daily. But with that weight comes great responsibility, and I carry it with deep reflection and respect," she says.

Despite the demands of her professional life, Jennifer remains grounded in her personal identity and values rooted on the foundations of Christian principles.

She is married to Nicky Doan, a public servant from Ambae and Malekula, and together, they are raising three sons, aged 21, 18, and 9. Her faith and her family remain her greatest source of strength.

My parents were my first teachers, and their guidance continues to shape my decisions," she says. "Their resilience and wisdom inspire me every day."

Looking ahead, Jennifer envisions taking on even greater leadership roles—but with careful consideration. "I know there's another step for me, but it must be the right time—mentally, financially, and spiritually," she reflects.

Jennifer Kalpokas Doan is more than a leader—she is a norm changer. Her career tells a story of determination, humility, and service. Whether breaking barriers in the boardroom or shifting mindsets in rural communities, she is building a legacy that uplifts women and inspires a more inclusive Pacific future.



LEADING IN BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH TOURISM



LISA DINH

Santo & Vietnam

MEMBER, BOARD: VANUATU TOURISM OFFICE

VICE CHAIR, ESPIRITU SANTO TOURISM ASSOCIATION

On her father's side, Lisa Dinh's family's story in Vanuatu began in the late 1930s, when her grandparents migrated from Vietnam — then still Indochina. Lisa's father, along with his fourteen siblings, was born in Port Vila in the 1940s. While many Vietnamese families returned to Asia during the 1960s, the Dinh family chose to remain. By then, Vanuatu was already their home.

Lisa's mother, originally from Malawi in Africa, arrived in the 1970s, just before Independence, working under the British government. She and her father met when the islands were still called the New Hebrides, and together they built a life rooted in their joint cultural heritage. Lisa was born in Port Vila, but only days later her parents brought her to Santo — the island that would always be her

true home. Growing up in Luganville until high school, Lisa later moved to Vila to complete her secondary education. She then studied a double business degree in France and the United Kingdom, followed by a Master's in Economics, Finance, and International Affairs in International Tourism Management.

These studies launched a career spanning more than 20 years in Europe and Asia, where she worked in tourism, hospitality, and development, with Spain serving as her main base.

For Lisa, tourism has never been only about destinations, but rather the cultures, traditions, and connections that make us human. When Covid-19 confined her to Madrid, she realised what she missed most was not places, but people. In 2021, she made the life-changing decision to return to Santo, reconnect with her roots, and dedicate her experience to serving her community.

Tourism was already in her blood. Her father had built Hotel Santo in 1975, and her mother managed it for over four decades. She grew up in a hotel environment where hospitality felt second nature. When she was only eight, her father gifted her a postcard of the United Nations headquarters in New York, telling her:

"Be kind, be brave, lift each other up, and never doubt that your voice matters. Because when women rise, Vanuatu rises with them."

"I would be proud if you worked here one day, helping to make the world a better place." Not long after, he passed away, but those words shaped her destiny. Years later, she began her career at the United Nations World Tourism Organization, fulfilling his vision and paving her own professional journey.

Today, Lisa continues that legacy through multiple roles: refreshing her family's historic Hotel Santo, serving as Vice Chair of the Espiritu Santo Tourism Association, sitting on the board of the Vanuatu Tourism Office, acting as Tourism Councillor at the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and running her own consultancy, T Global, which focuses on tourism, gender equality, and social impact.

Lisa's work emphasises that tourism in Vanuatu is not a luxury, but the backbone of livelihoods. It pays for children's education, sustains rural communities, and empowers women who play a critical role in the sector.

Lisa's leadership philosophy has been shaped by humility, resilience, and service.

She remembers her first day as a director in an international hotel chain, where she was asked to start by making beds. It taught her that

leadership begins with the basics and that no role is too small to matter.

Like many women leaders, Lisa has faced double standards and barriers — often being the youngest or one of the few women in leadership spaces. Voices like hers were sometimes dismissed or undermined, but she learned that consistency matters more than volume.

Leadership, she believes, is about showing up, building trust, and never leading alone. This is why Lisa advocates strongly for women's

representation in leadership and on boards.

She believes that board service is not about recognition but contribution. These roles are voluntary, requiring time and sacrifice, but their value lies in building institutions that uplift the nation.

Lisa's final message is one of courage and solidarity: "Be kind, be brave, lift each other up, and never doubt that your voice matters. Because when women rise, Vanuatu rises with them."



A LIFE OF SERVICE, SPIRIT, AND QUIET DETERMINATION



MARGARET MACFARLANE

Vanuatu

PRESIDENT

BOARD: VANUATU PARALYMPIC COMMITTEE

At 71, Margaret Elizabeth Macfarlane still hasn't quite retired.

"I hoped to last year," she says, "but they keep offering me interesting jobs."

After more than three decades in Vanuatu, coming first as an educational consultant in 1989, Margaret has left her fingerprints on

some of the country's most impactful institutions, from international schooling to financial inclusion, from technical education to the Paralympic movement.

Born in Australia and now a dual citizen of Australia and Vanuatu, Margaret holds a Master's in Education and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Queensland,

as well as credentials in speech and drama from Trinity College London. But it's her ability to turn vision into reality, and to do so with grace, grit, and relentless optimism, that defines her.

When Margaret first arrived in Vanuatu, her assignment was to evaluate whether an international school could be established in Port Vila. She didn't just write the report, she built the school.

From 54 students in 1991 to 135 in 1995, Margaret led the growth of Port Vila International School (PVIS), expanding its staff from four to 27, and increasing its income more than twentyfold. Today, PVIS has nearly 500 students—and Margaret served with its board for 25 years.

After PVIS, Margaret turned her attention to national systems. As Team Leader of the Vanuatu TVET Sector Strengthening Program, she managed a \$2 million annual investment into the country's education and training sector, developing institutions, building partnerships, and mentoring both local and international teams.

Her work stretched across 12 of the 13 government ministries, always grounded in the belief that sustainable change must include women, youth, and people with disabilities.

"The service you do others is the rent you pay for your life."

Each ministry has its own culture," she says. "So, I focus on building people, processes, platforms, and procedures."

Over the last decade, Margaret has worked independently as a consultant in governance and institutional capacity building.

Her clients have ranged from UNICEF to telecom companies, banks to government departments. Yet she never calls herself a leader. "I work with teams," she insists. "Never above them."

In 2017, in search of a little extra funding for her disability rowing program, Margaret attended the AGM for the Vanuatu Paralympic Committee (VPC). She left the meeting as its new president.

"Since then, VPC has eaten my life," she jokes—but behind the humour is a story of transformation.

When she stepped in, the Committee had been deregistered. Today, Vanuatu's para-athletes are national heroes and multi-medal winners on the international stage, including the Commonwealth and Pacific Games.

Their music video "Para Pawa" and a series of short films, which includes *The Hidden People* and *Mi Tu Mi Save Mekem*, shine a light on stories too often unseen.

"We promote our athletes as 'Champions of Change,'" Margaret explains. "They're shifting perceptions in every village they reach."

Margaret lives by the mantra, "The service you do others is the rent you pay for your life."

But it hasn't always been easy. She's faced threats, stress, and burnout. "I've thought about giving up," she admits. "But then I hear the laughter of our para-athletes at training, and I remember if they're not giving up, I have no excuse."

Margaret doesn't speak much about personal barriers as a woman in leadership.

"You have skills, you work hard, you get things done," she says simply. But she strongly believes in diverse leadership: A balanced board across gender, ethnicity, age, background is one that leads to stronger decisions."

After 36 years of service in Vanuatu, Margaret says she truly intends to retire. And when the day finally comes to rest, what would her last words be? "I wish I'd tried just a bit harder."



BREAKING BARRIERS IN MEDICINE AND LEADERSHIP



DR. MARGARET TARERE LEHI

Pentecost

VICE PRESIDENT

BOARD: VANUATU FAMILY HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Dr. Margaret Tarere Lehi, 41, is a proud daughter of North Pentecost, Vanuatu. Born to two primary school teachers, her early life revolved around education, culture, and values of respect, integrity, and collaboration within the community.

Moving often during her childhood, Margaret adapted quickly and thrived in her studies. In 1996, she

began her secondary education at St. Patrick's College in Ambae, where she completed seven years of schooling, graduating at Year 13.

Margaret's passion for both education and sports led her to secure a sports scholarship through VASANOC in 2003, which enabled her to study for a year at the University of the South Pacific at Emalus.

Balancing sports and academics was a challenge, but her perseverance paid off when she was awarded a scholarship to study at the Fiji School of Medicine.

In 2009, she graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery. She further specialised in women's health, earning a Postgraduate Diploma in Obstetrics and Gynecology in 2016, and later a Master of Medicine in Obstetrics and Gynecology in 2019.

Today, Margaret serves as a consultant obstetrician and gynecologist with the Ministry of Health. She is also the Vice President of the Vanuatu Family Health Association (VFHA), a role she has held since 2021.

VFHA, a non-governmental organisation, works closely with the Ministry of Health to deliver programs on sexual and reproductive health, youth services, family planning, and antenatal care.

Her decision to join VFHA was driven by her passion for advancing women's health and her belief in the organisation's mission.

As Vice President of the VFHA Board, Margaret plays a critical role in supporting the President, ensuring smooth governance, and upholding

"Dream big. Know that you have a God-given purpose in life. Challenges will always come, but we learn from them & move forward."

the organisation's values. She describes the position as both overwhelming and rewarding. Traditionally, leadership spaces in Vanuatu have been dominated by men, but VFHA's inclusive policies guarantee gender equity in governance.

For Margaret, this is a source of pride. Her service—first as Interim President and now Vice President—is entirely voluntary, balancing her demanding medical career with leadership responsibilities in the NGO sector.

Through this role, Margaret has gained invaluable skills in governance, leadership, and strategic thinking. Networking with other NGOs, government agencies, and donor partners has broadened her perspective and deepened her understanding of collaboration. Most importantly, her position allows her to break barriers, serve as a role model, and inspire other ni-Vanuatu women and girls to step into leadership roles.

Margaret's journey has not been without fear—fear of acceptance, fear of making difficult decisions, fear of failure. Yet, her strength lies in her resilience, her faith in God, and her strong support system of friends and family.

She acknowledges the immense challenges of balancing her responsibilities as a doctor, leader, wife, and mother of two daughters. But she remains committed, guided by her faith, her values, and the memory of her late parents, who she calls her greatest role models.

Margaret's vision for women in Vanuatu is bold and inspiring. She dreams of a society free from violence, where women and girls live with dignity, respect, and equal opportunity.

She envisions every girl having access to education and opportunities to fulfill her potential, unhindered by gender bias. She also advocates for a stronger health system that

prioritises maternal and mental health services.

For Margaret, true national progress lies in men and women working side by side, because when women rise, communities thrive—and when women thrive, the nation thrives. This belief is also bolstered by her faith and values.

Margaret's message to women and girls of Vanuatu is clear: "Dream big. Know that you have a God-given purpose in life. Challenges will always come, but we learn from them and move forward. If I can come this far, so can you. Be kind to yourself and others, lead with respect, and never forget that resilience and courage will carry you through."



A LIFE OF LEADERSHIP, PURPOSE AND FAITH



RELVIE POILAPA

Efate & PNG

VICE-CHAIRLADY, BOARD: VBTC

VICE PRESIDENT, OCEANIA FEDERATION

At 47, Relvie Poilapa stands as an influential woman in community development, leadership and media governance.

With roots in Mele, Efate and Papua New Guinea, her story is one of cross-cultural strength, personal resilience and over two decades of dedication to the people of Vanuatu.

Relvie's early years were shaped between Vanuatu and Australia. After completing Class 6 at Central School, she moved to Melbourne where she attended St Leonard's College. Upon graduating, she returned to Vanuatu for a year, working in the hospitality sector before enrolling at the University of Western Sydney to study hospitality.

However, Relvie's path would soon shift toward community and social development. "When I returned to Vanuatu in 2001, I started to work in social development areas," she says. At 24, she joined the Foundation for the People of the South Pacific (FSP), marking the beginning of her journey in the non-governmental sector.

From 2018 to 2024, Relvie served as Portfolio Manager for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) at World Vision.

"The WASH sector taught me how men and women can have different needs. For instance, when building toilets, men don't often consider that women need proper washrooms during their periods. You need a balanced perspective to meet everyone's needs."

Currently, Relvie is the Vice-Chairlady of the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), a role she's held since September 2023. "Our board is set up to give advice to the current CEO of VBTC and ensure everything is in the best interest of the organisation," she explains. "As a woman, I have different perspectives, and I often speak my mind so we can work together as a board committee to find solutions."

She says, "Media comes under the Prime Minister's Office, so we have to ensure our programs are run with good leadership."

*"I love witnessing the journey of young women building themselves up.
I'm proud when they seek my advice to learn."*

Relvie first became involved in media during VAN2017 as a Marketing Coordinator, working closely with outlets like Daily Post, FM107 and VBTC. "Media is essential to ensure people receive the right information in a timely and accurate way," she says.

When the December earthquake struck, the damage to the old VBTC building had a deep impact. "Many of our staff were traumatised. We are always on the frontline in every disaster, but it's hard to balance our own mental health and keep up with the news. I am not afraid, but concerned about our staff's well-being. A mother of four, aged between 12 and 24, Relvie understands the need for balance. "Sometimes when you're stuck, you need to let go for a while, rewind and change the topic before getting back on track."

Relvie is also the co-founder of two NGOs — 'Voes Blong Yumi', which played a critical role in the referendum campaign, and 'Vanuatu Family Medical Assistance Society', which advocates for improved cancer medical services. She serves as Vice Treasurer and Operations Director respectively.

In the sports world, she recently became Vice President of the Oceania

Federation, after previously serving as Secretary and then President of the Hockey Federation.

Relvie's leadership approach is also shaped by powerful women in her life.

"I don't have one inspirational person, but a few — mostly strong female role models like my mother and her close friends.

I love witnessing the journey of young women building themselves up. I'm proud when they seek my advice to learn."

Relvie acknowledges that gender barriers remain. Her hope is that more men create space for diverse voices.

"In Shefa, I've been given that space by my people. I didn't have to fight as hard as some other women in other provinces," she notes.

And if today were her last day? "God alone," she says without hesitation.

"Get yourself right with God and everything will be perfect. At the end of the day, your strength will come from God only."



A JOURNEY IN BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY



ROSEMARY LEONA SPRIGGS

Pentecost

**VICE-CHAIRLADY, BOARD: VANUATU RURAL DEVELOPMENT BANK
BOARD MEMBER, THE VANUATU REGULATION TRIBUNAL**

Rosemary Leona, a dynamic entrepreneur and respected leader from Pentecost Island, embodies resilience, vision, and a deep commitment to uplifting both her family and community.

Married with two adult children and two grandchildren, she has managed to balance her personal and

professional life with remarkable grace — building a career that reflects dedication, innovation, and integrity.

Her journey is a true testament to what can be achieved when determination meets opportunity, and when leadership is guided by both heart and purpose.

Holding a Bachelor of Commerce in Banking and Finance from the University of Canberra, Australia, Rosemary began her professional career in the financial sector, where she served at ANZ Bank Vanuatu for 13 years. During this period, she gained invaluable experience in financial management, customer relations, and institutional operations.

More importantly, she developed the confidence and strategic insight that would later empower her to venture into business ownership.

Rosemary's time in banking not only provided a strong professional foundation but also gave her firsthand understanding of the financial challenges many Ni-Vanuatu face, particularly women seeking to establish and grow businesses.

In 2015, driven by her vision of creating economic opportunities and promoting local products, Rosemary founded Vanuatu Wise, a kava processing and exporting company.

Through this enterprise, she has been instrumental in promoting Vanuatu's kava industry internationally, contributing to both the local economy and the livelihoods of rural farmers. Her leadership in this male-dominated sector has inspired other women to see themselves as capable business leaders in areas traditionally reserved for men.

"I would also like to acknowledge the support from my husband who has full confidence in me - allows me to think, articulate & make decisions."

Building on that success, Rosemary took on an even more ambitious project — the creation of the Vila Rose Hotel, a boutique accommodation facility in the heart of Port Vila. Personally overseeing every stage of its development, from design and financing to construction and management, Rosemary brought her vision to life in 2017.

Despite the many challenges that came with the project, including navigating regulatory processes, financial constraints, and logistical hurdles, her perseverance paid off. Today, the Vila Rose Hotel stands not just as a thriving business but as a symbol of what determination and self-belief can achieve.

Beyond her entrepreneurial ventures, Rosemary's contributions to leadership and governance are equally significant. She currently serves as a Board Member of the Government Remuneration Tribunal (since 2020), Vice Chair of the Vanuatu Rural Development Bank (since 2023), Chair of the Friends of the Vanuatu National Museum (since 2018), Member of the Vanuatu Kava Industry Association (since 2017), and President of the SiaRaga Football Club (since 2025).

Each of these roles highlights her versatility, community focus, and

ability to lead with both strategy and empathy. Her involvement across such diverse sectors reflects her belief that leadership is not limited by one's background but strengthened through continuous learning and service.

She often emphasises that women bring a distinct and valuable perspective to leadership spaces — one that encourages inclusivity, collaboration, and emotional intelligence.

In her view, empowering women to lead results in more balanced discussions and better decision-making outcomes for all.

"I would also like to acknowledge the support from my husband who has full confidence in me - allows me to think, articulate and make decisions in the board and business journey., she says.

For Rosemary, being a female entrepreneur in Vanuatu is achievable and deeply rewarding. Her journey demonstrates that with vision, courage, and determination, women can shape industries, influence policy, and create opportunities.

Her story is a powerful reminder that every woman has the potential to lead, build, and transform her community.



FROM THE CORPORATE WORLD TO NATION BUILDING



SEREANA MOIRA MARUM

Futuna

**CHAIRLADY, BOARD: NATIONAL BANK OF VANUATU (NBV)
OPERATIONS LEAD, VANUATU-AUSTRALIA HEALTH PARTNERSHIP**

Balancing high-level leadership roles in both public service and the private sector, Sereana Moira Marum stands out as a determined and principled female leader in Vanuatu.

Her career has been defined by steady progression, from early roles in finance and banking to her current positions as Operations Lead at the

Vanuatu-Australia Health Partnership (prioritises maternal and mental VAHP) and Chairlady of the Board of Directors at the National Bank of Vanuatu (NBV).

Born and raised in Port Vila, Sereana is originally from Futuna Island in Tafea Province. The eldest of four sisters, with adopted siblings as part

of her extended family, she grew up in a household shaped by commitment and service. Her father worked as a radio technician and her mother as a secretary typist, both her early role models who demonstrated the value of reliability and hard work.

At 45 years old, she is married to her husband who is from East New Britain, PNG who is now a citizen of Vanuatu, and together they raised three beautiful children – a daughter and two sons.

Sereana's educational path laid a strong foundation for the future. After attending Central Primary School and completing high school at Malapoa College, she received an Aotearoa Scholarship to study at New Zealand Bursary in 1998. There, she completed Year 13 before pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce and Management at Lincoln University. Years later, she advanced her qualifications with a Master's in Applied Finance and Professional Accounting from the University of Queensland.

Sereana's professional career began in 2003 as a trainee accountant at Equity Investment Group. By May 2006, she transitioned into the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu, where she would spend the next 16 years building her capacity in finance and governance. Starting as a Settlement

"Never see someone else's strength as a threat, it's a complement to yours. Together, we can build a great team and a great nation."

Officer, she eventually rose to overseeing critical internal operations. In 2022, Sereana made a bold move into the development sector, joining VAHP. She was tasked with managing operations and finance for a donor-funded program that plays a key role in strengthening Vanuatu's health systems.

Despite having no prior experience in managing donor programs, she quickly adapted, learned the ropes, and by early 2025, was promoted from Manager to Operations Lead. This position placed her on the VAHP's Coordination Team, the program's core strategic decision-making body.

At the same time, her leadership influence has extended to the financial sector. In February 2023, Sereana was appointed to the Board of Directors at the National Bank of Vanuatu as a representative of the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF). By October 2024, she was appointed as the Chairlady of the NBV Board—a historic achievement as the first woman in an institution critical to the country's financial system.

Her role at NBV, meanwhile, presents a different set of challenges. Board governance in a national bank involves high-level decision-making

in a fast-evolving financial environment. As Chairlady, she is a symbol of growing female representation in decision-making spaces.

"In my leadership role on the NBV Board, it is being the change agent and ensuring the Institution's policy and procedures reflect best practices while serving the needs of the people of Vanuatu."

Sereana also credits the people she's met along the way; friends, mentors, and colleagues for helping shape her journey.

In Vanuatu, where relationships are often the key to getting things done,

she understands the importance of networks and community. Sereana's commitment to service extends beyond the workplace.

She is actively involved in Futuna Island community committees, helping women plan investments that can benefit their communities. She is also a member of a family church ministry, where elders mentor young leaders to plan and manage projects.

"Be your own competitor. Challenge yourself personally, spiritually, and professionally. Never see someone else's strength as a threat, it's a complement to yours. Together, we can build a great team and a great nation."



CHAMPIONING INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT



SHEROL GEORGE

Ambae

**CHAIRLADY, BOARD: VANUATU SOCIETY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY
INCLUSION MANAGER, VANUATU SKILLS PARTNERSHIP**

From Ambae Island and raised on Aore, a small island just off Santo, Sherol George has built her life and career around education, inclusion, and empowerment.

The youngest of five sisters, she grew up in a family of women who shaped her resilience and drive. But it was also the support from her dad that

was instrumental in her making it this far. Today, she is a mother of two—her eldest in Year 13 at Epauto Secondary School and her youngest just beginning primary school at Central School.

Sherol's academic journey began at the University of the South Pacific (USP), where she completed her

foundation studies before moving on to USP's Laucala Campus in Fiji. There, she graduated with a Bachelor of Education in English and Geography. Returning to Vanuatu, she taught for five years before pursuing further studies in Australia, where she earned a Master's in Special Education. Upon her return, she continued teaching before making the leap into development work.

Her first role outside teaching was with the Vanuatu Australia Education Support Program, a DFAT-funded initiative within the Ministry of Education and Training, where she worked for about 18 months as Inclusion Strategy Coordinator, supporting the Ministry with its inclusion priorities. From there, she joined what was then known as Vanuatu Skills for Economic Growth. Over time, the program transitioned into the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, where Sherol has now worked for nine years.

Sherol began as a Disability Inclusion Coordinator, and in 2020, she stepped into her current role as Inclusion Manager. In this position, she leads the unit responsible for ensuring gender equality and disability inclusion across the program's work.

She acknowledges the challenges of this role: "Changing mindsets is not easy. People have different beliefs,

*"Don't be afraid to take risks.
Failing is part of growth—learn from it and start again."*

experiences, and perspectives, and you cannot expect results overnight.

"Despite the challenges, Sherol finds joy in what she does, knowing that it is contributing to the overall goal of an inclusive Vanuatu. She acknowledges the support from her workplace and describes it as one filled with openness, support, and laughter.

Sherol credits her education and experience as her greatest assets. They allow her to speak with confidence and credibility on the issues she is most passionate about. Currently, she is pursuing a PhD focused on disability inclusion and employment.

Her late mother remains her greatest role model. Although Sherol's mother did not have the opportunity to pursue formal education, Sherol admired her determination to give others a better life. Inspired also by strong women she has worked alongside and guided by the mentorship of leaders she respects, Sherol has developed her own leadership style—one rooted in reflection, listening, and honesty.

She acknowledges the challenges of stepping into spaces often dominated by older colleagues and men, especially as a woman leader. At first, she was cautious with her words,

knowing they could be interpreted in many ways.

Over the years, however, her confidence has grown, thanks to supportive bosses, colleagues, and her circle of friends.

She is also active beyond her full-time employment role. This includes being Chairwoman of the Board for the Vanuatu Society of People with Disability – only the second woman ever appointed to this position, and re-elected for a second term this year – as well as Board Member for the Wilkins foundation, a charitable organisation established to support girls' in Malampa to access education.

For the women of Vanuatu, Sherol's message is clear: "You can do it. Put your mind and heart to it. Don't be afraid to take risks. Failing is part of growth—learn from it and start again."

Her vision for Vanuatu is one of peace, inclusion, and opportunity, where women and men work together to create positive change. As she continues her journey in education, inclusion, and leadership,

Sherol George remains a powerful example of how determination, humility, and vision can shape not only one's own life, but also the lives of countless others, including those who are the most marginalised.



A JOURNEY OF PURPOSE, PERSEVERANCE, AND LEADERSHIP



EMILY LEIPASU TUMUKON

Ifira

COUNTRY MANAGER PHAMA PLUS PROGRAM

Emily Leipasum Tumukon is the Country Manager of the PHAMA Plus Program in Vanuatu, where she leads initiatives that strengthen agricultural value chains, promote biosecurity standards, and enhance trade opportunities.

Her leadership journey is marked by quiet determination, unwavering faith, and a lifelong commitment to

service.

Born on 5 March 1973 on the island of Ifira, Emily was raised in British Paddock (now Independence Park) in a family deeply rooted in leadership and education.

Her late father served as Vanuatu's first Chief Minister during the nation's transition to self-government

in 1978, while her mother was a dedicated schoolteacher. Together, they instilled in her the values of integrity, learning, and service.

The youngest of ten siblings, Emily's leadership qualities emerged early. While attending Malapoa College, she became the first day student ever elected Head Girl in 1990. Her academic commitment earned her a scholarship to New Zealand, where she completed her senior studies at New Plymouth Girls' High School and later graduated from the Auckland Institute of Technology (now AUT) with an Advanced Diploma in Applied Science, specializing in Food Technology.

Early mentorship within the Ministry of Industry and Trade and her participation in regional and international Codex Alimentarius meetings further strengthened her analytical, negotiation, and decision-making skills—essential tools in her transition to senior leadership roles.

Upon returning to Vanuatu in 1997, Emily faced the challenges of early career uncertainty. Her first year—spent baking cakes while seeking employment—was a humbling period that deepened her perseverance and sense of purpose. In 1999, she secured a temporary position at the Food Technology Development Centre under the

"Don't try to be someone else. Don't wear a size 12 shoe if you're a size 10. Just be yourself, and that's enough."

Ministry of Industry and Trade, marking the beginning of a distinguished career in public service.

Over the next decade, Emily advanced steadily from Assistant Laboratory Technician to Senior Food Technologist and Acting Manager, earning recognition for her diligence and professionalism. She represented Vanuatu at regional and international forums, contributing to the development of national and regional food-safety guidelines and standards.

From 2013 to 2017, she served as Political Advisor to several ministries, including Agriculture, Justice, and Internal Affairs, where she helped bridge the gap between science and public policy. By 2019, she had transitioned to the private sector as part of the PHAMA Plus Program, an Australia- and New Zealand-supported initiative focused on strengthening productive sectors in Vanuatu.

In July 2023, Emily was appointed Country Manager for the PHAMA Plus Program. In this role, she leads engagement with farmers, processors, exporters, and government ministries to advance agricultural value chains. Her work emphasizes biosecurity and quality standards, particularly through the

Biosecurity Quality Standards Initiative, which supports sustainable growth in the cacao and kava industries.

Emily is also an active member of the Vanuatu Kava and Cacao Industry Associations, platforms that promote collaboration, investment, and sustainability across the agriculture sector.

Emily's vision is to empower farmers, entrepreneurs, and professionals to drive inclusive and sustainable development.

She plans to establish a private consultancy that will continue supporting national growth while mentoring young professionals—

especially women—in agriculture, trade, and food technology.

She believes in leading by example and in cultivating leadership through presence and authenticity:

"Don't try to be someone else. Don't wear a size 12 shoe if you're a size 10. Just be yourself, and that's enough." A devoted Christian, Emily draws strength from her faith, describing it as the anchor of her personal and professional life.

She is a proud mother of four and continues to instill in her children the same values of faith, discipline, and service that shaped her own journey. As she looks to the future, Emily "keep trusting in God to guide me."



LEADING WITH HUMILITY AND STRENGTH



ERINAH GLADYS MALRES

Tanna & Malekula

**DEPUTY DIRECTOR
VANUATU SKILLS PARTNERSHIP**

At just 34 years old, Erinah Gladys Malres, from Tanna and Malekula, is a testament to servant leadership and perseverance.

Married and a proud mother of three beautiful girls, she currently serves as the Deputy Director at the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, where her leadership continues to shape

communities and strengthen the country's human capital.

Raised by humble, respectful, and supportive parents, Erinah credits her values to her upbringing. She is the second of four siblings, and today, she strives to instill the same sense of humility and determination in her daughters.

Her academic journey has been equally impressive. She holds an International Diploma in Business Administration, Sales & Marketing, Hotel Operations and Management from Cambridge International College.

With over ten years of experience in the private sector, specifically in hospitality and tourism, Erinah worked across three major resorts in Port Vila, mastering various roles across a range of departments.

Always eager to learn and share knowledge, she embraced a new challenge in 2019 when she joined the Vanuatu Skills Partnership.

Starting as a Skills for Tourism Officer, Erinah quickly proved her capacity to lead, moving into sector coordination and management roles across tourism and creative industries.

In May of this year, she stepped into her current leadership position as Deputy Director, overseeing programmatic operations, and partnerships, ensuring strategic alignment with the National Sustainable Development Plan 2030.

"It was the best decision I ever made—to step from private sector tourism into the Vanuatu Skills Partnership," she reflects. "I have grown so much both personally and professionally through this experience."

"Believe in second chances. Life may take you on detours, but with strong focus, you can always get back on track."

"Knowing that the work I do, with support from my colleagues, is contributing to the development of Vanuatu—for the benefit of this current generation and the future—gives me strength," Erinah says.

Her personal relationship with God also plays a vital role. "My faith has been my strength. Saying a prayer when times are hard gives me the courage to press on, knowing that while I do my best, God will do the rest." Leadership has not always been easy. "There are times when you must deal with difficult situations, and people may not always agree with you," Erinah admits. "But it is part of the journey."

Her ability to pause, reflect, and approach challenges calmly has helped her make effective decisions.

Even during crises such as TC Harold and the pandemic in 2020, she and her team adapted by operationalising the Yumi Tuketa Strategy for Recovery, expanding skills training to the infrastructure sector to build community resilience.

Throughout her work, Erinah has passionately supported women-led initiatives, particularly in the creative industries. She has collaborated with provincial associations and handicraft hubs, empowering women to refine

their skills, grow as leaders, and achieve economic independence.

She highlights a reality many women face: "Celebrating the achievements of women can sometimes bring more criticism than support—even from other women. That's why I am consciously trying to model positive and constructive celebration, because when women thrive, we all benefit."

Her philosophy is simple yet powerful: "Believe in second chances. Life may take you on detours, but with strong focus, you can always get back on track."

Erinah never imagined she would become Deputy Director of an Australian Government-funded program. She considers this role her greatest career accomplishment, a milestone achieved through dedication and the unwavering support of her loved ones.

Looking ahead, she hopes more women will embrace leadership roles and support one another in breaking barriers. "Effective and meaningful development requires input from both men and women," she says. "I'm proud to see norms shifting, and I hope this continues."



FROM JOURNALISM TO LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION



JENNIFER KAUSEI

Tanna

**NATIONAL COORDINATOR, AUSTRALIAN HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIP
PEOPLE AND CULTURE SENIOR ADVISOR, WORLD VISION**

Jennifer Kausei's journey is a testament to courage, adaptability, and the power of taking risks. Originally from Tanna, Vanuatu, Jennifer is a mother of four — three sons and a daughter, whose ages range from 16 to 30.

Today, she holds multiple leadership roles, including Australian Humanitarian Partnership National

Coordinator in Vanuatu, People and Culture Senior Advisor for World Vision Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, and most recently, Councilor for the Port Vila Municipal Government Council.

Jennifer's professional journey is built on a strong academic background. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, Language, and Literature

from the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, as well as a Diploma in Project Management through TAFE Australia and USP. This blend of communication and management skills has given her the tools to navigate both technical and leadership spaces throughout her career.

Jennifer's career began at the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), where she worked as a journalist, presenter, and later as the newsroom editor for 10 years. This background in journalism helped her develop a strong mindset and confidence, but Jennifer was determined to explore new areas.

She moved into the hospitality sector at the Holiday Inn Resort, where she worked in Sales and Marketing for four years before transitioning to Human Resources leadership for another five years.

Later, Jennifer held roles in communications and policy, including at the Vanuatu Australia Education Support Program, the Vanuatu National Provident Fund, and as a Policy and Public Diplomacy Advisor at the New Zealand High Commission.

Today, in addition to her humanitarian and advisory work,

"Women in Vanuatu do a lot of great work. We need to be united, build confidence and always be visible. Representation matters."

Jennifer sits on several leadership boards. She served as Chairlady of VBTC for two years, is on the Board of Directors of Youth Challenge Vanuatu, and leads the UN Spotlight Initiative Reference Group, bringing civil society together to address gender-based violence and recently a member of the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network (PICAN) Board of Directors.

Reflecting on her current roles, Jennifer says she has transitioned into a strategic level of leadership — working on concepts, planning, and drafting ideas that drive real change.

As the Australian Humanitarian Partnership Coordinator, she has spent the past three years supporting DFAT-funded projects across six NGOs, focusing on disaster readiness and community resilience.

In her People and Culture (P&C) role with World Vision, she is committed to supporting the P&C teams of World Vision Vanuatu and Solomon Islands in creating better workplace environments, crafting policies that are culturally appropriate, and working with the team in identifying tools that can create a great working environment for all staff.

Networking has been a key strength for Jennifer. Her years as a journalist

built strong relationships across government and community sectors, and today she leverages those networks to amplify her work.

Her philosophy is simple yet powerful: "It's okay to fail. Taking risks determines the next step you take in life. When you fail, you learn. If you sit and feel bad about it, you will never grow."

In 2025, Jennifer took a bold step into politics, successfully contesting and being elected as a Councilor for Port Vila Municipal Government. She describes it as an unexpected accomplishment, which she considers to be her greatest achievement; this was not something

she planned but embraced when her community encouraged her to stand. "Professionally I've built my personal life, and now moving onto the political stage is a new challenge. This role is not about serving donors and NGOs but directly serving my community."

As a former Chairlady of VBTC and the Spotlight Initiative, she highlights the importance of having women on boards to bring balance, voice community perspectives, and ensure inclusive decision-making.

"We women in Vanuatu do a lot of great work. We need to be united, build confidence and always be visible. Representation matters."



A LIFE OF SERVICE, ADVOCACY, AND EMPOWERMENT



JUDITH I YANHAMBATH

Tanna

**PROGRAM MANAGER
VANUATU SOCIETY OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY**

At 44 years old, Judith Iakavai stands as one of Vanuatu's most dedicated advocates for inclusion, women's empowerment, and disability rights. Married to a man from Malekula, while she herself hails from the island of Tanna, Judith is also a proud mother of four children.

Today, she serves as the Program Manager at the Vanuatu Society of

People with Disability (VSPD), a role she has held since 2015.

Judith's early life was shaped in Port Vila, where she grew up and pursued her education. She attended Matevulu College for her secondary studies and afterwards enrolled at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT), where she graduated with a Certificate in Accounting and

Management. Her professional journey began in hospitality at Le Lagon Hotel, where she worked as a guest service attendant.

Judith's transition into the NGO sector began with the Vanuatu National Council of Women, where she was first exposed to women's issues and empowerment programs. From there, she joined Wan Smolbag Theatre, where she spent nearly nine years.

She started as a Finance Officer but quickly grew into project management and overseeing programs. Judith's journey then led her to World Vision Vanuatu, where she served as Assistant Finance Officer.

While Judith enjoyed contributing in these positions, she longed to work more directly with people and communities, and therefore decided to join VSPD in 2015, stepping into her current role as Program Manager. VSPD is Vanuatu's national NGO dedicated to service delivery for people with disabilities.

This marked a turning point in Judith's career. For the first time, she was closely involved with people with disabilities, managing not only activities, but also entire programs aimed at improving lives and building inclusion for all in-Vanuatu.

"If you are living with a disability, you can still make it! For those without a disability, what's your excuse to not learn something new every day?"

Judith recalls that her inspiration partly came from growing up with a cousin who had a disability. This personal relationship gave her the confidence and compassion to work in the sector. She also credits a long-serving VSDP colleague, late Arthur Simrai, who became one of her greatest supporters when she first joined the organisation.

Their shared vision and teamwork encouraged her to adapt to the new challenges of a new environment. Despite initial fears, Judith embraced her role, motivated by the chance to serve the most vulnerable.

When she joined, the organisation lacked many key systems, including a strategic plan and financial procedures. Judith played a major role in strengthening operations, especially with the support of partners such as UNICEF, Australian volunteers and others.

Today, she proudly acknowledges that VSPD's growth is the result of collective effort from past and present staff, rather than individual leadership.

For Judith, seeing parents of children with disabilities recognise positive changes in their children's lives is among the most rewarding aspects of her work. She is especially proud when VSPD secures partnerships that

enable services to reach remote communities. Conversely, her most discouraging experiences are when she sees other organisations treat disability inclusion as a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine commitment.

Judith's encouragement is, "If you are living with a disability, you can still make it—don't look down on yourself. For those without a disability, what excuse do you have not to get up every day and learn something new?"

Judith's motivation also comes from her family. She describes her mother as the most inspirational person in

her life—a hardworking woman with a kind heart who taught her life principles. Her husband, one of her greatest supporters, always listens and offers advice when challenges arise at work. She recalls advice from her uncle that continues to guide her life: "Every day you must challenge yourself to learn ten new things."

Her faith in God is another cornerstone of her resilience, strength and purpose in serving others. For Judith, her work is not just a career but a mission—an opportunity to serve, empower, and advocate for those whose voices are often unheard.



BUILDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR VANUATU'S YOUTH



LARISA CSIBA

Ambae & Malekula

**PROGRAM MANAGER
YOUTH CHALLENGE VANUATU**

At 40 years old, Larisa Csiba stands as a shining example of what dedication, passion, and purpose can achieve. Originally from Ambae and Malekula, Larisa grew up on the island of Ambae, raised in a faith-based home that instilled in her a deep sense of compassion and responsibility.

Today, she is the Program Manager at Youth Challenge Vanuatu (YCV), a

she has held for the past seven months, but her journey in the youth sector began nearly two decades ago. Larisa's early education saw her complete Year 10 at Navuturiki Junior Secondary School in 2000.

Determined to do more, she went on to earn a Certificate in Community Development and a Certificate IV in Youth Work; qualifications that would

later support her growing impact in youth-focused development.

Larisa's professional journey started in 2005 as a volunteer with the Vanuatu Family Health Association (VFHA).

"In this role I discovered the importance of investing in the next generation by empowering young people to reach their full potential, become responsible leaders and contribute positively to their communities," she stated.

She then took on various positions from Youth Educator to Hotline Operator, delivering life-saving information about adolescent sexual and reproductive health across the islands.

Larisa's dream of working with Youth Challenge Vanuatu (YCV) became a reality in 2016, when she joined the organisation as a Youth Centre Coordinator. Since then, she's worn many hats from Training Coordinator, Ready for Work Coordinator, and now Program Manager.

In this leadership role, Larisa oversees a team of project coordinators and volunteers, managing program planning, budgets, and implementation, all with one goal in mind - making youth success a national priority.

"You have control over your mindset. Stay teachable, be adaptable, and surround yourself with people who lift you up."

"Teamwork, respect, inclusion, and honesty are the heart of our work," she says. "We're creating safe spaces where young people feel valued and supported."

Over the nine years with YCV, Larisa's biggest reward has been witnessing transformation in young people's lives. "Seeing a young person get their first job, take ownership of their life, and grow step by step, it's incredibly fulfilling," she says.

Amongst the joys, there have been challenges. Larisa admits she has, at times, doubted herself and hesitated to take on new responsibilities. "Those were learning moments," she says. "Now I know that fear is just part of growth."

Faith is a constant pillar in her life. Whether dealing with workplace stress or navigating personal hardships, Larisa leans on prayer, scripture, and self-reflection.

Outside of work, she stays grounded through family and self-care. She finds calm in positive music, physical activity, and spending time with her four children—two boys and two girls. Asked about her proudest accomplishment, Larisa doesn't hesitate: "It's the impact I've had on others. Knowing I've played a role in someone's journey is the most meaningful reward."

Larisa is deeply engaged in youth development networks and represents YCV in the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Working Group led by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF. She's also driven to see YCV expand into other provinces.

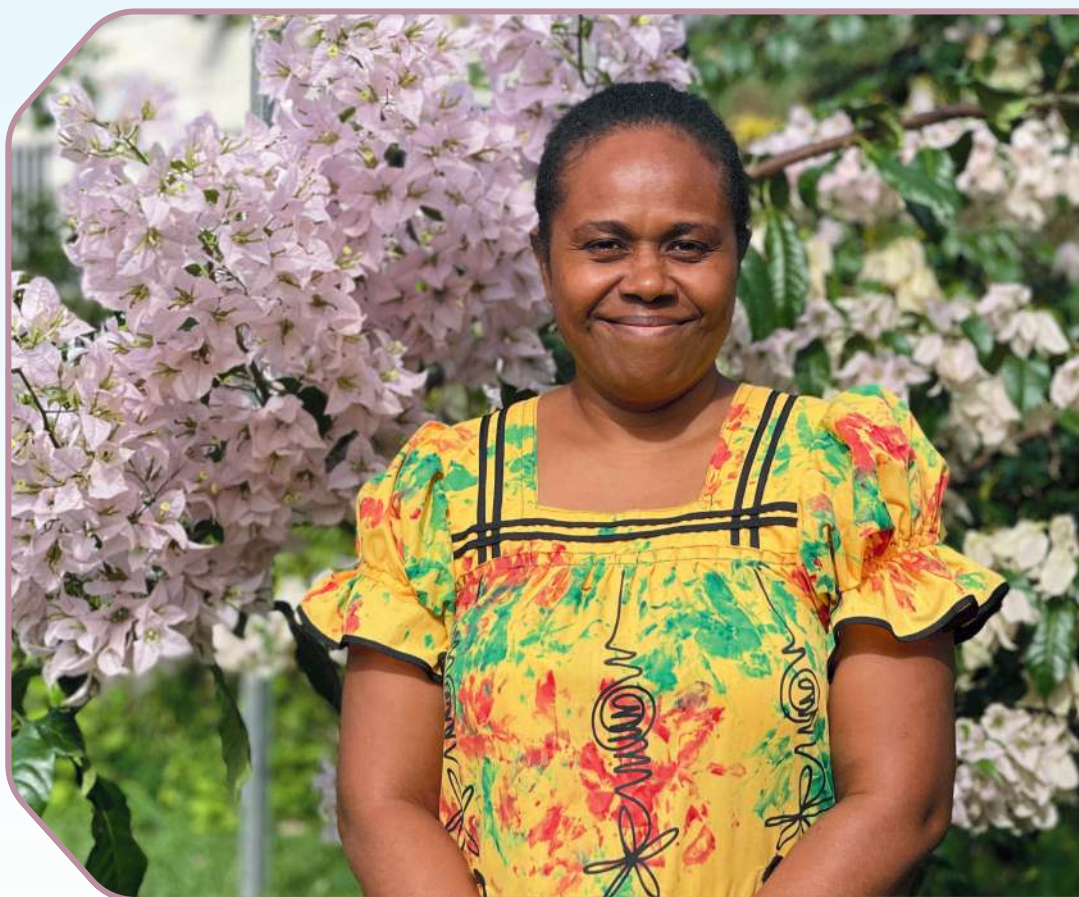
For the women of Vanuatu, she hopes for unity, self-belief, and a deeper understanding of their influence within families and society.

"We were created for a purpose," she insists. "And when we uplift each other, we all rise."

To young women stepping into leadership, her advice is: "You have control over your mindset. Stay teachable, be adaptable, and surround yourself with people who lift you up."

As she looks to the future, Larisa remains committed to her calling, developing the next generation of Ni-Vanuatu leaders.

"Challenges will come," she says. "But they're also opportunities to rise. I believe I'm exactly where I'm meant to be and there's still so much more ahead."



CHAMPIONING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND EMPATHY



LIKU JIMMY

Epi & Efate

**(FORMER) SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER
NZ HIGH COMMISSION**

Liku Jimmy, originally from the island of Epi, but was brought up from her mother's side, on Efate.

She is a Ni-Vanuatu professional whose career spans over two decades of service in government and foreign missions. Her journey is a testament to resilience, leadership, and a deep commitment to inclusive development.

Liku's educational pathway began at Vila East Primary School, continued through Malapoa College, and advanced to tertiary studies at USP's Emalus Campus in Port Vila.

Her professional career is as rich as her academic foundation. Liku served for 13 years in the Ministry of Education, rising from Senior School Marketing Officer to Principal Officer

in the Policy and Planning Unit. There, she played a critical role in shaping the frameworks that continue to guide Vanuatu's educational policy and planning today.

She later transitioned to the international development cooperation arena, taking on roles with the Australian High Commission and the New Zealand High Commission. At the Australian High Commission, she worked in the DCPAM unit, focusing on the productive sector for over two years. For the past six years, she has served as a Senior Programme Development Officer with the New Zealand High Commission (NZHC).

In her previous role, Liku manages programs across the productive sectors—including tourism, agriculture, fisheries, and biosecurity—while coordinating aid funding through strong partnerships with the Government of Vanuatu.

One defining moment in Liku's career came while overseeing a project on a remote island that integrated private sector investment with local farming communities. An evaluation revealed an unintended consequence: a rise in gender-based violence linked to household income redistribution. Recognising the urgency, Liku acted immediately. "We partnered with CARE to integrate gender-sensitive

"For me, it's not just about your qualifications, it's about your capability to perform. Real growth comes from walking with colleagues & learning."

training and community education. It changed everything," she recalls. The result was transformative; pastors, chiefs, and local leaders became champions against violence, fostering safer, more equitable communities.

Liku has just transitioned to a new role as the Evidence and Impact Manager at the World Vision Vanuatu (WV) Country Program Office (CPO) in July 2025.

Liku credits her previous workplace environment for enabling her to lead with both purpose and empathy. "We don't have a rigid hierarchy. With an open-door policy, we can share ideas and support each other. Even on tough days, we find ways to laugh," she says.

As a woman also holding a board position in a private business while managing high-level development programs, Liku embodies strategic leadership and multi-tasking flexibility. Yet she is quick to reflect on her achievements with humility.

"When I started in planning, people didn't see me as capable because I was young and a woman. But I expanded, I learned, and I returned stronger. For me, it's not just about your qualifications, it's about your capability to perform. Real growth comes from walking alongside your colleagues and learning through experience."

Her practical approach to leadership also shaped her contributions to the Prime Minister's Office Aid Coordination Unit, where she facilitated planning sessions, streamlined processes, and helped align development partners with government priorities.

Her philosophy is rooted in resilience. "Every morning, I tell myself there are only two options: stay happy or stay sad. I choose to stay happy," she explains.

Whether facing criticism or navigating challenges, she views each obstacle as an opportunity to grow.

This resilience was put to the test in the most extreme way when Liku lost

her daughter to complications related to COVID-19 in 2022. But even through this darkest time, she found the strength to keep going and believe in her life's purpose to make a difference for others. These lessons guide her as she raises her daughter and supports her siblings.

Another daily source of inspiration, she says, comes from one of her younger siblings: "If things are beyond your control, don't stress. Focus on what you can control."

From reshaping government systems to empowering communities, from policy rooms to quiet evenings at home, Liku Jimmy continues to live out the values of leadership, empathy, and integrity.



ADVOCATE FOR GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNICATION



LILLYROSE WELWEL

Epi & Ambrym

PRESIDENT

MEDIA ASSOCIATION OF VANUATU

Lillyrose Welwel is a prominent figure in Vanuatu's media and business landscape, celebrated for her dynamic leadership and her unwavering commitment to governance, communication, and community development.

At 38 years old, Lillyrose has already established herself as a respected voice of influence and inspiration.

A devoted single mother of two, she proudly hails from the islands of Epi and Ambrym, carrying within her a deep connection to her heritage and the values it instilled.

Her upbringing in a faith-centred home, surrounded by family and community, shaped her moral compass and spiritual resilience. This foundation, combined with her

exposure to diverse cultures, has given her a broad worldview and a strong sense of purpose as a woman navigating leadership in modern Vanuatu.

Currently serving as the outgoing President of the Media Association of Vanuatu (MAV), Lillyrose brings together academic excellence and almost two decades of professional experience, and currently serves as the ABC Reporter for Vanuatu. Her educational background reflects her passion for both business and human development. She holds specialisation in business management with a focus on human resource administration, a field that aligns perfectly with her belief in people-centred leadership.

Her academic pursuits have also taken her beyond Vanuatu's shores. She undertook international training in trade, economics, and finance at the Asia-Pacific Journalism Centre in Melbourne, Australia, an experience that broadened her understanding of global systems and strengthened her ability to engage with complex governance and communication issues.

Lillyrose's professional journey began with the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), where she quickly distinguished herself as a multi-skilled media practitioner. From radio and television news

"What drives me is the opportunity to amplify the voices of others, foster good governance, and connect with people from all walks of life."

production to documentary filmmaking, public relations, and community engagement, she immersed herself in every aspect of the media industry. Her versatility allowed her to move fluidly between editorial work and corporate communication, giving her a unique insight into how media shapes public understanding and national development.

Over the years, she has worked across multiple sectors and with a diverse range of agencies—including international NGOs, private enterprises, and government initiatives.

Her leadership journey reached a new height when she was appointed President of MAV, a voluntary position through which she has tirelessly championed press freedom, ethical reporting, and the empowerment of media professionals throughout the country.

"I love media—I am passionate about it," she says with conviction. "What drives me is the opportunity to amplify the voices of others, foster good governance, and connect with people from all walks of life. Listening is learning—and leadership requires a listening heart." These words capture her leadership philosophy, one rooted in empathy, understanding, and inclusiveness.

Throughout her 18-year career, Lillyrose has collaborated with leading professionals and institutions, often working quietly behind the scenes to strengthen communication systems, support institutional reform, and mentor emerging talent. She speaks with deep admiration about the collective strength of Vanuatu's media community, acknowledging that collaboration and solidarity have been essential to the sector's growth.

Lillyrose is open about the personal cost of leadership. Reflecting on one of the most difficult periods in her professional journey, she shares: "There was a time I chose to keep peace by staying silent—even when

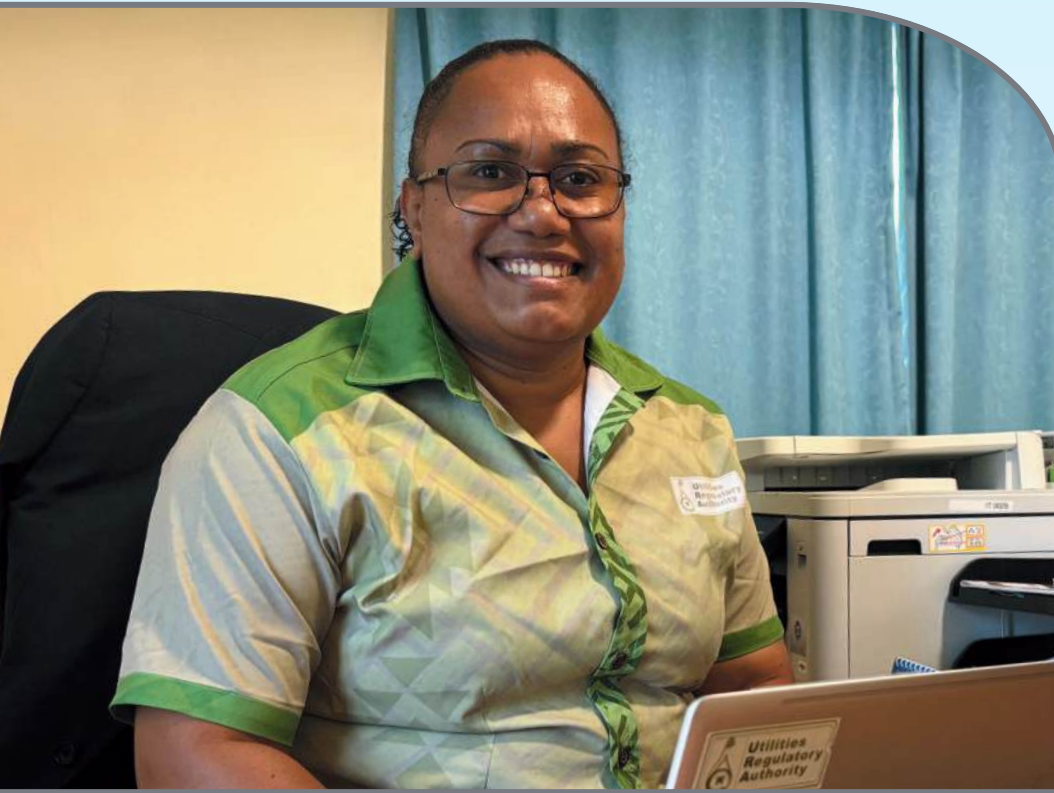
false narratives about my leadership spread. I did it not out of weakness, but out of a desire to protect fragile relationships and preserve unity. That decision, while costly, taught me the true weight of leadership."

For Lillyrose, leadership is a lifelong learning process. While she values formal education, she believes that wisdom, empathy, and emotional intelligence are what truly sustain great leaders.

Today, Lillyrose Welwel continues to inspire as a force of positive change—balancing governance with grace, professionalism with compassion, and leadership with the enduring values of faith and family.



FROM CURIOSITY TO LEADERSHIP RISE IN THE UTILITIES SECTOR



MAUREEN MALAS

Eplate

**MANAGER
UTILITIES REGULATORY AUTHORITY**

Maureen Malas is a 38-year-old Manager at the Utilities Regulatory Authority (URA), where she works under the Regulatory Economics and Accounting Division.

Currently engaged and with no children, Maureen has her life carefully mapped out—prioritising education and career before focusing on settling down once she feels

financially secure.

Maureen's education began at Central Primary School before she moved on to Malapoa College, where she completed her secondary education and graduated in Year 13. In 2008, she was awarded a New Zealand Scholarship to study in Fiji and earned her undergraduate degree in Accounting and Economics.

Upon her return to Vanuatu in 2010, Maureen applied for work and was accepted at URA that same year in September.

"I had no idea what that institution was for when I first arrived," she admits. "I didn't understand the roles and functions, but out of interest and curiosity, I stayed." Established in 2008 under the URA Act, the institution regulates electricity and water services across Vanuatu. It sets maximum prices for companies that supply these utilities, oversees performance standards, and addresses customer complaints.

Maureen began her career as an Analysis Officer and moved up the ladder to a managerial role, a position she held until 2017. After that, she resigned to pursue further studies at the Victoria University of Wellington under another New Zealand scholarship, completing a Master's in Professional Economics.

By 2019, she had returned to Vanuatu and began applying for employment opportunities. While she had part-time and holiday jobs, her next full-time post was again with URA. In 2020, when a vacancy for a management position opened, she applied and was successfully appointed. Maureen explains that the work culture at URA is a male-dominated environment with a blend

"Just be you and do what you love.

Stay on the course."

of officers from diverse qualifications and expertise.

Maureen believes both experience and qualification are equally necessary. "I'm an Accountant and Economist, but I understand how electricity is generated—from generation to retail. The experience you gain over the years is important because it builds your network and exposure. Education equips you with the required knowledge, but it comes down to your personal drive. Some people are educated but lazy, while others without formal education are highly skilled and experienced."

Her best work quality, she believes, is the ability to teach and advise colleagues. She refuses to keep knowledge to herself and makes a conscious effort to explain complex ideas in ways that grassroots communities can understand.

Public speaking was once Maureen's greatest fear, especially in front of expatriate staff who dominated the organization in earlier years. But over time, Maureen built confidence and now speaks freely in workshops and regional conferences. "It took me a while to get out of that shell, but it was all worth it."

Maureen's motivation also comes from her personal investments. With her wages, she has built and grown a

rental business, including houses under her name, to sustain her after retirement. Looking ahead, Maureen hopes to eventually work with regional regulatory offices while expanding her private business.

She lives by the words: "Just be you and do what you love. Stay on the course."

As a leader, Maureen believes in work plans, clear priorities, and open communication.

"A leader should never neglect her team. Even if you're busy, you must communicate and keep your team grounded."

Being a woman in a male-dominated sector has not been easy.

"Sometimes when we express opinions, we're not taken seriously. But if a man says the same thing, they'll listen. Women must be confident and strong-willed."

To women, Maureen's message is clear: "Don't let anyone dictate your life. Be confident, stand tall, and speak with truth. Every challenge is temporary—don't give up."

And if today were her last day? She would spend it with her closest family and friends, thanking them for everything—just as her late father once did.



A QUIET FORCE IN DEVELOPMENT BANKS



NANCY WELLS

Espiritu Santo

**PRINCIPAL COUNTRY OFFICER,
ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, VANUATU PACIFIC**

From the island of Espiritu Santo in northern Vanuatu, Nancy Wells has spent decades quietly and purposefully influencing the trajectory of national development, both behind the scenes in government and now at the forefront of one of the world's leading development banks.

"I come from the island of Santo. My matrilineal lineage is from Tongoa Island and my patrilineal lineage is from Hog Harbour village."

Nancy grew up in Santo and went to Tata Primary School in South Santo before attending Malapoa College in Port Vila. From there, she did her university entrance at New Plymouth

Girls' High School, commenced a science degree with the University of Otago in NZ, then continued her studies across multiple countries, including Japan, Australia, Germany, the UK, and the Philippines.

Nancy holds a Bachelor's in economics from James Cook University and two Master's - a double-major in International Relations and Development Studies from the UK and one in Business Administration from Manila.

Her academic path was shaped by an early interest in numbers and analysis, but it was a local experience that planted the seed for her future.

"I started working for the Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO) as a supervisor for the 1989 Census in Santo," she says. "After that, I got a scholarship to study in Japan. That's when I really became interested in economics."

Nancy returned to Vanuatu in 1991 and joined the VNSO as a permanent staff member. She rose quickly, eventually becoming the Government Statistician (GS) in 1999 during the Government's comprehensive reform program that began in 1998.

"During my stint as GS, I also filled in the role of Acting Director of the Department of Economics and Sector Planning (DESP, now moved to the PM's Office and known as DSPPAC) from 2004–2006 as well as the role of

"Remain humble always and thank God in all circumstances.

Remember, all jobs are genderless, except bearing babies."

Acting Director-General (DG) Finance while the DG took up a program in the World Bank. During these periods, I chaired the VNPF where my board instituted the first investment guideline of the fund and amended the VNPF Act to start subsidiary investment arms of the fund. My board was instrumental in approving the building of the Australia High Commission's office. I co-chaired and assisted in the set-up of AVL Limited and sat on various committees. We also set up the Macroeconomics Committee in 1998."

Nancy's transition to international development came in mid-2006, when she joined the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as a Director's Advisor on the Board representing Vanuatu until early 2010.

In May 2010, she was asked by Minister Sela Molisa to help set up a joint office for the ADB and the World Bank in Vanuatu. She took on the role as a consultant and helped establish the first-ever ADB/World Bank joint-liaison office in August of that year, in the newly completed Reserve Bank building under the leadership of Governor Odo Tevi.

Nancy recalls that period vividly. "ADB had been absent for 13 years and the World Bank had re-engaged after 19 years."

Today, as the Principal Country Officer for the ADB Vanuatu Pacific Country Office, Nancy oversees a growing portfolio of development projects.

"Back in 2010, our portfolio was under \$90 million. Today it's over \$190 million in active projects covering infrastructure, energy, education, health, climate resilience, Water and Urban and more."

Her 19 years in development financing have involved policy dialogue, donor coordination, and ensuring ADB projects align with Vanuatu's national development goals.

Nancy avoids micromanagement, preferring instead to delegate and empower her team.

"I encourage them to take risks, apply for new opportunities, and grow professionally. We celebrate milestones together, hold regular meetings, and I always share what I learn. Praying is also a major part of our work culture—we bring our faith into our work."

Nancy encourages everyone to "Always challenge yourself to get to the top. But remain humble always and thank God in all circumstances. Remember, all jobs are genderless except bearing babies."



LEADING WITH PURPOSE AND FAITH



NELLY WILLY MATOU

Paama

PROGRAM QUALITY, INCLUSION AND COMMUNICATION LEAD
VANUATU AUSTRALIA HEALTH PARTNERSHIP

At the heart of the Vanuatu Australia Health Partnership (VAHP) stands Nelly Willy Matou, an experienced leader who has journeyed to national influence.

With more than two decades of experience in youth development, governance, and public health, Nelly is currently the Program Quality,

Inclusion, and Communication Lead for VAHP, where she continues to shape the future of health services in Vanuatu.

Born in South Paama, Nelly grew up in Luganville, Santo, where her parents relocated during her childhood. Her early education began at Ecole Primaire de Sainte Thérèse,

before she moved to Port Vila to attend Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville, completing her secondary education to Year 13. In 2000, she earned a Diplôme de Tourisme et Loisirs from the Vanuatu Institute of Technology.

Her thirst for learning never faded. While working full-time, she embarked on a long educational path through the University of the South Pacific (USP), completing a Diploma in Management Studies in 2017, a Bachelor of Commerce in 2019, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Commerce in 2025. Nelly is currently two courses away from completing her Master's degree, aiming to graduate by 2027.

Nelly's career began in 2004 as a Youth Development Officer with Youth Challenge Vanuatu, working with out-of-school youth and managing rural community projects. Her work with Oxfam from 2007 to 2012 saw her rise from Youth Officer to Program Manager, coordinating national programs and partnerships.

Between 2013 and 2017, she served as the Country Representative for the Pacific Leadership Program, supporting leadership and governance reforms. One of her most impactful contributions during this time was helping shape key policies such as the Right to Information Act, Youth Authority Act and the Special Temporary Measures for women's

*"When purpose drives your work,
every challenge becomes a step toward progress."*

representation in Municipality Councils. After a return to Youth Challenge Vanuatu as Executive Director, Nelly transitioned into public health, joining VAHP as Operations Manager. Her role evolved into Program Quality Coordinator with VAHP and, most recently, into her current senior leadership role.

Through these positions, Nelly has worked at the intersection of community engagement, health system strengthening, and governance. Her leadership helped secure resources for the re-registration of the Vanuatu College of Nursing Education, a move that strengthened the nation's health workforce and service delivery capacity.

Nelly describes the work culture at VAHP as one of inclusivity and local leadership. She values the partnership-based approach that brings together national expertise with international insights. Her team combines local knowledge with external perspectives to support the Ministry of Health in delivering impactful programs.

For Nelly, each step forward in health service delivery or policy reform is a sign that purpose-driven work matters. "When purpose drives your work, every challenge becomes a step toward progress."

Balancing work, family, and community is a daily exercise in time management and self-care. Nelly finds creative expression and relaxation through her sewing business, started in 2007. Her leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly in youth ministries, has also been a significant outlet for service and personal growth. Nelly's contributions go beyond her formal work. She has served on several boards, including Transparency Vanuatu, VANGO, and currently V-Lab. She also plays an active role in professional networks focusing on leadership, life skills, and innovation.

Nelly wants women in Vanuatu to embrace their role as change makers. She urges them to dream big, work hard, and lean on their faith. "The power to make decisions lies within you," she says, encouraging women to silence self-doubt and believe in their vision.

"Women bring diverse perspectives, strengthen decision-making, and promote inclusive leadership. When men and women lead together, they complement each other's strengths, resulting in more balanced and effective outcomes. Diversity at the board level helps organisations reach their full potential."



INSPIRING LEADERSHIP AND DEDICATION



ROSLYN ARTHUR DAVID

Efate

ADVISOR

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND

Roslyn David, 48, is a dedicated leader from Efate, married to a Santo native. She is a proud mother of two and a grandmother to a three-month-old grandson. Currently, she serves with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Vanuatu, an international organisation focused on reproductive health, gender equality, and population issues.

Growing up in Port Vila, Roslyn frequently spent holidays in her home village of Siviri, north Efate. She considers herself fortunate to reside close to her home village where she derives her connection to community and culture. Her parents, both public servants, inspired her dedication to service from an early age.

Roslyn began her professional journey as a teacher at Malapoa College, instructing Year 11–13 students in history and geography. She spent four and a half years teaching before joining the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2003, working in the UN division.

By 2008, as UN agencies expanded their presence in the Pacific, Roslyn transitioned to the UN system. She was initially contracted by UNICEF to serve as a coordinator, stepping in for UN agencies lacking a physical presence in Vanuatu. In this role, she played a key part in program management and coordination, ensuring that UN funds were efficiently allocated to create meaningful, measurable impacts in the country.

In March 2023, she officially joined UNFPA as a consultant, before quickly rising to a leadership position, where she now oversees the office's operations and strategic initiatives.

Roslyn holds a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Queensland, Australia, completed in 2020. She reflects on pursuing her Master's later in life as both a challenge and an advantage, allowing her to integrate years of professional experience into academic learning. For Roslyn, experience is as critical as formal education, providing practical wisdom that enhances leadership.

*"Pursue education and meaningful careers,
and speak with confidence and optimism despite adversity."*

Her inspiration for working in the UN stems from a lifelong curiosity about global events. Guided by the principle that "no man is an island," Roslyn believes that what happens around the world inevitably affects Vanuatu. This perspective drives her interest in geopolitics and global interconnectedness.

At UNFPA, Roslyn's work focuses on sexual and reproductive health, ensuring families can exercise their reproductive rights, including decisions about family size and spacing.

She is particularly committed to empowering women, girls, and marginalized communities, ensuring that interventions are meaningful and life changing.

She values the UN's investment in staff development, training, and welfare, which allows her to grow personally and professionally while making a positive impact.

Family is central to Roslyn's life. She credits her mother, a pioneering nurse from the Solomon Islands, and her father, Vanuatu's first land surveyor, for inspiring her dedication to service.

Her own family—including her grandchildren—provides her with strength and balance, helping her

navigate the pressures of professional life with joy and resilience.

"My greatest personal accomplishment is caring for my parents and ensuring that my children grow up with values of responsibility and compassion toward others," she says.

She encourages young Ni-Vanuatu women to exercise agency in shaping their futures, to pursue education and meaningful careers, and to speak with confidence and optimism despite adversity.

Her vision is for them to embody both pride in Vanuatu's family and communal values and a readiness to engage with the global community.

Roslyn believes that every challenge presents an opportunity to grow. She strives to give her best in all aspects of life, learning from successes and failures alike.

Through her work, family, and dedication to community, she serves as a powerful example for the next generation of Ni-Vanuatu women, inspiring them to pursue their goals fearlessly while remaining grounded in their culture and values.



A VOICE OF PURPOSE, VISION AND QUIET POWER



SARAH MECARTNEY

Erromango

REGIONAL DIRECTOR, MELANESIA
THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY (SPC)

Sarah Anne Nautong Mecartney has spent over two decades demonstrating how regional development work can be led with values, ethics, and a long-term vision. Today, she serves as the Regional Director for Melanesia at the Pacific Community (SPC), but her story goes far beyond her title. It is a story of resilience, service, and the deep

belief that leadership is about listening and lifting others. A daughter of Erromango who grew up on the island of Efate, Sarah has spent over twenty years building a career that spans public service, science, innovation, and strategic leadership. From her early days at Central Primary School and Malapoa College

to the classrooms of UWC Atlantic in the United Kingdom, the University of London, and the University of Sydney, she has carried with her a strong sense of purpose.

Sarah's current role at SPC is expansive and dynamic. She is responsible for building and maintaining regional relationships, strengthening the delivery of scientific and technical capabilities across Melanesia, and ensuring staff wellbeing.

It's a role that demands both vision and empathy, the two traits Sarah has cultivated through years of working in development and regional policy spaces. "I find my work deeply fulfilling, precisely because it changes every day and constantly requires learning and humility. Seeing progress take root in communities, and witnessing the ripple effect of positive change, is what brings me the greatest satisfaction".

Before joining SPC, Sarah held several leadership and advisory roles. Her portfolio includes work across science, technology, innovation, and development. While the roles may have varied, her focus has remained steady: supporting inclusive, values-led development outcomes and helping to create enabling environments for others.

Not every decision in her career has been easy. One of the toughest

*"I believe true leadership is not about holding power,
but about preparing others to carry it forward".*

moments came when she accepted a position for financial reasons rather than for purpose or alignment. Although it met practical needs at the time, the experience left her feeling disconnected. Looking back, that period served as an important turning point. It reminded her that career choices are not just economic, they are also personal and cultural. "These lessons are what fuel my commitment to work that is rooted in service and grounded in values", she asserts.

Throughout her life, Sarah has drawn strength from a small circle of constants: family, faith, and friends. These sources of support have helped her navigate both professional pressures and personal trials. She speaks openly about the "heroism pressure" often placed on people in Vanuatu — the expectation that resilience must come effortlessly, all the time.

Sarah's commitment to service extends beyond her professional duties. She is actively involved in community-led initiatives that reflect the cultural values she holds dear - resilience, collective wellbeing, and the importance of local voices. Rather than labelling this as charity work, she sees it as a natural extension of her identity and responsibilities. She doesn't point to a single achievement as her proudest.

Instead, she describes her career as a collective of shared wins, which was made possible through collaboration, mentorship, and support networks.

Her ability to ask for help, and to recognise the strength in others, has been one of her defining traits.

One of the most important lessons she has learned in her career is to stay open. She likens it to crossing the road: pause, listen, and learn. That philosophy has guided her through tough decisions, organisational changes, and shifting political landscapes.

"I believe true leadership is not about holding power, but about preparing others to carry it forward".

She encourages women to lead with purpose, not perfection, and to see imposter syndrome as a shared experience that can be overcome with the right support.

To young women entering leadership or professional spaces, Sarah's message is simple: "Your values, empathy, and courage are your greatest tools. Don't strive for perfection: instead, strive to make a difference."



BREAKING BARRIERS WITHIN NGOS



SHIRLEY ABRAHAM

Malekula

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
VANUATU ASSOCIATION OF NGOS

Shirley Abraham's journey into leadership did not begin with a clear path or a predetermined plan. Like many young people in Vanuatu, she once believed that the best career options lay in traditionally respected professions such as law or aviation. "Before, I thought becoming a lawyer or a pilot was the best job you could find," she recalls.

But as fate would have it, Shirley found her calling in the NGO development sector, a world that, at first, she might not have envisioned. "I realised I made a good decision. It is truly rewarding to see positive change happening in people's lives," she says with a sense of fulfillment. This realisation transformed her outlook, showing her that the impact

one could have on community development far outweighed the prestige of her earlier aspirations.

Working in the NGO sector, however, has not been without its challenges. Shirley has encountered deeply ingrained cultural norms and gender biases that still shape leadership roles in Vanuatu.

She explains, "When you work with male-dominated committees or decision-making platforms, especially as a woman, our culture says women have limitations in leadership."

This candid admission reveals the social barriers many women face — barriers not just of policy or procedure, but of mindset and tradition. Yet Shirley refuses to be confined by these limitations. Over time, she has seen these barriers begin to crumble.

Shirley's leadership extends beyond her personal journey. She actively participates in mentoring networks designed to support young women as they navigate their own paths.

"I am part of mentor networks where we help young women grow and become leaders in their communities," she shares, underscoring her belief that leadership is a collective responsibility. For Shirley, mentoring is not just about passing on advice but about building a future

"I want women to trust their abilities, their contributions, and their technical expertise — and to make themselves visible,"

generation of confident women who will carry forward the torch of change.

Her role as CEO of the Vanuatu Association of NGOs (VANGO) stands as a significant milestone in her career.

"When I joined, there was no office operation funding. I took the risk to find funding and to pay for staff salary," she remembers.

This bold move not only revived VANGO but also highlighted her determination to lead by example. Shirley's success in revitalising the organisation speaks volumes about her leadership style — one grounded in risk-taking, perseverance, and a commitment to service.

One of the key issues Shirley champions is the importance of women's representation in leadership roles, particularly on boards.

She argues, "Women bring a special contribution because they offer the female perspective in decision-making. You have to have confidence — sometimes people might not immediately see the greatness in you, but you must be confident enough to take on the tasks given to you."

This message resonates deeply in a society where traditional expectations may hold many back from stepping into their full potential.

Shirley's words serve as a powerful call to embrace self-belief and courage as necessary tools for success.

"I want women to trust their abilities, their contributions, and their technical expertise — and to make themselves visible," she states with conviction.

Despite her modern outlook, Shirley holds a profound respect for Vanuatu's culture and traditions.

"Vanuatu is unique; people are conservative and traditional, which is something to be proud of," she observes.

Shirley's advice to the next generation of women is both practical and visionary: "Think outside the box. With digitisation and technology, find innovative ways to advance your careers in this new era."

By breaking barriers, mentoring future leaders, and revitalising key organizations, she is forging a path for Vanuatu's women to follow — a path illuminated by confidence, courage, and conviction.



PAVING THE WAY FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS



TATAVOLA MATAS

**NATIONAL COORDINATOR
VANUATU WOMEN'S CENTRE**

Ifira

Tatavola Lumbu Matas is a formidable leader in the advancement of women's rights in Vanuatu.

At 42 years of age, Tatavola serves as the National Coordinator of the Vanuatu Women's Centre (VWC), where she also holds the position of Principal Legal Officer.

A proud daughter of Tongoa and Ifira—her father's home islands, and Pentecost Island—her mother's home island—and of Port Vila, where she was born and raised, Tatavola's professional and personal life is deeply rooted in service, advocacy, and justice.

Her journey into leadership and law

began with a passion for helping others and a commitment to making a difference in the lives of women facing injustice.

After completing her early education in Port Vila, Tatavola pursued legal studies at the University of the South Pacific (USP), earning a Bachelor of Laws, followed by a Postgraduate Diploma in Legal Practice.

She later completed her Master of Laws at the Australian National University—an achievement that would prepare her to become a central figure in Vanuatu's legal advocacy for women.

Tatavola began her journey at the Vanuatu Women's Centre as a volunteer between 2003 and 2004, a time she describes as eye-opening.

In 2005, she took time off to further her legal studies, returning in 2010 to assume a formal position at the Centre.

Over the past 15 years, she has been instrumental in coordinating national efforts to support survivors of gender-based violence, while also overseeing sub-centres in Vanuatu's provinces.

She is a strong believer in access to justice as a fundamental right.

Throughout her career, she has witnessed first-hand the challenges

"The law is for everyone.

Every woman and every girl deserves access to justice."

many women and girls face in seeking legal support—often blocked by cost, lack of information, or societal attitudes in a patriarchal setting.

These experiences have only deepened her resolve. "The law is for everyone," she states firmly. "Every woman and every girl deserves to access justice."

Tatavola's leadership has been tested by both professional hurdles and cultural pushback.

At times, she has faced threats—some even invoking witchcraft—while advocating for women who dare to challenge systemic abuse. Yet, her faith in God, her strong sense of purpose, and the unwavering support of her family and colleagues have kept her grounded.

"My life is safe because I have my family and colleagues, who take care of me. That's what keeps me going."

Under her guidance, the Vanuatu Women's Centre continues to evolve—now in its 33rd year—serving as a national pillar of support and empowerment for women and girls across the country.



CHAMPIONING CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND COMPASSION



VIVIAN OBED

Paama

GENERAL MANAGER FURTHER ARTS

At the helm of Further Arts stands a woman whose name has become synonymous with cultural advocacy, youth empowerment, and women's leadership in Vanuatu.

Vivian Obed, General Manager of Further Arts, has dedicated her life to service, finding strength in her family, faith, and the values that shaped her upbringing.

Born and raised in Vanuatu, Vivian's story is deeply rooted in the traditions of her country. She grew up in a warm and community-oriented environment, grounded in culture and responsibility. As a wife, mother of five, and grandmother of three, she carries a deep understanding of the challenges and blessings that come with balancing family, work, and purpose.

Vivian's academic path included formal schooling, but her most significant education came through experience. From an early age, Vivian was drawn to causes that uplift others, particularly youth and women. Before joining Further Arts, she held various positions that cultivated her leadership skills and broadened her understanding of grassroots and national development work.

What drew her into the nonprofit sector was a calling to be part of something meaningful. Her journey into Further Arts came from a desire to be engaged in cultural and social impact work, giving voice to those often unheard.

Today, as General Manager of Further Arts, Vivian oversees programs that focus on community development, arts, and cultural revitalisation. Her role involves strategic planning, organisational leadership, and building partnerships that amplify local voices.

What she loves most about her job is the opportunity to create change and to bring people together through storytelling, arts, and shared values. One of the best decisions she made was to pursue this path despite uncertainties, because it allowed her to work in alignment with her principles.

*Once a goal is reached, set another—even harder—
to keep growing."*

Vivian's career has not been without fear. At times, she's faced the pressure of leading during difficult moments, but she draws strength from her belief in open communication, family support, and her faith in God. In moments of hardship, she talks to herself, prays, and leans on trusted relationships.

Since she joined Further Arts, Vivian has seen the organisation evolve to become more inclusive and impactful. She is excited about its direction and plans to continue contributing while nurturing younger leaders who can carry the vision forward.

Vivian is deeply inspired by her mother and the other strong women who shaped her life. Their wisdom, resilience, and commitment to others remain guiding lights. Talking things through with family or a trusted friend has helped her maintain mental and emotional balance.

Vivian's proudest accomplishments include raising her children, being a present grandmother, and building a life filled with service and joy. One of her greatest lessons is that goal setting can protect your health and happiness. As she shares: "Once a goal is reached, set another—even harder—to keep growing."

A career setback she once faced later became a stepping stone.

At the time, it felt like failure, but in hindsight, it opened a new direction filled with opportunity.

Her advice to young women is to believe in themselves, especially when they hear inner voices of doubt.

"Like yourself even when things go bad," she advises. "Don't blame yourself. Don't bottle it in. And never feel alone. There is always someone to talk to."

Vivian emphasises the power of resilience, describing it as the ball that refuses to sink. To the next generation of women leaders, her guidance is to be expressive, to trust themselves, and to always get back up no matter the fall.

Vivian Obed embodies the spirit of nation building with a heart full of culture, compassion, and commitment.

Her life and work remind us that leadership begins with love—for oneself, for others, and for the place we call home.



THE VOICE, VISION, AND POWER BEHIND SISTA



YASMINE BJORNUM COVO

Vanuatu

FOUNDER & DIRECTOR SISTA

"My life is a gift from God. How I live my life is my gift back to Him."

This powerful quote is more than just a mantra for Yasmine Bjornum Covo—it is the philosophy that guides her activism, her leadership, and her personal journey.

Born and raised in Vanuatu, Yasmine is the founder and force behind Sista,

a grassroots feminist organisation and media platform she launched in 2016. Before starting Sista, Yasmine studied journalism and creative writing at the University of Technology in Sydney.

She did not finish her degree as she faced an unplanned pregnancy. Facing the journey alone, Yasmine experienced the stigma of being a

single mother and saw the importance of creating spaces so that women can connect, share their stories and uplift each other.

What began as a digital platform to amplify women's voices has since evolved into a nationally recognised organization working on gender-based violence, women's leadership, civic engagement, and the creative arts.

Yasmine didn't just want to create a platform—she wanted to change norms. "Our hope is that women and girls are able to make decisions that affect their lives and to have a voice," she says.

Sista is known for its unapologetically bold presence. Its campaigns incorporate music, fashion, visual art, and media. For Yasmine, culture is not separate from activism—it is the vehicle through which social change can happen.

Yasmine is not afraid to speak uncomfortable truths. In her feminist advocacy, she has faced criticism from within the Pacific feminist movement for her opinions on gender and identity.

Yet she holds fast to the need for respectful dialogue and cultural sensitivity. Her approach to feminism is grounded in values, not trends.

"Don't be afraid to talk about what's in your heart."

"Be true to yourself."

"I think Sista's biggest challenge is to consider how we progress gender equality while still respecting Christian principles and Melanesian values. It's why Sista is adamant we need to have uncomfortable conversations so we can move forward as a prosperous nation for all, but still protect Vanuatu's identity."

Despite her international education and experience, Yasmine's heart remains firmly rooted in Vanuatu. "I joke that my blood is Filipino and Swedish, but my heart is Ni-Vanuatu. I'm very proud of my country, and I am more certain of this the more I travel around the world. We are a peaceful country, rich in resources, and full of decent people. We don't even realize how blessed we are," she reflects.

Yasmine sees civil society not as a platform for individual ego but as a space for collective service. "If you're in this space for money, power, or ego, go to the private sector. Civil society is for those who want to serve their country and people."

Yasmine encourages people to not just focus on formal education to better their lives. "We all have smartphones and the internet. If you don't know how to do something, learn how to do it online," she advises.

"Don't have a mindset of 'getting a job'. Create your own dream job. Be your own boss. Our nation is young and we need to foster an entrepreneurial mindset."

Through Sista, Yasmine works at the intersection of culture, gender equality, and development.

The organisation is deeply involved in issues like empowerment, women in leadership, and movement-building.

When asked what her final words would be if today were her last day, Yasmine answers without hesitation:

"I am aware that life is a blessing and that God doesn't promise tomorrow. So I don't have any final words. I try to say everything from my heart now, and match it with action, and live each day like it's my last, just in case it is."

That urgency and sincerity define everything she does. Fierce, grounded, and visionary, Yasmine Bjornum Covo continues to build a life—and a movement—that empowers women to dream, speak, and lead. She is not just creating space. She is creating change.



