



**Winner of the Australian High Commission
2020 International Women's Day
40th Anniversary Gender Equality Advocate
Award**

Merilyn Tahigogona

I have the honour to nominate Merilyn Rose Leodoro Tahigogona (Merilyn Tahigogona), the coordinator of the Vanuatu Women's Centre for the 40th Anniversary Gender Equality Award.

Merilyn was born on Ambae in the north of the country on 26 June 1950. Her parents were from the island of Pentecost but went to work for the Anglican mission on Ambae as a doctor there. Merilyn was the eldest of seven siblings, and was married to Ambae. She went to school on Ambae and later became one of the first students chosen to attend the then British Secondary school in Port-Vila; now Malapoa College from 1966 to 1970. She left secondary education by force to get married, as was the customary practice by then, and she had to respect that.

She worked for 20 years in the Government, firstly in the Condominium Government before Independence and in the Foreign Affairs Ministry after independence as a public servant as well as briefly in political posts.

Merilyn's volunteer service included the Vanuatu National Council of Women, Sports and Community groupings in the 1980's. She has served on many committees within both Government and NGO. She had held the post of Chairperson of VANGO the Vanuatu Association of NGOs and national committee to oversee the writing of the national CEDAW report in the 1990's.

In September 1992, she was involved in setting up the Committee on Violence against women to become later the Vanuatu Women's Centre – a crisis-counselling centre for survivors of Domestic Violence. She holds the post as Coordinator. The VWC now has five sub-centres in the provinces and 38 Committees throughout the islands.

She had that passion to complete an education, so she did degree courses by extension with the Reg Revans University and graduated with a Bachelor of Management in 2003, which empowered her greatly in her work.

She has been actively advocating against Violence Against Women and Girls and advocating for Gender Equality in Vanuatu and in the Pacific since 1992 to date. She is a very active member of the Pacific Network Against Violence Against Women.

What I admire about her is her commitment in addressing Violence Against Women and Girls and advancing gender equality. Merilyn was bold to speak against violence against women and girls, and against gender inequality against all odds, even when gender equality was not part of the government priority in the 1990's.

What I also admired about her was that between 1992- 1994 (before the Australia Government started funding VWC in 1994), she and her other colleagues did voluntary work and ran the small counselling centre out of their own pockets, or that of their husbands and out of their personal fundraising efforts to support their clients.

Through Marilyn and her colleagues' work in addressing Violence Against Women and Girls and Domestic Violence in 1992, Vanuatu was made aware that Violence Against Women and Girls and Domestic Violence is an issue.

Marilyn continues to advocate in all avenues, whether it is a Vanuatu Women's Centre workshop, or some other advocacy avenue that Violence Against Women and Girls and other aspects of gender inequality affect all areas of women's and girls' lives and have a detrimental impact on the advancement of women and girls. For example, last week, she watched the talk back segment by the Presenter of the *Inside Long News* Presentation at Television Blong Vanuatu, and thought the callers were giving all the wrong ideas and solutions regarding the death of women and girls in the past weeks. She decided that there was not enough information given, so she called and arranged for a radio interview the next day to ensure that adequate and right information is given to the public regarding the issue, and that people -especially men and boys must respect women and girls. She made an emphasis that the notion of abusing and killing women is an issue of power, in which men/boys believe they have towards women, coupled by the negative attitudes towards women and girls and the lack of respect towards women and girls.

Marilyn firmly believes that Gender Equality is achievable if women and girls are recognised as equals in all levels of society; and all discriminatory practices and attitudes towards women and girls are eliminated.

That is why she believes in the work Vanuatu Women's Centre does in helping to make a change in society's attitudes towards women and girls.

I believe Marilyn deserves the award for the continuous work she does in advocating for gender equality.

Tatavola Matas