

Her story: Lilieta Takau – leading through service and resilience

I grew up in a family where education and service shaped our daily lives. With both of my parents as educators, I watched their unwavering commitment to the people of Tonga – King, state, church and community. Their example inspired me to begin my own journey as a teacher and planted in me a vision of leadership as humble service to others.

My career has not followed a straight line, and I believe that is an important message for young people today. I moved from teaching into environmental work, supporting national initiatives and community engagement. Over time, I transitioned into development programming and leadership roles across environmental governance, ocean planning, public sector reform, economic development and education. In each of these spaces, I have had the privilege to guide teams, influence policy discussions and help shape programs that touch the lives of our communities. Each step taught me something new about service, resilience and the responsibility we carry for our people.

Joining Save the Children last year felt like a natural continuation of that calling. Strengthening the systems that protect and support children is, to me, nation-building. Saving the children is saving Tonga, because our future depends on how we nurture, educate and safeguard the next generation. In my role, I see myself as a steward of that future – championing children’s rights, backing the women and men who care for them, and making sure our work reflects the realities of families across our islands.

A defining moment in my life came in late 2023 when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. In those moments, your priorities become clear – family, faith and the relationships that truly matter. I also came to see leadership differently: not as never breaking, but as choosing honesty, courage and hope even when you are afraid. I had to learn to lead my own life and my teams from a place of vulnerability, to ask for help and to model that it is possible to keep moving forward, one small step at a time.



My message to women this International Women's Day is simple: It's okay to cry, to feel overwhelmed and even to fall down. What matters is finding your anchor and standing up again. My anchor was Jesus, the one who saves. I want women and girls to know that their tears do not disqualify them from leadership; they can be the very place where strength, compassion and clarity begin.

Today, our young people have greater access to education and leadership opportunities than ever before. As we celebrate this progress, we must ensure education remains grounded in our Tongan values – respect, service, faith and community: Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga ko hotau Tofi'a. With more than half of our population under 24, their voices must be central in shaping Tonga's future, and we as leaders must create spaces where they are heard, mentored and trusted with real responsibility.

For me, leadership always returns to one principle: service. Whether in a classroom, a village meeting, a government office or an organisation like Save the Children, I see leadership as lifting others, protecting those who are most vulnerable and making decisions anchored in our values. If my journey says anything to the next generation of Tongan women, I hope it is this: your path does not need to be straight to be meaningful, and even in seasons of hardship, you can still rise, lead and serve with courage and grace.