

# From SAI Young Leader to senior SAI representative at a unique gender-focussed summit – two SYL graduates reflect on their journey

The first ever PASAI (Pacific Supreme Audit Institutions) Women Symposium took place from 12-15 February 2024, in Apia, Samoa. In an extraordinary example of female empowerment in public auditing, the three-day event was attended by around 80 established and emerging leaders from PASAI and the Samoan public sector, including integrity agencies, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), regional and development partners, and the media.

Among the women present were two graduates of IDI's SAI Young Leaders (SYL) programme. Oceanbaby Penitito, from SAI Samoa, was not only a participant in the inaugural Symposium, but was also a member of the first cohort of SYLs who immersed themselves in the programme from 2017-2018. Maritina Iloi Cirikisuva from SAI Fiji was one of the only candidates from the Pacific SAIs to participate and graduate from the third round of SYL in 2022 – 2023. Here, both SYLs discuss how their SYL experience contributed to their proud presence at the PASAI Women Symposium.

## Ocean

As I reflect on my journey as a SAI Young Leader, I would like to re-emphasise these words: *"Leadership is a journey, not a destination"*.

I was in middle management when I applied for the SAI Young Leaders Programme, 2017-2018. I saw myself as a bridge, assisting senior management strategically, supporting our junior staff operationally, and relaying the message from top to bottom and bottom to top in a manner that would improve the SAI as a whole.

In this position, I realised that I needed to discover more about myself - and that is exactly what the SYL programme did, providing a stepping-stone to assist me with self-discovery to support my growth to where I am now.



Photo: Oceanbaby Penitito presenting on SYL programme



Photo: Ocean speaking at PASAI's Women's Symposium February 2024

The support and 'exposure' of SYL were also important. Having the Controller and Auditor General as my mentor for the SYL programme gave me a great opportunity to be involved in the bigger picture of our SAI. It enabled me to build synergistic relationships in pushing for my SYL change strategy to succeed, and to shape my career development plan going forward. The exposure also expanded my network with other auditors in the SYL programme globally, as well as CAGs within PASAI.

As I reflected on SYL, I realised that it's not the end point that matters, but the journey – and, most definitely, the learning. I was the first person from SAI Samoa to complete the SYL programme. I was involved in the first SDGs Audit on Preparedness. The SDGs Preparedness Report was our first stand-alone report to Parliament. These are significant milestones, for me personally and for the SAI.

And PASAI's first ever Women's Leadership Symposium in Samoa is another such milestone. As a presenter as well as a participant, I was deeply honoured and privileged to speak on behalf of the Controller and Auditor General, who was and will always be my mentor. The atmosphere was full of resilient, influential women leaders from the public and private sectors. Inspired and inspiring women speakers from all walks of life such as parliamentarians, former and current chief executive officers, lawyers, judges, governors, media reps, academia, coaches in the sports industry, financial institutions and donor partners - all shared their experiences, aspirations and challenges with very inspirational, informative and moving messages. I can personally say that 'the leadership journey must go on!'



*Ocean with young female colleagues at the Women's Symposium*

## Maritina



*SYL Fiji, Maritina Cirikisuva and SYL China, Bai Yu, at the 2nd SYL interaction in Arusha, Tanzania - 23 to 27 October 2023*

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG), Fiji, is a female dominated organisation with women forming close to 60% of the establishment. From the pool of very eligible women holding senior positions in OAG, I was nominated by our current Acting Deputy Auditor General, Ms. Finau Nagera, to accompany her to the PASAI Women's Symposium, where she was a speaker.

My nomination was due, in part, to my recent graduation from IDI's SYL Programme, as well as my profile as an upcoming female leader in OAG. It's a great achievement for SAI Fiji to have participated in and completed all three consecutive cohorts of SYL since its inception in 2017 - not just because candidates have successfully graduated from the programme, but because all three graduates are women. I'm the third female SYL graduate from SAI Fiji.

While the SYL programme has delivered on its promise to achieve its two-pronged objective of 'changed SAI and changed SYL', the journey was not an easy one. A high degree of sacrifice, determination and perseverance was required to carry out the change strategy from concept to implementation. Through my change strategy, "Taking full advantage of our digital working tool (Team Mate Plus)", SAI Fiji now has a risk library with audited entities categorised according

to strategic and operational risks, allowing for proper scheduling and customised procedures and folders on Team Mate Plus. I believe that I've also grown as a person because of the skills and knowledge learned and gained from SYL. I now consider myself more confident, competent and better equipped as an upcoming female leader in OAG.



*From left: Participants from SAI Fiji, Cook Islands, and SAI's from the Australian Audit Offices. (Source: Samoan Government shared by PASAI.)*

The emotions felt when being nominated to attend the first ever PASAI Women Symposium mirrored those emotions felt when I was informed of my selection into the SYL programme back in October 2022. It was truly an honour and privilege to represent my SAI – OAG, Fiji. Being able to witness so many well-established women during the Women's Symposium was empowering and motivating. Networking and experience-sharing during the event was not only eye opening, but it also stimulated the necessary action from the receiving SAIs, as the more developed SAIs shared their experiences on audit practices that would allow audit for impact.

Other messages and stories echoed circumstances back at home in Fiji. The “Frozen Middle” was a new concept that both our A/DAG and I learnt during the symposium, referring to the uninspired and unmotivated middle managers that most often hold the key to whether an organisation achieves its objectives or not. As an upcoming female leader, I endeavor to distance myself from this description - although it will not be easy. As upcoming women leaders, we need to assert ourselves into the leadership roles. Through the SYL programme, I believe that I have been able to step out of my comfort zone: speaking up during meetings, volunteering to lead without expecting anything in return, and doing public speaking. The symposium was a similar breath of fresh air, as everyone was allowed to feel vulnerable, without being judged, surrounded by our Pacific sisters.

Graduating from one of the best development programmes for public sector auditors is an achievement I will cherish forever. I encourage upcoming leaders to apply to the SYL programme because the friendships forged and skills and knowledge gained from the initiative are not just transformative - they are empowering, eye-opening and life changing.



SAI Young Leader Fiji, Maritina Cirikisuva receiving her certificate of completion. (Source: Photo taken by SAI Tanzania).

## SYLs together



### Maritina

During the Women's Symposium, I was delighted to learn that a graduate from the first cohort of the SYL initiative 2017 – 2018, Oceanbaby Penitito, now in charge of the Performance Audit Services in SAI Samoa, was one of the esteemed speakers. This was my additional motivation, returning from the symposium – to be a leader in the Performance Audit Unit in my SAI. Initiatives such as the SYL programme and being awarded opportunities to attend milestone events such as the inaugural Women's Symposium are a stepping stone to bringing this vision to fruition.

### Ocean

I was thrilled to meet and be alumni with an SYL member from another cohort, Ms. Maritina I. Cirikisuva of SAI Fiji. This is a good reminder for me to push for our young leaders to participate in such initiatives from IDI in nurturing and fostering future leaders. Also featured is Ms. Grace Afatia Mulitalo (left) who also joined me on the SYL programme in the beginning. I conclude this reflection on this note: I was the first of the SAI Young Leaders from SAI Samoa ... and certainly, not the last.