

Jenny Da Rin
Remarks in acceptance of the
2017 Catherine McAuley Award

Principal Stephen Walsh and the Executive of Our Lady of Mercy College

Members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy

Fellow alumnae and members of the Alumnae Committee

Teachers and students

I wish to pay my respects to the Barramattagal people, the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, and their owners past and present.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your warm welcome.

I am very honoured to receive the Catherine McAuley award for 2017.

I thank the Alumnae Committee for recognising the contribution of ex-students since 2009 through this award and I am delighted to be a co-recipient with Jacqueline Scott this year.

It has given me cause to reminisce about my journey from school to the South West Pacific where I am a diplomat serving as the Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu.

And reflect once more on the amazing life of Catherine McAuley.

To imagine what it took for a woman, born 240 years ago, who lost both her parents at a young age, to devote herself to the care of poor women and girls and deal with the stresses, frustrations and obstacles that stood in her way.

Because in Catherine's time, life for most people was a daily struggle. Poverty, social injustice and child labour were widespread. Half of all infants didn't make it to their fifth birthday. Many women died or were severely maimed in childbirth.

When Catherine inherited an estate in her early 30s she could have lived a comfortable life. Instead, she built a house to relieve the suffering of women and girls and provide them an education.

She inspired women to join her cause, and at about my age she founded the Sisters of Mercy and spawned a world-wide movement.

Catherine's life work began long before women's suffrage; long before anyone was talking about gender equality or women's rights.

It wasn't until 1948 that a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created to reaffirm the dignity and worth of the human person and the equal rights of men and women.

It wasn't until 1978 that the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women to support women to enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

And it wasn't until 2010 that the United Nations General Assembly created a single organisation, UN Women, to unify its efforts to promote gender equality globally.

Catherine's vision to educate and empower women remains highly relevant today. There is overwhelming evidence that an educated girl is better able to earn an income and support herself and her children. That an educated girl will have healthier children. That, for many women, an education is also a means to escape violence.

The small Pacific island countries to our north are amongst the poorest in the world. In the Pacific, women and girls are a long way from

achieving the rights enshrined in the UN conventions and the quality of life that we enjoy in Australia.

The rates of violence against women are amongst the highest in the world. In Vanuatu, three out of five women and girls are victims of violence.

The rates of maternal and infant mortality are also high.

More girls than boys miss out on an education or drop out early to work or care for family members. Poor parents often have to choose between the education of their sons or daughters because they can't afford both.

Vanuatu is one of only three countries with no women in the national parliament, and only 7.4% of parliamentarians in the Pacific are women (the world average is 22.7%).

It is a great privilege to serve Australia abroad and to promote peace, security and prosperity in our region.

As a diplomat I work in the United Nations, in global organisations and in our region to improve women's access to health and education, to fight discrimination and to advocate for women's rights.

For example, I have advocated for greater access to life-saving vaccines for women and girls, including by providing the cervical cancer (HPV) vaccine developed by Australia to women in developing countries.

In 40 years of our presence in Vanuatu, I am only the second woman to be appointed High Commissioner. The first was 30 years ago.

In the High Commission in Port Vila the senior leadership are women, and most of our senior ni-Vanuatu staff are women. It has given us a unique opportunity to shed light on the issues affecting women in Vanuatu; to support and promote women in leadership, and to advocate for an end to violence against women.

We have also changed policies in the High Commission to advance the interests of women on staff and assist them to meet their work and family commitments more easily, for example with policies on breastfeeding and flexible work.

I didn't plan my career and I never expected to one day become an Ambassador.

Education changed my life. I was the eldest child of migrant parents and spoke very little English when I enrolled in kindergarten at St Michael's Meadowbank. I attended OLMC Epping from 1976-79 and graduated from OLMC Parramatta in 1981. Most of my friends left school and married young, but my mother insisted I continue my education. Without her encouragement I wouldn't be where I am today. My education opened those doors to me.

There were no glass ceilings at OLMC, and women of vision like Catherine McAuley and those who have come after her are wonderful examples to us all of what one woman with guts and determination can do to change the lives of others. Their stories inspire us to contribute in our own way to make the world a better place.

As our school prepares to celebrate its 130th anniversary I am confident that it will continue to strive for excellence and to promote the values that have served us so well. Values that have also shaped us; and the way we see the world and guided me in my work as a diplomat and humanitarian.

I'm very proud to be an alumna of OLMC – a Mercy Girl - and to walk in the footsteps of Catherine McAuley.

Thank you again for honouring me with this award.

