

The University of Manchester Medal of Honour 2026

Citation for Rita Robert Otu

Distinguished guests, I am delighted to present Rita Robert Otu for the Medal of Honour.

An alumna of this University, Rita is an agricultural scientist, a Rotary Peace Fellow, a philanthropist and a certified Gender Equality Changemaker. An activist and a leader since 1997, Rita once reflected that one of the inspirations for her mission and work was understanding that “women constitute 70% of the labour force yet they face a lot of structural barriers such as lack of access to markets, and land; and limited access to transport for their produce or to trade with buyers. As a Nigerian, I have a responsibility to grow women's voice in agriculture. When a woman is empowered, it trickles down to the roots!”

Rita has taken this sense of responsibility and joined it with an innovative approach to founding and sustaining a wide range of initiatives to support and develop women’s careers in farming, initiatives which have been increasingly recognised nationally and globally. Her work with neighbouring local governments experiencing farmers-herders crisis, and the injustice of their suffering, also motivated her to pursue conflict resolution and peace-building, which drove her to undertake a masters in International Development (Economics and Management of Rural Development) at the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester.

Today, she is an advocate for community-led initiatives through research and advocacy, capacity-building and continued reconciliation efforts through education. I will cite just some of her remarkable work now.

She founded a local peacebuilding community group for women called ‘Women Helping in Security and Peace-building Reconciliation (WHISPER)’ – Rita has a knack too for the acronym title! -- which specializes in training and consultancy in peace building. Whisper partners with developmental organizations to raise awareness on key international and regional instruments on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Rita has used innovative methods including theatre and, in a recent venture, radio: ‘Radio FANTASEE’, again a memorable acronym, (Food and Nutrition on the Air for Social and Economic Empowerment), weekly, broadcasts local communities’ experiences with climate change and ecologically sound adaptations during evening prime time, supplying listeners with crucial information systems, with 40% of listeners reporting that they had put its advice to use.

Rita’s extensive work in empowering women farmers and connecting their lives to larger issues also defines her work on combating Vitamin A deficiencies through support for cassava farming via her YELLO NUTRTION (YELLONUT) campaign while she has also

launched 50,000 Nutri-Gardens in Nigeria, a campaign which involves encouraging local food consumption, food education in schools, promoting biodiversity and valuing African gastronomic cultures.

Rita is already the recipient of many honours. In 2022, Rita was selected as a Food and Land Use (FOLU) ambassador, a role in which she engages in decision-making at local, country and global level by integrating the FOLU values and approach into the work they do. Her project (Musical Agriculture): A Song for climate change was selected as 300 World Best International Practice on Sustainability and Innovation for the Global Entrepreneurs Awards. As a panellist in 2024 at the People's Day at UN Campaign to Combat Desertification in COP16 she highlighted the essential role of non-state actor's youth, women, local governments, farmers and civil society organizations in addressing desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD). She received the Women's World Summit Foundation Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life - in Switzerland. She is the Honorary Life Member of ALL Ladies League (ALL). She won this University's Volunteer of the Year awards (Alumni Category) in 2023 from the and is a member of the Board of Trustees of our Nigerian Alumni Association.

Across her career's many roles, Rita has worked worldwide to empower young women, encouraging them to take control of their health and prevent hunger and malnutrition. Thanks to her incredible work, many women are healthier today in Nigeria and in Africa.