

Taking the fish to the mountains: Tilapia fish farming and the women of Rewasau Village, Monasavu, Fiji



Tilapia fish reared in Rewasau ponds are being posed here for the camera (image: Tim Pickering).

For women in Rewasau Village in the highlands of Monasavu, life is busy and it's tough. Their days are constantly filled with patient negotiation, learning and lots of hard work. Rewasau is in the interior of Viti Levu in the Fiji Islands. The village itself is quite inaccessible as the roads are steep and buses are unable to stop at the village itself. Like many other villages across Fiji, the people of Rewasau are resilient. They work hard and despite accessibility issues, are able to get their produce to Tavua market to sell.

In 2014, when the Fiji Ministry of Fisheries staff at Naduruloulou Research Station (NRS) started conducting fish farming workshops in Naitasiri to introduce villagers to farming of tilapia fish, a group of women in Rewasau saw this as an opportunity to earn a supplementary income for their families. When their first crop of tilapia was harvested, they realised this new found investment could also be used as a source of payment for services, because fish is a much sought after source of protein for people in the highlands. 'When I did my first harvest, the youth in the village helped to dig another pond and I gave them fish to eat as payment,' said Mere Sinu Kula, a farmer in Rewasau.

Many of the tilapia farmers engage in this activity together with their husbands. They admit that although decisions regarding the tilapia farm are jointly made, many of the big decisions have been made by the women as a group. 'When we did the first harvest, most of our fish

was shared. We gave it as our tithe to the church and we shared it with other families. We said we would use the second harvest to sell, but when it was time to harvest again, Tropical Cyclone Winston hit our area, so we used most of our fish as payment for rebuilding our homes. All the women agreed that we would feed the youth as payment for building our church and our village hall. So we used our tilapia for that,' said Sylvia Nabola, one of several tilapia farmers in the village.

Even though Rewasau is at the foot of the largest dam in Fiji, water is still a problem for half of the village. Piped water is only available for one part of the village and many of the tilapia farms are on the other side of the village. The farmers have used traditional knowledge of water resources by building bamboo water pipes and identifying natural springs in the ground to fill their ponds. 'These women know where the natural springs are and how to

use their resources and where to place their ponds, but the problem is, they have a lot of livestock around the village. Many times the livestock damage the bamboo pipes so they always have to repair it,' highlighted Farm Development Officer at NRS, Ms Makalesi Rauto.

The women highlighted that accessing resources in the village was not a problem – whether it was water, land, livestock or the only four vehicles in the village. They acknowledged that control of these resources was not theirs, nor that of their spouses. Water and land is controlled by the *mataqali* so all decisions are made communally. However, for the livestock, the women said decisions on when to sell or eat their livestock was usually made with their spouses or other family members.

The four vehicles belong to other members of the village. The women say that every day a vehicle goes to Tavua town or makes a drop-off to the nearest bus stop. Accessing this transport often involves planning – who needs to go where, what time and who has money to contribute to the fuel. According to the women, they are good at

coordinating this, as they often speak to each other and therefore know the needs of other families in the village – whether it is fish feed, or to sell yaqona or take someone to the health centre.

None of the women of Rewasau village know how to drive. When asked if they would like to learn, they smiled shyly and then excitedly. 'The men will just say, what's our business in learning to drive, how can we drive the trucks?' said one of the women. 'Maybe one day,' they all agreed.

These are experiences about tilapia farming related by women of Rewasau Village during one of several Gender in Aquaculture case study visits currently being conducted in Fiji. This is being done jointly by the gender team within SPC's Social Development Programme (SDP), the Aquaculture Section of the Fisheries Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division, the Fiji Ministry of Fisheries, and the Women in Fisheries Network – Fiji (WiFN-F). Rewasau was one of several tilapia farm sites visited in December 2016 in efforts to understand gender issues in aquaculture in Fiji.



Left: Fresh tilapia fish are a welcome addition to the mainly vegetable diet of people living in the mountainous interior of Fiji (image: Tim Pickering).

Right: Rewasau women carry sacks of tilapia feed up the hill. Fish harvested from their ponds were used to make payment for repairs to village homes and community hall (in background) damaged by Tropical Cyclone Winston (image: Tim Pickering).

Pacific island aquaculture is for the first time being formally assessed from a gender perspective, as part of work for the Community Aquaculture project administered by SPC with support from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research ACIAR. One of this project's goals is to ascertain the impacts that community aquaculture can have on household income, nutrition, and the status of women and children in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Kiribati. These results can be used to verify the ways that benefit flows of food to households and communities from small-scale fish farming, and identify possible entry points, policies or activities to further strengthen and improve this food production sector in the Pacific.

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Most of the fish ponds have been constructed close to village homes, which makes daily care easier (image: Tim Pickering).