



# Women in fisheries profiles

## Josephine Rambay

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*“Fisheries might be seen as a male dominated sector; however, women participate in really important aspects of fisheries and add value by playing key roles in the aquaculture industry. For instance, an aquaculture farm is usually owned by a male, but the farmer’s wife is the greatest support behind the scenes. Women oversee the logistics and maintenance of a farm, feeding the fish on time every day, report any recommendations for the farm and handling the fish sales during harvest on top of their expected household duties.”*  
– Josephine Rambay

Josephine Rambay, married with four children, is originally from Malekula in Vanuatu. She works as Principal Freshwater Aquaculture Officer at the Vanuatu Fisheries Department (VFD). She sees herself as someone who received her qualifications late in life, because after high school and starting at the University of the South Pacific she paused for a few years to get married and have kids, so it took a while before she could go back to complete her studies. Nevertheless, she has a Bachelor in Marine Science and Postgraduate Diploma in Aquaculture from the University of the South Pacific. In between her bachelor and postgraduate degrees, she helped her father run a small internet café in Port Vila. After gaining her postgraduate diploma, she worked in several places, including the Department of Environment Protection and Conservation as administration support. She also worked as project coordinator for the National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan, and as an Industry Officer at the Shefa provincial Department of Industry.

### What inspired you to study aquaculture?

When I was helping my Dad at the small internet café business, I signed a contract with Skills Partnership to clean reefs, collect the poisonous starfish, crown-of-thorns (COTS) and plant corals. Engaging in this activity increased my motivation to get rid of COTS. With my interest in aquaculture, my thought trail led me to thinking that I should make feed material for animals out of the COTs. So, this inspired me to make fish feed for aquaculture from

COTS, resulting in my proposed field in postgraduate studies in aquaculture. A fish feed usually contains proteins, carbohydrates and fats. So, for my postgraduate diploma I studied local products to supplement the protein ingredient and I used dried COTS to support reef cleaning, and since it can be locally found, I used it in the fish feed. Unfortunately, my findings showed that COTS is only rich in calcium and not enough protein, thus, overall it was not an appropriate protein supplement for fish feed. Needless to say, the exercise was a big learning moment for me in so many ways

### What are your current roles in VFD?

In my current role, I look after freshwater aquaculture activities in the whole of Vanuatu. The two main sites where this activity is centered are Santo (in the northern province) and Efate (in the southern province). I oversee the two main seed production centers and any other work that is related to freshwater aquaculture. This means that I produce the annual work plan for the aquaculture program and tasking the officers in the field. All aquaculture requests from communities, farmers and other groups needs my approval and I ensure that my officers have the necessary equipment and support to achieve these targets. I am also responsible for the quarterly reports to the office of the Director for the aquaculture section. I also provide advice to the mariculture team, where necessary.

From my past experience as a project coordinator, I have the network and efficiency in organising events and so VFD

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Josephine and colleagues laying the pond liners. © Josephine Rambay

occasionally requires my skills and experience. So, I have been part of various organising teams in doing logistics for such events in Port Vila and other islands of Vanuatu.

#### What aspects of your role inspire you the most?

It is inspiring to see aquaculture become an alternative income generation as part of the resource management together with food security in communities during disasters. To relieve fishing pressure on reef fish, communities are encouraged to shift to deep bottom fishing or aquaculture to have access to alternative household protein sources and as an income source. During disasters, aquaculture has been proven to be an important fallback source of protein for the community immediately after tropical cyclones with the leftover root crops in the gardens while they wait for relief supplies. So, it is fascinating to see how the aquaculture program, even though its small, has the potential to make a big impact on the surroundings of an aquaculture farmer. For example, when category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold hit Santo in 2020 and affected communities had to wait for relief supplies, the Wailapa Community which was severely impacted had tilapia from the community pond for about two weeks as the main protein source. Similarly, it is very rewarding to see a successful farmer in an in-land community has a positive impact on the community as a whole. His family benefits from it, his fellow community members also benefit from the activity by working for the farmer for household income and having access to protein on site. So, it is inspiring to see successful harvests from farmers I work with because when they are happy, I am happier.

But what inspires me the most is that working in this male-dominated environment allows me to realise the role of both men and women in this sector. Fisheries might be seen as a male dominated sector; however, women participate in really important aspects of fisheries, and add value by playing key roles in the aquaculture industry. For instance, an aquaculture farm is usually owned by a male, but the farmer's wife is the greatest support behind the scenes. Women oversee the logistics and maintenance of a farm, feeding the fish on time every day, report any recommendations for the farm and handling the fish sales during harvest on top of their expected household duties.

#### What are some challenges you had to overcome in your role within VFD?

One of the major challenges I encounter periodically is linked to staff (the majority of them being men) and the lack of human capacity. Human capacity is a challenge that affects all divisions at VFD, not only the aquaculture team. However, we always try our best to hit our targets annually but sometimes work can be delayed due to lack of people on ground. So, there are times when I end up with hard labour work. For example, when my team has an immediate dateline to meet but there are not enough boys for the job, I have to help them to dig the ponds with the spade and place the bond liners which can happen in harsh weather such as heavy rain or a hot sunny day. I find this physically very challenging sometimes!

Also, it is a very male-dominated field. At the moment, I manage four male staff members in the aquaculture



hatchery and extension services and I also work with aquaculture farmers who are all male. As a woman it is challenging sometimes working in a male-dominated field.

Additionally, getting training for specific technical needs to increase our capacity is becoming more difficult within the aquaculture sector in the region. There are few opportunities since I begin with VFD, but those are more technical which I was not being included and it might be because I have the theoretical knowledge on aquaculture from my studies while my male staffs have more technical experience. To me, I believe it will be more beneficial if we can all benefit simultaneously as it will strengthen team work and exchange knowledge and experience to support each other to develop our capacity and achieve our targets efficiently.

Finally, there is also a challenge with my family being a wife and mother. I work in an environment where I get torn apart sometimes but then I have to balance it all with my family and my responsibilities at home. At first, I struggled, but now I am grasping the management part of it, so now I can cope with managing both my work and my family at the same time.

What are some challenges that women in Vanuatu have had to overcome in the aquaculture sector?

In Vanuatu, women are highly involved in aquaculture but the visibility of their involvement is often hidden. Women are often the operational staff in a farm that is owned by their husbands, who are the fish feeders, farm maintenance workers and fish sellers. But at the end of the day, it is the farmer himself getting all the recognition from a very successful farm while the women are the hard workers behind the scenes. In my experience, I always see men coming forward to collect the free materials I have for distribution such as pond liners, but I hardly see women. There are also women farmers involved in backyard farming but the challenge is that they do not seek advice from me as the female lead in this program so I see that women are not making use of this opportunity. I assumed it was due to cultural barriers and the norm that

this is an activity for males. It might be that women do not socialise a lot that they don't have access to this type of information, or it might be lack of confidence coming from a rural community to take up this task. However, this year I am seeing more women showing interest and reaching out for the help they need. And I think it is because of the exposure during the first Women in Fisheries Forum organised by VFD this year and the Facebook live promoting women in Fisheries in celebration of the 2024 International Women's Day.

What advice would you give women who participate or are interested in aquaculture farming?

My advice to women in Vanuatu is to take the opportunity of having a woman heading the freshwater aquaculture programme. They need to step forward and speak about their interests or even their challenges so I can assist them. I want to see a change in the aquaculture sector through women. To do so, I need to know how I can assist women and what can we do to get them to become an aquaculture farmer. Even women having a backyard farm (fish pond), should let me know how I can help them with it.

Do you recall a "WOW" moment where you felt that you had achieved something important?

I have a lot of WOW moments in aquaculture. Every time I support a farmer to build his pond and seeing it completed with all the fish inside, is a wow moment for me. It is a good opportunity for me to sit and reflect on that particular success. When I hear about his/her successful fish harvest and sales, it is also a wow moment for me – as I know that all the hard work has paid off. Sometimes there are bad weather days, with heavy rain. On those days, pond building should be postponed but the work still must go on, and at the end of those days, I will be very happy, personally. Finally, an important wow moment for me is when all my staff are present and we communicate well, engaging in our tasks and achieving more than our targets in a year. I will surely celebrate these achievements because I am overwhelmed by our team work.



Josephine at work on a rainy day with the men. © Josephine Rambay