

Tarusila Veibi: Inspiring and supporting the improved engagement of rural women in community-based management in Fiji



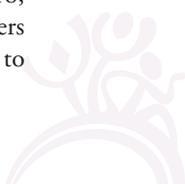
Tarusila Veibi. (image: Sangeeta Mangubhai)

Tarusila ('Taru') Veibi is a bold and dynamic woman who is passionate about the environment she lives in, and her people. Originally from Bua Village in Bua District, in Fiji's Bua Province, Taru is 56 years old, and has two sons and three grandchildren. She worked for Fiji Pine for 18 years as a clerk on Vanua Levu. In 2007, she volunteered with the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area (FLMMA) network, acting as their representative for Bua District. In 2010, she started working closely with local communities and the Wildlife Conservation Society to set up traditional closures (*tabu* areas) in her district in order to improve fish and invertebrate stocks within customary fishing grounds. That same year, in recognition of her knowledge and leadership, Taru was invited to be part of the Traditional Council (*Bose Vanua*) for Bua District. The *Bose Vanua* is usually only for chiefs and heads of clans, and women are not usually part of this traditional decision-making body on all issues relating to Bua District. Taru's presence on the *Bose Vanua* is helping to voice the needs of rural girls and women in the fisheries sector, and broader resource management.

In 2015, Taru signed a contract with FLMMA to increase the engagement and support to rural women, to help them become more vocal and share their concerns about natural

resource management issues. Over the last three years she has been working with women mud crab fishers to help them set up 'crab fattening pens' made of local materials in mangrove forests on Viti Levu (Ba and Tavua districts) and Vanua Levu (Bua district). Crabs are held in the pen and fed fish and chicken scraps for at least 4–6 days to help fatten them – the greater the weight, the higher the price these women can fetch at local markets. Taru is also helping the women implement a catch per unit effort (CPUE) logbook so they can record the number, size and sex of the crabs being caught within mangrove areas adjacent to their village. Mud crabs are both an important food source and livelihood for women, and require a high level of knowledge and skill to catch them by hand.

In August 2016, Taru was selected to represent her community as a women's representative in parliament for a week. In recognition of her work and her tireless efforts to support and encourage women to articulate their needs and to be more engaged in fisheries and broader national resource management issues, Taru travelled to the United Nations Ocean Conference in New York in June 2018, and presented a statement at a side event titled, 'Healers of our ocean: Asia-Pacific women leading ocean action to



achieve Sustainable Development Goal 14'. In late 2018, she was selected by the Bua Provincial Office and endorsed by the Ministry of *i-Taukei Affairs* to be the 'Mata ni Talai' (nominated community representative to government) to contribute to discussions at the provincial level.

The Editor of the *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin* interviewed Taru to learn more about what it is like to be a woman working in fisheries in rural areas in Fiji.

What motivates you to work on fisheries issues in the communities of Bua Province?

I was brought up in a community where women and young girls always go out fishing. I used to sit and watch my grandmother, my mother and other women from the village pick up their fishing nets and baskets and off they went to the sea. I really wanted to be like one of them one day. I grew up fishing, and so love fishing. Watching my friends going out to the sea really motivates me to work within Bua Province.

What changes have you seen in your lifetime with regard to fisheries resources?

I've noticed big changes since when I was young. These days, lots of rubbish is thrown into the rivers and oceans, which destroys and kills living things in the sea. Excessive logging has been carried out on the mainland, which causes landslides that impact both the people and our natural environment. Mangroves are cut down for firewood and for *bures*. Both fisherwomen and fishermen use modern fishing gear that damages delicate coral reefs. These losses are happening so fast that people don't even bother replanting native trees to logged areas, replanting or protecting mangroves, or placing *tabus* on certain areas to replenish fish populations. Looking back 30–40 years, fisherwomen and fishermen used only spears, simple nets or fishing line. In the early 2000s, people started to use other tools such as crowbars, cane knives, iron rods, scuba, compressors, and many of the more destructive gear types. It is quite sad for me to see these changes happening so quickly.

What challenges have you faced as a woman working with FLMMA, and how did you overcome them?

Because Fiji is a male-dominant society, women's voices are not always heard in key meetings, or are not included as part of decision-making. When I joined FLMMA as their 'Women in Fisheries' representative I found it challenging to engage with the women in the villages I visited. This is because when FLMMA visited the village, the women often were the ones doing the catering. During workshops, which still tend to be male-dominated, I try to highlight the important role women play in communities all over Fiji in a way that still respects our culture. I have helped to change their mindset and encourage more women to join workshops, encourage them to speak up, and find different ways for their voices to be heard in any meeting. I try and lead by example and I feel proud of those women who feel confident to stand up and speak about their concerns about their fisheries and their environment.

What advice would you give to young rural women and girls about fisheries and natural resource management?

Plan first before doing anything regarding our natural resources. I would like to encourage young girls to listen properly to the elderly with their advice on the sustainable use of our natural resources because they have a lot of traditional knowledge. If women go out to the sea, I would like to advise them to just collect what they require for the family. Avoid overfishing, avoid unsustainable logging, and use resources wisely so that our generation can also feel secure.