

Trailblazers: Conversations with Pacific women driving scientific advances in fisheries

Melinda Morris

Pacific islanders have a close relationship with the ocean that surrounds their island homes, and this can bring a unique perspective to the field of fisheries science. Promoting gender equality in fisheries science is critical to achieving development and conservation goals, but a significant gender gap still exists at all levels.

In celebration of the International Day of Women and Girls in Science on February 11, the Pacific Community Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystem Division took the opportunity to hear from four Pacific women working in the region in fisheries science.

Lucy Joy

Lucy is a Junior Professional with the Data Management Division of the Oceanic Fisheries Programme at SPC. Previously, she worked with the Vanuatu Fisheries Department as their National Tuna Data Coordinator.

What challenges have you faced as a woman working in fisheries science, and how did you overcome them?

As a woman in fisheries, there will be challenges faced whether internally or externally in this field as it is traditionally a male-dominated field. A challenging experience I have encountered was giving instructions and not having them followed or taken seriously only because of the mentality and belief that women are inferior to men in many areas of work and life.

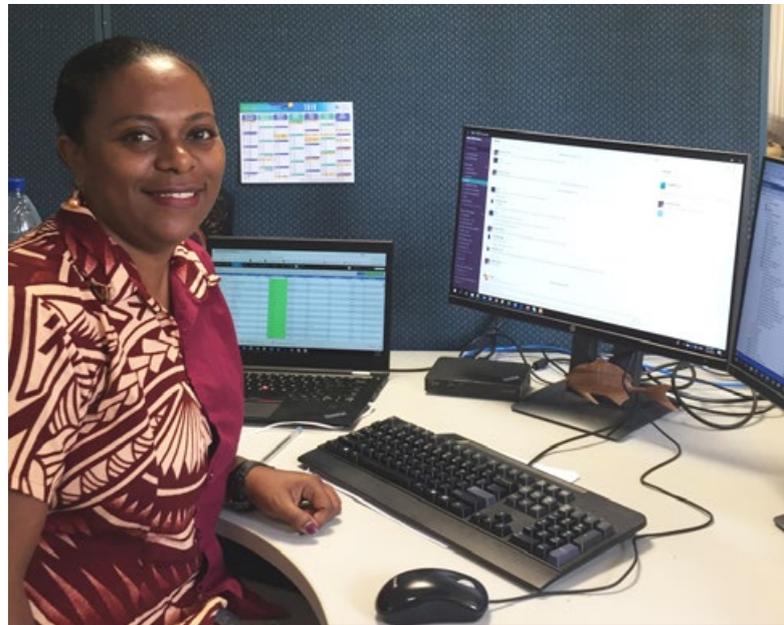
No matter how difficult the situation, I have learnt that being vocal and speaking out to correct issues and promote respect at work has helped to overcome any challenges I have faced.

What motivates you to work in this field?

Having grown up in a Pacific Island country surrounded by ocean, I have experienced the high dependency that our people have on our marine resources both as a source of food and income. Our ocean plays a large role in the welfare of our people.

Working in fisheries has helped me to appreciate the significant contribution that our marine resources play, and our role as resource owners and managers of our fisheries. We are responsible for the protection, management and conservation of our resources from issues such as over exploitation, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and much more.

My motivation in this field lies greatly on my acknowledgement of the importance of this resource in the lives of our people. As resource owners, we need to work together to understand, protect and conserve this resource for the future. It is my hope that through my work in this area, I am able to contribute towards these goals.



Lucy Joy, Junior Professional (Oceanic Fisheries), SPC FAME Division.

What advice would you give to young women and girls considering a career in fisheries science?

Fisheries science, like many other careers is an exciting career path to pursue – especially for young women. It is a broad area, which comes with various professions such as being a marine biologist, an aquaculturist, a fish inspector, an observer and many more. It is a great profession for anyone, but especially so for Pacific islanders as it is one of our main resources.

My advice to young women wanting to consider a career in fisheries is to go for it, it is a great career that has a lot to offer you. Like all other professions, it will have its challenges also. But I believe that when you have your heart and mind set on something, nothing can stop you from achieving it – no matter your gender.



Esther Leini

Esther is a Mariculture Scientist with the National Fisheries Authority in Papua New Guinea. In 2017, she was one of the delegates at SPC's first South–South Exchange on Sandfish Aquaculture for Restocking.

What challenges have you faced as a woman working in fisheries science, and how did you overcome them?

It is a constant struggle to achieve research goals with limited resources and skill-set, and sometimes being a woman in a male-dominated field can make my work more difficult than it is for my male counterparts. I overcome these challenges with hard work and determination – I aim for success and do everything I can to achieve it!

What motivates you to work in this field?

I really enjoy researching suitable mariculture techniques for marine target species as a benchmark study in my country. I love that my work allows me to discover new information, and then use that information to help protect PNG's unique marine ecosystems and contribute to food security. Working in fisheries gives me the opportunity to make a real difference.

What advice would you give to young women and girls considering a career in fisheries science?

Take up the challenge and don't feel that you're not good enough. There is so much to discover and research in this field, and we women have the patience and persistence to be great fisheries scientists.



Esther Leini, Mariculture Scientist with the National Fisheries Authority in Papua New Guinea, adding pearl oyster settlement baskets to a tank.

Maria Fiasoso Sapatu

Maria is a Programme Associate with Conservation International's Pacific Islands & Ocean Program, based in Samoa. Previously, she worked with the Samoa Fisheries Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries for around 10 years.



Maria Fiasoso Sapatu, Programme Associate with Conservation International's Pacific Islands & Ocean Program in Samoa.

What challenges have you faced as a woman working in fisheries science, and how did you overcome them?

Fisheries science is a male-dominated field that for me is quite a challenging career both physically and mentally. Mentally, it can sometimes be hard when colleagues don't take young women seriously when she voices her ideas and issues. Physically, field work that is easy for a man can be more challenging for a woman. In saying that, it doesn't mean that it can't be a career for a woman.

I learned to tackle such challenges by being a doer and making people believe in the work I can do to contribute. At the same time I was lucky to work with great colleagues (both men and women) that helped me shape my career, and gain skills to manage the physical side of my work effectively.

What motivates you to work in this field?

As a Pacific Islander, we depend heavily on the ocean for our livelihood. To be in a field that contributes to sustainable management and conservation of marine resources is very rewarding.

What advice would you give to young women and girls considering a career in fisheries science?

My advice to young women interested in fisheries science is to be bold and take on the challenge, and always have confidence in what you do and say. Also remember that sometimes being a woman in a male-dominated field can actually be an advantage!

Sarah Botaake Teetu

Sarah is the Assistant Secretary at the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agricultural Development in Tarawa, Kiribati. She attended the University of the South Pacific, and has worked in community aquaculture and fisheries.

What challenges have you faced as a woman working in fisheries science, and how did you overcome them?

My working environment is dominated by men, which can at times be quite isolating. Sometimes I have not been able to participate in activities such as diving, cleaning tanks and raceways and cleaning hatchery equipment for micro-algae mass culture. When this happens and I need to delegate tasks to my male colleagues, I am still present to give the right advice and support. In my last role, I focussed on capacity building and training staff, so that when I left to join the Ministry as Assistant Secretary, most of my male colleagues were fully trained on hatchery protocols, guidelines and methods.

What motivates you to work in this field?

I know that most marine resources are overexploited, and require good and careful management. My studies at the University of the South Pacific and my roles in aquaculture and fisheries mean that I can play a role in restocking depleted marine resources. It feels great to be working in jobs that I enjoy, and that I can have a real impact in.

What advice would you give to young women and girls considering a career in fisheries science?

My advice to girls who wish to become fisheries scientists and managers is to consider studying marine management or marine science at the tertiary level. It is a fascinating job and important to protect and conserve the marine ecosystems that God has blessed us with, and restocking is one way to achieve this. It is fun to work in fisheries, and most importantly it is a crucial job that contributes so much to food security and achieving the sustainable development goals.



Sarah Botaake Teetu, Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agricultural Development in Tarawa, Kiribati with sandfish.

