

Women in fisheries profiles

Seeing the value of my role: The journey of Lesiala Petaia

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Lesiala Petaia, also known as Pole, stands as a testament to the transformative power of education, perseverance and seizing opportunities. Her journey from humble beginnings to becoming a key player in Tuvalu's fisheries sector illustrates how training and personal growth can profoundly impact both individual lives and communities.

The youngest in her family, Lesiala is no stranger to hardship. With her mother leaving for New Zealand and her father working in Tuvalu as a captain on a vessel, then work taking him to Fiji, she found herself living with her brothers, dependent on their earnings. Each payday, she would ask them for money for her basic needs, which made her feel vulnerable and helpless. Eager to change her circumstances, she sought employment as a shop salesgirl, but when an opportunity arose to apply for a fisheries observer position – a role traditionally reserved for men – she took a bold step and applied. Despite her father flying back from Fiji to discourage her, she remained determined.

Lesiala was offered the fisheries observer role and her decision to embrace the position marked the beginning of a remarkable transformation. Upon completing her time as a fisheries observer, Lesiala transitioned into the position of Assistant Fisheries Officer, where she was responsible for overseeing observer data entry at the Tuvalu Fisheries Department.

While she initially knew little about the broader fisheries and marine management landscape, the experience she gained from her observer and fisheries officer role – coupled with various training courses she undertook under support through the Pacific European Union Marine Partnership Programme (PEUMP) and the Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme – would shape her perspective, career and community contributions.

The first turning point came when Lesiala learned about the Certificate IV in Fisheries Enforcement and Compliance Course in 2020–2021 (an activity implemented under PEUMP by the Forum Fisheries Agency). It was an opportunity to develop skills that would not only help her professionally but also broaden her understanding of the

interconnectedness of marine management. She realised the data she was collecting in her role as an observer had far-reaching implications, feeding into scientific studies, supporting case investigations, and influencing policy decisions. She no longer viewed her job as merely data entry; she became acutely aware of her role in a much larger system.

Her pursuit of growth did not stop there. Lesiala continued to seek out learning opportunities, taking part in the Certificate IV in Resilience Course in 2020 (an activity implemented under PEUMP by the University of the South Pacific, USP), and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment Course in 2022 (a joint PEUMP–USP activity). Her participation in all the courses not only enhanced her technical knowledge but also developed her leadership skills. Through face-to-face interactions and hands-on experiences, such as standing in court and simulating enforcement actions, she gained practical skills that would later prove invaluable.

One of the most profound lessons Lesiala learned was the importance of self-awareness and leadership. She was exposed to methods of handling difficult conversations and realised that open communication with her superiors was crucial. Before the training, she had been hesitant to challenge authority figures or voice her opinions. But afterward, she felt empowered to engage in meaningful dialogue, understanding that her contributions were valuable to the team's success.

Beyond the workplace, the skills she gained also helped her assist her community. Her father, now a community leader, was involved in a rainwater catchment project. When they faced challenges in securing funding for work labour, it was Lesiala who advised him on how to approach the local government and secure additional support. Her knowledge of feasibility assessments, which she had learned from her courses, became instrumental in helping the community move forward with their project efficiently and effectively.

Reflecting on her journey, Lesiala recognises that the training opportunities she pursued were instrumental in shaping her academic and professional development. Without these courses, she would not have met the qualifications necessary for acceptance into the USP's Marine Management

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programme at USP. The Certificate IV qualifications she earned through institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency and USP enabled her to embark on her bachelor's degree, which she is currently pursuing as a privately funded student, drawing from her own savings. These credentials have also strengthened her candidacy for job applications, consistently earning her a spot on shortlists and positioning her as a strong contender in the job market.

Lesiala's story serves as an inspiration to many. It highlights the critical role that education, particularly in the form of targeted training, can play in empowering individuals. Her journey from a young woman struggling to make ends meet, to a confident, educated leader in her community, is a powerful reminder that with determination and access to the right opportunities, anyone can achieve their dreams and contribute to the well-being of their community and people.

Her advice to others is simple yet profound:

“Don't just sit back. There are opportunities, make use of them. If you don't have money, look for funding and sponsors. There is always something you can do to build yourself up.”

