



Women in fisheries profiles

Rachael Luru

The first female Pacific Island fisheries observer, debriefer and assessor

This is a story about a woman who was determined to succeed, no matter the obstacles. In this case, it was to go to sea – even though she grew up in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and had never seen or lived near the sea. Rachael Luru, the first Pacific Island fisheries observer, debriefer and assessor, works for the National Fisheries Authority in PNG, and this is her story.

I first joined the Papua New Guinea Observer Program in 2011 as a 22-year-old single mother and underwent an intense nine-week basic observer training at the PNG National Fisheries College in Kavieng, New Ireland Province. I come from the Southern Highlands region of PNG, where you cannot see the ocean or sea. My small village, Yaro, is situated in Pangia District of Southern Highlands Province.

At first, I thought to myself that I was never going to be recruited because of where I am from – the highlands – with no knowledge or idea of the sea. I think I was selected because of my answer to this question:

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“Why do you think we should recruit you?”

My answer was, “because I am built for it!”
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Soon after that interview, I received an acceptance letter from the National Fisheries Authority confirming the success of my application. The letter was an invite to attend the basic fisheries observer training at the National Fisheries College. Believe it or not, I topped my batch of 15 other males with one female and was awarded a Sony digital camera. That is where the challenge began.

My first observer trip was on a Philippines-flagged purse seine fishing vessel. I had to take the challenge to go out on a foreign fishing vessel with only male employees. It took a lot of courage for me to leave my four-year-old son, but as a single mother and in order for a better future for my son, I took the trip. The vessel consisted of more than 30 male crew from different nationalities, but mainly Filipino crew members. At first I was nervous and scared, but I took the risk and sacrifice. I was aware of my role, my rights and responsibilities. I respected myself as well as every other crew member on board. How I treated myself and the crew was reciprocated, and that was how I carried out my duties: without fear and with confidence.

As the only female on board, the greatest challenge I tried to overcome was sometimes having to share shower blocks with the all-male crew. I would put up a huge sign on the door so

they knew I was using the bathroom. I always made it my duty to avoid going to specific areas of the vessel. The crew were very aware of my gender. They were respectful and friendly but sometimes cheeky. I always maintained a professional approach and presentation on board. Code of conduct is vital, especially in such a male-dominated field.

Most of the crew didn't really understand English. Sometimes I used hand signals, had to draw, or resorted to learning some basic words in their language to obtain information, as this is a key part of my role as a fisheries observer. I admit it was quite frustrating at times, but I managed to face and overcome the challenges.

The fun part of being a fisheries observer is that I get to travel to other countries and meet other fisheries observers from the Pacific.

In 2013, I was selected as the only candidate to take part in the fisheries observer debriefer training. I passed and was certified as a Pacific Islands Regional Fisheries Observer (PIRFO) debriefer. I continued taking trips both nationally and regionally, and to date, I've covered over 200 plus sea days and debriefed over 100 fisheries observers, both for national and sub-regional trips (Federated States of Micronesia Arrangement and United States Treaty).

In 2018, I was selected to study Certificate IV in Fisheries Compliance and Enforcement, which I completed in May 2019. I graduated from the course in September 2019.

In August 2019, I was selected to attend the two-week PIRFO debriefer assessors training in Port Moresby. I passed the training as the second best among 23 male colleagues, and was awarded a PIRFO debriefer assessor certificate as the first female fisheries observer, debriefer and assessor in the Pacific.

I thought I had passed just another training, but when I was acknowledged by training facilitators as the first female debriefer assessor in the region, my heart jumped and I cried tears of joy. The feeling of accomplishment and relief came to me that very moment. This was the highest achievement in my career in this very challenging role as a female fisheries observer. I have a lot of people to thank and acknowledge – my mentors at work, my parents, my bosses and colleagues who have contributed one way or another towards this achievement.

This journey wasn't an easy one. It took me almost nine years to get to where I am now. I would like to advise other young females out there that “what job ONLY MEN can do is a thing of the past”. You are not a failure. You have a purpose in life, and all it takes to achieve your dreams is to be a brave, strong woman who believes in herself and is dedicated and committed. Never think that it is impossible, because what men can do, women can too.

