

Inspiring profile

Mele 'Elenga Tongile'o

by Mele 'Elenga Tongile'o and Jeffrey Kinch

Meet Mele 'Elenga Tongile'o from the Ha'apai Group of Islands in the Kingdom of Tonga. Mele is one of 10 children, and at 42 years of age is the third to last child in a family of seven brothers and two other sisters. Mele has family connections to the villages of 'Uiha and Lofanga.

Mele has lived with her parents and an aunty (Lavinia Vaipuna) who has been the head of the Information and Communication Technology Division of the Tongan Ministry of Fisheries for a number of years now. The relationship between Mele and Lavinia's family began when Lavinia's father's younger sister, Neomai Vaikona, was the principal of the government primary school on Mele's island. Through this relationship, Mele has found herself embraced by the Viakona family and an integral part of the Vaikona household.

Since 2014, Mele can be found two to three afternoons and evenings each week from around 4 pm to 9pm, trolling and Tongan jigging (a mid-water fishing method) with Lavinia's father and one or two of her brothers. The target catch is pelagic species, notably wahoo, yellowfin tuna, blue trevally, dog tooth tuna, barracuda and skipjack tuna. The fish that are caught are for household consumption as well as for selling and to contribute to church functions and special village festivities. Mele supports her 76-year-old mother from these activities, her father having passed away some years ago.

Mele also assists with the Vaikona family with farming, vanilla on the land and penguin pearl shell in the sea. Mele is also a renowned artisan making pearl shell jewellery-making as well as being an expert weaver of mats, baskets and skirts. Mele also assists with pearl farming and she assisted the Tonga Ministry of Fisheries in restocking pearls in the Vava'u Group of Islands.



Among the Ha'apai Group of islands, Mele is one of a few Tongan women who is certified as a small boat skipper. She has also has the distinction and the respect of many people from winning several prizes at the annual Royal Agricultural, Fisheries, Tourism and Trade Show, including first prize for best catch, first prize for trolling, and second prize for jigging in 2018. Mele also won first prize that year for the best and most impressive ducks.

From 15–28 March 2020, Mele was a participant in a Small-scale Fishing Operations training, conducted by the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Tongan Ministry of Fisheries, with support from the Pacific European Union Marine Partnership Program. As part of this training, Mele and 11 other participants from villages around Tonga, as well as 8 fisheries officers, were shown alternative fishing methods such as vertical longlining, mid-water fishing methods using chum bags and spreader rods, as well as trolling. Mele proved herself proficient during this training especially in the practical fishing trips.

Mele will return to 'Uiha and Lofanga villages with new knowledge. First however, she has to convince Lavinia's father and her brothers that they should try these new styles of fishing. Given Mele's prowess at fishing and her love of the sea, the Vaikona family, and even her own family, can expect more fish on the table, not only the dinner table, but the market table as well.

Mele participating in a training to learn how to make a mini tuna longline, set it from a small craft and retrieve it by hand. © William Sokimi and Watisoni Lalavanua

