



Women in fisheries profiles

Merelesita Fong

Ever since Merelesita Fong was little, she has loved being in the water. Her fondest memory was taking long walks by the seawall in Suva, where she grew up. She was always intrigued by marine life and all its little critters, spending most of her time scavenging in rocky pools.

Merelesita Fong (Meme to her family, friends and colleagues), holds a bachelor's degree in Marine Science from the University of the South Pacific. Throughout the four years of her study, she actively participated in various volunteer and ocean conservation activities with organisations such as World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Uto ni Yalo, Pacific Ocean Litter Youth Project, and Wantok Moana Association. After graduating in 2021, Meme assisted three PhD students with their research. The first one included studying patterns of coral relative to 3D coastal hydrodynamics, physicochemical water parameters and nutrients. The second project involved using indigenous and local knowledge of fishers across Fiji to fill knowledge gaps present in the conservation and management of marine and freshwater resources. With the third project, she supported laboratory practical sessions on the life history, reproductive biology and feeding ecology of the largest endemic riverine fish in the South Pacific (*Mesopristes kneri*).

In late 2022, Meme worked with regional fisheries expert Robert Gillett to compile the fourth edition of the Benefish Study on *Fisheries in the Economies of the Pacific Island Countries and Territories*. The book included a chapter for each Pacific Island country and territory covering: 1) recent annual fishery harvests, values and volumes covering six fishery production categories; 2) fishing contribution to gross domestic product; 3) fishery exports; 4) government revenue from the fisheries sector; 5) fisheries employment; and 6) fisheries' contribution to nutrition. She spent three months interning at Talanoa Consulting, supporting the gender analysis of the fisheries and aquaculture sector in Kiribati, which led to an opportunity that allowed her to be a marine biologist at Barefoot Manta Resort in Yasawa.

Why did you choose to work on fisheries?

It was not so much about choosing to work in fisheries, it was rather just being completely open to trying new things. I was a fresh graduate when I heard there was an opportunity to co-author a fisheries book, and I was willing to take on whatever came my way. I have always recognised the importance of fisheries to the economies, livelihoods and cultures of Pacific Island countries, but I was only able to fully appreciate the complexity of their economic significance while carrying out the in-country visits, for which I was very grateful.

What was it like working on the economics of fisheries in the Pacific?

For a newly graduated young woman working on a project as big as this one, it was exciting and frightening at the same time. Throughout the eight months of being a junior consultant, I had the privilege of travelling with Robert Gillett to several Pacific Island countries to learn how in-country visits work, the protocols for entering each country, and organising meetings with fisheries officials. Prior to the visits, I assisted Mr Gillett with conducting internet searches relevant to fisheries in the Pacific, and learned how to analyse the information procured from fisheries agencies. I made trips to Nauru, New Caledonia, Samoa and Tonga, all of which provided me with new challenges and memorable experiences. My first solo trip to Nauru was quite difficult due to being nervous and doubtful that my young, inexperienced self would be able to do as good a job as Mr Gillett. Although I felt like I was thrown into the deep end of the pool I thought that maybe there was no better way to learn something. I was fortunate to expand my network

of people within other national fisheries agencies and made friends from different sectors and positions along the way. And it was very encouraging to see that although fisheries agencies are typically male-dominated, Mr Gillett and I were met with an all-female fisheries department in Samoa.

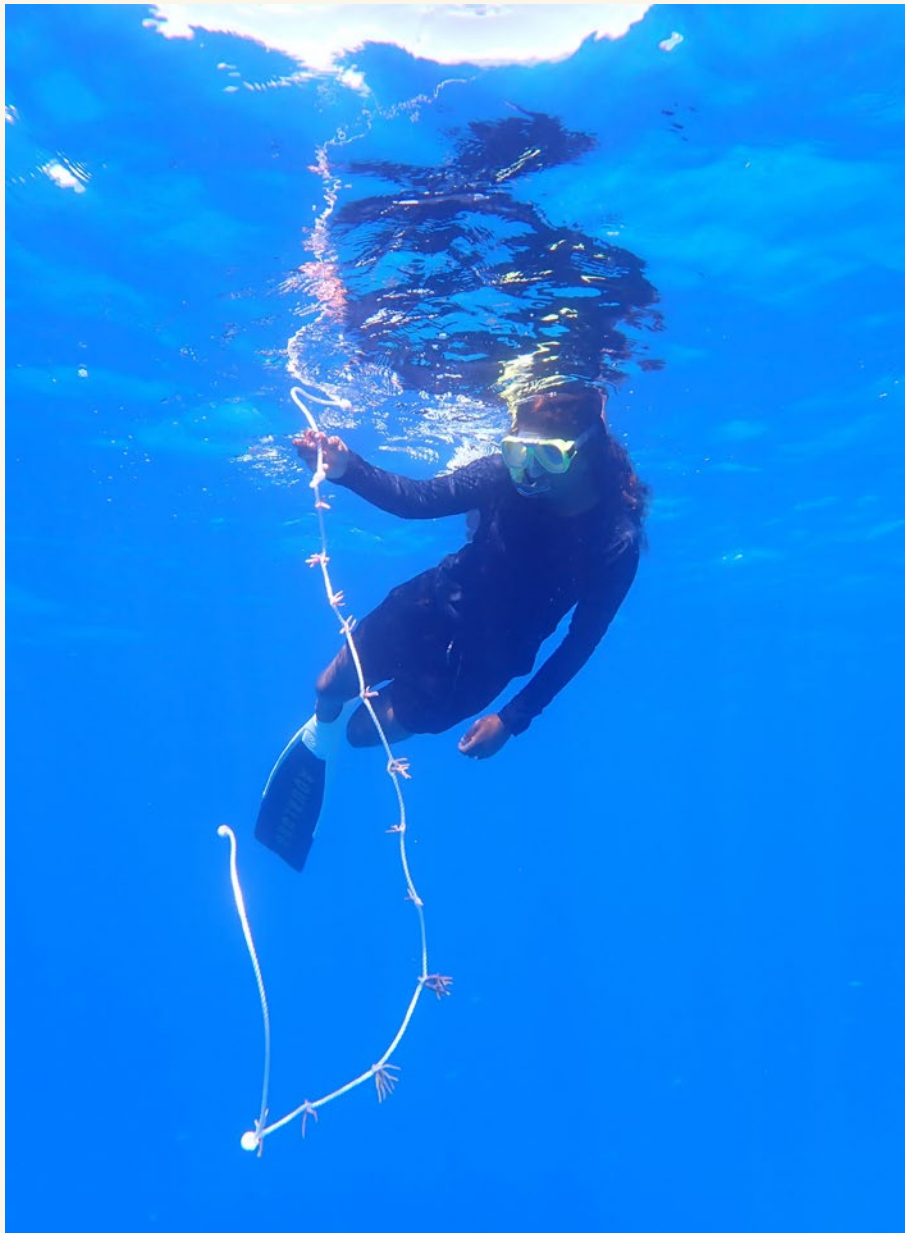
What challenges do you face as a young woman in your career?

I know a lot of young women whose parents think studying marine biology is a waste of time and doubt its potential. I, too, had my parents scratching their heads when I decided I wanted to study marine life. But I was fortunate enough to be able to pursue it, unlike others who were expected to follow whichever career path their parents preferred. Furthermore, it can be quite challenging and concerning for women to travel alone for work (or for anything in general) requiring us to take extra precautions. Moreover, I have received various

forms of prejudice from older men in senior positions, which can be discouraging as well, especially when they expect a fisheries consultant but find a young, timid woman instead.

What advice would you give to other young women?

Do what makes you happy. It's never too late to live your life how you want. It can be difficult going against the advice of friends and family who disagree with your career path, especially if they feel it may not "take you anywhere". Your career choice will occupy a big part of your life so make sure it is what you are passionate about and enjoy doing. Life is too short to be dreading going to work every day. And once your family sees you are happy and have a successful career, they will value and support the decisions you made. After all, most parents only want the best for their children.



Meme planting coral at Barefoot Manta Resort. © Rafa Jaklik