

Leadership programme “changed everything for me”

Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme supporting successful women in fisheries

The Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme (PFLP), launched in 2018 by the New Zealand Government aims to address the complex challenges facing the region’s fisheries sector. The programme works to strengthen the leadership capabilities and capacities of emerging leaders in the sector, with 237 Pacific Islanders – half of them women – some starting and some continuing their leadership journeys through the programme.



Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme participant, Lorian Finau-Groves - Principal Fisheries Officer for the Fisheries Division Competent Authority under the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in Samoa. Image: © SPC

Lorian Finau-Groves, newly appointed as a Principal Fisheries Officer for the Fisheries Division Competent Authority under the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in Samoa, figured this was the perfect time to enrol on the Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme. Encouraged by her supervisor, she seized the opportunity to hone her leadership skills.

PFLP offers a unique, customised programme for current and emerging Pacific fisheries leaders to develop additional skills and tools to support the mobilisation of change on national and regional fisheries priorities. Participants engage in a suite of courses including Inclusive Strategic Leadership, Leading and Managing People and Leadership for Change, contextualised mini-workshops, and personalised coaching support to enhance learning.

The people-centred approach enables participants to explore their own style of leadership and how they can strengthen their skillset. “It changed everything for me; it opened my eyes to new ways of seeing and understanding what

leadership is,” says Lorian. “It was a whole new mindset; I had never previously thought about how far I could go or the significant roles of women working in fisheries. I am in a leadership role now and the course offered guidance that can only help me go up from here.”

The courses are intended to enhance participants’ capacities to confront challenges across organisational and regional boundaries through the application of analytical tools to address the complexity of change in social systems. The participants learn and develop strategies for effective intervention in challenges they currently face. “The course helped me to understand myself better and to understand my colleagues and how they work,” Lorian explains. “It enabled me to be more sensitive but also to lead effectively. I learned different ways of leading and building a team that works well together. Now we do better planning, set realistic goals, and communicate clearly and openly. The programme gave me many tools that I continue to use every day.”

The Pacific Community (SPC) estimates that women carry out 50 per cent of traditional fishing activities that are crucial to Pacific livelihoods, much higher than the international average,¹ yet their contributions to the fisheries sector is largely undocumented and therefore not recognised. Despite their critical role in this sector, women in Pacific fisheries still face major obstacles when it comes to decision-making, career advancement and access to finance.

This sentiment is echoed by other women who have participated in PFLP. For example, one female participant was facing challenges in managing her team, including men who are older than her, adding further complexities and cultural considerations. At times she felt undermined and invisible. Navigating cultural values in this context is challenging and participants have noted the frameworks and support provided by PFLP as valuable. PFLP provides a culturally sensitive approach to these issues and one participant noted that it was very different to other leadership programmes in this respect. “After undertaking the Leadership for Change course, I learned tools and techniques to better understand and manage the team dynamics. I felt more confident and was able to build trusting working relationships with my team.”

Lorian acknowledges how things have changed for her: “Many years ago, Samoa Fisheries used to be male-dominated, where people would say ‘only men fish and men do the fieldwork.’ But now, with acknowledgement of equal opportunities, everyone appreciates having women on board. There are a great number of us women now working in Samoa Fisheries, with a perfect balance of males and females. I’ve had the chance to go on a boat deploying FADS with other female colleagues, and to participate in surveillance programmes on-board patrol boats. We are breaking down the old stereotypes that only men can do this job, and fisheries women are now being acknowledged and respected. It is indeed a great change for Samoa Fisheries.”

In interviews with other women participants, the impact of PFLP on their lives and careers appears to be particularly significant with the women telling stories of major positive changes in their lives after doing PFLP courses. Many of the women interviewed attributed their work promotions as well as their ability to make real change in their workplaces (using their newly acquired leadership skills and tools) to their participation in PFLP. The impact on their confidence and their ability to speak up in the workplace and in their communities is impressive and a major change for all the women interviewed. As a successful course attendee, Lorian gives it a positive review and recommendation. “The coaching was a delightful and unique part of the programme. It was good to have someone looking out for me, checking in on me, supporting me, and saying, ‘you can do this!’ Everyone out there needs to do this programme.”

The Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme is managed by a consortium, led by the Pacific Community (SPC), with the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), the University of Queensland Business School and CLA Consulting. To date, participants have come from 16 Pacific Island countries and territories and a total of three different courses and 10 mini workshops have been delivered. The first course to be delivered face-to-face since the COVID-19 lockdowns, Leadership for Change, will be held in Fiji in November 2022.

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¹ <https://www.spc.int/updates/news/2020/03/new-report-highlights-womens-invisible-roles-in-the-pacifics-fisheries-sector>