

# Women in fisheries profiles

## Mereseini Rakuita

From a girl by the sea to Principal Strategic Lead

Sian Rolls<sup>1</sup>



In a village by the deep blue waters of Natewa Bay in Fiji, a loving mother and father sowed the seed of equality in their home. Mereseini Rakuita grew up playing in the ocean, collecting firewood and coconuts, and eating pawpaw and oranges fresh from the plantation.

*“Growing up in a coastal community, I got to see on a daily basis how my mum and aunts and grandmothers would go out to the shore to put food on the table.”*

*“My mother grew up in a setting with clearly demarcated gender roles, but was applying gender equality principles without me realising it at the time. She’d make sure that if I washed dishes, my brothers would too; if one of us came home late, girl or boy, your food was kept; you messed up, you got a telling off just like your brothers – you don’t get your hair cut off just because you’re a girl.”*

This early demonstration of equality in the home, despite a prevailing patriarchal culture, ingrained a standard of behaviour that has guided Mereseini’s life journey.

*“A lot of times we undervalue our upbringing and how that shapes the person that you become later on in life – the roles that you take up and how that upbringing impacts on how you see things at work.”*

From the seaside, the family moved around the country as civil servants often do – from the northern island of Vanua Levu, to the Western Division, and then to the capital, Suva.

*“I spent a few years in different towns around Fiji and that gave me an opportunity to befriend children from other cultures – giving me an insight into the different circumstances and lived experiences of different families, which shaped my thinking on issues that I got to deal with as an adult. I had a great upbringing, with great parents who taught me the value of hard work, of commitment, and of achieving the things you put your mind to. But also empathy, compassion and basic human decency that’s needed in every place that we serve.”*

And service was indeed her guiding star – after finishing legal studies, there was no question of where to go to next.

*“My father used to take me to his office and as a little girl, I’d walk in and tell myself ‘I want to work in an office like this’. I didn’t know what work I wanted to do – but moving from town to town and following my dad around communities really inspired me to venture into the public sector to serve people.”*

Mereseini joined the ranks of the civil service on the precipice of change. After joining, many senior staff were retiring and leaving positions open to younger civil servants to take up leadership.

*“Many of my mentors retired; opening a window of opportunity for me and my colleagues. As a young woman lawyer being promoted to a senior position made me realise I had the capacity to perform the role, but I may not necessarily have had the opportunity otherwise. With capacities, it doesn’t have to do with gender or age – but back in my early civil service days, my workplace was a boy’s club and getting into that space wasn’t easy.”*

The issue, she says, was not a malicious one. It was, simply, gender blindness.

*“They’re all good people. I had great mentors who were men and women who taught me how to write a good legal opinion, but nobody was thinking about gender equality. No one was thinking about the impact of the gender blindness on policy, procedure or infrastructure.”*

This is part and parcel of Mereseini’s motivation to keep moving forward – from civil service to politics and now the Pacific Community (SPC) to make a change.

As Principal Strategic Lead – Pacific Women, Mereseini stands shoulder-to-shoulder within the executive team at SPC. Reporting directly to the Director-General,

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Dr Stuart Minchin, to elevate the importance of gender equality in the work of the whole organisation.

*“SPC is spearheading some great initiatives. The Women in Leadership programme is looking at women in the workplace; both for the professional setting but also considering the unpaid care economy and its impact on deliverables at work.”*

When considering equality in the workplace, Mereseini reflected on her own experience as a working mother.

*“My three children are my greatest achievement. My youngest is six years old. I had him when I was a government minister. I could bring the baby to the office and breastfeed during the day.”*

Acknowledging a level of privilege, she's encouraged by recent developments at SPC like a creche for the Nabua Campus in Fiji. “I think every organisation should look into what they're doing to support women, including those who may not yet be at a senior level – and I'm glad to see SPC leading the way on this.”

Alongside “internal” work, the organisation is making great strides in advancing gender equality in sectors such as fisheries.

Mereseini knows the pressures of governments to meet their own gender equality commitments – she held the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation portfolio and travelled to Geneva as head of the delegation for the 69th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2018. In preparation for the questions from the Committee, she reviewed the available data to get a clear picture of the situation of women and girls in her country.

Preparing for CEDAW was a “light bulb” moment that cemented her lifelong commitment to gender equality in her career. The data confirmed and quantified vast gender disparities, highlighting the significant volume of work needed to address gender inequalities.

*“Looking at the statistics on labour force participation of women and gender-based violence really, really showed the amount of work and the type of work that had to be done. We could see the sectors that are ‘traditionally male oriented’ and overlook the contribution and role of women, like fisheries.”*

For example, Pacific women comprise 70–90 per cent of the tuna processing force but continue to face barriers to safety, transportation, managing the burden of unpaid care work in the home, and limited skills development and promotional activities.

*“By producing gender-disaggregated data and tools, it gives us the insight to further support Pacific Island countries and territories to tailor their policies accordingly – something that SPC has been doing for decades.”*

*“For those working on the ground, there has been the development of tools and resources to support tailored application of gender as well as increased training facilitated through the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division and the Human Rights and Social Development Division to mainstream gender in the policy and programming work of national fisheries agencies.”*

*“Through FAME, there has also been a growing body of research on gender and fisheries through country assessments as well as pre-harvest and post-harvest*

Mere with staff at CePaCT © SPC







Mere with Sarlesh Kumar at the SPC Plant Health Laboratory. © SPC

*fishing activities. The work of the latter unearthed the volume of work that women are doing that really solidifies the kind of work that I would see the women back home in Natewa Bay doing; they're venturing into new roles in the harvesting, value-adding and marketing space and breaking resistant gender barriers. So, I'm also glad to see the FAME Aquaculture team supporting the women oyster fishers in the Rewa River Delta in Fiji, and enabling their greater market access and training to address health and safety aspects for the safe consumption of wild oysters."*

These initiatives are bringing to life the parallel work on strategies such as the recent and first Pacific Framework for Action on scaling-up Community-based Fisheries Management (2021) and a key guiding regional fisheries instrument *A new song for coastal fisheries – pathways to change: The Noumea strategy*. Also underway is a gender equality, social inclusion and human rights handbook highlighting the social dimensions across onshore and offshore operations, at port, or in science and management in the tuna industry.

With gender mainstreaming a significant priority for SPC as it moves to implement more integrated programming under the organisation's Strategic Plan 2022–2031, this volume of work shows promise in existing initiatives and ways of working. To build on the successful work thus far, an ambitious task has been placed before Mereseini.

*"In my role, I'm looking across the whole organisation to see what we're doing as an institution on gender equality. Then seeing where we as SPC need to go from here to sustainably mainstream gender equality as part*

*of the people-centred approach to science, research and technology across the Sustainable Development Goals. It's not something that can happen overnight. While we are doing this work, it must also be done properly. We need the right motive for substantive, sustainable change."*

While this is an ambitious mandate and a large organisation in the midst of change in front of her, Mereseini is not one to fear complex challenges.

She is inspired daily by her mother, and remains steadfast in her commitment to gender equality since those early days by the ocean.

*"I've got all this education she didn't, what excuse do I have not to do the work?"*

*"She was able to teach me all these great things. So, rooted in faith and the ultimate belief that nothing happens by accident, I don't see roadblocks or challenges – I see stepping stones. Every time I look back at an issue I encountered or a challenge I overcame, I see that it was an opportunity for development, to work differently or to strategise – pushing my capacity to its limit."*

*"So, for gender equality and the principles that surround it – it has to do with behaviour and how our minds are shaped, especially in the circumstances we find ourselves in. It's not just something that can be taught in school or a workshop. It goes back to parents and how we raise our children."*