

Samoan women at the helm of inland fishing

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‘Since we built the fish pond, I’ve been trained in tilapia farm management, maintenance and feed formulation and when the Fisheries Division come here, they come to see me. I’ve also taught my husband and son-in-law as they help me with the tilapia project. Now, other women are also interested in this venture’, says Epifalia Muliaga, a farmer and mother of two girls. Epifalia’s farm is one of several tilapia farms undergoing testing for intensive culture. Her tilapia tank was established under a project run by the Pacific Community (SPC), alongside five other families. Epifalia and her son-in-law Talalelei were among 85 key informants interviewed for a gender assessment of the aquaculture sector in Samoa in December 2017.

According to Epifalia, the farm and her knowledge of tilapia farming have given her a sense of empowerment. Family members look up to her and her family, as they share the fish harvest with extended family members. Food (tilapia) is always readily available when extra food is required urgently, and this has aroused the interest of other members of the community, as they see this as a great alternative food source. Epifalia is part of the *auluma*², which comprises at least 60 untitled women. She is also a Sunday school teacher and her husband is an assistant pastor in the Assembly of God denomination. The *auluma* meet on the first Monday of every month and Epifalia uses the opportunity to share her knowledge of tilapia farming and the importance of an alternative source of protein in their community. ‘I feel good when there is a need in the village and I am able to support immediately. Like when we need to organise food for the pastor, I am able to say, we can contribute the fish’, says Epifalia.

Epifalia’s husband works in Apia, so the management of the tilapia farm, livestock (chicken and pigs) and rootcrops plantation is left to her. According to son-in-law Talalelei, Epifalia will discuss chores for the day with him, which usually involves feeding the livestock and working in the plantation, as well as what food is required for the household and other community obligations. ‘I am married to the youngest daughter and so, whatever my mother-in-law and

father-in-law tell me, I will do it. There is plenty food but we have to work hard. The tilapia is very good because the fish habitat is overfished but also the waters of this village are very rough’, says Talalelei.

Like other women involved in tilapia farming, Epifalia has experienced increased decision-making opportunities leading to a greater sense of empowerment, greater involvement in village activities and increased visibility in the community. ‘At the moment, a Chinese businessman wants to buy our tilapia for five tala each but I decided not to sell it yet and I discussed this with my husband and he agreed’, she said.

Epifalia says that almost all major farming decisions are made in consultation with her husband, even though she manages the day-to-day running of the farm. This is a reflection of the strong gendered roles of men and women, with men leading decision-making, but nevertheless Epifalia believes she has more to contribute to decision-making because she is the one managing the farm activities. ‘For me, I really enjoy this work because there is a lot I can talk to my husband about and we both can see the rewards it will bring us in the future. It is not only about making money, but we know there is food always available and we always have something to contribute for our community obligations’, said Epifalia.

When asked about how easy it was to start a tilapia venture in her community, Epifalia said it was relatively easy for her and her husband because she is an *auluma* of the village and her husband is also from the village. Although women married into a village would still have access to land through their husbands, the gender assessment of the aquaculture sector in Samoa revealed that the *auluma* of a village appeared to have more autonomy when it came to community ventures. ‘Within the *auluma*, there are women who are untitled and of course titled women who can sit in the village council meetings, so our issues can be presented by them in these meetings. However, we are also members of church committees so there are many ways to raise any issues we have’, Epifalia said.

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² Daughters born of the village.