



PROFILE

Sharon Maiseveni – The woman who refused to let the Sea go to waste

Sharon Maiseveni's women-led fisheries enterprise in Papua New Guinea is on a mission to connect sustainable fisheries development to responsible stewardship, family welfare and community resilience

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Sharon Maiseveni

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On the islands of Papua New Guinea's Milne Bay Province, where the sea is legacy, livelihood, linkage, lodestone and larder, opportunity has ever arrived with the tides – and proven just as fickle. Fishers would return to shore with valuable hauls from spending hours on the water, only to lose part of their catch to spoilage before reaching the marketplace. Coveted species found ready buyers, while

“fishers don't lose income” due to selective purchasing.

Overcoming the challenges posed by limited infrastructure, she designed the business around strengthening market access, improving pricing fairness, reducing wastage through better handling of catch, and promoting sustainable use of marine resources by sensitising fishers on the need to avoid undersized catches and respect spawning periods.

“We sit with the fishermen and talk to them directly,” she said. “Sometimes we go out with them to demonstrate how to fish responsibly and take care of the reefs.” Besides raising awareness on appropriate gear use, responsible harvesting and reef protection, Sharon and her team conduct practical training sessions and hands-on demonstrations to help drive these lessons home.

Beyond capacity-building and community engagement, her business is tackling the lack of adequate cold storage infrastructure with support from a UNDP-led enterprise initiative that is expected to reduce costs from renting processing facilities once completed. Plans for solar-powered refrigeration and ice-making systems also promise to ensure stable cold chains – a persistent challenge in rural fisheries – while reducing dependence on costly fuel and unreliable electricity.

Increasing fisher incomes equates to better livelihood certainty and greater household stability, as does the hiring of women in administration, processing, and community outreach – creating new pathways into a sector traditionally dominated by men and helping ensure economic benefits are shared more equitably. In so doing, Sharon links fisheries development to broader questions of family welfare and community resilience.

“It is challenging, but I believe in creating opportunities for women and families,” she noted. “Through this work, we can help support school fees, daily needs, and better livelihoods.”

Hers is a story of uncommon perseverance and rootedness: of how sustainable development begins with local people shaped by the same challenges they seek to address – and willing to solve problems others have learned to endure. ■

those deemed to be lacking commercial value were discarded. The post-harvest losses ate into already uncertain incomes and the narrowing margins compounded household worry – the growing pressure on shore was mirrored in the mounting burden on the reefs that sustained generations.

For years, Sharon Maiseveni observed this troubling dichotomy, of abundance and scarcity, from Saiwaga village, where fishing is less a profession than a way of life. Given the limited opportunities for formal employment in remote island settlements, she understood how the distance between a fisher and the market could determine whether a family could afford to pay for their daily needs, let alone school fees. Rather than accept such realities as inevitable, Sharon envisioned a different future – one in which the fisheries could sustain both people and the marine ecosystems on which they depend.

Today, she manages Refah Fisheries Suppliers, a growing enterprise that has become an engine of change for coastal communities across Gamadoudou Ward in Huhu LLG. The business involves purchasing a wide selection of fish, including mackerel, tuna, trevally, and reef species, directly from local fishers and supplying them to buyers in town. By stepping in to “buy more of the catch”, Sharon said, it ensures the