

Narrative Article

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From Struggles to Strength: A Woman's Journey in Mabe Pearl Farming Empowering Women and Communities through Aquaculture in Tonga

Faka'ānaua Lākai

Founder and Owner, Naua Jewels of Vava'u Mabe Pearl Farmer, Jeweller and Seller Longomapu, Vava'u, Tonga

*Corresponding author

Faka'ānaua Lākai Founder and Owner, Naua Jewels of Vava'u Mabe Pearl Farmer, Jeweller and Seller Longomapu, Vava'u, Tonga.

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My Journey from Struggles to Strength

It is truly an honour to share my story and the story of many women in Tonga who have found hope, strength, and opportunity through pearl farming. I warmly welcome you, and I hope that my journey will inspire us all to see how resilience, inclusion, and determination can transform lives and communities.

My name is Faka'ānaua Lākai. I am the President of the Vava'u Pearl Association and the owner of Naua Jewels of Vava'u. I am also a mabe pearl farmer, jeweller, and seller from Longomapu, Vava'u, Tonga.

Today, I share my journey from struggles to strength, and how pearl farming has transformed not only my life and my family's future, but also contributed to the wider community of Vava'u. My story is personal, but it also represents the resilience, courage, and determination of many women in Tonga.

"Before, I felt like a failure. But now, I feel like I can fly."

These words describe my journey as a single mother raising five children in Vava'u. There was a time when my life was filled with uncertainty and hardship. However, through challenges came opportunities, and through those opportunities I discovered new strength, confidence, and hope.

Facing Life's Challenges

At the beginning of my journey, I was married, and together we were blessed with five beautiful children. However, life was not always easy, and differences between my husband and me eventually led to separation. From that moment, I faced the responsibility of raising my five children on my own with very limited income. I worked hard to provide for them through weaving and making handicrafts, but the income was often not enough to cover our daily needs, including food, education, and other necessities. Every day was a struggle, not only financially but also emotionally. There were many nights when I stayed awake wondering what the future would bring and how I could create better opportunities for my children. During those difficult times, I often questioned myself. I wondered whether I would ever overcome these challenges and whether I could give my children the future they deserved.

Discovering a New Opportunity through Pearl Farming

My turning point came when the Tonga Skills Program, funded by the Government of Australia, offered training in pearl shell carving. At first, I doubted myself because I had no previous knowledge or experience with pearls. I did not imagine that this opportunity would become a pathway that would transform my life. However, with encouragement from a friend, I decided to take the opportunity and participate in the training. During the training, I discovered a passion that I never expected. Working with pearl shells opened my eyes to creativity, possibility, and a new future. That passion developed into determination, and soon after, I registered my own maybe pearl farm. For me, pearl farming was more than just starting a small business. It was the beginning of independence, personal growth, and a new hope for my children's future.

Growing Through Partnership and Support

Another important opportunity came when the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) was looking for someone to support the development of the pearl sector in Vava'u. They needed a woman who could communicate in English and who was willing to participate in pearl farming. Through God's grace and the recommendation of an Australian volunteer, Emma, I was selected and became the Manager of the Vava'u Pearl Centre in 2019.

This opportunity changed my life.

Through ACIAR, I received valuable training, equipment, and guidance. I learned how to farm pearls professionally, support other farmers, manage the Pearl Centre, and contribute to marketing and export opportunities.

This was not only an opportunity for me personally. It became an opportunity to support many pearl farmers in Vava'u by sharing knowledge, encouraging participation, and strengthening the industry together.

Women Transforming Aquaculture

One of the greatest lessons I have learned through this journey is the important role of women in pearl farming. Women are not only supporters behind the scenes. Women are farmers, artisans, entrepreneurs, and leaders. They take raw pearl materials and transform them into beautiful jewellery. They manage small

businesses, create income opportunities, and contribute to the wellbeing of their families.

The creativity, commitment, and leadership of women have strengthened the pearl industry in Vava'u. When women are included and empowered, families become stronger and communities become more resilient. Pearl farming has shown that women have valuable skills and knowledge to contribute. Given opportunities and support, women can create meaningful change.

Challenges, Resilience, and Moving Forward

The journey has not always been easy. Pearl farming requires patience, dedication, and commitment. Farmers work long hours under the sun and must wait years before pearls are ready for harvest. It requires perseverance, especially when markets are uncertain and challenges arise.

Then came COVID-19, which created one of the greatest challenges we faced. International markets were disrupted, exports stopped, and many farmers felt uncertain about the future. After investing so much time and effort, we feared that our hard work might be lost.

However, we chose not to give up.

With support from ACIAR and Fisheries, we found ways to continue moving forward. Slowly, we rebuilt our confidence and strengthened our cooperation. Farmers began working together more closely, sharing opportunities, and supporting each other. We learned that success is not only about individual achievement. True success comes when the whole community benefits.

From Personal Transformation to Community Leadership

Looking back, I can see how completely pearl farming has transformed my life.

Financially, I now have greater stability. I am able to support my children's education and provide opportunities that I once only dreamed of. Professionally, I have grown into a farmer, jeweller, entrepreneur, and leader. Personally, I have regained confidence, dignity, and a sense of purpose. Pearl farming is not only about income. It has given me pride, hope, and fulfilment. It helped me rebuild my identity and reminded me that I am capable, valuable, and strong.

Today, I am honoured to serve as President of the Vava'u Pearl Association. In this role, I work alongside other farmers, supporting and encouraging them as they develop within the industry.

To me, leadership is not about being above others. Leadership is about lifting others up, creating opportunities, and helping people discover their own potential. I continue to build networks and seek opportunities to expand markets so that our pearls can reach more people internationally. This work is not only for my own family but for the future of the pearl industry and the wider community of Vava'u.

The Meaning Behind Every Pearl

For me, every pearl carries a deeper meaning.

A pearl is created through a long process of patience, endurance, and transformation. In the same way, people are shaped through their struggles and experiences. Difficult moments can become the foundation for something beautiful.

Pearls represent resilience, inclusion, and hope.

Each pearl harvested is more than a piece of jewellery. It represents a family's opportunity, a community's strength, and a reminder that beauty can emerge from hardship.

A Message of Hope

I return to the words I shared at the beginning:

"Before, I felt like a failure. But now, I feel like I can fly."

My journey proves that struggles do not have to define our future. With determination, support, and opportunity, transformation is possible.

I am deeply grateful to God, to ACIAR, to the Australian partnership, and to my community for walking alongside me throughout this journey.

My hope is that my story will encourage other women to believe in themselves, recognise their own potential, and embrace opportunities that can transform their lives and communities. Pearl farming has taught me that from struggles can come great strength, and when women are included, entire communities are uplifted.

Mālō 'aupito - Thank you.

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