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Slo slo: increasing women's representation in parliament in Vanuatu

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Introduction

In the recent general election (May 2002) Vanuatu elected its third ever woman (Isabelle Donald) to parliament. In 1987, Hilda Lini and Maria Crowby were the first women elected to parliament of Vanuatu. Hilda Lini served three terms and Maria Crowby one. During her term, Hilda Lini was also Minister for Health. From 1998 to 2002, Vanuatu had no women's representation in parliament, although equity is enshrined in Vanuatu's constitution, the Comprehensive Reform Program and Vanuatu's ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995.

The reasons women in Vanuatu are so under-represented in national, provincial and municipal governments are complex and include the reluctance, and in some cases direct opposition, of some (both men and women) to acknowledge women's rightful place in the decision-making processes of the country. These attitudes are deeply embedded in traditional custom and Christianity. Particularly in the early days of independence, many members of parliament were also church pastors and today many are chiefs.

Conservative attitudes, such as believing that the man is the head of the household, are difficult to change. For example, recently the president of the Council of Chiefs, Tom Numake, publicly stated that women of the island of Tanna had no place in either politics or the judiciary. Tanna women protested strongly, publicly berated Tom Numake for his statements and demanded he apologise (*Trading Post* 2002).

Attempts to change this situation in the past have been ad hoc and lacked a clearly planned and coordinated approach, as well as political will. However, this does not mean that nothing has been done to try to change this situation. In particular, NGOs such as the Vanuatu National Council of Women and Vanuatu Women in Politics (VANWIP) were active in the 1995 and 1998 elections, particularly when none of the political parties fielded women candidates. In 1998, as a political protest VANWIP put forward a number of women candidates. All stood as independent candidates, including Hilda Lini. VANWIP gave cross-party support and training.

VANWIP realised that its protest probably would not be successful in getting a woman elected to parliament. However, it was successful in raising women's political profile. The VANWIP women candidates experienced hostile opposition from both men and women (Molisa 2001).

The reluctance of political parties to nominate women is probably the single biggest barrier to women being elected to parliament in Vanuatu. If people stand as independent candidates, they do not have party machinery behind them. Candidacy is costly in terms of support, advertising and registration fees. Independent candidates have to raise funds

to cover the costs. If they stood as party candidates, women would recover these costs, in theory anyway.

Another significant barrier to women's representation is the 'first past the post' electoral system used in Vanuatu for national elections. The ten countries in the world with the highest women's representation in parliament all have proportional representation elections. Such systems provide an incentive for political parties to broaden their appeal to voters by adding women to their party lists. The results are significant, especially when the 'zebra' rule is applied, that is, every second seat goes to a woman (Inter-Parliamentary Union).

The plan of action

The plan of action undertaken by the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) in 2001 and 2002 to get a number of women elected to parliament in the 2002 general election was based on strategies found to be successful elsewhere in the world. For example, the strategies suggested by the Asia/Pacific 50/50 by 2005 Women in Government: Get The Balance Right campaign (Centre for Legislative Development 2001), and the lessons learned by VANWIP in their 1995 and 1998 election campaigns, informed the plan of action adopted by the department.

In 2001, in response to the mounting criticism about the government's lack of political will, the DWA completely overhauled its operations. Given its limited resources, the department acknowledged that alone it would be unable to make much difference. It also acknowledged that it was important to utilise the considerable commitment and expertise available in NGOs. In the past, it had been criticised for not working with NGOs, so it adopted a philosophy of working in partnership for equality (Department of Women's Affairs 2001a). This philosophy was to underpin all the work of the DWA, including all aspects of policy development and implementation. It did not include just NGOs, but other government departments, men, chiefs, pastors and other critical stakeholders.

The next stage was to prioritise areas for policy development. Because of the impending national elections in May 2002 top priority was given to the area of women in government. The first stage in the policy development process was preparing a discussion paper to be sent out to stakeholders for comment. When the feedback was received, the policy was finalised, translated into Bislama¹ and submitted in November 2001 to government for endorsement. To date that endorsement has not been received. Slow government processes are a major factor in the lack of progress in improving the status of women.

The policy included both long and short-term strategies, some of which could go ahead without government endorsement. The long-term strategies included a quota system that required eight seats in parliament to be reserved for women, and political parties being required to nominate women as candidates for a minimum of 30 per cent of seats. A proportional representation electoral system was also recommended (Department of Women's Affairs 2001b). The short-term strategies are discussed in detail below.

All these strategies involved working in partnership with key stakeholders. Projects were submitted to donors, who implemented these strategies on a small scale (Port Vila and Luganville only) and they were all successful. Only small-scale interventions were possible given the short lead time to the national elections. The DWA also wanted to test the effectiveness of the strategies so that the lessons learned could be considered when planning the long-term strategies for the 2006 general elections.

A task force was convened which included representatives of key stakeholder organisations. The task force met over a number of months to plan the implementation of the strategies. Representatives of the churches and the chiefs, although invited, did not attend the meetings. One chief who was keen to be involved was directed by an official of the Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri) not to be part of the task force.

Lobbying the political parties to nominate women candidates

In 2001, all political party presidents were approached to attend a meeting to discuss a 30 per cent quota system for women candidates. They were sent a copy of the DWA's Women in Government policy and asked to read it and discuss it within their parties, and particularly with their women members. They were also asked to bring a woman representative with them to the meeting. Out of nine parties invited, four attended the meeting and none brought a woman representative with them. The meeting proceeded and the quota of 30 per cent men, 30 per cent women and the balance of 40 per cent of candidates being of either sex did not receive support. It was also apparent that women had not been involved in a discussion of the policy paper and had not been invited to the meeting with their presidents. At the May 2002 general election, only two women were nominated by their parties; five women stood as independent candidates. Our lobbying of the parties was spectacularly unsuccessful.

Voter education for women

The Voter Education for Women workshops followed a 'training the trainers' model. The DWA worked with community theatre group *Wan Smolbag*² to train key women leaders, representing a wide variety of church organisations, in voter education. These women underwent two days of training about, for instance, how to register and vote, the importance of women's representation in government, and their rights as voters and as female voters.

The women then returned to their own communities in Port Vila and Luganville to run similar workshops. In all, over 2,000 men, women and children attended the resulting workshops in the two municipalities. At the same time, *Wan Smolbag* was also running voter education workshops in some rural island communities.

Many women who attended the workshops did not realise they could vote independently of their husband's and chief's direction, or that their vote was secret. Many were also unaware of the importance of having women's representation in parliament and the power their vote carried to influence who was elected. This highlighted the importance of the workshops and the need to run them over a much wider area of the country.

Training workshops for potential women candidates

Two three-day workshops were run for potential women candidates, one in Port Vila and one in Luganville. Isabelle Donald was flown from the island of Epi to attend the Port Vila workshop. The workshops run for potential women candidates included such topics as what it is like to be a female MP, the electoral process, issues affecting Vanuatu and women, running a campaign and using the media.

Facilitators and presenters in the three-day workshops were both men and women from the business sector, the government sector and NGOs. They also included Hilda Lini and Maria Crowley, and current male MPs. The materials developed by UNIFEM (1999a, 1999b, 1999c) were extensively used in the workshop and all participants received copies. Almost 80 women attended the workshops.

Research

The final strategy was research. There are two ongoing projects:

- tracking the progress of women's access to senior government positions (including parliament), and their experiences in that process. This will provide important indicator information and data will have to be collected annually;
- tracking the progress of women in the national, municipal and provincial elections in Efate and Santo, including candidate nomination rates, votes won, seats gained and the experiences of the women in that process.

In particular, the information gained from the latter will be used when devising the plan of action to attain the goal of 30 per cent female members in national, provincial and municipal governments by 2006.

For the 2002 general election, seven women candidates stood for election out of a total of 257 (Electoral Commission 2002), so 2.7 per cent of the total number of candidates were women. Political parties nominated two women (the Vanuaaku Party and the Vanuatu Republican Party) and five were independent candidates. Some of the independent candidates chose to run under an independent coalition called the Vanuatu Independent Movement.

Isabelle's story

Isabelle was born on the island of Epi and has lived and worked there for most of her life. She is married with three children. Her husband is very supportive of her political aspirations. For the past 18 years she has worked in both the government and non-government sectors on Epi. Most recently she worked as the local coordinator of the Rural Skills Training program, work that brought her into extensive contact with women's and youth groups throughout Epi. She organised many training programs on Epi and ensured that all had an equal representation of men and women.

Why was Isabelle successful when the other candidates were not? What contributed to her success? In a comparison of how the seven female 2002 candidates polled, Isabelle was far ahead of the others. She captured 19.5 per cent of the valid votes cast in her electorate. The other six women obtained from .24 per cent to 4 per cent of the valid votes cast in their respective electorates (Electoral Commission 2002). Her story reveals that belonging to a political party, being well known and respected in the community, receiving training and being well organised made significant contributions to her success.

Belonging to a political party

Isabelle was supported in her nomination as a candidate for the Vanuaaku Party (VP) by the youth of her community, the women and a number of local chiefs, but her official nomination came from the Epi VP regional committee. Previous to her successful nomination, Isabelle had been a VP supporter. She said:

There is one big reason why I wanted to go into parliament—because I want to try and educate the male MPs about the needs of women. They think about big things and sometimes overlook the small issues. When we are planning a development we need to start small.³

She found the support of the party machinery invaluable in her campaign and recommends that women affiliate with a party so they gain a profile inside the party and understand how the selection process works.

Being well known and respected in her community

There is no doubt in Isabelle's mind that, because she was born on Epi and had lived and worked for most of her life there, she already had the trust of the voters, particularly young voters and women. In some ways, her unofficial campaign had started well before she actually stood as a candidate. Much of the hard campaigning work had already been done. Her advice to women who are thinking of standing for election in the future is to start now:

The next election is not long away—it is very close so they should start preparing now. They must build up trust in the community, but first your family. If you build up that trust in the community it will be easy when you come to campaign. Then you will feel surer of your success. If you don't build up that trust you won't make it. You must gain your community's trust before 2006.

Receiving training and being well organised

Isabelle found the training she received at the workshop invaluable. She shared the information and ideas she obtained with her campaign team and they used this in planning her campaign. In fact, while she was campaigning, she got feedback from the audiences she spoke to about how well her campaign was organised and how disorganised the other candidates were.

In Vanuatu, it is the custom for candidates to let other people, usually their campaign team, speak for them so they are seen not to praise themselves too much:

Talking politics was new [for me]. Before my campaign we organised that one person would talk about the qualities of an MP, another about the popularity of one candidate, also about the personality of the candidate you want, is she/he good or do you not like her/him. I answered questions that were hard for the other members of the team to answer. The first time I watched how it was done, what the format was but I answered questions. There weren't too many questions.

Isabelle also commented on how it was important for women in the outer islands to also receive support and training. As a rural woman she was keenly aware of the difficulties faced by other rural women:

Women in town have got greater access to workshops, but women in rural areas need workshops so they can develop too. I gained experience from the workshop I attended but many women can't attend workshops. So we need to provide them in rural areas too.

Another important difference between Isabelle's campaign and the campaign of the other candidates was that her campaign team consisted of both men and women. It was the first time that women were part of a campaign team.

Some of the difficulties

Isabelle faced a number of difficulties during her selection process and the campaign itself. Transport was a problem: rain made the roads very difficult to navigate. They needed two trucks and it was expensive to travel to remote rural locations on Epi. They were unable to let many villages know they were coming as the island has few telephones, so they just turned up and spoke to those who were available and willing to listen.

Financing the campaign was difficult as the Epi regional VP committee was not prepared for the campaign. Both local and national fundraising helped, but Isabelle also had to use her savings to fund her campaign.

Another major difficulty was dealing with the attitudes of the men in the other campaign teams. Five men who had not been selected as VP candidates chose to stand as independents. These men spoke out about how women had no place in politics and actively discouraged people from voting for Isabelle. Some men were abusive. One of these men openly challenged Isabelle's right to stand as a candidate. This was particularly ironic as he had previously been an MP and the minister responsible for the Comprehensive Reform Program, which has equity at its core. Isabelle and her team ignored them.

So what has been learnt?

Before the scheduled general election in 2006, there will be provincial and municipal elections. Vanuatu has a history of early elections so it could well be that another general election takes place before 2006. The women candidates must be prepared so that, once an election is called, they can quickly swing into their official campaigns. Training must start early and women should be encouraged to build up their profile in their communities and earn the respect of the voters. It could be that rural women have an advantage over their municipal sisters with their community profiles. We should consider a shift in focus to include more rural women in the training program, and to build those costs in when asking donors for funding.

Parties need to know that women with party support, and the right training and community background are very strong candidates who can help a party's prospects of governing. Well-trained women with a high positive community profile are assets, not liabilities, to parties. We must focus on persuading political parties to nominate women, and on encouraging women to work inside party machinery. We must continue with the Voter Education for Women program and expand it to rural areas.

Finally, we must encourage women to work within their political parties to achieve change, so they have an equal chance of selection. Selection criteria should be examined and women should build their credibility in and their knowledge of the party system. Selection processes must also be more transparent than previously. For years men have used the biased selection system to their advantage. Those systems should be changed to prevent discrimination against women.

Conclusion

Progress might be slow, but the experience of the last election has shown us that people are increasingly willing to work together to achieve increased female participation in parliament. There is a mood of optimism and a genuine delight among many, both men and women, that Isabelle has been successful. Donors have also indicated that they are willing to support a long-term action plan. We must keep the pressure up; persistence and patience will be needed.

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with a poem by the late Grace Mera Molisa who worked tirelessly for and with the women of Vanuatu.

Vanuatu Women

Teaching by showing
Learning by doing
Voicing our concerns
Sharing ideas
Actively participating
In empowering ourselves

To Assert our identity
To Make visible
To Improve our status
Health, Economics, Politics
To Achieve some measure
Of Freedom and Control
Of our own lives
Within our Environment
(*Grace Mera Molisa, 1995*)

Notes

1. Bislama is the lingua franca of Vanuatu. *Slo slo* is Bislama for slow.
2. *Wan Smolbag* has considerable experience in voter education. Their video, *Vot Blong Yu I Sekret [Your Vote is Secret]*, was used extensively in the training.
3. Isabelle was interviewed in Bislama for this article. Her interview was then translated into English. She checked the translation to ensure that her intended meaning was accurately captured.

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