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The experiences of women political candidates in Vanuatu

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Introduction

The research described in this paper is the first in Vanuatu that specifically investigates the experiences of women candidates in the election process.[1] Participants were chosen because they were candidates in either the 2001 municipal election or the 2002 national election. Twelve candidates and five campaign managers were interviewed.

Political parties were very reluctant to nominate women as candidates, so many of those that stood were independent candidates. The findings showed a need to work with and encourage political parties to nominate women. Lack of funds and other resources were major obstacles, particularly for independent candidates. The women often experienced a hostile reception from both men and women when they were campaigning. Early planning and training are essential to prepare women for candidacy.

In a previous *Development Bulletin* article, Donald, Strachan and Taleo (2002) documented the development of the Government of Vanuatu's Women in Government Policy by the Department of Women's Affairs and the experiences of Vanua'aku Party candidate Isabelle Donald in the 2002 general election. It was considered important to document the experiences of other women candidates to better understand how to prepare women for candidacy.

Methodology

The research set out to explore the following research questions:

1. What were the experiences of women who stood for election?
2. How can their experiences inform future planning to increase women's representation in government?

The methodology used was qualitative using interviews (in either Bislama, the lingua franca Vanuatu, or English) to gather information from the 17 participants (seven national election candidates, five municipal candidates and five campaign managers). Of the 12 candidates, seven were party candidates and five were independent candidates. The women came from Port Vila (on the island of Efate), Luganville (on the island of Santo) and the island of Epi. One candidate stood as a party candidate for the municipal elections in 2001 and as an independent candidate in the national election in 2002. However, she was only interviewed about her experiences as an independent candidate in the national election and so was counted only once.

Candidacy

Getting selected as a candidate by a political party was problematic for many of the women. Some of the women had been active within their parties for many years but when it came time for selection they were passed over. This was a pattern repeated in earlier elections when the political parties did not nominate any women. So it was often out of a sense of frustration that they decided to stand as independent candidates, particularly in the national election. Women were much more likely to get selected as a candidate for the municipal election than the national election.

Party candidacy

Only two women were selected as party candidates for the May 2002 national election and both their selections were problematic:

> There was conflict within the party as to why I had to contest the general election. The idea of having a woman contest was still really unacceptable for a few men in the party.

However, it was not only men that were opposed and uncooperative. Sometimes women stood against other women. This lack of support of women for women was a recurring theme and is commented on more fully later in this article.

The Vanua'aku Party (VP) nominated the most women candidates, especially in the municipal elections. Of the seven women who were party candidates, six were VP candidates. The municipal candidates had to stand in the ward where they lived and were registered. In some cases, this meant that they had little chance of being elected as their *wantok* (extended family) lived in other wards, so their support base was very small. Some of these women experienced strong opposition from male candidates. A number of these men had been passed over as candidates so set themselves up as independent candidates in the same ward and in opposition to their own party's female candidate. This meant they split the vote so both had little chance of being elected.

All the women in the research thought that the party systems assisted women candidates. The parties provided support in organising the campaign, helped with funding, transport, publicity materials, access to communities and policies. Within the party, support came from both men and women, although this was not always the case:

At first I felt reluctant to participate in the elections, there were more men who were politically involved at the party level, so I was shy and frightened, but other women in the party were supportive.

A few women noted that political parties were largely a male arena. This provided men with a better chance of being chosen as a candidate, as the following quote illustrates:

I was the only lady working amongst men, and a lot of times we push for men to get in for elections, and so I viewed there would be a low chance to push women into Parliament.

Some women claimed to have experienced a negative attitude from both women and men, within their political party. Such circumstances forced some women to move out of the party. Some of those that stayed experienced opposition by other party supporters during the election campaigns. A few candidates deliberately contested against the women in order to divide the vote. They found this a very difficult and challenging situation. One candidate commented:

The difficulties went as far as the opposing members of my political party holding back the money sent for my campaign by the head office, and my posters were torn as a result of these conflicts. This is a result I received from people after being involved for 20 years [in the party].

Independent candidacy

The women who stood as independent candidates identified the autonomy they had as the main advantage. They also appreciated not being controlled by other people within a party. One national election independent candidate explained, 'Standing as an independent candidate allowed me to really say what I wanted'. However, all the candidates saw more disadvantages than advantages in being an independent candidate. In particular, they mentioned it would be difficult to implement their policies: 'Being an independent candidate, it is also a problem, because how would you enforce your policies when you do not have a party, and when you are alone?'

Another perceived disadvantage was that voters usually focused on a party rather than on a candidate. This was viewed by some of the women as a negative aspect that reduced their votes and therefore their chance of being elected. They thought this an unfair situation:

We have always believed in the party system, people have their minds set that the party is best. So people would vote for the party preferably as a choice over the candidate who may be better, but because she/he is an independent candidate, so we have to work extra hard.

Most independent candidates also faced funding difficulties. The difficulties experienced in fundraising were big disadvantages for independent candidates. The lack of funding caused other difficulties such as transport for the campaign (especially in the rural areas), campaign materials and the registration fee.

Another problem for the independent candidates was establishing contacts within communities. It was particularly difficult given that many of them had very little time to prepare their campaigns as the following quote illustrates:

You do not have ready contacts that are in place for you to go directly to once you start your campaign, you have to start from square one, whereas in the party the system is already there, and people (supporters) are there to help you.

The overwhelming opinion of the women was that if you could get selected it was much better to be a party candidate. However, because parties have been reluctant to nominate women as candidates women had had little choice but to stand as independent candidates.

The campaign

How each candidate conducted her election campaign depended largely on whether she was a party candidate or an independent candidate. It also depended upon whether she was standing as a candidate in the municipal or the national elections. For example, as a party candidate, campaign strategies, policies and a campaign team were all organised by the party for the candidate. So aspects such as policy development, funding and transport were not as problematic as they were for independent candidates. However, this did not mean that campaigning for the party candidates was all smooth sailing. Party candidates also experienced difficulties, some of which were similar to those experienced by the independent candidates.

Being well known in the community in which they were campaigning was a huge asset. Isabelle Donald commented that having lived and worked on Epi most of her life meant that her unofficial campaign had started well before she actually stood as a candidate, as she was already well known.[2] Much of her hard campaigning work had already been done, particularly with youth and women (Donald, Strachan and Taleo 2002). Another candidate found that her previously high public profile was helpful as people already knew who she was and what she stood for.

Organisation

Having such a short period of time in which to organise and present their campaigns was problematic. Many women did not stand until the very last moment so the campaign organisation was often carried out as the campaign was underway. This meant that some communities did not get visited at all as there was not enough time. This was not just an issue for the independent candidates.

Some candidates chose to carry out a house-to-house campaign and others spoke to groups within each community. Others used a combination of both approaches. They all

commented on the need for good planning and how in the future they would be better prepared, but how the lack of time and funds severely limited the effectiveness of their campaigns.

Nearly all the candidates and campaign managers attended the training provided by the Department of Women's Affairs. All found the training very helpful when organising their campaigns. Isabelle Donald received feedback from the communities on Epi on how well her campaign was organised and how disorganised the other male candidates were (Donald, Strachan and Taleo 2002). Before her campaign started, Isabelle shared with her campaign team the training she had received and they carefully planned how they would carry out their campaign.

The campaign teams

There were a lot of women in the campaign teams and many had been involved in previous campaigns. However, some campaign teams also included men. The teams varied in size from just one or two people to up to 30 people. It was usual for those in the campaign teams to speak on behalf of the candidate. So, as they were representing the candidate, they also needed to have the respect of the communities and this was an important criterion when selecting people to be part of a campaign team. A candidate made the following comment:

they [the campaign team] were known for their honesty and it was linked with their personal life ... the people who showed up had good records of the past ... they were good at their jobs, good community people and good in their relationships.

The 'respectability' of campaign team members was another recurring theme as the personalities, personal life and qualities of a candidate and her campaigners were frequently attacked. Also, campaigning is hard work and so both the candidate and her campaign team needed to have the support of their families:

campaigning is very hard work ... you have to make sure this person has a stable home and the husband is supportive of women's issues and the issues she will be campaigning for.

There were times when a lack of planning was evident in the campaign, particularly in the consistency of the messages given. There were instances when the campaign team members spoke they contradicted one another and so confused the audience. Sometimes, though, it was not easy to find reliable and willing people to be part of the campaign team. Some of the political parties threatened party members with expulsion if they stood as an independent candidate, or if members helped with the campaign of independent candidates:

we decided to call a meeting and initially there were 20 women who were at our side, but every one of them were scared of the party, and one after another they withdrew until there were only five of us.

Accessing communities

All candidates, whether party or independent, needed to access communities for their campaign. This involved negotiating with chiefs and other community leaders such as pastors. Candidates could not just walk into a community and start campaigning, permission had to be granted by the community leader and a time for their visit negotiated. This was problematic in the rural electorates as telephones were in many cases non-existent, roads were bad and transport expensive.

Many spoke of the need to expand their campaign to a wider group of communities within their electorate/ward. Once again the extent of their campaign was limited by a lack of both funding and time. One candidate commented:

I only concentrated on the communities where I live ... I need to expand that to getting involved with activities for other women in other parts of Port Vila.

Because the community leaders (for example pastors and chiefs) are almost always men who have a big influence in how their community members vote, some of the candidates actively worked at bringing the men in the communities 'on-side'. They did not want to be seen as undermining their authority:

So when we approached the communities we sat with the other women on the mats and left the seats to the men. I thought this was important because I felt that through this way the people could see we did not want to over-ride the men who were mostly community leaders.

Policies

The policies of the independent candidates reflected the reasons why they had decided to stand for election. Polices that focused on social issues predominated, for example, education, health, economic empowerment of women, especially rural women, women in decision making, encouraging investment, supporting the market women, and reducing violence against women. The welfare of women was at the centre of many of their policies and a number of the women stressed the importance of pushing the Family Protection Order Bill through parliament. They were very concerned that it had not yet been passed into law. An independent candidate explained:

My policies go mainly with community-based needs ... such as poverty, upgrading the standard of living for people through economic empowerment, issues such as health, education.

Another believed it was important not to focus only on women's issues as this put some voters off. She considered it was important to focus on the big issues such as the economy and corruption, but to keep women's issues in the back of her mind. Once she was elected, then she would voice women's concerns.

However, little detail was given by the independent candidates as to how these polices would be implemented. Policies were more an expression of concern rather than a detailed plan of action. The lack of time was at least partly responsible for poor policy development. This was a very real weakness in their campaigning and one that should be considered in any future training of women candidates.

Campaign difficulties and challenges

The women experienced a number of difficulties and challenges including lack of funding, transport difficulties, men threatening and bribing, and women not supporting women.

Funding and transport

Funding was frequently commented on by the independent candidates as being their biggest problem. Raising funds for the registration fee (50,000 vatu or approximately A$600), transport and publicity was very difficult. Raising funds was made even more difficult because many did not start their campaigns until very late. Some approached businesses for support, some individuals assisted, but most of the funding came from the women candidates and their families. Lack of funding restricted how extensive their campaigns could be.

One independent candidate used the radio to promote her candidacy, which she found to be very effective, but this was financially beyond the reach of the other candidates. Money was also in short supply to provide food for the campaign team, brochures, posters, T shirts and other advertising materials. The strategies most often used were posters and talking to communities. A candidate explained how she differently she would campaign if she had sufficient funds:

> Suppose I had the finances what I would do differently is that I would have a proper plan when I am going around to do the campaign and to do the transportation. If you had the finances you would be able to deal with transportation and plan how it could assist you in taking you to places within the rural areas.

The problem with transport was commented on time and time again, particularly by the independent candidates. Transport was dependent upon funding and this was in very short supply. One woman who helped with the campaign of an independent candidate commented:

> I faced difficulty in finding transport, by the time I found transport the time had passed, and once I got to the area to do the campaign the community had dispersed because the time was up.

Also, some male taxi and truck drivers refused to transport the women candidates and their campaign teams because they belonged to a different political party to the one they supported.

Men threatening and bribing

Some male party members actively disrupted the women's campaigns. For example, in one campaign, male candidates who had not been selected by their own party decided to stand as independents and were abusive to the selected party candidate when she campaigned. They publicly questioned her ability as a woman to stand as a candidate. Although many men did support women candidates, including some chiefs, it was common for women to be verbally abused:

> There were a lot of threats that I received from members within my own party who opposed the idea of me standing in the election.

Some supporters of other candidates specifically asked questions to try and trap the women candidates. The women commented that they had handled this by focusing on the issues and the policies and refused to use the same abusive tactics. This was appreciated by the communities, some of which commented that they did not like it when candidates verbally attacked other candidates.

Bribery was also commented on. Some male candidates were bribing voters with money, food and alcohol, comments like the following were common, 'bribery and threats play a big part during the campaign' and 'They [the male candidates] were paying people ... parties were doing things against the law'. The women commented that they chose not to obtain votes by using bribery and threats. They did not want to stoop to the level of some of the male candidates.

Women not supporting women

There was a real concern amongst most of the research participants that some women were not supportive of other women. In some instances, women were actively working against other women, for example standing as a candidate in the same electorate. Many commented that this was very disappointing and a real hindrance to women's involvement in politics:

> The reason I mention women as a stumbling block to get into politics is because we women have this jealous attitude, when a woman wants to stand up women get together from the opposing side and oppose the contestant ... women are really bad at getting together to support a contestant.

> There were a lot of the women who did not support me, a lot of times, we women tend to blame men as the main obstacles to our progress, but I would stress that women are their own enemies.

The women offered some solutions but felt that until women were prepared to support other women it would be very hard for women to get elected. One candidate suggested:

Often women are watched by men and a lot of the times the internal conflicts we have among ourselves is seen as a weakness by the people, and so men continue to say we are not ready to work as a team and so they keep pushing us aside.

However, there is also disunity among male candidates and members of parliament but this is not necessarily seen as an impediment to their ability to lead.

Another candidate suggested that the women should select only one or two candidates for Port Vila and all the women vote for them. This raises an issue about the quality of candidates. It is probable that the strategy mentioned above may get some women elected. But should a woman candidate be supported just because she is a woman? What if a voter does not like her polices? And, what if she does not have the background, experience and personal qualities voters consider necessary to be a good member of parliament. Is being a woman enough? The answer would have to be no.

Planning for the future

The women candidates need to be prepared early so once an election is called they can quickly swing into their campaigns. Fundraising and training must start early and women encouraged to build up their profile in their community and earn the respect of the voters. It could be that rural women have an advantage over their municipal sisters in terms of their community profiles. The training for women candidates needs to be offered around the country so rural women are not disadvantaged.

Political parties need to understand that women with party support, the right training and community background are very strong candidates and can help their party get elected to government. Well-trained women with a high positive community profile are assets not liabilities to political parties. We need to focus more on getting political parties to nominate women and for women to work inside the party machinery. It is very hard to run a campaign as an independent candidate. Campaigns are costly and without party support women struggle to put together an effective campaign.

Women need to work within their chosen political party, to work for change from the inside so women have an improved chance of selection as a candidate. Criteria for selecting candidates need examining and women must build their credibility in and their knowledge of the party system. There must also be greater transparency in the selection process. For years men have used the biased selection system to their advantage. Those systems need changing so the selection playing field favours women and men equally.

Training workshops for women candidates should be an ongoing process so that they are prepared if there is an early election. Very importantly, women must work more strategically and have clear and carefully planned policies. If women continue to stand against other women in the same election the vote is split, the result is women don't get elected. Sadly, this is what happened in these elections.

Epilogue

Since this research was completed Vanuatu had an early national election. It was scheduled for 2006. Instead, took place in July 2004. Isabelle Donald was re-elected as a Vanua'aku Member of Parliament. Leinavao Tasso, from the island of Epi, which is also Isabelle's island, was also elected, so Vanuatu now has two women MPs out of a total of 52. Unfortunately, because the election was called early there was no time to implement the training of women candidates. We were unprepared. This was a salutary lesson. We cannot assume that elections will happen as scheduled. Vanuatu has a history of early elections. We need to have an ongoing program that provides education and training each year.

Finally, by the end of 2004, and despite the Women and Government Policy being completed in 2002 and presented to the government for approval, approval had still not been received. The policy had stalled. It would appear that some of the recommended strategies within the policy proved too controversial, particularly the quota system and proportional representation. There has since been a change in government and with it a new minister of women's affairs (the prime minister). The policy is in the process of being updated and revised and will be presented again to government for approval.

Acknowledgement

Notes
1. This article was originally presented at the Pacific Islands Political Studies Association Conference, 'Governance and Stability in the Pacific', Noumea, 3–5 December, 2004
2. Isabelle has been identified here as this information came from an article she co-authored with Jane Strachan and Hilda Taleo, which included her personal experiences in her campaign to get elected, see Donald, Strachan and Taleo 2002.

Reference
Donald, I, J Strachan and H Taleo 2002, 'Slo slo: Increasing women's representation in parliament in Vanuatu', *Development Bulletin*, 59, 54–57.