



**Development
Studies
Network**

Development Bulletin

No. 51 March 2000

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Gender and the reform process in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands

Heather Wallace, Department of Social Inquiry and Community Studies, Victoria University of Technology

Both Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have experienced a major change in government during the last three years. The introduction of reform programmes has been a significant feature of these new governments, with an emphasis on the development of 'good governance'. Current policy statements do reveal a clear commitment to addressing gender issues and gender inequality. This commitment has been identified as one of the components of what is deemed to be good governance and it has been stated that it is essential to the reform process. However, the success of effective policy implementation depends not only upon its delivery but also on the commitment of funds and personnel to programme and project development. Greater gender awareness and understanding will rely, particularly in these two countries, upon the development of a closer relationship between government and non government organisation (NGO) sectors. Unless the gap between them is addressed and a coordinated approach developed, a change in both community and government awareness and practice is unlikely to occur successfully. This critical link between good governance, sound policy and community action has been noted:

The many difficulties that governments face in ensuring that these fundamental opportunities are available to all people have regularly been catalogued. Yet recent research into development processes has concluded that resources per se have less impact on development outcomes than do political resolve and sound policy and programmes (UNDP 1999:92).

Data gathering

There has been a growing awareness and acknowledgement that there is considerable gender inequity, particularly in the areas of health and education, in the South Pacific region. There has also been a steady development of research in this field, although the collection of essential data has been rather challenging. As noted in the *Pacific human development report 1999*, at this stage neither the gender-related development index (GDI) nor the gender empowerment measure (GEM) can be used to gauge gender inequality and disparities in economic and political decision making, because of a lack of gender-disaggregated data. The dearth of reliable and official data available to the governments of Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, a feature common to many other countries in the region, has resulted in the formulation of policy based on information that requires considerable expansion and verification. Generally, the understanding of gender differences has been drawn from the

limited data available on school enrolments, adult literacy levels, and life expectancy and birth rates. Significantly, there has been some input from the community sector, combined with lobbying and advocacy from particular government departments with a commitment to gender issues, to the formulation of current policy documents addressing gender concerns in both countries.

Policy planning and implementation

The main activity around gender issues in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands has traditionally occurred in the non government sector. NGOs and community groups have made practical attempts to address gender inequality. The NGOs have also functioned as significant lobby groups in calling for change and for the development of policy on gender issues. Women's groups and organisations are mainly located in the community sector. Until the introduction of the reform programmes, the track record of both governments in tackling gender issues was rather poor. Overall, there has been little commitment to funding and organising programmes to redress gender inequality, and specifically to promoting and developing programmes and policies addressing women's needs.

The Solomon Islands Government, for example, is yet to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The efforts of the Women and Development Division (WDD) in policy and programme delivery have been characterised by a lack of funding, a reliance upon overseas aid, and inadequate staffing levels. The national women's policy was finally accepted by the parliament in October 1998 after a frustrating five-year history of rejection and procrastination. Although there are now clear guidelines for addressing gender inequality through government policy, such as the following aims (Solomon Islands Government 1998), the problem of the level of commitment and support for their effective implementation remains.

The aims of the WDD are to:

- Promote an increased and more effective role for women in decision making in national development.
- Improve the availability and circulation of information and resources relating to the welfare of women and families.
- Facilitate women's training programmes to develop appropriate knowledge and skills for women and to improve their participation in development.

Further, there is now recognition that contradictions exist between policy and practice. There is an awareness that effective action is needed to address this issue within the bureaucracy:

The present level of human resources in this Division is inadequate to: (a) gather and compile a baseline data base on women which is absolutely essential to plan any work in this area (b) formulate policies, programmes and projects relating to women and (c) implement and monitor the policies, programmes and projects planned. Another constraint is that women are currently underrepresented at all levels of decision making (Solomon Islands Government 1999:44).

Like Solomon Islands, Vanuatu has a history of poor commitment to gender issues, such as minimal staffing of the women's division and a lack of delivery of specific programmes and policies. A major change has occurred, however, with the development of policy which is clearly committed to addressing gender inequalities. In the Comprehensive Reform Program (CRP) document, there is recognition, for example, that there is an absence of women in decision making at all levels. There is also some acknowledgement of the impact of traditional gender relations and the CRP provides an outline of policy and strategies to address this situation, although there is minimal discussion of how to promote attitudinal change. A gap exists between the rhetoric of policy and programme development and the reality of entrenched traditional attitudes and lifestyle. The following key statement in the CRP provides an insight into traditional attitudes but does not appear to be linked to any discussion or analysis of the need for change:

Ni-Vanuatu women are generally not considered to be equal to men in customary or contemporary society and are not generally expected or encouraged to participate in decision-making in the family, the community or government (Vanuatu Government 1997:Attachment D).

Reform changes

In Vanuatu, some positive changes have occurred at government level, such as the appointment of a gender equity officer, the introduction of a programme of awareness raising on gender issues and some training in gender and development for government personnel, as well as the introduction of a microcredit scheme for women, based on the Grameen Bank model and known as the VANWODS Project. Also, the CRP policy documents state that the following policies and actions are 'central' to the reform process:

- Incorporation of gender awareness and gender analysis into policy making at all levels.
- Introduction of a strong gender dimension into the collection and analysis of statistics.
- Review of all legislature to ensure gender neutrality.
- Incorporation of gender awareness education into government and donor-sponsored community activities on natural resource management and human resource development.

- Development of policy and legislation on violence against women and children.
- Appointment of a planner with specific responsibility for gender policies and programmes.
- Creation of a working group to coordinate and monitor the above.

It would appear that recent policy formulation in Vanuatu on gender issues is principally government driven and, although consultation with the community has occurred, there is a level of criticism, particularly from the NGO sector, that this process has not been inclusive nor extensive enough. Among the women's organisations, there has been some scepticism concerning what has been perceived as a male-dominated policy change, without enough reference to, or consultation with, women from all sectors of society and it is indicative of ongoing traditional male-dominated decision making.

Another assessment of the formulation of gender policy and its integration into the planning process for both Vanuatu and Solomon Islands has been that it is determined or influenced by international pressure and the agenda of aid donors. One view from the Solomon Islands is that

the integration of gender in the government process has been determined largely by two major factors: government's response to national and global issues such as gender to ensure that its policies and plans are widely accepted ... and aid donor emphasis on gender issues as a requirement to be addressed in funded programs and projects (Kere 1999:127).

This raises the question of how much of the reform process is truly reflective of the desire and commitment of governments to address gender issues or whether policy statements are perhaps a product of, and response to, international agendas.

National Council of Women

Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have both experienced some difficulties in sustaining and financially maintaining a much-needed umbrella NGO for women. The identity and role of the National Council of Women (NCW) in both countries has been characterised by a certain degree of confusion and ambivalence. Some of these issues arise because of the location of NCW offices, which in Solomon Islands are attached to government, and because of the reliance on government funding in both countries to maintain NCW operations. In Solomon Islands there is also a lack of understanding within the community and among women's groups of the nature of the relationship between the NCW and the government's WDD, and of the functions of both organisations. A survey conducted in 1998 (Kere 1999) reveals both the expectations and understanding of the interviewees that 'the main roles of the WDD to be the conduct of skills training and the funding of income generating programs', indicating limited awareness of the policy and coordination role of the department and further that 'very little is known on the roles and functions of the NCW'. Similar problems exist for the NCW in Vanuatu, which are

compounded by the difficulties of trying to liaise and develop policy with a Women's Affairs Office, subject to constant staff losses and inadequate funding.

Non government organisations

The NGO sector in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands had a broad range of gender-equity programmes in place well before the introduction of the government reforms. Lobbying and advocacy on gender issues has also been a feature of many NGOs, with activity occurring at the local, national, regional and international levels. In particular, many of them address gender inequality in the areas of health and education.

Within the internal organisational structure of many NGOs in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, there has been a deliberate policy of addressing gender issues both in terms of programme development and staffing practices. Development partners such as the United Nations Development Programme and the Asian Development Bank have played a key role in introducing or integrating gender issues into the reform programme. Other international NGOs and funding organisations with clear policy guidelines on gender and development have also influenced project design and policy development in these two countries.

In Solomon Islands, there has been a steady growth in women's organisations (Kere 1999), with 20 being located at the national level and an estimated 3,000 operating at the provincial and community level. Major NGOs such as Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) have been instrumental in providing and facilitating gender training, particularly through its extensive village development worker scheme. Within SIDT's own organisational structure, there has been a concerted effort to incorporate gender and development practices. Other NGOs, specifically women's organisations, have focused on health, education and income generation issues affecting women. Others, such as the Solomon Islands Information Women's Network, focus on awareness raising on a broad range of gender issues, using radio and conducting training courses. Many of the women's organisations attached to various churches are known as 'church women groups', and they play a significant role in a country that has a widely dispersed rural population. The rural-urban divide is particularly pronounced in both Vanuatu and Solomon Islands and NGOs have proved to be most effective and active in delivering programmes aimed at addressing, for example, women's health and education needs.

In Vanuatu, a broad range of NGOs operate to promote equity and raise gender awareness. Some, such as Wan Smol Bag Theatre Group, National Community Development Trust, Vanuatu Women's Centre, and Vanuatu Rural Development Training Centres Association, employ diverse strategies and approaches to gender issues and in the delivery of specific activities aimed at meeting the needs of women.

NGO-government relationship

The relationship between NGOs and government in both countries has been characterised by uneasy dialogue at some

levels and only a limited amount of cooperative work in other areas. In Vanuatu, there has been some representation of NGO personnel on government policy committees and there has been a small amount of government representation in NGO projects. In Solomon Islands, the tension in the NGO-government relationship has been far more pronounced; the NGOs have generally not been included in discussions on reform, which has led to a degree of mutual suspicion and some antagonism. However, following the change of government in Solomon Islands, there appears to be an improvement in the relationship and a preparedness by both to work on some joint projects.

In contrast, during the reform process in Vanuatu, there have been efforts to develop the NGO-government relationship but the main impetus appears to have come from the government, resulting in a degree of wariness in the NGO sector. However, in both countries, cooperation between the two sectors often relies on the development of relationships between individuals or specific departments and particular NGOs. The positive relationship between the Women's Development Division in Solomon Islands and a broad range of community organisations is a prime example of how a cooperative situation can be fostered under difficult political, financial and administrative circumstances and which is promoted and developed by particular individuals.

Conclusion

The reform process in both Vanuatu and Solomon Islands has resulted in significant changes in gender policy. At this stage it is unclear what degree of substance will be given to the rhetoric of policy and whether the outcome will be a serious commitment to gender and development issues across all departments in both governments and throughout the broader community. The success of a combined practical and strategic approach to gender issues will very much depend upon the establishment of a far more cooperative relationship. There are major challenges for both governments and NGOs in developing a more trusting relationship and concerted approach, which is certainly required for addressing gender issues in these two countries.

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