

Government of the Republic of Vanuatu



Introductory Statement by
Honourable Isabelle Donald Sikawonuta
Minister for Justice and Social Welfare
& Head of the Vanuatu Delegation
On Vanuatu's Combined Initial, Second and Third
Periodic Report
At the Thirty Eighth Session of the
UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination Against Women
New York, 18th May 2007



***Distinguished Chairlady and members of the UN-
CEDAW Committee,***

I convey to you Warm Greetings of the Government and People of the Republic of Vanuatu. It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me, as my Country's Minister for Justice & Social Welfare, to present before this Committee our combined 'Initial, Second and Third periodic report' on the 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women'.

Please allow me now to introduce to you the other members of my delegation:

- Ms Myriam Abel, Director General for the Ministry of Health
- Mr Dudley Aru, Acting Attorney General
- Ms Hilda Taleo, Director of Women's Affairs
- Mr John Niroa, Director of Secondary, Technical & Further Education
- Ms Merilyn Tahī, Coordinator of the Vanuatu Women's Centre

Madam Chair,

Vanuatu, with a population of some 219,000, of which women comprise 49%, is a country of considerable beauty and diversity. Since independence in 1980, the Government has worked hard to improve the lives of its people, through sustainable economic growth and improved incomes, while conserving resources for future generations. The vast distances between the 80 inhabited islands, and lack of dependable transportation and communication facilities continue to impede development initiatives. Around 80% of the population depend upon the traditional economy for their livelihood. Women contribute substantially to it.

Vanuatu, like other Pacific island states, is still facing challenges on how to amalgamate the old and new systems of governance. In the process of nation building, the Vanuatu Government finds itself at odds with the traditional political and cultural systems and processes. These traditional systems are dominated by male chiefs.

However, the Vanuatu Government is committed to sustained growth and development through the improved participation of women in decision-making roles.

One of the challenges facing Vanuatu women today is the constant need to reconcile tradition and progress so that women can take their place in society. It is important that progress and development is managed in such a way so that it does not erode or undermine traditional systems and practices that support and protect women and children.

Access to improved health services and education continue to be priorities for women. Progress has been made towards eliminating the gender disparity which finds significantly fewer women attend tertiary education than men. Maternal and infant mortality are significantly reduced, however challenges in strengthening maternal health services are key priorities.

While the Constitution affords equal rights to women and men, the Government continues its efforts to encourage institutions to establish and/or review mechanisms for promoting and enhancing the status of women.

Madam Chair,

Having raised these issues and concerns, I am now pleased to highlight to the Committee some key developments and progress since the completion of our Report in 2005.

It has taken my country quite some time to furnish you with our first periodic report. However I wish to assure you and your Committee that Vanuatu is committed to CEDAW.

Vanuatu ratified CEDAW without reservations in 1995. I am happy to notify the Committee that in December 2006, our Parliament ratified the OPTIONAL PROTOCOL to CEDAW which was subsequently published on 5 February 2007 in the Government's official gazette.

I am delighted to further inform the Committee that I personally deposited the instrument for ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW to the UN Office Treaty Section yesterday.

During the compilation of this periodic report, there were calls for more vigorous action from Government to improve the status of women. As a result, I hosted on behalf of Government the first ever 'National Women's Forum' for one week in August 2006. This Forum brought together over 100 representatives from all six provinces and two municipalities of Vanuatu, to review the Government's implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the commitment to gender equality as enshrined in our Constitution and CEDAW. The outcome was our 'National Plan of Action for Women 2007 – 2011' and a resolution was passed for the Forum to be held every four years.

Madam Chair

We acknowledge that progress has been slow in getting women into decision-making roles in public life. Nonetheless the Government is committed to continuing its efforts in appointing women into senior positions, such as the recent appointment of the Public Prosecutor, the secondment of a female to ADB, and the appointment of the two most senior women civil servants to be members of the Recruitment Panel for all executive positions.

Our country goes to the polls in 2008 and we are taking positive steps to increase public awareness and understanding of the democratic processes and how their input can bring about better balance in government and improved outcomes for women and children. The Government, in collaboration with UNIFEM and national women's organisations, is delivering voter education, leadership training and civic education commencing in 2007.

It is pleasing to note that in the elections held in April 2007 in Luganville, one woman won a seat in the municipal election and has been appointed Deputy Lady Mayor.

Madam Chair

Government continues to assist VANWODS – a microfinance institution targeting women – in its efforts to expand, and in March 2007, VANWODS commenced its outreach program by setting up a branch in Santo. VANWODS is also currently working with clients to arrange for them to become voluntary members of the Vanuatu National Provident Fund – VNPF. Because of VANWODS’ success, the Government is also looking at options on how VNPF funds can be utilised to assist VANWODS members.

Madam Chair

I am pleased to report to the Committee that the Parliamentary Committee established in 2006 to receive public comments on the Family Protection Bill, is currently

progressing with its activities, with a view to passing the Bill later this year.

A workshop was held in December 2006 for all members of parliament to enhance understanding of the Bill, and an in-depth training session was held for the members of the Adhoc Committee. As we are reporting here, the Parliamentary Adhoc Committee is also holding a two-week consultation session in Port Vila on the Bill.

I am pleased to report that in 2005, the National Council of Chiefs, revoked the 80,000 vatu bride-price. They have however maintained the traditional forms of bride price.

In its ongoing efforts to improve the status of women, the Government's recent activities include the following:

- Existing mechanisms for mainstreaming gender are being enhanced.

- In 2006, the Ministry of Education launched a leadership training program for women in senior positions in education, and appointed one female to a director position.
- In 2007, Vanuatu hosted the 7th Pacific Health Ministers Meeting, at which time all ministers reiterated their commitment to addressing HIV/AIDS, non-communicable diseases, mental health and pandemic influenza including international regulations, all of which are of concern to women.
- A National Land Summit held in September 2006 recommended that all custom owners, including women, be consulted in any decision making on land issues.
- The Government established the Department of Correctional Services under the 'Correctional Services Act of 2006'. Special consideration is provided for female detainees.

- In 2006 the Penal Code Act was amended to provide the definitions of sexual intercourse and make them more inclusive.
- Amendments to the Citizenship Act have been initiated.

Distinguished Chairperson,

The Vanuatu Government is committed to improving the status of women. We face considerable challenges in our endeavours but we believe our work will continue to enhance and eventually empower women so that they can enjoy their fundamental human rights and participate in all spheres of life on an equal basis with men.

The compilation of this periodic report, which commenced in 2003 and completed in 2004, was in itself a program of information dissemination and awareness raising on women's human rights by both Government and non-state actors.

Madam Chair,

On behalf of my delegation from the Republic of Vanuatu, I extend to your esteemed Committee our appreciation for your commitment in assisting our young nation to build on and enhance our current efforts to fulfil our obligations under CEDAW.

Madam Chair,

Thank you for your attention.