

Developing Young Women's Collective Action in Vanuatu



Australian
National
University

CERIDWEN SPARK

IN BRIEF 2014/28

Introduction to Research

Over the past year, I have conducted 38 interviews with young, educated women in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Two important findings have already emerged. The first is that young women in Melanesia are subject to intimate forms of control. However educated and able they may be, family members continue to exert or seek to exert control over their behaviour and choices. The second is that young, educated Melanesian women derive solidarity and support from one another. This peer group support appears to be particularly important for women who have made countercultural 'choices' – for example, to remain single, leave violent partners or bring up children on their own.

In this *In Brief*, I consider these findings in relation to the prospective benefits of supporting the development of a 'community of practice' (Kabeer 2011, 504) among young women in Vanuatu. I draw on Naila Kabeer's (2011; 2012) writing on collective action and associational communities and on international research on diverse women's movements that shows that 'women build movements around particular identities and interests' as well as 'categories and circumstances' (Batliwala 2012, 65). Kabeer discusses the 'transformative dynamics that ... come into play when women come together around some common agenda' (2012, 4). Emphasising the benefits of having shared goals, I argue that discussion alone is insufficient to sustain a movement or group and that it is important to have joint projects and aims. While not suggesting the development of anything as specific as a group for 'single mothers', I suggest there is merit in young, educated ni-Vanuatu women exploring the formation of a purpose-oriented group designed to maximise their ability to co-operate for collective change.

Educated Women: Strengths and Challenges

The young women I have met in Vanuatu are strong, articulate, well educated and professionally capable. This is largely a reflection of my research focus on 'emerging women leaders', which elicited a list of names of women under the age of 35 who are perceived by their peers as showing leadership or the potential for leadership as a consequence of their cur-

rent activities, interests and capacities. Many of my interviewees are friends with one another and share the ability to analyse gender inequities in their homes, families and workplaces. Because of their relative financial autonomy, this cohort possesses more capacity than most ni-Vanuatu women to display a degree of independence in relation to their marital status. Some, for example, have left violent or abusive relationships and others have opted to be single mothers rather than to stay with male partners for the sake of propriety.

Such countercultural choices render ni-Vanuatu women vulnerable to criticism about their morality and worth. As Maggie Cummings (2013, 33) notes: '[t]he face of Vanuatu is that of the mama (mother)—the married, visibly Melanesian, church-going, village-dwelling mother who is respectful of both kastom and Christian (most often male) authority'.

Cummings (2013, 60) wonders how young women who are not (yet) mothers might find their worth and value in a society so geared toward the reproduction of the family and of conventional women's roles within this: 'it is not clear how or whether young women are supposed to participate in the present; it seems that they must wait to participate as the mothers of the future'. If young women who are not mothers are perceived as yet to cross the threshold of citizenship and belonging, women who have become mothers but who remain outside the strictures of patriarchy by virtue of their single status, are even more anomalous.

The young women also shared other challenges, including being both workers and mothers, discrepancies between their status at work and their status in the home, and cultural expectations about their behaviour, including the willingness to share their resources. In addition to working full time and raising children, most were also involved in volunteer activities, at church, in their communities or both. Some were also active in national coalitions such as 'Leadership Vanuatu', in sports teams or on committees. The obvious danger is that individual women will burn out and withdraw from making any contribution to public service.

Ideally, young women would derive strength and support from earlier generations of women who have grappled with similar if not equivalent challenges and

who might provide a source of advice and advocacy. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Vanuatu. Instead, the young women spoke about the collective experience of being dismissed and denigrated by older women — including women leaders who had established themselves around independence in 1980 — in meetings, emails and in local media. The main charge was that they were ‘*pikinini blong yestedei*’ (barely grown up) — too young to know anything and lacking sufficient life experience to make decisions. The young women were silenced in meetings, or, when they did speak out, berated for being disrespectful.

The young women’s response was that they, unlike their older counterparts, co-operated rather than fought with one another. However, because of the older women’s prolonged and public disputes with one another, it is all too easy and convenient for those in power (overwhelmingly men) to dismiss all women as incapable of unified decision-making and action. Thus, not only do young women experience a gap in mentoring, they face the added challenge of convincing men in power that they are a united force and thus one to be reckoned with.

As a Bangladeshi woman in a grassroots organisation put it: ‘one stick can be broken, a bundle of sticks cannot’ (cited in Kabeer 2011, 514). The benefits of women forming ‘communities of practice’ or movements around common goals are evident and have been documented in international research across diverse countries and struggles (Batliwala 2012). Although less well documented than in other contexts, such groups are increasingly apparent in the Pacific. In PNG for example, the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Port Moresby (BPW) — a non-government organisation under the umbrella of the PNG National Council of Women), has been instrumental in bringing educated, employed women together. One of the group’s aims is ‘to encourage women and girls to further their education at every level’. In Solomon Islands, the Young Women’s Parliamentary Group (YWPG) is similarly emerging as a space for young women to co-operate in order to achieve shared goals — for example, presenting petitions in parliament and addressing women’s health issues such as cervical cancer. Notably, the YWPG and BPW are not only about women meeting for mutual support and discussion — both groups have common action agendas, including, in the case of BPW, assisting

hundreds of PNG women and girls to continue their education through the allocation of scholarships.

Conclusion

The strengths and capabilities of young educated women in Vanuatu suggest that there is untapped potential in their collective capacity. To date, this potential has been thwarted as a result of the active denigration of young women by older women and by pervasive, but misleading, discourses about women’s inability to co-operate with one another. In Vanuatu, partly as a consequence of this background, there is as yet no group focused on justice and equity for women such as those in PNG and Solomon Islands. While not wishing to suggest donor intervention to create such a group, I would argue the many benefits of local women creating a ‘chosen’ community with shared interests and purpose. As Kabeer (2012, 503) notes, such communities can ‘expand women’s knowledge, information and interactions with others ... allow a critical re-assessment of what was hitherto accepted as the natural order of things and open up the possibility of alternative ways of living that were hitherto inconceivable’ (Kabeer 1999).

This ‘opening up of alternative ways of living’ could work to promote increased status, respect and participation among young, educated ni-Vanuatu women, including those who do not conform to societal expectations about women’s roles.

Author Notes

Ceridwen Spark is a research fellow with SSGM at the ANU. Her research is focused on gender and leadership among young women in Melanesia.

References

- Batliwala, S. 2012. *Changing Their World. Concepts and Practices of Women’s Movements*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Association for Women’s Rights in Development.
- Cummings, M. 2013. Looking Good: The Cultural Politics of the Island Dress for Young Women in Vanuatu. *The Contemporary Pacific* 25 (1): 33-65.
- Kabeer, N. 2011. Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Navigating Pathways of Women’s Empowerment and Gender Justice in Rural Bangladesh. *Development and Change* 42(2): 499–528.
- Kabeer, N. 2012. The Power of Association: Reflecting on Women’s Collective Action as a Force for Social Change. *Thinkpiece #2*. London: UK Feminista.

