



The Vanuatu Mamas' English Class

Reading is power, power for growth!

Universal Periodic Review Submission to the UN Human Rights Council

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Background:

(1) Vanuatu, a South Pacific archipelago hundreds of miles from its closest continental neighbor, is a country with big plans as outlined by the “Vanuatu 2030: People’s Plan”. However, ensuring a literate population to fully participate in their country’s development is a goal not yet met. Low adult literacy is a major problem negatively impacting Vanuatu’s ability to promote and sustain equitable growth. While Vanuatu’s geography has made it difficult to form a comprehensive picture of adult literacy nationally, data from the “Education Experience Survey and Literacy Assessment,” done in 2011 of rural Shefa Province, helps to shed light on the needs and challenges¹.

- (1.1) *Despite 85% of respondents self-declaring they were literate, only 27.6% were actually classified as literate.*
- (1.2) *Only 32.6% of those who completed primary school are literate. Only 55% of those who completed secondary school are literate.*
- (1.3) *Over 90% of respondents expressed interest in participating in free or low cost, locally available literacy courses.*
- (1.4) *While around 90% of respondents aged 15 to 60 years had attended some formal schooling, almost 40% had not even completed primary school.*
- (1.5) *Respondents with higher literacy levels were more likely to be currently holding a job paid in money.*
- (1.6) *Almost all (96.1%) respondents expressed the belief that education was important to increasing their income.*

(ASPBAE and VEPAC, 2011)

¹ Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), Vanuatu Education Policy Advocacy Coalition (VEPAC). (2011) *Education Experience Survey and Literacy Assessment*. Canberra, Australia: ASPBAE Australia Ltd.

(2) VANUATU MAMAS' ENGLISH CLASS (VMEC) was founded in 2015 as a new organization to make a major impact on literacy in the participating VMEC villages. VMEC was founded with four main goals:

Goal 1: Provide women with the building blocks for English literacy

Goal 2: Empower women to take leadership roles in their village and beyond

Goal 3: Encourage women to create a time and space for English literacy in the home

Goal 4: Increase women's knowledge of the English language

(3) In service of these goals we have developed a culturally relevant English literacy curriculum to encourage Ni-Vanuatu women to be at-home literacy leaders. Through our 4-month literacy program, facilitator training workshops, literacy events and strategic partnerships, we are changing the lives of all Ni-Vanuatu one family at a time. It is our vision that in Vanuatu there is at least one book in every home, a good student reading that book, and confident parents helping that child to become the leader they are meant to be. To achieve this vision, the Vanuatu Mamas' English Class will need to engage women, men and children from every part of this country. Using the example of the Christian God, VMEC is starting with women to spread our message and touch the lives of men and children with future inclusive classes.

(4) Funding for our organization thus far has come from foreign grants, foreign and domestic private donations and large in-kind donations of goods and labor from the rural Ni-Vanuatu communities we serve. We are very grateful for the passion and hard work of our facilitators and their village supporters as we continue to seek sustainable government and NGO financial backing.

VMEC Perspective on the Implementation of 2014 UPR: Vanuatu Recommendations:

(5) As an adult literacy organization designed to educate and empower women, our contributions will focus in three areas: adult literacy, access to education for all and women's leadership. The following contributions will either detail our outreach or areas of need. The listed recommendations are taken from the 2014 UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the UPR: Vanuatu.

UPR Recommendation 99.23, 99.33 and 99.50

(6) Continue to improve the knowledge of human rights among its population, especially by promoting education and awareness-raising activities on the matter (Switzerland)

(7) Develop affirmative actions for women's empowerment in the public and private sectors (Mexico)

(8) Continue to take the necessary measures to combat all forms of violence against women and girls and to reduce discrimination against women, in particular in the job market and in national political life, where women are seriously underrepresented (Brazil)

(9) In May of 2018 The Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) held its 15th National Conference. With the assistance Oxfam in Vanuatu, they were able to host a two-day Influencing Forum just before the conference began. VMEC organized with the Vanuatu Police Women's Project to have five representatives (3 from VMEC and 2 from Vanuatu Police Women's Project) present at a portion of the second day of the forum. We commend

the VNCW and Oxfam in Vanuatu for organizing and implementing this enormous undertaking. Bringing together women from every province and helping them to use strategic tools to better plan how women can have a more significant role in government, is no easy task. It was an incredibly educational and valuable event, but fell short of its attendance goals. VMEC believes that this was not due to a lack of interest, but rather insufficient awareness and promotion of the forum and conference.

(10) VMEC believes that, in order to achieve an equitable gender balance reflective of Vanuatu's population in the Vanuatu Parliament and all levels of governance, it is vital to educate and include all Ni-Vanuatu, particularly women living outside of provincial centers. We would like to see more money and staff allocated to the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) to expand their current political leadership training programs to villages and outer islands. As we have stated, we believe it vital to Vanuatu's growth and the achievement of Vanuatu's human rights goals to have fair, equitable gender participation in all political levels. This will not happen if rural women are continued to be overlooked. DWA needs financial and staffing support to reach out to remote communities and respond to requests from smaller CSOs. VMEC believes current training for women to run on a national level is important, however equally important is training women to run at the provincial and municipal levels, as well as educating communities as to why they should vote for female candidates and how to effectively champion them. Our efforts cannot be solely focused on preparing the woman in the seat; we must also prepare the community to put her there.

(11) This is why VMEC also believes additional funds should be given to VNCW to support candidates from the newly formed Leleon Vanua Democratic Party at every level of government. While the Leleon Vanua Democratic Party is billed as the women's political party, it is open to both women and men, therefore creating a unique place for true gender equality. Additionally, it is important to encourage the election of both men and women seeking gender equality in Vanuatu government and society. VNCW should also be a resource and training hub for women contesting regardless of party affiliation, as the goal is to advance women, not political parties, in various levels and roles in government. Gender equality and equal rights is not a women's issue, it is everybody's issue.

(12) Organizations like VANGO and VCSIN with existing national and international backing should press those backers for the materials and staff to run public awareness sessions on the political process, citizen's voting rights and the importance of gender equality at every level of government. While it may be necessary to include political candidates and officials in these events, it should be clear that they are not promoting a particular political party. If that is not possible, these events must be run exclusively by CSOs, NGOs, or other International agencies with the direct guidance of active national agencies. VMEC believes these efforts should have the full backing and support of the entire government, particularly the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

UPR Recommendation 99.38 and 99.44

(13) Take prompt action to implement the Family Protection Act, and consider initiatives to raise community awareness of that Act (Australia)

(14) Ensure the dissemination of information about protective measures that are available and the legal framework in place to protect women, also among the rural population of the country (Belgium)

(15) VMEC believes awareness and outreach, particularly to those communities outside the provincial centers, is extremely important. In 2016 a chapter of VMEC in the village of Ienimillen on the island of Tanna held an English literacy awareness event celebrating their students' efforts and achievements as they improved their English language and literacy skills. This chapter also organized for a police officer from that community to speak about the Family Protection Act and explain the rights of all people under this law. This event was well attended by approximately 65 women, men, and children. A demographic breakdown of the event's attendees is not available.

(16) In October of 2017 one of our facilitators from the village of Iakulpou on the island of Tanna was selected to attend the 13th Triennial Conference for Pacific Women by the We Rise Coalition, made up of DIVA for Equality, FemLINKPacific, Fijian Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), Australian Aid, and UN Women. It was her first time outside of Vanuatu and an incredible opportunity for exposure. She learned a lot through this experience and was given the opportunity to present what she gained from this valuable conference in a public forum.

(17) In November of that same year participants from the 13th Triennial were invited to serve on an organizing committee to plan the Post 13th Triennial Conference for Pacific Women, Vanuatu Civic Society Forum on Gender Equality. VMEC played a key role in planning the event and preparation of forum materials translated from English to Bislama. The event was attended by more than 100 people from both the public and private sectors. VMEC believes that both the government, NGOs, and CSOs need to put more effort into providing information in all three official languages, particularly Bislama. Unfamiliar vocabulary frequently used in human rights documents needs to be explained and broken down into easy-to-understand concepts and language. You cannot expect gender mainstreaming to occur if participants literally do not know the meaning of the words.

(18) How will Ni-Vanuatu know their rights if they are not able to read or even understand them? For instance, the National Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019 has yet to be translated into Bislama, and we are more than halfway through 2018. This document was created by the Vanuatu government and is not translated into all three official languages; it is then easy to see why other documents regarding national and international human rights policies, treaties, and agreements have not yet been translated. Again we ask: How can Ni-Vanuatu from every corner of our country be expected to participate in a process that has never been explained to them?

(19) In 2018 we joined forces with Vanuatu Beach Volleyball's outreach program Volley4Change and the Vanuatu Police Women's Project to host the Inaugural Volley4Change Shield Community Volleyball tournament. This was an organic opportunity for community members to meet and interact with community police women. The goal behind this and other events like it hosted by the Vanuatu Police Women's Project is not only to educate, but also to positively and proactively engage the communities and women they serve. Hopefully, these events will make it easier for those suffering abuse or acts of violence to approach or reach out to police officers they consider friends. There were 5 teams of 6 women who competed in fun and friendly matches. Even though there were difficulties with the date, the event brought out 76 attendees (46 women, 11 men, 19 children) for volleyball fun and facts about the Family Protection Act and how to seek help.

UPR Recommendation 99.80, 99.85, 99.88, and 99.96

(20) Continue to take measures that allow the improvement of the health and education systems of its population (Cuba)

(21) Continue to consolidate its education policies to improve the living conditions of its people, in particular of the neediest sectors of the population (Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of))

(22) Give consideration to improving its domestic legislation and existing programs aimed at increasing access to education (Philippines)

(23) Allocate more resources to the education sector (Timor-Leste)

(24) In June of 2017 the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) along with the Australian High Commission to Vanuatu launched the “National Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) Framework”. This document provides a common language and unified identifying markers to CSOs, NGOs, and public and private agencies working in adult literacy and numeracy, presumably regardless of the language of delivery. The LLN Framework was the first step in bridging the gaps between education and employment.

(25) The next step was “The National Strategy to Improve Language, Literacy and Numeracy Rates for Youth and Adults in Vanuatu 2018 to 2023”. In November of 2017 VMEC was one of the CSOs invited to participate in MoET’s consultation meeting to review the efficacy of the adult LLN strategy. VMEC would like to commend the Ministry of Education and Training, as well as the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (TVET), for their work to create this comprehensive strategy and their efforts to involve adult literacy practitioners at every level in its review.

(26) The meeting was engaging and educational and provided an opportunity for CSOs and public and private agencies to identify how they fit into Vanuatu’s adult literacy strategy moving forward. The steps outlined in the “National Strategy to Improve Language, Literacy and Numeracy Rates for Youth and Adults in Vanuatu 2018 to 2023” directly address recommendations 99.80, 99.85, 99.88, and 99.96 of Vanuatu’s 2014 UPR.

(27) However, without government support and funding, this strategy will have no impact on adult literacy rates in Vanuatu, and it is the fear of VMEC that with no other plan in place, all efforts to improve adult literacy and numeracy in Vanuatu will stall and momentum to increase literacy and numeracy rates will be lost, thus making it virtually impossible for Vanuatu to achieve the UN 2030 Sustainable Goals related to adult literacy and numeracy. Full funding of the National Strategy to improve adult LLN is important to the work of VMEC and vital to the future of fair, sustainable development in Vanuatu.

(28) Additionally, direct and consistent grants need to be provided by the Vanuatu government to Vanuatu CSOs working in the area of adult literacy and demonstrating progress. Two recommendations from the 2011 SHEFA Literacy Report, “Education Experience Survey and Literacy Assessment” state the following:

- *(28.1) The very low literacy levels of Ni-Vanuatu in rural Shefa Province are of serious concern. A more concerted planning effort and commitment of resources is required to lift the literacy levels of the population.*

- *(28.2) Substantial second chance and post-school education programs need to be developed by the government to give out-of-school youth and adults the opportunity to achieve functional literacy and receive a basic education.*

(ASPBAE and VEPAC, 2011)¹

(29) These recommendations are in line with those from both Cuba and Timor Leste made in the 2014 UPR, listed above. This same Shefa study revealed that “Over 90% of respondents expressed interest in participating in free or low cost, locally available literacy courses”. It also showed that almost all (99.1%) of those respondents who participated in a literacy course as an adult felt the course was effective (ASPBAE and VEPAC, 2011)¹. Though this report focused on Shefa Province, VMEC has seen these same positive, eager attitudes toward literacy learning in villages outside of Shefa. Unfortunately, without adequate funding those villages and others like them will not see these necessary programs for development.

(30) While financial backing is vital, it is not the only form of support necessary. It is also important to VMEC and all CSOs focusing on adult literacy and/or numeracy for the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority (VQA) to publish qualification standards for community-based adult LLN programs. Since March of 2016 VMEC has been reaching out to the VQA through quality assurance officers and even direct contact with CEO David Lambukly.

(31) When VMEC has inquired about the process of becoming certified by the VQA, the consistent response is that there is no process for certifying community-based adult literacy programs. Adult literacy certification is a new concept for the VQA, and it has focused its early efforts on school-based programs on a case-by-case basis, like Central School’s second-chance learning program, Central Community Education Program (CCEP). This individualized certification process is not fair, nor is it sustainable. We would urge the Ministry of Education and Training to impress upon the VQA that the assessment of adult literacy programs should be a priority. Particularly given that MoET has already launched a national framework and a strategy that includes CSOs. Further, the fact that many donors, like the Australian High Commission, will not work with or support CSOs that do not have VQA certification.

UPR Recommendation 99.97, 99.86 and 99.98

(32) Put in place a strategy for the promotion of access to education for women and girls, reduce dropout rates among girls in secondary education and improve the access to and the quality of education in rural areas (Canada)

(33) Prioritise the education of all Vanuatu citizens (Nigeria)

(34) Reinforce efforts addressing high level of adult illiteracy and low rate of girls’ enrollment in secondary and higher levels of education (Ukraine)

(35) Since May of 2015 when the first VMEC graduation was held in Eratap village, VMEC has been changing the lives of women and their families on both Efate and Tanna islands. Despite the total derailment of the program due to Cyclone Pam, 6 women graduated from that first Eratap class, and 4 of them are still active as teachers and trainers. More than 100 women have completed the program and received a certificate from VMEC.

(36) VMEC calls this certificate a seed. Whether the information planted in the lives of VMEC students will bear fruit and grow or lay dormant, never to reach its full potential, is the responsibility of the student. However, VMEC provides each graduate with the tools and knowledge for a strong harvest. After just 2 weeks of committed regular attendance, students are permitted to take the class workbook home. At that point the book becomes their property regardless of program completion. After one month of the program, students begin to receive Vanua Readers: culturally relevant, easy readers written by Ni-Vanuatu authors that students can read in class and at home. These books are the start of the student's at home VMEC library. At the closing graduation, participants become members and are given additional reading books, a notebook, writing utensils and a dictionary to continue their study. After graduation VMEC continues to engage members with additional training and workshop opportunities. VMEC also encourages them to share what they have learned by hosting community events or volunteering in their local school. VMEC hopes these seeds planted in the lives of our students will help to make education a priority in the home.

(37) Our students, facilitators and trainers work hard to serve their communities and their country, but without significant, annual financial support, VMEC will not be able to sustain this program. Without a dependable budget, we are unable to plan for the future and are often forced to make or change plans suddenly. This instability causes frustration and confusion in the communities we serve as well as those still waiting for a VMEC program. We are currently playing a significant and positive role in the lives of our students and their families, but we need the reinforcement recommended by Ukraine. While Central School's CCEP and the adult literacy tutoring done by Wan Smol Bag work hard to serve urban populations in Vanuatu's provincial centers, very few adult literacy programs serve rural communities, particularly in the ways in which VMEC is able. Using a formal curriculum, facilitator training, and continuous support we are able to empower women throughout Vanuatu, specifically in rural areas and Vanuatu's outer islands. In accordance with the articles of CEDAW, specifically article 14, the Vanuatu government should provide grants to help CSOs expand their work in rural areas and those of critical need to fill the gaps in government programming. There should also be special, specifically assigned staff in offices like the Vanuatu Financial Services Commission to help CSOs navigate technical and financial areas as they develop and serve.

(38) VMEC believes it would be most appropriate for the current adult literacy professional working in Vanuatu to come together with the VQA and create a fair, public process for certification. VMEC would like to see "The National Strategy to Improve Language, Literacy and Numeracy Rates for Youth and Adults in Vanuatu 2018 to 2023" fully and financially supported through MoET. As the only program of its kind, VMEC believes it is vital to the organization's growth and sustainability that VMEC becomes a fully funded arm of the Vanuatu government.

Submitted by:
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