

**Tess:** My name is Tess Newton Cain from the Development Policy Centre. And this morning, here in Port Vila, I'm meeting with Yasmine Bjornum. Yasmine, welcome to Pacific Conversations.

**Yasmine:** Thank you, Tess. Thank you so much for having me here.

**Tess:** You're very welcome. So, to begin with, perhaps you could tell us a bit about yourself. Your background, what your current roles are, what your story is so far.

**Yasmien:** Sure. So, my name is Yasmine Bjornum. I established *Sista* magazine, which is an online women's platform for the Ni-Vanuatu women, in 2016. I also work for Action Aid Vanuatu, a non-government organisation that has a strong focus on women's leadership.

**Tess:** And you're a Ni-Vanuatu citizen, is that right?

**Yasmine:** Yes, I am a Ni-Vanuatu citizen. I was born and raised here, but my father immigrated to Vanuatu in 1980. He's from Sweden. My mother's from the Philippines. It's been interesting having to grow up in a Melanesian country with a Eurasian background, but I feel that it's been able to really support the work that I do with women's rights here. It allows me to kind of step back and have a look at gender and how the women's rights movement is progressing in Vanuatu, because I'm not directly involved.

**Tess:** I guess you've sort of got a bit of perspective. You're sort of like an inside/outsider, or an outside/insider. Is that right?

**Yasmine:** Yes, I would say so. Because I am ni-Vanuatu, but I am not indigenous. And therefore, I'm not directly held down by cultural barriers that see women not being able to have their voice heard.

**Tess:** Okay, great. Well, we might be—we might get chance to pick up on a couple of those things later on. So, you've mentioned *Sista*. So, can you tell us a bit more about it? What's your vision for it? How does it work? What do you think its key achievements have been? And what do you see for its future?

**Yasmine:** Sure. So, *Sista* was founded in 2016. We believe in celebrating the diversity of ni-Vanuatu women and supporting causes that inspire positive change, from raising awareness about gender equality and climate change, promoting local businesses and events. We believe in using the power of arts and communication to create a positive, sustainable change.

We're a feminist organisation, and our goal is basically just to create a safe space for women to come together, to talk to each other, to celebrate each other. And it's not just about providing information as well. We strive to amplify the voices of ni-Vanuatu women. Most of the content that we have is pretty—it's pretty simple, really.

Like because it's run on a voluntary basis, and everything with *Sista* is a testament to just young women doing this voluntarily, we've never had funding, never had—sought out funding. It's all been literally just my friends putting it together. The website was put together by a friend, the graphics was put together by

a friend, the content is collected by friends, and we're all just trying to create this space where women do get heard.

And for our key achievements, honestly, if you want me to be honest, I think that the only—the biggest achievement that we have is our existence alone. I mean I feel very—so much joy seeing my friends and I coming together to create this space and then seeing other women coming together to contribute to discussions, whether it's about violence, whether it's about public transport, that alone is enough. When we're speaking about women, progressing the women's movement in Vanuatu, it's not just a moment, it's a movement. And that ongoing dialogue is very important.

**Tess:** Yeah. So, it's had two years' worth? You're just about to celebrate the second birthday. So, as you say that it's established itself, its created that space, and it's ongoing. So, that's a big achievement, I think, in this environment.

**Yasmine:** I would like to think so, especially when—I'd like to think that it's something that is authentic and is coming from a place where we aren't motivated by anything except social justice. And I really would like to think that that—you hear so much people talking about “We need this much money to create this project, to do this...” When it's like no, really, sometimes you just need a bit of heart and soul, and a bit of hard work, and putting yourself out there. And I feel that's what *Sista* is.

**Tess:** Okay, great. So, within *Sista*, there's also sort of a sub-bit of it called *Sista Gat Style*. So, tell us a bit more about that. Is it just a fashion shoot, or is there more to it than that?

**Yasmine:** So, *Sista Gat Style* is a piece that we feature every month in the *Vanuatu Daily Post Life and Style Magazine*. And it does go beyond more than just a fashion shoot. I wanted to create something that celebrates Ni-Vanuatu women, and also highlights their achievements. So, actually, for this month, we had Marie-Louise Milne, the wife of former prime minister Moana Carcasses, and she was recently elected into the Port Vila Municipal Council.

For me to be able to showcase her as a leader, but to do it in such a way that we can connect with her, to recognise that yes, like this is a woman. Women are often put in this—or perceived as just being, I don't know—especially in ni-Vanuatu culture, women are expected to just be quiet, stay at home and sort of like succumb to these expectations of—you're not really expected to have a voice.

If you do celebrate your beauty or dress up a little bit, you get shamed for it. You get told. Or if you speak up, you get told you're a big mouth. So, for me having *Sista Gat Style* and celebrating someone such as Marie-Lou, it sort of allows us to look—to break down these perceptions of women and to have a look at them in a different light and to see that actually, yes, a woman can be beautiful, she can be smart, she can be a leader, and she can be all of those things.

We had *Sista Gat Style* a few months ago, where we celebrated our first transgender woman, GG Baxter, and I think that was awesome to sort of, again, break down that—these perceptions of our transgender community and our women. And yes, that includes trans women. *Sista* stands very strongly with all

women, and that includes trans women. And using fashion as a platform to be able to look at these—to look at them beyond—yeah.

**Tess:** So, it's more than just the clothes and the makeup? It's sort of—because obviously, I've followed that feature, and very much about the story, as you say. And I know, I've seen you've had trans women, you've had older women, young women, students. So, it's obviously a way of really highlighting that diversity.

**Yasmine:** Yes, definitely. And doing it in a way that's not so confronting, in a way that's fun, in a way that people can relate to it. And fashion is—fashion is political, it really is. If you look at like GG Baxter, our transgender activist who we celebrated, fashion provided her that platform to be who she truly is. When you have someone like Marie-Louise Milne, showing that beyond being a leader, like yeah, she's a woman. She's a businesswoman, she's a mother. She's all of these things. And women are capable of doing it.

**Tess:** Yeah, that's great. Thank you. So, looking back over the last few years in Vanuatu, so we've said that *Sista's* been around for two years. But maybe even going back a little bit further than that. What do you think the most significant things are? And they may be good things or bad things that you would point to as being really standout moments in terms of the feminist movement here in Vanuatu.

**Yasmine:** When I—honestly, upon reflecting, I think the word feminist is—should probably be taken out of the equation, because that word is not common in the women's movement here. We don't—there—in terms of being a significant change with feminist activism, you only hear young girls talking about feminism.

Feminism is a very dirty word, especially for the older women. They don't see it—they see it as women trying to overtake, or women trying to be the boss, when that's not what feminism is about. I know though, that over the past few years, particularly after Cyclone Pam, and more so in the year 2000s, a lot of NGOs have a strong gender focus.

So, there's a lot of work coming in, in general, to strengthen gender equality. But is there truly transformation? I don't know. I don't know if there is that real meaningful transformation. Yes, all of these little projects, in the long run, do contribute to advancing gender equality a little bit, but I'm sorry, until I see women in more leadership positions, I don't really feel that there have been any significant...

If I may, let's refer to yesterday's newspaper, the front cover, where we had the Vanuatu National Council of Women celebrating their—the 15<sup>th</sup> conference of their organisation. And the front page was Minister Napuat talking about how women don't need to have reserved seats. And with all due respect, I understand that his—what he's trying to say is—it may have—he may have well-meaning commentary or justification between—behind what he's trying to say, saying that yes, if women unite we'll be able to have women in leadership positions.

And in fact, if women stood in solidarity, we wouldn't need reserved seats because we could fill up half the seats. But the fact is, it doesn't matter what he said. If you just look at the newspaper article alone, we

had over 100 women leaders there. And the front page is about one man speaking. And this is why our voices don't get heard.

They don't get that we have all these structural barriers, these power dynamics that we have to go through. Like seriously, come on. The media, the government, everyone needs to do better. How can we have—that space is given to a man? We just heard one man speaking. Couldn't we have found, out of the 100 women leaders, give them the platform for once?

**Tess:** Mm-hmm. Okay. So, there's still a long way to go?

**Yasmine:** Oh, a long way, a long way. It's very frustrating. I know that we have male allies, and it's a very difficult conversation. It's a painful conversation. And it's not about offending anyone or hurting anyone. But we just need to just look at the front page of the newspaper and understand that. I hope the people can understand what I'm trying to say here. If we're talking about the Vanuatu National Council of Women having this conference, why did we just give that space to a guy? Why did we just highlight that? Why is that the message that we're projecting?

**Tess:** Yeah, okay. So, as you say, there's still a long way to go, and it's not—it's not a straightforward conversation. It's very complex conversation in a very complex environment.

**Yasmine:** Yes.

**Tess:** That doesn't mean to say we shouldn't be trying to have that conversation and progress it, even if we're doing it maybe more slowly than we might like.

**Yasmin:** Yeah. I think it's about really taking—people taking responsibility that—I truly adore the *Vanuatu Daily Post*. I do a lot of work with them. And even with me, with my own journey, like it really is having to take a look back and being like “Who is being left behind here? Whose voices are not being heard?” I am in no way disrespecting Minister Napuat, I am in no way disrespecting the *Daily Post*, but it's like in that space, please let women claim it and give them that space. Please, you know? And look at what we're doing. Look at what we're doing there.

**Tess:** Yeah. No, that's great. So, just finally, and I guess it's the codicil question to that, is—it may be something that you want to pick up on that you've already said. But if you had a magic wand, if there is one change that you could make that you think would have the potential to really catalyse all these bigger changes that you've been talking about, in the Vanuatu context, what do you think that change might look like?

**Yasmine:** Oh, put women in leadership positions now. Like whether it's through reserved seats, whether it's in the media, on the front page of the newspaper, whatever. It's time to put women—you need to get them visible. They're invisible. And therefore, how can we really promote women if we don't see them and if we don't hear them? Even in places where that space is supposed to be for them. So, that's what I would say.

**Tess:** So, it's about increasing the visibility, as you say, amplifying voices. So, just to come back to the whole *Sista* piece, do you see social media or online platforms, such as Sista, I know you make a lot of use of social media as well, do you see that as being a valuable tool in your kit for doing this sort of thing, or is there—because I know we have various conversations about social media here in Vanuatu, obviously there are pros and cons, but overall, do you feel that the availability of social media is helping with this amplification and the raising of visibility?

**Yasmine:** Oh, 100 percent. You have people—when you're on social media, that kind of opens up all the doors and breaks down all the barriers, and you can do it at your own pace. You can choose what you want to see, you can choose what you want to share. I think it is such a powerful, incredible space. And to be honest, *Sista* has had—I've rarely had a negative comment. I don't even think I could count it on one hand. Like it's always been positive and always been about people sharing their thinking, sharing their thoughts. I totally see it. If anything, I think social media is the way forward and is going to be the catalyst to creating this change.

**Tess:** Okay, great. Yasmine, thank you so much for your time and sharing your thinking. And we're looking forward to hearing and seeing a lot more from you and from *Sista* and from all the women that you're supporting.

**Yasmine:** Thank you so much, Tess. I'm so happy to have been here with you today.