

Rising from the ashes: women in Vanuatu's economic recovery

by Nicola Barnes and Joanna Spencer

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Women business owners and Phoenix Project participants

Photo Credit: Groovy Banana

The business world in Vanuatu is still predominantly male oriented, but COVID-19 related job losses have shown no gender favouritism. Loss of income for families has driven men to fruit picking overseas and families becoming reliant on remittance money to finance the basics of life like food, school fees and bills.

So, where does this leave women? Well in Sylvia's case, it means managing both the family retail business and the household in the busy village of Mele, close to the capital of Port Vila. Her husband has been working from farm to farm in Australia under the Seasonal Worker Programme since the borders closed last year.



Sylvia Mansale, Vanuatu business owner (Credit: Groovy Banana)

As the effects of COVID-19 started to impact businesses in Vanuatu early last year,

the **Vanuatu Business Resilience Council** (VBRC) decided to work with female business owners tasked with managing more of the business responsibilities. The Phoenix Women in Business program was developed. This program offers support to local women business owners and was one of five projects that the **Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund** (supported by UN Women) chose to fund after an internationally competitive bid.

"This is the first time Vanuatu has been granted this sort of funding via the Peace and Humanitarian Fund with technical support from UN Women", says Glen Craig, VBRC Chairman. He added,

The participating women business owners are being provided the tools to stay resilient and to endure this current period of economic downturn, while being supported to grow their businesses into the future. Our focus is accelerating economic recovery by providing targeted support to female small business owners who in turn will lead the economic recovery of their communities.

Women who have been selected for the pilot program are being provided technical business skills development, leadership coaching, personal counselling, and one-on-one business mentoring.

Participants who complete the program will be offered the chance to present their business plans to the program's committee with grant funding being offered to those viewed as promising.



The leadership committee developing the leadership component of the workplan (Credit: Groovy)

“While it might feel right now that it’s not a good time to invest in business, it may be a particularly important time to invest in women in business”, says Ms Astrid Boulekone, General Manager of the [Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#) (VCCI), which has partnered with VBRC in this initiative.

The program is currently supporting nine women from a variety of industry sectors including hospitality, manufacturing, tailoring and construction. The program participants were carefully selected via an intensive interview process where they needed to demonstrate their desire to keep their businesses up and running during these difficult times, and to better utilise their leadership position in their communities. “With employment numbers right down, each job that is saved and each business that is strengthened counts”, adds Ms Boulekone.

One of the first things to change for Sylvia after joining the Phoenix Program was her financial management. Improved understanding of cash flow and pricing, and how to keep an accurate profit and loss statement has meant that Sylvia is better able to manage her money. She is now less stressed and better able to plan.

Sylvia has also participated in life skills workshops (learning about confidence and self-esteem) and leadership development programs, and has learnt how to implement improved sales and marketing techniques. She now has a steady flow of orders for her tailoring business and this, alongside income from her community retail store, has boosted her confidence. The increase in demand for her services means she has now employed two full-time staff to assist with the work – young women from her own community. Sylvia’s dream is to be a successful and respected businessperson, and through her reputation and business skills be able to offer employment and training opportunities to other young women in her community.

“A big part of this for me is my support network”, she adds. Sylvia is currently helped by extended family who support at home, looking after the kids and allowing her to put in the time required to manage her workload.

The Phoenix Project is being implemented by the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry on behalf of the Vanuatu Business Resilience Council and is a COVID-19 response project funded by the Women’s Peace & Humanitarian Fund, with technical support from UN Women. Support in establishing the project was provided by Governance for Growth, a DFAT-funded program supporting a range of economic issues and public financial management reform in Vanuatu. These donors recognise that private sector organisations have the agility, flexibility, and innate understanding of how businesses work to make the programs successful.

Let's all hope that the 'phoenix rising' effect continues and ensure that we remain active and engaged in supporting the economic recovery of Vanuatu, via its strong women.

Disclosures:

The Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC) is a standing committee of the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI). VCCI is Vanuatu's National Private Sector organisation and every registered business is automatically a member of VCCI. The authors work for the VCCI and the views expressed are their own.

Author/s:

Nicola Barnes

Nicola Barnes Is the Project Manager for the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Vanuatu. She is a Vanuatu citizen with a passion for developing business skills and demonstrating the role a business can play in supporting a community.

Joanna Spencer

Joanna Spencer is the Development Adviser for the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Vanuatu. She is responsible for policy reform and overall governance strengthening of the Chamber. Joanna is dedicated to the development of programs and services focused on strengthening Vanuatu's private sector.

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