



## **Launch of the Solomon Islands *Women in Government Strategy***

**Special Coordinator Tim George**

**Honiara, Solomon Islands**

**9 November 2007**

It is my great pleasure to be here today, among the leaders and decision-makers of women's issues in Solomon Islands to launch the STRATEGY FOR ADVANCING THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT.

During the first years of our lives, our mothers provide the foundation for our future, setting us on the right path, nurturing and caring for us.

During the tensions I understand many women in Solomon Islands were the peacemakers, and it was the mothers of this nation that brought together warring parties and demanded that they lay down their weapons. This is no small achievement but it is not enough to say that women play an important role in our community and within our families – that is what we already know and treasure.

We need to go further. International experience has shown that addressing issues of women's participation in decision making is critical to development.

For women to truly help shape the world we live in and manage the nation's resources, they must be in positions of real leadership and in positions of political power. Women must be supported as they strive to overcome traditional and institutional barriers in order to play a key role in policy and decision-making processes.

The WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT STRATEGY is a very positive step in this direction and RAMSI – through the machinery of government program - is delighted to be supporting the government in this exciting and important initiative.

I am also pleased to say that RAMSI programs are developed using gender equality guidelines to ensure they do not harm or impede the advancement of women.

Women's leadership and participation in formal public and political spheres plays an important role in promoting good governance - which is at the heart of RAMSI's work. In Solomon Islands, women's voice in these spheres has been minimal:

- Solomon Islands remains one of only ten countries in the world with no women members of parliament

- While holding four Permanent Secretary and four Undersecretaries positions in 23 ministries, overall, women hold just six per cent of senior public service positions.

There is a sense that things are changing. After 29 years of Independence we now have the first woman Secretary to Cabinet. In the recent People's Survey, 91 per cent of people said they would vote for a woman if she was a good candidate. In the last national election a record 26 women candidates nominated from a total of 452 candidates - however none were elected to parliament. This shows that significant institutional barriers to women participating in government remain.

In coordination with the government, RAMSI conducted research into why women found it difficult to be elected. The study found many barriers including:

- flaws in the electoral system
- discrimination of women candidates
- lack of capacity of many women candidates to plan campaign strategies
- a culture that defines formal power and public leadership as the preserve of men.

But systems can change for the better. Dr Waring, here with us today, became the youngest member in the New Zealand Parliament in 1975, at the age of 22.

RAMSI hopes that this Women in Government strategy will help address these issues and has provided funding of SBD3 million for strategy activities.

It can be tough to challenge the way things have always be done. However, the development experience of many countries and many communities has proven that this challenge is worth undertaking.

One of the strengths of the strategy is the close consultation with government and stakeholders that has taken place as part of its development.

In addition to the strategy that we are launching today, RAMSI is supporting women to overcome traditional and developmental barriers and take on leadership roles in other areas of society and the workforce.

Recently Solomon Islands women working in the law and justice area travelled to Australia with RAMSI's support to attend the Asia Pacific conference, 'Women Leading Change'. RAMSI is also supporting 'Women in Uniform'. This initiative brings together women working across customs, corrections and police to share experiences and develop the skills to challenge traditional barriers to women in the workplace.

The SIPF, with the support of RAMSI Participating Police Force advisors, have developed policies on responding to family violence and are delivering family violence training to all SIPF officers.

RAMSI women are volunteering their free time to help community groups like Women in Law Association of Solomon Islands. The aim of this group is to support the legal and human rights of women, and promote and protect women's interests.

None of these programs or initiatives can happen without Solomon Islands women putting themselves forward to take up new and important roles.

This will also be the case with the Women in Government Strategy. For the strategy to work Solomon Island women will need to work together with RAMSI towards a better future for all Solomon Islanders. Solomon Islands needs women that have the courage to step forward or to support their sisters that do.

We are very fortunate to have the services of two locally and internationally respected women Doctors Alice Pollard and Marilyn Waring to coordinate this strategy and I wish you both well in it forward in a way that will benefit not only women, but all Solomon Islanders.