

Keynote address by Hon. Rhoda Sikilabu
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A very good Women's Day breakfast to you all.

The global theme for this year's International Women's Day is connecting girls, Inspiring Futures, and it reminds me of a story of a young clever girl who did well at school but fell pregnant at the age of nineteen and became a single teenage mother. Despite this, she went on to complete tertiary courses, found work and developed her sporting talent. She was chosen by ANZ Bank as Independence Queen on their float on Independence Day in 1978, and competed as the only woman in field events at the 1982 south Pacific Mini games. She later became a member of the Bugotu House of Chiefs and served two terms in provincial government and became the first female Deputy Premier in the Solomon Islands.

Ladies and gentlemen, that girl is me.

As I stand here before you, many of you may be asking – how did I do it, and what lessons can I share about my life as a female politician.

The first point is to remain humble, despite your successes. It is not all a bed of roses and you can not be up there all the time. Life is full of ups and downs and you have to take it in your stride and keep going. I started from very humble beginnings – heartbreak, shame and despair but I believed in myself and my strong faith in God my strong family ties and the support of others saw me through.

My family was always there for me and like many women the greatest influence has been my mother. She, Margaret Kolitevo, is now 82. She was a teacher, nurse and bible translator of Bugotu language, a choir master, a tailor, a very skilled traditional dancer and skilled traditional weaver. I continue to be inspired by her as she is inspired by the fulfilment of her vision for her daughter, continuing the family success and it is her dream comes true.

In fact, first is not new to my family: my grandfather Dr. George Bogese was the first medical practitioner in the Solomon Islands in the 1930's. My mother was the first President of the Mother's Union of the Anglican Church of Melanesia for the whole of the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides in the 1970's. My late eldest sister Lilian Kolitevo Feltis was the first draughtswomen of the Solomon Islands in the 1960s and now I am the first female Deputy Premier. We are a family of firsts, which some will say is exceptional but we are normal people, who have struggled and continue to struggle with challenges of life.

In all of this, it is important to remain humble. Achievements don't change me as a women, success does not change me. My integrity is intact. I am confident in myself and proud of who I am. I remain true to the things I believe in, my faith in God and my family upbringing.

Secondly, as a leader you must understand the people. Be with the people, live with them and know what they need and work with them. I had worked in paid employment in Honiara for 11 years, during which time I gained experience, knowledge and had established myself with opportunities and a great future ahead of me. However, deep inside me, I had developed a yearning to be with my people.

The decision to return to my traditional home was the beginning of a new journey in my life. Going home meant giving up my income, car, house, depriving my children of a better quality education, my husband giving up his privileged job as Estate manager with lucrative benefits. My husband tried to change my mind, telling me returning to the village would be a waste of my knowledge and skills and the good life in Honiara. But my mind was made up. Underneath it all I found myself thinking "this isn't the real life of the women of my country". There was work I needed to do and felt this was God's purpose for me in life. In January 1991, I made the most powerful and significant decision of my life to give up my luxurious modern life in Honiara and to return to my village. Lo ting ting blo mi, hem set nao!

So for 16 years that followed, I lived a simple life with my people and struggled like everyone else.

I really did not have political ambitions to get to where I am now, but it was the women who saw what I was doing in the community who wanted me to stand and so in 2006, I ran against 6 male candidates and won in a landslide victory. When I was elected into office, it was the first time my community and Isabel Province saw first hand, what a woman is capable of when it comes to politics. I was like an experiment – the trial to see what would happen with a woman, in a male arena – and everyone was watching me to see if I would flourish or fail.

My re-election in 2011 to the Isabel Provincial Assembly is proof of my success in the eyes of my people. To be appointed the first female Deputy Premier in the Solomon Islands, speaks of the shift in recognition, and the value of women not just in the politics of my province, but our country as a whole. Maybe it's because we are a matrilineal society but my province Isabel leads the way counting 2 female Ministers within its current 8 member executive, and I am

extremely proud of this, particularly as we live in a world that still treats women as secondary class citizens compared to men.

Apart from the role of Deputy Premier, my other responsibilities include appointments as the Vice-President of the Diocese of Isabel Mother's Union, a Chief, and I serve on many Boards. As Minister for Women, Youth and Children, these responsibilities coincide with my work, strengthening linkages with churches, resource owners and chiefs.

As their Minister, I make sure my government continues to support funds for these groups, because they are the very heart of the communities. My collaboration with the village people, who in the Solomons represent 80% of our population, places me in the position to understand their needs, challenges and opportunities relating to livelihood improvements, affecting communities and families.

Before I came into politics, I had the idea that someone had to be qualified politicians to be elected, but a year into my second term, I know this is not true. I now know that the real test of political character comes from living the life of your people in your constituency and your province, so that you not only understand their needs and desires, but your everyday qualities and integrity become your campaigning tools. Many think that having a good qualification is all that is needed, or having a piece of paper will automatically make you a good politician. Having a degree is not the core of politics – it is one's understanding of your community and their needs. There is a place for higher qualifications in politics but there is also a place for real world experience and no amount of schooling in the world can replace this. Looking back, I thank god for the decision I took in 1991, to return home because I am able to shape the future of my community and entire province and I believe I am also contributing to the development of Solomon Islands as a nation especially for women.

The need for women in parliament can be deeply felt from where I am to be inside the arena – to be at its centre – I can see the incredible need for more women. One woman's voice may reach us all through the media, but a single female voice – no matter how powerful – does not make up for having fair representation of women in politics. Until there are more women and we are truly represented in our Parliament and Provincial Assemblies, we will never be able to reach our full potential and deliver the kind of change our society needs. All women who enter politics will inevitably face our own cultural barriers. Unfortunately, in this society, no matter how hard you work or the good kind of politician you are, female politicians will still face some form of cultural rejection. We must weather this, stay the course, and make the future easier and less resistant for our daughters and granddaughters.

I would also like to add, that being a politician, does not relieve me as a woman from my role as a mother and a daughter and all the traditional and cultural obligation, expected of me such as cooking, preparing food and looking after family. As a woman I still attend to my duties and many times I still feel I have to serve men but I have also realized that when it is time to lead, I must accept it and put the traditional feelings aside in order to take on the leadership role.

As a woman who has twice won elections running against all male candidates, I am completely in support of and an advocate for the introduction of special temporary measures through reserved seats for women in the Solomon Islands parliament and Provincial Assemblies. From experience, I know just how many obstacles there really are, for women through the processes of nominations running and winning an election. We just do not currently exist on level playing field, and TSM is an important device for levelling this out.

Taking a leaf out of the page of the PNG experience, after the recent failure of the Women bill for reserved seats for women in PNG's parliament, I would like to urge the Solomon Islands government not to make the same mistake by leaving it too late and we must work on it together, men and women now.

For women to be successful having support is crucial and the need for capacity building is important. I would like to acknowledge here the training and encouraging support I have benefitted from by various individuals and organisation. Prior to running in the 2006 election, I was trained by the women in Leadership Desk at the National Council of Women – Sarah Dyer and Margaret Sandy. In 2010 National Election, I benefitted from training provided by NCW again and the WISDM Group and from overseas training in Fiji, Canberra and Malaysia. I am grateful for the support and opportunities provided especially through the Ministry of Women, RAMSI Machinery of government – Women in Government program and other donor support.

It is often said that behind every successful man is a strong woman. In my case, I am very grateful for a strong and supportive husband. We have worked together as team to guide and support each other. We have able to draw from each other's qualities – what he brings as a man and me as a woman. I have heard criticisms that my husband directs my work, but this criticism is just another example of putting women down. If you are wife of a male politician, people praise you for supporting and helping him. But if you are husband of a female politician, people seem to be assuming that you are directing your wife and making all the decisions. To my husband who is here present, I thank him and publicly acknowledge his enduring love and support.

Finally, knowing that my political life will someday end, I have always worked to the very best of my ability, in order to do as much as I can, in the time I have to do it. Melanesian politics is dominated by men, and I can only hope that I have been a role model and inspiration to other women, and have demonstrated through my life, that women have a central role in politics.

To young women, I say I bear my tireless efforts for the next generation of women leaders. I do not sugar coat the difficult conditions of my journey that is required of those women who aspire to a life in politics; who aspire to a marathon of faith. I persevere knowing that through my work, I have ensured that I will not be the last and that the future of Solomon politics will see many more incredible, brave women stand up to lead our nation.

To the women of Isabel, I urge you all to follow in the footsteps of the Hon Beverley Dick and myself and of the late Lily Ponanski Rubha, the first Solomon Island woman in the Legislative Council.

Before I conclude, I would like to acknowledge RAMSI especially Mary Louise O'Callaghan for the honour of Guest Speaker for this year's International Women's Day, RAMSI Women's Breakfast and it is indeed an honour to my government and my people.

Last but not the least, on International Women's Day, the day we celebrate the achievements of women, I would like to finish by expressing my eternal thanks to my mother. She is the reason for everything that I am and everything that I will be and I would not be here without her especially having started out as a lost young teenage mother.

I dedicate this speech to her.

May God bless her and may God bless the women and girls of our Beloved Solomon Islands.

Happy International Women Day