

## The continuum of women's activism in Timor-Leste in the context of UN peacebuilding

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This paper looks at the continuum of women's activism from the end of Indonesian occupation through to the period of independence in Timor-Leste and focuses on some discursive tensions between international norms of gender equality and domestic women's activism in Timor-Leste. The paper is based on the authors PhD research which assesses UN Security Council mandated missions in Timor-Leste and their approach to gender mainstreaming – the process by which the UN must allow for the equitable participation of men and women in the whole of peace support operations.<sup>2</sup> The paper draws on interviews conducted as part of this research in Timor-Leste in 2012 and 2013. Interviews are referred to by number, rather than name, and all interviews were conducted with the author of this article. The analysis here will highlight the continuum of women's activism in Timor-Leste and their role in translating international conventions on gender equality into benefits on the ground. This account can provide an impetus for improved policy and engagement on gender inclusive post-conflict reconstruction. This discussion brings to the fore concerns with ownership and empowerment in international gender equality projects. Improved understanding will further buttress empowerment of women in host countries, a central theme of gender mainstreaming rhetoric.

Over time, the UN system has increasingly incorporated insights from feminist movements and gender equality advocates into the weave of peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations. This has been done through a process of Security Council resolutions that mandate action on, variously, preventing sexual violence in conflict, improving women's representation in decision-making – in both peace processes and UN structures – and ensuring that the human rights of women in post-conflict situations are not overlooked. The watershed moment for this was the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security which established the foundations for gender mainstreaming and argued for women's increased representation in the UN system and in decision-making. Resolution 1325 acknowledged women's experiences of war and laid foundations for incorporating gender perspectives into state-building processes – such as electoral, peace and judiciary systems. Most notably it was 'the first time the Security Council [had] devoted an entire session to debating women's experiences in conflict and post-conflict zones' (Cohn, Kinsella and Gibbings 2004, 10). Subsequent resolutions on women, peace and security have continued to support women's role in these processes and have attempted to address some of the gender based impacts of conflict (see Security Council Resolutions 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960 and 2122).<sup>3</sup> Together these mandates centre on two central themes of gender mainstreaming in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, which can be broadly defined as protection and empowerment of women in conflict and post-conflict zones.

The process which led to Resolution 1325 built on collaborations between feminists that had been emerging across borders for some years, including the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW 1979) and the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995) which itself was borne out of the momentum of the Nairobi Conference in 1985 which closed the 'UN Decade for Women'. These movements highlight the intertwining agendas of equality, development and peace. The Nairobi Conference

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<sup>2</sup> Established as a 'global strategy' in the *Beijing Platform for Action* in 1995, and as a strategy fundamental for peace and security operations in Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (S/RES/1325, 2000). However a commonly used definition and principles of gender mainstreaming can be found in the ECOSOC 'Agreed Conclusions' (1997/2).

<sup>3</sup> For literature that more closely analyses UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions on women, peace and security see *inter alia* Barrow (2010), Cohn (2004), Gizelis and Pierre (2013), Puechguirbal (2010), Shepherd (2011), St-Pierre (2011).

saw nearly 14,000 women from around the globe come together, a majority of who were from the developing world (Çağatay, Grown and Santiago 1986, 402). East Timorese women were also present at both the Nairobi NGO Forum held prior to the official UN conference and the UN's Fourth World Conference in Beijing 1995 (Hill 2012, 218). The culmination of these movements is, in essence, about recognising women's unequal share of decision making power and simultaneously rectifying the historical silence in the international realm on both this exclusion, the subordination of women it perpetuates, and the differential experiences of women during times of conflict. Notably, the movements were driven by diverse groups of women from around the globe that represented various intersections of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality.

As laudable as these developments and their stated ideals are, implementing these principles in a positive, effective and meaningful way has not always occurred. Resolution 1325 has spawned large amounts of literature questioning its effectiveness, both real and potential, and analysing the impacts it has had since its introduction.<sup>4</sup> A less insignificant part of this literature points to the ad hoc and often lackadaisical approach of the UN and the inherent problems of enforcing such a broad mandate (Binder, Lukas and Schweiger 2008; Westendorf 2013, 4-5). These represent internal limitations – institutional limitations in ability or will to implement such a framework. External obstacles are also part of this discussion and are frequently connected to a national culture, a tension between local and international norms of gender equality (Hall 2009), 'deep-seated gendered hierarchies' in the country in question (Hall and True 2009, 159) or 'discriminatory social norms' (UN General Assembly 2010, 7). At its most basic level, this iteration of the tensions between international and national sees them as mutually exclusive and the local can be brushed aside as incompatible with peacebuilding whereas international norms are equitable.

Both internal and external factors are present in Timor-Leste. Successful implementation of gender mainstreaming principles has meant contending with both patriarchal norms in Timor-Leste and the attendant challenges of having a large UN bureaucracy in country. In Timor-Leste, the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET, 2000-2002) was obliged to incorporate a gender perspective into its operations even though it predated Resolution 1325, due to the precedent set by the international conferences on women. Due to lobbying from both East Timorese women and activists within the UN, UNTAET was the first UN peacekeeping mission to have a Gender Affairs Unit (GAU). Therefore, in regards to gender mainstreaming, Timor-Leste represents an important milestone for UN peacebuilding missions. The GAU of UNTAET became the predecessor for the Office for the Promotion of Equality (OPE) and subsequently the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality (SEPI). The following mission, UNMISSET,<sup>5</sup> gave less importance to gender and failed to support ongoing consolidation of some of the gains made during UNTAET (Olsson 2009, 82). With the establishment of UNMIT,<sup>6</sup> gender advisors were placed in most units and as well as these positions UNMIT had its own GAU. UNMIT's focus fell towards physical security, with the Security Council encouraging security sector responsiveness to the needs of women in Timor-Leste, in line with the security sector focus of UNMIT.

The women's movement in Timor-Leste has been active and visible prior to the establishment of UNTAET. The development of this movement is inextricably linked to the fight for independence and self-determination from 1974 onwards. In 1975, Rosa Bonaparte, the founding secretary of the women's wing of Fretilin, *Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense* (OPMT), famously stated their aim as 'firstly, to participate directly in the struggle against colonialism and second, to fight in every way the violent discrimination that Timorese women have suffered in colonial society' (Bonaparte 1976, 7). OPMT was the first indigenous women's organisation in Timor-Leste and women participated actively in every arm of the resistance movement, including in armed combat, attending training on how to assemble and disassemble a

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Black (2009), Rehn (2001), Willett (2010).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor, 2002-2005.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste, 2006-2012.

rifle (Sequeira and Abrantes 2012, 49).<sup>7</sup> Women's activities in resistance against occupation were many and varied and reflect the organisational and logistical stages of the resistance movement. OPMT was organised consistent with the administrative sectors of Fretilin and provided support networks of women and spaces for them to work together, with the opportunity to engage in active combat and clandestine activities (Alves, Abrantes and Reis 2005; da Silva 2010, 152-159; Cristalis and Scott 2005). OPMT also engaged in Fretilin's education programs, which included learning of women's emancipation, as well as political and literacy education (CAVR 2005, section 5.2, para 38-44). *Organização da Mulher Timorese* (OMT) was established in 1998 and welcomed women from all political parties and none, to reflect the united front of the newly created CNRT.<sup>8</sup> The OMT's aims and objectives were not much different from OPMT and would continue to support the cause for independence and organise at the grassroots level (Cristalis and Scott 2005, 47). Also established during the occupation period, FOKUPERS,<sup>9</sup> a grass roots women's advocacy organisation, was 'one of only a handful of pre-referendum non-church NGOs trying to operate in a hostile environment' (Conway 2010, xviii).

In 1975 Rosa Bonaparte produced OPMT's manifesto, providing insight into the theoretical basis of the women's movement at that time, and which highlighted the causes of women's oppression as 'both cultural and structural' (da Silva 2010, 149). Speaking out against polygamy and *barlake* – commonly translated as dowry or bride price<sup>10</sup> – the capacity of this movement was clearly demonstrated as members critically engaged with internal issues of women's equality. This was not simply a women's 'auxiliary' role to the independence movement, but also a movement that demanded changes within the structure of East Timorese society and saw their participation in resistance as integral. East Timorese women have spoken of learning about emancipation whilst fighting for independence, and many gained knowledge in these areas from those who had studied abroad and returned to Timor-Leste. Therefore, prior to the arrival of the UN missions, the East Timorese women's movement was not isolated from the globalised movements discussed above and indeed East Timorese women brought the violence they and others suffered under Indonesian occupation to international attention well before 1999 (Hill 2012, 218).

In the post-1999 period, given the lifting of a hostile and oppressive environment and the influx of international funds, a number of local and national NGOs have been established supporting the rights, needs and interests of East Timorese women.<sup>11</sup> In 2000, the First National Women's Congress was organised and an umbrella women's secretariat, Rede Feto, was established which brought together 16 women's organisations. Rede Feto was instrumental in campaigning around women's political representation in independent Timor-Leste (Wigglesworth 2010, 245). Resistance era organisations such as OPMT, its sister organisation GFFTL,<sup>12</sup> OMT and FOKUPERS continue their work in issue areas such as women's parliamentary representation, women's literacy and domestic violence.

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<sup>7</sup> See Sequeira and Abrantes (2012) and Conway (2010) for the testimonies of women and the many roles they undertook as part of the resistance against Indonesian occupation and also their day-to-day lives during occupation.

<sup>8</sup> *Conselho Nacional da Reconstrução Timorese* – National Congress of Timorese Reconstruction – united front of the resistance, established 1998, which incorporated political parties outside of Fretilin.

<sup>9</sup> *Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Lorosa'e* – East Timorese Women's Communications Forum.

<sup>10</sup> Although *barlake* is commonly translated to mean dowry or bride price, Sara Niner (2012, 141) has pointed out that this is a mistaken translation, stating: 'The term "dowry" refers to an endowment by the bride's family, transferred with her in marriage, representing her natal inheritance in patriarchal societies which have no tradition of independent inheritance for women...Bride-price...is a gift of payment from the groom's family to the bride's family, understood as compensation for the loss to the bride's kin group of her labour and fertility...'. *Barlake* on the other hand represents reciprocal exchange (Niner 2012). One interview participant elaborated on this: 'You give a present, you receive a present more or less the same value...But your presents are of a different kind than the present you receive, for example, I give you live things, you give me dead things. If you give me *tais*, gold, money, I give you pigs, cows, this is life' (Interview no. 24, 22 August 2013).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed account of NGOs, national and international, operating in Timor-Leste with a gender framework, see Trembath and Grenfell (2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Grupo Feto Foinsa'e Timor Lorosa'e* – East Timor Young Women's Group, was established in 1998 as part of student organising against occupation, working in rural areas.

Despite various challenges, not least of which was an extremely challenging political and social environment, East Timorese women have continued, in many respects successfully, their advocacy for equality and empowerment in the presence of successive UN peacebuilding missions. In the case of Timor-Leste, a simple dichotomy of international norms taking hold and dislodging restrictive cultural norms inherently opposed to gender equality does not fully capture the complexity of this relationship, as the international presence itself can reinforce a patriarchal hierarchy through the exclusion of women. Despite precedent for women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes, there were concerns that East Timorese women were excluded from transitional administration:

Today we have entered a new stage, the final stage until full independence for East Timor under [UN] Administration. However, it has become apparent that even with the UN's presence in East Timor, the women of East Timor still have a double battle to fight. We must combat our own society's views of the role of women, the traditional ties that bind while at the same time continuously advocating to the UNTAET and the East Timor Transitional Administration for policies and hiring practices that include women (Rede Feto 2000).

The above sentiment bears similarity to the dual purposes of OPMT outlined in 1975, to fight both patriarchal structures within Timor-Leste and those within Portuguese colonialism. This has also occurred in the context of a 'post-conflict backlash', in which women in post-conflict areas may find their needs marginalised and their behaviours and rights restricted as part of romanticised notions to return to a more traditional era (Pankhurst 2008). This process has been evident in post-occupation Timor-Leste (Charlesworth and Wood 2002, 334-339; Hall 2009, 317-320; Niner 2011). Yet it is also true that the international community can be complicit in this process by excluding women from peace-making and peacebuilding. In Timor-Leste, women have felt excluded from peace-making processes;<sup>13</sup> at a Security Council session in 2000, a Rede Feto representative stated:

Although we also participated and suffered in the struggle our participation in peace making has been limited. But we have embraced and welcomed the small opportunities given and have [made] every effort not to be forgotten or overlooked (Rede Feto 2000).

This exclusion has been noted again following 2006 crisis in Timor-Leste as women were excluded from high-level dialogue to end outbreaks of violence in 2006 (Haq 2011). Certainly issues of ownership are intertwined with this discussion. Viewing women's role in peacebuilding in Timor-Leste solely through the lens of international conventions can ignore women's sense of ownership over the gains made in this period. This was neatly captured by one participant (Interview no. 3, 27 July 2012) who stated:

For me, international treaties or the adoption of the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] or adoption of 1325 is just to strengthen what is supposed to be there. It is not because of CEDAW we want to reduce discrimination [against women]. It is not because of the MDGs that we want to improve our living standard or poverty or nutrition and gender equality.

Whilst patriarchy does present challenges to women's and men's attempts to improve gender equality in Timor-Leste, to view challenges to patriarchal norms solely as a function of international mechanisms is to ignore the full continuum of women's activism in Timor-Leste. By acknowledging work already underway on the ground, we see that women in Timor-Leste had already been challenging barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights; however, the language of gender mainstreaming did not comfortably reflect this work (Interview no. 16, 7 September 2012; Interview no. 19, 29 July 2013). Participants often stated that

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<sup>13</sup> Such as at the 5 May Agreements which were the final agreements between the governments of Portugal and Indonesia under UN Secretary General auspices made on 5 May 1999 regarding Timor-Leste, which outlined the process for the popular consultation to take place to decide on autonomy and makes necessary security arrangements. See S/RES/1236 (1999) which was adopted by the Security Council on 7 May 1999.

the discourse and practice of 'gender' within the UN mission 'looked different' to the rhetoric of women's emancipation which already existed (Interview no. 19, 29 July 2013). This was explained in particular relation to context; the context in which women advocated for their needs and interests changed dramatically in the post-1999 era:

Before 1999, there have been cases...Some women, those who are affected by the violence, they cannot go and report to the police or to the military or to people they can trust...We cannot talk about human rights, we cannot talk about women's rights. We made an effort to promote women's rights but because we were under Indonesian occupation we couldn't do anything, so the military [could] do whatever they want to do with women...After 1999, we can see there is no more Indonesian occupation but women still experience sexual violence...Now we cannot let this happen. But this was not because of *malaes* [foreigners] but before *malaes* were here we already knew that sexual violence wasn't good, but we couldn't do anything because we were under occupation. So we still work the same but in a different situation (Interview no. 20, 31 July 2013).

The idea that the language and theory used by the international community was different to that in practice in Timor-Leste is an important characterisation and brings to the fore the importance of ownership and context. Through this lens we can also challenge the assumption that knowledge of and activity around women's rights was simply absent; an assumption that has been more readily the response of some institutional accounts that reflect upon the work of the UN missions. For example:

The gender unit of UNTAET was established in December 2000...It was instrumental in mainstreaming gender in all functional areas of the mission's work and in supporting the creation of a national women's movement (UN DPKO 2005, 35).

This disregards the role of East Timorese women in maintaining UNTAET's commitment to gender mainstreaming and credits the GAU with the creation of the women's movement in Timor-Leste which is demonstrably untrue.

When we focus on international norms, we start to focus on adherence or non-adherence to these norms, rather than on whether women and men benefit, and benefit equally. The gaze of these norms usually sits squarely on the presumed inadequacy of third world, developing, underdeveloped or fragile states. Yet transnational partnerships have developed across these lines, as can be seen at the Nairobi Conference and other movements that have led to documents such as Resolution 1325 as a mechanism for women's empowerment.<sup>14</sup> This is also true in Timor-Leste as a key arm of the resistance front was to garner international attention and create solidarity across borders, essentially a form of transnational partnering. We can also see this in the combined lobbying efforts to maintain UNTAET's focus on its gender mainstreaming commitments and partnerships around particular issues, such as work on the *Law Against Domestic Violence* (Hall 2009).

East Timorese women were integral to placing gender principles on the initial agenda of UN peacebuilding in Timor-Leste, challenging the notion of a dichotomous relationship between the international and the national. Part of the problem of a static and homogenous understanding of 'tradition' or domestic norms is that tradition in Timor-Leste is contested, porous and intractably linked to histories of colonialism, occupation *and* international intervention post-1999. This is not to suggest that we should overly romanticise the local. Rather, I would suggest that we are de-romanticising the international, challenging its rigidity whilst simultaneously seeing the role it can and does play in supporting a range of actions of an indigenous women's movement. This can reshape our perspective to one in which the post-1999 UN missions are another political backdrop against which East Timorese women fought for their rights. I would argue that this better supports the empowerment mandate of international resolutions

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<sup>14</sup> As Carol Cohn (2004, 8) has noted, what makes Resolution 1325 particularly important is that 'it is both the product and armature for a massive mobilization of women's political energies.'

regarding women, peace and security and casts a more critical eye to the way gender mainstreaming processes are judged and evaluated.

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