

## The emergence of an East Timorese women's movement<sup>1</sup>

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The Popular Organisation of Timorese Women is a mass organisation of the Revolutionary Front of an Independent East Timor – Fretilin – which enables Timorese women to participate in the revolution. The principal objective of women participating in the revolution is not, strictly speaking, the emancipation of women as women, but the triumph of the revolution, and consequently, the liberation of women as a social being who is the target of a double exploitation: that under the traditional conceptions and that under the colonialist conceptions (Bonaparte 1976, 7).

In a rare statement issued on 18 September 1975 by Rosa 'Muki' Bonaparte Soares, the founding secretary of the first East Timorese women's organisation, the Popular Organisation of Timorese Women (*Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense* – OPMT), Muki articulates the inseparable relationship between women's emancipation and national liberation in Portuguese Timor. Her priorities for the East Timorese women's movement are: 'Firstly, to participate directly in the struggle against colonialism, and second[ly] to fight in every way the violent discrimination that Timorese women have suffered in colonial society'. East Timorese women were, she wrote, fighting 'a double exploitation': against traditionalist, patriarchal social structures, and against Portuguese colonialism (1976, 7).

The window of opportunity created for East Timorese women by the April 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the subsequent decolonisation processes was short-lived. In December 1975, the Indonesian military launched a full-scale land, sea, and air invasion of East Timor and occupied it for the next twenty-four years. However, revolutionary events in 1974 stimulated a widespread, anti-colonial, revolutionary nationalist movement in Portuguese Timor – the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* – FRETILIN) – which created an ideological and political space for the emergence of an East Timorese women's movement. In this paper, I explore the role of women within the development of political consciousness and nationalist thinking in Portuguese Timor during the critical period of 1974-75. I highlight the often overlooked presence of women within the early nationalist movement and explore the gendered manifestations of early East Timorese nationalism beyond the role of women simply as symbols, via women's actions as informants and disseminators of nationalist ideology. I suggest that this early period was influential and formative both for the women's movement and for the development of early East Timorese nationalism.

The philosophy of the nationalist front, FRETILIN, was an explicitly anti-colonial form of nationalism and its leaders sought to unite all East Timorese in the pursuit of independence. This goal involved not only freeing the people from colonial rule, but also called for the elimination of all colonial social structures and for the implementation of new forms of social democracy. A popular explanatory statement issued by the party in 1974 outlines its purpose and aims:

FRETILIN is the REVOLUTIONARY FRONT OF AN INDEPENDENT EAST TIMOR. It unites all the nationalist and anti-colonialist forces in a common cause – authentic liberation of the people of East Timor from the colonial yolk [sic]. FRETILIN proposes to show the people of East Timor in a way towards PROGRESS, PEACE and FREEDOM [sic]. FRETILIN repudiates all forms of colonialism and neo-colonialism, so that the people of East Timor can be truly INDEPENDENT, FREE and PROGRESSIVE (1975).

The statement articulates FRETILIN's nationalist, anti-colonial agenda, as well as the emphasis upon individual and collective freedom. FRETILIN used this lens to assess the impact of both colonial and traditional social structures for East Timorese women (Bonaparte 1977, 1). Its program sought to eliminate discriminatory traditional practices, such as polygamy, and advocated for equal wages, widespread educational programs, and sexual equality. The progressive ideological position of

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FRETILIN on the issue of gender equality was not reflected within its organisational structure, with only three women included in the fifty-member original Central Committee (Hill, conversation with the author, 2014). However, a women's organisation was established, according to the party's political program, 'so that every person will actively contribute to the political life of the country': OPMT (Program 1974, 4). OPMT can be seen as emblematic of an emerging East Timorese women's movement, yet it was established within the context of FRETILIN's commitment to independence, and to the democratisation and modernisation of East Timorese society.

Although during her visit to Portuguese Timor Australian Masters student, Helen Hill, recalled groups of women being pointed out as OPMT from January 1975 (Hill, conversation with the author, 2014), the organisation only became widely active at the end of August, after the Civil War (Hill 2002, 159-60). Originally intended as 'a mass organisation' that would enable East Timorese women 'to participate in the revolution', the immediate roles of the organisation were borne out of the post-conflict conditions: specifically, to attend to the children and families who were homeless as a result of the conflict. Muki envisaged women's roles to include educating the youth to 'continue the revolution', to organise 'the more active and conscious women', and to 'awaken those [women] who are passive and submissive' (Bonaparte 1976, 7). Women who participated in OPMT, such as Ilda Maria da Conceição from Viqueque, recalled its role as a vehicle for organising women, encouraging their participation in meetings, facilitating their role in decision-making processes, and teaching women 'how to participate in politics' (Conceição, interview with the author, 2012). OPMT also established crèches and kindergartens, with the headquarters at Mau-Koli in Maubisse, where children were looked after, taught to read and write, and about systems of colonial oppression and how to overcome them (AAP 1975, 2). Thus, OPMT was conceived as a source for the unification, organisation, and education of East Timorese women within the context of a broader social and political revolution.

While the prime objective of OPMT was the 'triumph of the revolution, the revolution of the Mau Bere people', Muki's statement demonstrates an awareness that 'exploitation and oppression' of women was occurring well beyond the borders of Portuguese Timor. In 'the great majority of countries', she writes, women were being 'deprived of their most fundamental rights, being denied an active participation in political life'. She argues that this 'exploitation and oppression' was heightened by the colonialist and traditionalist conceptions of women within East Timorese society (Bonaparte 1976, 7). This approach indicates a specifically anti-colonial brand of feminism, but one that still constitutes a legitimate part of feminist historiography. Historically, feminism has often arisen in the 'Third World' in tandem with nationalist movements. In the case of Portuguese Timor, this movement took the form of an anti-colonial struggle against the Portuguese, and therefore that OPMT arose within the context of the nationalist movement does not discredit its feminist agenda. Indeed, Muki's assertion that East Timorese women were living under 'a double exploitation' parallels with other imbricated feminist and nationalist struggles occurring in the colonial world. She also draws upon the material conditions of life within Portuguese Timor to ground these conceptions, highlighting repressive practices such as *barlake*, polygamy, and the sexually exploitative attitudes of the colonialists toward local women (Bonaparte 1976, 7). While early forms of East Timorese feminism can be situated within the context of broader movements for women's emancipation, they were informed by the specific culture and experiences of exploitation within Portuguese Timor.

Ideas about women's emancipation and national liberation were also inspired by other movements occurring across the Lusophone world. In the late-colonial period, a small number of East Timorese received scholarships from the colonial government to pursue higher education in Portugal. There, the students read revolutionary literature, discussed political ideas, and learnt from the examples of other liberation struggles. In particular, they drew inspiration from the revolutionary ideas and practice of the African liberation movements. Maria Madalena Brites Boavida, who received a scholarship to study in Portugal in 1974, remembered making contact with students from other Portuguese colonies, such as Mozambique, Angola, Guinéa-Bissau, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Macau (Boavida, communication with the author, 2010). Another student, Lola dos Reis, recalled frequent political discussions among the students, 'every day, every night, every weekend'. She remembered attending meetings for students from African liberation movements, who would help the young East Timorese 'to understand the issues' and 'the essence of our rights. The essence of why we need to become independent' (Reis, interview with the author, 2013). In reflecting upon this period, Filomena de Almeida felt that it was not only the political nature of the discussions that inspired her, but that she felt 'motivated by the

[revolutionary] environment itself' (Almeida, interview with the author, 2013). These recollections evoke a revolutionary atmosphere, in which the students were encouraged and inspired by political discussions and shared experiences.

In Portugal, East Timorese female students participated in political discussions in a way that they had not yet done at home. For Lola, the conditions in Portugal were 'very different'. She remembered that the women who participated in these discussions were 'very active and energetic', that the different environment meant that the male students 'understood that we had a role to play, that we had a right to contribute'. The students debated the colonial and traditional conditions of East Timorese society, as well as the social and economic status of East Timorese women. Lola recalled the colourful and evocative nature of these discussions:

Debates were constant, for example, why should we call ourselves *maubere* and *buibere* and not Timorese? A lot of debates [...] there were issues like women's participation: this we discussed a lot. But among the students, it was ok. They all saw that it was our right to be there. Other issues like what to do for the people to make sure that there will be a better life for them – there was a lot of discussion. For example, how to organise Timor-Leste in such a way that it will belong from [sic] everybody? So everybody can benefit from it and not just a few (interview with the author, 2013).

Lola suggests that women's oppression was discussed not solely within the context of countering gender inequality, but as part of a broader vision for a new, independent state.

Several students returned back to Portuguese Timor from September 1974 to help with the revolutionary struggle at home, including Muki (Reis, interview with the author, 2013). The influence of the returned students upon FRETILIN's direction was instrumental, particularly in creating a space for women to participate in the struggle for national liberation. Muki's role in organising women via OPMT, the example provided by her active participation, as well as the involvement of women within FRETILIN's literacy campaigns, inspired and encouraged a cross-section of women to participate. Although the idea of a women's organisation had already been raised, these students provided the ideological constructs and practices to begin to effect real change for women. OPMT women observed the significant influence that studying in Portugal had upon women, especially Muki. Muki's classmate and fellow OPMT member from Ermera, Lourdes 'Merita' Alves Araujo, recalled that in Portugal, Muki gained new ideas, new examples, and new knowledge about politics. When she returned to Portuguese Timor, she tried to introduce these ideas and to mobilise the people – the whole population, including women, so that everyone could become a part of the political process (Araujo, interview with the author, 2012). Another OPMT member from Aileu, Zulmira 'Sirana' da Cruz Sarmiento, remembered that when the students came back from Portugal both the men and women shared their experiences, and emphasised the similar roles of couples in Portugal in terms of work, housework, and studying (interview with the author, 2012). The returned students transferred not only these ideas, but also the excitement and revolutionary feeling of the climate, from Portugal to Portuguese Timor.

Technological developments in Portuguese Timor during the late-colonial period enabled the examples of politically-active women and stories of successful liberation struggles in Africa to be disseminated throughout the territory. In the FRETILIN newsletter, *Timor Leste: O Jornal do Povo Mau Bere*, Muki wrote an article that commemorated 11 November (Angolan Independence Day) as 'a day to remember in the history of the Angolan People and, consequently in the history of everyone around the World'. Angola's attainment of independence, Muki wrote, 'signals another victory of the People oppressed by the system of domination and exploitation in the form of colonialism'. In particular, she described Angolan women, who 'fought side by side' with men, as inspiration for East Timorese women (OPMT 1975, 6). In another article for the newsletter, Muki emphasised the participation of women in revolutionary struggles in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinéa-Bissau (1975, 3). These references enabled Muki to position East Timorese women and their struggle within a pan-Lusophone, transnational movement for liberation from colonial oppression, and as such to stimulate excitement and enthusiasm among East Timorese women. At a time when illiteracy was estimated to be around 90 per cent, newspapers were not the most far-reaching method of communication (Jolliffe and Reece 1975, n.p.). In addition, FRETILIN's radio station, *Radio Maubere*, broadcast traditional East Timorese music, nationalist poems, and songs, thus providing access to nationalist ideas to those beyond the educated elite.

The literacy campaigns were also key platforms for disseminating political ideas, and in generating a broader understanding of political objectives. According to Estêvão Cabral, who was involved in the campaigns, female literacy volunteers actually outnumbered males in late-1974 and in early-1975 (2010, 344). Helen Hill similarly recalled being struck by the number of the women (conversation with the author, 2014). The literacy campaign was initially tested at two pilot centres in Namuleco and Baucau, although after six months there were reportedly 200 literacy centres operating across the country (*TIS* 1975, 2). Through OPMT, educated women taught children and adults how to read. They used a literacy handbook, *Rai Timor, Rai Ita Niang* (Timor is Our Country), that had been designed and printed by students in Portugal to teach reading and writing; and to facilitate discussions about independence, East Timorese culture, and nationalism. They told traditional East Timorese stories and sang songs, such as *Foho Ramelau* (Mount Ramelau), to encourage nationalist sentiment and to articulate a unique sense of East Timorese identity.

The campaigns were also educational for the volunteers themselves, travelling into the countryside and observing the lifestyle of the rural population. For Maria Maia dos Reis, the daughter of a *liurai* (traditional chief or ruler) from Baucau, these experiences shaped the development of her class consciousness. It also clarified the way in which FRETILIN sought to draw upon material conditions of life, and to break down class and economic divisions. For Maria, ‘we came to feel that we have to guide these people to freedom, because FRETILIN’s doctrine was that everyone must have an equal life. There should not be rich people and poor people’ (interview with the author, 2012). Another participant in the literacy campaigns, Aicha Basareawan, later wrote of their importance in enabling the population to participate in FRETILIN’s revolution: ‘How can a people take active part in a revolution against colonialism if it is illiterate, namely if it is unable to analyse its situation and the actions of the colonialists against it?’ (2004, 41). Women’s involvement in the literacy campaigns enabled OPMT to transcend across class and geographic divides, demonstrating an inclusive approach to individual and collective emancipation.

The 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal brought significant changes to the social and political landscape of Portuguese Timor. It facilitated the emergence of a widespread nationalist movement that contained a commitment to women’s liberation, and sought their involvement in the struggle against colonialism. While women did not occupy a significant number of leadership positions within the formal structure of the movement, they were very much involved in the education, politicisation, and mobilisation of the broader population *on the ground*, in the name of national liberation, at this critical time. The revolutionary quality of the nationalist movement proved productive for East Timorese women. It enabled the emergence of a women’s movement that could extend its scope and influence beyond the urban elite to rural women, and facilitated the dissemination of a language of gender equality within the context of East Timorese liberation rhetoric. The emergence of OPMT and the involvement of a small group of educated, politically-driven women ensured that women’s participation remained important to the broader struggle against oppression and inequality.

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