

Customary values and global influences in youth attitudes to gender and violence in Timor-Leste

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Introduction

Violência doméstica, or domestic violence (DV) is a major issue, demonstrated by the fact that it is the crime most commonly dealt with by the justice system in Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL), with about half of all court cases estimated to be DV. Gender equality is enshrined in the constitution. The Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV) which was passed in 2010 makes DV a criminal offence but this research suggests it is little understood by the majority of the population and is said to directly conflict with Timorese culture.

Around 70% of the population of Timor-Leste live by subsistence agriculture (NDS 2010) in extended family networks where customary practices determine gendered roles and relationships. Customary practices do not readily accommodate international standards of democratic principles, human rights and gender equity, recently introduced by RDTL. In Timorese cultural belief, women are accorded a sacred status through a divine female element, but while they may hold power in a ritual context they generally do not have a strong public or political voice (Niner 2013). This paper draws on a study of 15-24-year-old young women and men to analyse their attitudes to gender equality and domestic violence in the context of social change taking place in this rapidly modernising country.

Gender equality and domestic violence in Timor Leste

Domestic violence stems from gender inequality and discrimination. Violence against women has been found to constrain poverty reducing efforts, reduce family incomes and have negative impacts on children, including girl's education (Egan & Haddad 2007). In Timor-Leste, 'domestic violence' is defined broadly in Article 2 of the LADV:

'Domestic violence refers to any act or sequence of acts committed within a family context by a family member against any other member of that family, where there is a situation of ascendancy, notably physical or economic...that resulted or may result in physical, sexual or psychological injuries or suffering, economic abuse, including threats such as intimidating acts, bodily harm, aggression, coercion, harassment, or deprivation of freedom' (RDTL 2010).

The law states that any such violence is a criminal act, and must be reported to the police.

The adoption of the principle of gender equality in the Constitution and its implementation through national policies such as the Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV) was a major win for Timorese women in civil society that have been promoting gender equality for decades (Hall & True 2009). But in Timor-Leste an understanding and acceptance of gender equality is still far removed from the collectivist cultural norms. In customary collectivist societies such as in Timor-Leste, notions of honour, shame and sexual purity are central in sustaining gender differentiation and gender inequality. Individual rights are curtailed by social constructs where women have subservient status so fear of shame envelopes women that have been targets of violence in a cloak of silence (Bennett & Manderson 2003d). In contexts in which men are unquestioned decision makers in a pattern of cultural value that privileges men, while devaluing what is feminine, gender equality, requires both *redistribution* in relation to economic inequality as well as *recognition* of social status and rights (Fraser 2007, 26).

Marriages using customary *barlake* practices are built around communal values binding families together through a brideprice involving mutual but unequal exchange between two families. Traditionally, the exchange of goods represented 'value' to enhance the bride's dignity and status. Since Timor-Leste's independence in 2002, *barlake* has become monetised and a shift of terminology

to a 'price' paid for 'buying a wife' is common, inferring a sense of 'ownership' that can lead to violence against the wife if she fails to live up to the expectations of her husband (Niner 2012). Such commodification of *barlake* supports a patriarchal view of wives as property, in contradiction to both traditional ideas of women's value and national principles of gender equality. Research has found the risk of violence against women is increased when *barlake* is exchanged, although it is not perceived directly as the trigger (Khan & Hyati, 2012).

Domestic violence stems from inequality. It is most commonly, but not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence towards women by their intimate partner. The 2010 National Demographic and Health Survey interviewed over 13,000 women from all districts between 15-49 years. It found that over a third of Timorese women experience physical violence, rising to 45% amongst married women. 38% of women reported to have experienced physical violence since age fifteen, with three quarters of these cases involving a current husband or partner (NDS 2010, 243). A secondary analysis of the DHS 2010 into DV risk factors found that the greater number of controlling behaviours a woman experienced from her husband the higher likelihood that she will experience violence (Taft & Watson 2013, 4). Young married women (age groups 15-19 and 20-24) have the highest levels of controlling behaviour exhibited by husbands (NDS 2010, 248).

Research Methodology

The study 'attitudes and perceptions of gender and masculinities of youth in Timor-Leste' analysed the attitudes and perceptions of young East Timorese men and women towards gender roles, relationships and violence, both as an ideal and more pragmatically in their own intimate relationships. The research, commissioned in 2013 by international NGO *Paz y Desarrollo* (PyD)¹, took place in the capital Dili and in three locations in the two rural districts of Baucau and Viqueque, including the district town and two villages purposely chosen to ensure a balance of language, geography and population density.

Qualitative data was gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) held separately with young men and with young women aged 15 to 24 years old at each research site and with village leaders. A total of 16 FGDs were carried out with the participation of 175 people. Individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) were held with community, district and national level leaders and others thought to be 'influential' in having a role in the dissemination of information to communities and young people. In total 26 persons were interviewed in 22 interviews. Informants were asked a standard set of questions similar to those asked in FGDs. 'Influencers' consulted included District Administrators and Gender Working Groups; village leaders; NGOs, the media and youth centres.

Findings

Social and economic causes of domestic violence

In Timor-Leste's patriarchal society there is a level of tolerance of physical abuse as an educative tool by senior people in relation to their inferiors. Physical abuse is perpetrated by those in relationships of power: teachers to students, parents to children, older siblings, particularly brothers, to their younger siblings (UNICEF 2006).

In the focus group discussions, young women (15-17 years) observed violence in the family as follows: 'Older brothers and mothers hit us. Sometimes our brothers are hit by our father' (FGD 8), and 'When children make mistakes, either girls or boys, parents have to beat them' (FGD10). Violence within a family was understood as normal and beatings as a legitimate mechanism of exerting authority: 'All are beaten in the family if they do not follow their father's instructions' (FGD 8). Women are beaten if they make 'mistakes' and the idea of a husband disciplining his wife who made a mistake is well accepted by many respondents (FGD 7, 9, 11, IDI 6), implying that she deserves punishment for making a mistake. The use of violence in the family to resolve differences or

¹ Research was carried in urban and rural Timor-Leste in 2013 with a joint research team of academics from Monash University and *Universidade Nacional Timor-Leste*; National University of East Timor (UNTL). The authors thank Paz y Desarrollo (PyD) for their permission to use the research for this article.

discipline women was also said to occur due to disagreements, economic stresses in the family and affairs outside the marriage (FGD 10, IDI 13).

While the LADV provides for protection for women and children, there is a superficial knowledge of this new law in the villages and the meaning of ‘domestic violence’ is inconsistently understood. For example, in interviews the meaning of the Portuguese words ‘*violência doméstica*’ itself was contested, and several people thought that this was a new concept that had not previously existed until LADV was passed in 2010. The Tetun phrases ‘*violencia iha uma laran*’ or ‘violence in the home’ was said to be the equivalent term in Tetun. Other phrases used for family disharmony include, ‘*baku atu hanorin*’ meaning ‘beat to teach’, which implies an ‘acceptable’ level of violence for educative purposes and ‘*bikan ho kanuru mak tarutu*’ (*plates and spoons bang together*) used to imply that some level of conflict between a couple is normal. A typical explanation of this was given by a woman leader: ‘*Bikan ho kunuru* is thought to be an internal problem which the couple must solve together. If a woman makes a public complaint or if she goes to the police, then she is not a good wife’ (IDI 6).

Bikan ho kunuru is generally dealt with in the family or by local justice processes, but when a woman suffers serious harm as a result of DV it is reported to the police in accordance with the LADV. *Violência doméstica*, the term used in socialisation of the LADV, is thus interpreted as violence which results in serious harm and has become understood as something different from the intimate partner violence that is described above. The fact that the words are imported from Portuguese and new in Tetun vocabulary, allowed it to be associated with new meanings, that is violence which is beyond what is seen as ‘acceptable’ disciplinary beatings.

Some rural community leaders blamed DV on the lack of jobs or income generation opportunities leading to violence, noting that young men have insufficient work and food and are unable to support their wife economically (IDI 16, IDI 17). The perception that economic conditions are responsible for violence is not consistent with the fact that status subordination is a key factor globally in women suffering sexual assault and DV. In Timor-Leste, economic stresses are found to be a contributor to domestic violence where women’s subordinate status results in being economically dependent or if her own earnings are controlled by her partner (Taft & Watson 2013).

In this research people expressed uncertainty about what gender equality might mean in Timorese society. Timorese cultural belief hold that complementarity (rather than equality) is the key to relationships between men and women (Trindade 2011), and in customary society, gender division of labour defines their roles (IDI 22). Thus the idea of gender equality raised concerns that men and women should do exactly the same work, as in these communities there is little understanding of gender equality as being built on equal rights and mutual respect between men and women.

Changing attitudes to relations between men and women

To record the perception of changing gender relations, research participants were asked about desirable characteristics of a wife, and a husband, and how this has changed over the generations. Both young women and men believed a ‘good wife’ should primarily look after the family. On the other hand, young people defined a ‘good husband’ by what he does not do (get drunk, gambling, act violently). A good husband should not show anger in the family or community and has patience, balance, calm and a cool mind and mood (FGD 2, 12, 13). Many men were said to ‘heat up’ and lose control of their emotions when they disagree with something (FGD5, FGD13). Some school girls simply described a good husband as: ‘he has love, does not hit you and is educated’ (FGD 8). Thus young women pointed to calmness and ability to control anger as a key attribute for a ‘good husband’.

Timorese culture places marriage at the heart of social arrangements, binding together not only husband and wife through arranged marriages but also their families (Molnar 2010; Silva 2011). Traditional marriage arrangements are being challenged as the majority of girls now go to school and are developing different ideas and expectations about their futures. A growing confidence of young women to seek work outside the domestic sphere is evident, for instance prior to Timor-Leste’s independence in 2002 teachers were almost all men, but by 2006 women made up a majority of the applicants to the Catholic Teachers College (Wigglesworth, 2012:48). Young women are increasingly aspiring to professional roles such as teaching, or community leadership roles and this work can create tension in fulfilling domestic duties expected by a ‘good wife’. Change is also evident, and

criticised, in relation to young women's preference for modern fashions such as wearing shorts instead of long traditional dress, and their use of mobile phones to make their own social arrangements to go out with their friends rather than waiting to be invited (FGD 9). Meanwhile, men are perceived by both men and women to have unchanged power to demand their wife obeys his wishes (FGD 1, FGD 2, FGD 15, IDI 3, IDI 6). Some men do support their wives in domestic work, for instance young men in Dili (where there is greater experience of working wives) suggested a 'good husband' will help in the house:

Although he goes to work, a good husband will return always to help in the house and look after the children, and can clean the dishes and sweep the house if his wife is occupied with other work.

Attitudes to domestic violence were investigated through a fictional scenario about a husband who hits his wife because she failed to cook dinner for his family when she was sick. The story was presented in the focus groups followed by a series of questions, to facilitate objective discussion. Young women's FGDs were largely sympathetic to the wife's situation suggesting ways that her husband could have responded better to resolve the situation (FDG2, FDG7, FDG10). Young urban men also made positive suggestions:

If he loves his wife his reaction would be different ... he would have to help his wife prepare food for his family, because she is sick (FGD1).

In contrast, other young men found reasons to blame the wife, elaborating on the story to justify the beating by suggesting she was feigning illness:

things were not prepared in the house and he wanted to show to his family that he could control his wife. If she is lying and just saying she is sick, then he needs to teach her with a beating so that she can change her behaviour according to the culture (FGD9).

Some community women leaders interviewed similarly took an aggressive position towards the wife, embellishing the story with her bad behaviour (FGD4, FGD7). This blaming of women is a way of enforcing traditional ideas of women's behaviour as submissive, compliant, passive and quiet. No participants voiced opposition to the equal right of females to receive an education or earn an income, but there was concern that working women could not fulfil their responsibilities of providing for their family, a view that has not changed in line with young women's new expectations and opportunities (IDI 18, IDI 19). Amongst young men, gender equitable attitudes were expressed by the youngest men (15-17) but inequitable attitudes increased with age (18-24), and were also stronger in district towns than in rural communities (see Wigglesworth et al. 2015).

Influences of 'globalisation'

Change in communities is seen to be taking place at a great rate, resulting both in a sense of empowerment, such as women having the right to an education and a life outside the domestic arena, and disempowerment as people struggle to understand national policies which are little understood and contradictory to the principles by which Timorese communities are organised (IDI 11, IDI 22). This change is driven by what communities understand as 'globalisation', a term used to refer to influences of communications technology, but also to Timor-Leste's adoption of international norms such as the LADV which are not derived from Timorese cultural values.

New technologies are having a widespread influence as most villages have been equipped with solar panels and a TV to view the news and other programs. Most young people in this study claimed to access the media regularly and many have smart phones with internet connection. These influences are impacting on parents' ability to influence their children's actions, as clandestine communication between young men and women have become outside their parent's control. The young age of partnering is said to be influenced by TV and the internet (FGD 15, IDI 16, 17). Young men are widely reported to access internet pornography, which leaders argue is promoting adulterous

and polygamous relationships by young people (IDI 14, IDI 16, IDI 17 & IDI 19). A youth leader explained:

In the past, young people believed in their parents as well as listening to their teachers, but now they do not pay any consideration to their parents or teachers. While their teachers are teaching, at the back students are watching porn movies stored in their cellular phones. They practice what they watch and many girls become pregnant when they are still teenagers. However, this pregnancy is often unwanted as they are not yet prepared to have families. As a result, many of them separated in a rather harsh way when they had financial difficulties, and failed to create a loving and harmonious family life. (IDI 13).

DV is particularly high amongst teenage families (NDS 2010). This paper has highlighted the link between gender inequality and DV, yet this research suggests that greater participation in the education system does not contribute in any way to promoting gender equitable attitudes amongst young men (Wigglesworth et al. 2015). Thus when young men access pornography that promotes masculine sexual domination, this is not counter-balanced by education on equitable gender relations and sexual information in school or elsewhere. Further, the dissemination of the LADV by national government tends to explain the rules without involving local people in debate such as would enable people to better understand how the gender equality policies and LADV can be implemented in the context of customary life.

Due to the perception that LADV is contradictory to customary practice many women are fearful of using the formal justice system (Asia Foundation 2012; Kovar & Harrington 2013). Meanwhile the LADV does not support preventative measures to limit domestic violence by involving local governance mechanisms in reducing violence in the home.

Conclusion

In Timor-Leste, violence is widely accepted as a mechanism of exerting power over subordinates. Men are accorded the status of chief of the family such that women and children are subjected to violence by members of the family senior to them. The perpetration of violence has become accepted as normal, and is described in various ways, but not as 'DV'. LADV's requirement to report all cases of DV to the police seems to have been reconciled with local practice by re-interpreting the meaning of DV as limited to severe physical violence.

While there is broad acceptance of 'gender equality' as a national principle with support for women to go to school and get a job, this commonly does not translate into greater acceptance of equality within an intimate relationship. The younger men and women, as well as some community leaders, argued that family conflicts should be resolved without violence through better communication and tolerance. Young women pointed to calmness and ability to control anger as a key attribute for a 'good husband'. However slightly older men (more than 18 years) and older women held harder attitudes with significant numbers arguing that women should submit to the demands of their husbands and blaming women for the violent behaviour of men such that physical violence was seen as an acceptable form of 'teaching' or disciplining.

It is evident that the gender equality changes in national values have not filtered down to rural and urban communities and status inequality leads to high levels of violence as an unacceptable response to social change. More gender equitable attitudes could be nurtured by effective teaching on gender equality in school to maintain these ideas as they get older. As well, national authorities need to engage at the local level to deal with the contradictions and establish clear linkages between customary and national law to achieve a greater understanding and acceptance of gender equality and the domestic violence law. Rapid changes in the country have opened up new expectations in the economic and social engagement of young men and women, but while gender inequality remains socially accepted, many young Timorese women will be unlikely to be able to live their lives free from violence.

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