

Young Women and gender dimensions of change in Timorese civil society

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In this paper I focus on the gender dimensions of change within Timorese civil society. The paper draws on field research undertaken for my doctoral thesis in which I focus on the younger generation of Indonesian-educated Timorese, many of whom work within the country's growing civil society movement. In this paper I seek to highlight how gender issues are dealt with in development-focussed non-governmental organisations (NGOs). I analyse gender inequalities using the concept of visible, invisible and hidden power of traditional and non-traditional leaders (VeneKlasen & Miller 2002) and the space within civil society being negotiated and claimed by young Timorese women. In this context, I argue that while civil society in many ways promotes progressive development strategies and international human rights principles, there remains a gap between policy and practice in civil society attitudes to gender equality.

Gendered experiences of youth

In Timor Leste the concept of youth is largely defined not by age but by being single. Early marriage of young women and the rapid transition from childhood to motherhood often denies girls a period as 'youth' and the right to continue their education. Amongst Timorese female activists there is a view that access to formal education is the key to women being able to make the transition from traditional gender roles in order to contribute outside the domestic sphere. Longstanding traditions with respect to gender roles, strongly held in rural areas, result in even educated women doubting that they can act as change agents if they return:

'Going back to the rural areas they will never change the culture – they will only care for the children and husband and do farming. Even if they want to do development in rural areas they will not be able to make any change¹.'

Girls are less likely to get an education than their brothers and are more likely to drop out of school at an early age. Post- primary schools may be situated far away from the village. Parents control and protect their daughters until puberty when it is considered time for girls to marry. A family may not value education for their daughters who will generally go to live with the family of their husband². Yet internationally, education and empowerment of women is seen as one of the most important contributors to the wellbeing of children: an educated mother is likely to have better nourished and healthier children and make a better economic contribution to her family³.

Although Timor Leste, since independence, has adopted progressive gender policies, the lives of most Timorese women are still dominated by traditional gender attitudes whereby women are restricted to a domestic role. A male Timorese activist explained:

Timorese culture is patriarchal - we always treat women as second class. So women may be a very young age but as soon as they are married, society considers they must stay at home to do cooking, look after the children and do housework. Everything is decided by the elders⁴.

¹ Interview with Zara, leader of women's NGO in Dili, 23/8/06. Note- pseudonyms have been used for all research participants.

² Except in the case of matrilineal heritage, for example the Bunak of Bobonaro and Covalima districts.

³ See the message of Kofi Annan on International Women's Day 8th March 2005 identifying the empowerment of women as a key contributor to development. <http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2005/message.html>

⁴ Interview with Guilherme, male NGO leader, Dili 11/8/06

That tradition demands that married girls stay at home, primarily involved in domestic activities, was repeatedly articulated by young male and female activists interviewed in this research. The parents normally choose a partner for their daughter in the rural areas and thereafter the responsibility for the young bride is transferred from her parents to the family of the groom. The age of marriage in rural areas is typically described as being during junior high school years⁵. One research participant commented that: ‘Girls marry at 14-18 years either because they are pregnant or their parents arrange it’⁶. In fact, the actual age of marriage has dropped since independence, with more married women under twenty than in previous generations (Ministry of Health 2003)⁷. At the age of twenty five, more than twice as many women than men are married, many having been forced to leave school once they reach puberty (Ostergaard 2005). The Secretary of State for Youth and Sport (SSYS & UNICEF 2005) places the average age of marriage for girls at about twenty years, while the 2004 census gives the mean age of marriage as 23 years for women and 27 years for men. The recorded age of marriage here is complicated by the multiple processes involving both traditional and religious ceremonies which may take place several years apart. At the traditional *adat*⁸ marriage the ritual exchange of goods known as *barlake*⁹ will bind the bride to the husband’s family (Thatcher 1988). It is the *Adat* commitment after which the couple cohabit which is being referred to by my research participants. Official registration of marriage, which provides data referred to by official studies, occurs at the church ceremony which may take place some years later, as the Catholic Church marries a couple only after protracted traditional negotiations are settled¹⁰.

Young married women are encouraged to have children because their status is determined by the number of children they have. In fact, a Timorese woman with a large number of children is viewed as senior to another with only one or two children (Thatcher 1988). In 2007 Timor Leste had the highest rate of child birth in the world with an average of 7.8 children per woman, with many women having a child each year (Ministry of Health 2003:72). The high birth rate is matched, unfortunately, by high maternal and infant mortality rates, attributable to the young age of motherhood, the frequency of childbirth and the poor health and nutrition of many mothers¹¹. The high fertility rate is constant across locations and social strata (Belton, Whittaker & Barclay 2009). There is little expressed desire by either men or women to have fewer children compounded by the fact that knowledge of contraception is also extremely poor. In 2003 sixty percent of Timorese women were not aware of any form of birth control and the figure is higher (seventy percent) for women under 20 years old (Ministry of Health 2003:81). A number of agencies have embarked on programs to encourage longer gaps between pregnancies, but the strong influence of Catholicism limits acceptability of artificial means of contraception.

Generational perspectives on women’s participation

Women played a major role in the history of struggle in Timor Leste (CAVR 2005). The Timorese Constitution recognises the symbolic importance of the resistance movement as a symbol of national

⁵ Junior high, or pre-secondary school follows six years of primary school, thus it is years 7 to 9, generally in the early to mid-teens.

⁶ Interview with Ofelia, women’s NGO leader, Dili. Similar ages were given by others.

⁷ This may reflect a return to the norms of the pre-conflict times, as is common in many post-conflict countries, and the fact that people feel more confident about the future.

⁸ *Adat* means custom or tradition, the term derived from Indonesian language.

⁹ *Barlake* is the term used for the ritual exchange of goods between the bride’s family and the groom’s family. In Timor several informants referred to *barlake* as ‘dowry’ or ‘brideprice’ in English which is technically incorrect. The term dowry refers to the payment by the bride’s family to the groom, such as takes place in Hindu society, and brideprice denotes a payment from the groom’s family to the bride’s family. *Barlake* includes payment in both directions where the groom’s family gives the means of wealth creation, typically animal stock, and the bride’s family give an exchange gift of home production such as *tais* and foodstuffs.

¹⁰ Interview with a Catholic Church worker, Baucau 18/8/06. There are no civil celebrants in Timor Leste, although a legal framework for civil marriages is in process. Protestant and Muslim religions also have their own recognised processes.

¹¹ The high infant mortality rate is largely a result of the prevalence of malnutrition in 43% of children in the first 5 years of life¹¹ (UNDP 2006). The extremely short spacing between pregnancies contributes to these dire statistics.

identity¹². The under-representation of women in the liberation struggle by the media leaves an image of a struggle fought only by men (Aditjondro 2000). Women, however, were deeply involved in underground work, risking their lives to transport food to the guerrillas on the front line. The clandestine movement was made up of more than 60% women, including women who took up arms and died fighting in the front lines (Cristalis & Scott 2005:39). Timorese women played a crucial role in the clandestine movement at the organisational, political and logistical level. FRETILIN's¹³ women's wing, *Organização Popular da Mulher de Timor* (OPMT)¹⁴ raised the status of women amongst the political leadership of the resistance struggle and the political consciousness of women, about the values of liberation, democracy and equality (Alves, Abrantes & Reis 2003). These women challenged the Timorese traditions of polygamy and *barlake* which became outlawed by FRETILIN in the first *Manual Político* (political manual) in the mid 1970s (Aditjondro 2000:130). As a result of their political work, many women suffered extraordinary hardship and were subjected to systematic sexual violence and rape by Indonesian soldiers. As well as this, these women were sometimes rejected by their families, their suffering not recognised as being a consequence of war. Yet in spite of women's significant contribution in the struggle and the above outlawing of polygamy and *barlake*, men continue to dominate most aspects of social, economic and political life within Timor. Most of the population continue to practice long held traditions and, furthermore, de Araujo argues that men remain the unchallenged decision makers in affairs relating to tradition, law and custom (de Araujo 2004).

In Timor Leste, stability within the household is customarily seen to be maintained where the wife is subordinate to the husband who is chief of the house and the key decision maker... women's participation in decision making may risk her husband's anger or possibly a beating as wives are supposed to listen to their husbands and follow their decisions (Victorino-Soriano 2004). The treatment of women within traditional custom in Timor-Leste is thus as a second class citizen subject to male authority. This also has implications for practices of sexual violence towards women is handled. Cases of gender-based violence are customarily dealt with by the male elders of the two families concerned. A victim of sexual assault receives no recompense, rather, a payment may be made to her father (Mearns 2002:39-40). Resolving such ideas of customary justice with gender equality enshrined in the Timor Leste Constitution is work in progress and beyond the scope of this paper¹⁵.

Traditional values imposed on young women limits their participation in activities outside the home, including education, training, youth activities and sports. The National Youth Survey showed that fewer girls than boys participate in extra curricula activities, and of those 47% of girls were involved in church related activities, compared to only 24% for boys who favoured sports and martial arts activities (SSYS & UNICEF 2005). In Dili a local male church youth worker conceded that the Catholic Church does not play an active role in encouraging broader participation of girls in society¹⁶. The church is seen to be a 'safe' environment but it tends to reinforce traditional values of women's domestic roles which limit women's potential.

One organisation which does seek to instil the value of gender equality is the Scouts as scout regulations stipulate the equality of the sexes and equal gender roles. During scout camps girls and boys are encouraged to do the same work and to undertake the same activities in order to raise awareness and to change attitudes towards gender roles. On returning home, the young scouts again face gender inequitable practices¹⁷. Nevertheless the scout movement does provide an opportunity for exposure to new ideas as gender roles are discussed and challenged amongst Timorese youth.

¹² 'RDTL acknowledges and values the secular resistance of the Maubere people against foreign domination and the contribution of all those who fought for national independence (RDTL 2002 :section 11(1)). According to Ramos Horta, the term *Maubere* proved to be the single most successful political symbol of the independence campaign as a mark of identity, pride and belonging (Ramos Horta 1987:37).

¹³ The nationalist independence party Frente Revolucionaria de Timor Leste Independente (FRETILIN).

¹⁴ Popular Women's Organisation of Timor

¹⁵ See for instance the work of the NGO JSMP (Judicial System Monitoring Program) based in Dili.

¹⁶ Interview with Roberto, Catholic church worker, Dili 15/8/06.

¹⁷ Interview with Berta, youth organisation leader, Dili 30/7/06

Civil society and gender equality

Civil society organisations are often the first means of engagement for citizens in issues which extend beyond their immediate family interests¹⁸. In independent Timor Leste, educated youth activists that had engaged in the clandestine youth movement started to form a range of different civil society organisations. The East Timor Student Solidarity Council (ETSSC) and RENETIL¹⁹, for example, re-focused on issues such as sustainable development, human rights and environmental issues. Development NGOs were set up drawing on funds available from international development agencies. Many Indonesian-educated Timorese felt marginalised by the official adoption of the Portuguese language in the new country which, they felt, deprived them of the opportunity to work in the public sector. They established civil society work as an alternative sphere in which to contribute to the development of their country (Wigglesworth 2007).

NGOs are typically drivers of change, places where new ideas and concepts can take root and challenge the traditions and norms of society. In Timor Leste, women have often set up separate organisations to work for equality for women. In fact, FOKUPERS²⁰ was set up in 1997 to support women victims of violence during the occupation and since independence has played a major role in bringing issues of domestic violence into the public arena. The women's organisations OPMT and Organisation of Timorese Women (OMT)²¹ continue to operate providing a grassroots network which enables the voices of rural women to be heard. A network of women's organisations, *Rede Feto*, was established in 2001 as an outcome of the first National Women's Congress which saw the need to present a united women's perspective in the political arena. Rede Feto has played a major role in advocating for a women's quota in parliament and although this was not successful a quarter of parliamentary delegates are women as a result of their campaign. The NGO Women's Caucus was also set up to support this process, promoting and supporting women candidates and supporting their nomination amongst political parties (Trembath & Grenfell 2007).

Young women student activists were instrumental in establishing the Young Women's Group of Timor Leste (GFFTL), running rural literacy projects, and Young Women Working Together (FKSH) focused on women's livelihood projects²². Both established working relationships with OMT to reach the grassroots level, an arrangement which has to some extent weakened the focus on young women as the major beneficiaries of their work.

Apart from these women run NGOs, the opportunities for women in NGOs are commonly limited according to FONGTIL, the umbrella organisation of Timorese NGOs. Typically women are found only in financial roles, a role traditionally ascribed to women, and 'women's' activities such as health education and gender issues (Wigglesworth & Soares 2006). Some female activists believe that male activists do not want to encourage women in leadership. In this sense Timorese NGOs sometimes reflect the gender inequity evident in society in general and male activists may not demonstrate concern about how to support women to participate more fully.

Male activists often point to the inability of young women to participate in civil society activities due to their 'shyness' or because of the demands of domestic duties. Young women are said to have '*vergonha*', translated as 'shyness' but significantly also means to be ashamed. This 'shyness' is a product of a social hierarchy in which women are expected to 'stay home and be silent'. Here, the inherent social power involves not only overt power structures, but also hidden forms of power and

¹⁸ Civil society is described as 'the space outside the government and market' and a key to establishing democratic societies (INTRAC 2009).

¹⁹ ETSSC was set up in 1998 by students at the university in Dili. *Resistencia Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor Leste* (RENETIL) is the organisation of Timorese students studying in Indonesia during the 1990s.

²⁰ FOKUPERS is the Indonesian acronym for East Timor Women's Communication Forum. It was the first independent women's NGO to form.

²¹ OPMT formed as FRETILIN's women's wing during the occupation as mentioned previously. The *Organização de Mulher Timorense* (OMT) was established as the women's wing of *Conselho Nacional Resistencia Timorense* (CNRT) in 1998, which mirrored OPMT but embraced women from broader political affiliations within the pro-independence movement. Both organisations continue to exist.

²² *Grupo Feto Foina'e Timor Lorosa'e* (GFFTL) was the women's wing of the student organisation ETSSC, which became a separate NGO after independence. *Feto Ki'ik Servico Hamutuk* (FKSH) set up in 2004. It recently changed its name to *Feto iha Kbi'it Servico Hamutuk* meaning strong women working together, retaining the original acronym FKSH.

exclusion that constitute the traditional world view. VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) have identified the concepts of 'hidden power' and 'invisible power' in addition to the overt visible power. Through hidden power, social control is exerted using customary practices, powerful people or institutions to prescribe socially restricted roles and responsibilities of a group. Invisible power refers to the psychological and ideological limitations to participation imposed through an internalised feeling of subordination, social exclusion and inequality (Gaventa 2006; VeneKlasen & Miller 2002). Invisible power has the effect of devaluing the concerns of the excluded group.

Gender inequalities in Timor Leste are often accepted rather than challenged by male activists. A male NGO leader argued that the organisation could not take on women for project activity because much of the office work was done between six pm and midnight when the town generator was operating. They nevertheless recruited a woman to manage their finances in the daytime²³. Another male NGO worker claimed 'it is the habit of Timorese to recruit men' because men have more freedom to travel and because local NGOs lack the funding to replace female workers during maternity leave²⁴. This activist also clearly expressed difficulty in promoting gender equity when he commented that in Timorese culture 'if men want something the women can't deny it'. Indeed, male Timorese NGO staff may not possess the requisite understanding and capacity necessary to help challenge the cultural norms which put women at a disadvantage. Consequently few women are visible in Timorese NGOs in the districts and educated women concentrate in Dili where they can work as activists freely and effectively.

An academic noted that ten years ago Timorese girls would not leave rural areas to study in the town, but now girls go to Europe or Australia and come back with different ideas, often rejecting the idea of *barlake* or being 'exchanged for buffalo'²⁵. Meanwhile in rural towns and villages women continue to be subjected to hidden and invisible power which ensures male domination over social, economic and political life. These traditional norms that constrain women continue to be justified as 'Timorese culture', even by some male activists, while changes affecting young men's own lives appear to be accepted as a natural part of progress.

Conclusion

Women have made huge gains in gender equality at the national level, but in the rural areas this research project found that responses to gender change have been conservative even within the civil society sector. Traditional gender roles persist and women's rights to participation in society are limited in much of Timor Leste. Within the civil society sector, a key focus of this paper, female *and* male respondents recognise that equitable gender practices have not been achieved. NGOs commonly provide leadership in progressive ideas and practice and can become role models for greater equality in society and the promotion of women's equal participation. Whilst every society is different, a wealth of knowledge and tools developed globally for facilitating participative practices can be adapted for each unique context. Many male activists could play a much more significant role to ensure greater gender participation and equality than is currently evident. A major contribution to rural development would be made if gender inequities, which constrain social change and lead to a drain of educated women to the towns, could be reduced.

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²³ Interview with CSO group 3, Los Palos 28/9/05

²⁴ Interview with Eugenio, Suai 7/8/06

²⁵ Interview with Timorese Academic, Dili 25/9/05

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