

**ISSUES FOR WOMEN IN
EAST TIMOR:
THE AFTERMATH OF
INDONESIAN
OCCUPATION**

Mira Martins da Silva & Susan Kendall



18 – 22 February 2002, University of Sydney, Australia

Issues for Women in East Timor: The Aftermath of Indonesian Occupation

Mira Martins da Silva

PRADET Timor Lorosa'e

Susan Kendall

***Coordinator, Sexual Assault Service,
Northern Sydney***

Susan Kendall first met Mira Martins da Silva, a Timorese senior midwife, when Mira came to Sydney, Australia, in March 2000. Mira was part of a group of Timorese health workers attending a training program to learn the basics of mental health. The program had been established by PRADET (Psychosocial Recovery and Development in East Timor) a consortium of Australian agencies which included the Department of Psychiatry Teaching and Research Unit (PTRU) of the University of New South Wales, based at Liverpool Hospital, STARTTS (Service for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, Fairfield), the Foundation of Torture and Trauma Survivors in Victoria, and the AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers). The program was funded by AusAid. The key objective of the program was to equip the Timorese workers to return to East Timor to establish the first mental health service in the country.

In June 2000 Susan visited East Timor, to attend the Congress for East Timorese Women; she then stayed on for two months to assist the East Timorese health workers to establish the new service. Mira Martins da Silva and other female colleagues of PRADET also attended the Congress for Women which was one of a number of forums established at the request of Xanana Gusmao to explore the problems facing East Timor after the occupation by the Indonesians and to propose solutions. Other forums were held for the issues of self-government, employment, and young people.

Over 500 women from all parts of East Timor attended the Congress which was held in the partly destroyed, but vast, gymnasium in Dili. Only a handful of women from the international community attended, including Meredith Burgman, President of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, Australia,

a long time friend and supporter of East Timor, and also one of the guest speakers.

East Timor has a population of about 820,000 people. It is estimated that one quarter of the population was murdered or died of famine and malnutrition as a result of the 25 year Indonesian occupation. This is the worst massacre, per head of population, in recent history, higher than the Holocaust or the Pol Pot violations. These surviving women had paid a terrible price; many were widows, many had been raped and tortured, their children had been killed or died of disease and forced starvation. They were determined to be heard by the new leaders, particularly Xanana Gusmao.

The four-day Congress began with Mass which lasted about four hours, with every Timorese woman receiving a communion. There followed an extraordinary process to elect a head of the Women's Congress. Women from the Districts complained that they had not been consulted by their 'city', Dili-based, sisters about the list of candidates, so the whole process of selecting candidates started from scratch. The final vote was carried out in the most transparent way possible, with all participants placing their name badges in front of their preferred candidate. These were then counted in front of everyone. The whole process took the rest of the first day, but the 'country' women who had claimed the 'city' women were hijacking the voting process were now very satisfied when their candidate, Maria Domingas, won.

Apart from the three priests conducting the Mass, Xanana Gusmao and his bodyguards were the only men present. When Gusmao formally addressed the Congress he assumed that men and women would be treated equally and did not acknowledge that women had special needs. The women gently, politely, but firmly disagreed with him. Of course the country as a whole needed to work together, everybody needed to be cared for, but women had specific needs that did not apply to men. Now the country was independent, these issues, which had been put to one side for 25 years in order to survive, were now being aired.

Over the next three days many of the women spoke. The concerns they raised can be roughly categorised as follows: gender based violence, patriarchy, poverty, health, education, housing, repatriation, and reconciliation and justice.

1. Gender based violence

Gender based violence includes sexual assault, domestic violence and public violence. Public violence includes street violence and torture by the Indonesian military (TNI) and militia.

It is not known how many women and children were sexually assaulted. A study by Fokkuper (East Timorese Women's Group) in 1996 estimated that 65% of women had been raped. Suffice to say there are three generations of women who have experienced rape. Firstly at the hands of the Japanese in World War II, then secondly through the time of invasion and occupation by Indonesia. Sexual violence was a regular form of torture by the TNI and it was a common practice for the TNI to take young Timorese women as 'wives', with or without their consent.

Now that the occupation is over, more attention is being given to domestic violence, which had been put to one side in the 25 years of struggle for independence, but is now considered the major problem. This sentiment was supported by East Timorese women's groups, the police, church people, and local leaders.

2. Patriarchy

Although there are some parts of East Timor that are traditionally matriarchal, patriarchy is dominant. This is reflected in numerous ways, but particularly in the practice of polygamy. There are, of course, many widows in East Timor and many men have more than one wife (despite the very visible presence of the Catholic Church which provided a wonderful structure for resistance).

Another aspect of patriarchy is that only men can own property. This is particularly an issue in the Districts, and makes the women even more financially dependent on men. The worst affected women (and their children) are the widows, especially if they have no supportive extended family to protect them. Such women are easy to exploit, particularly sexually.

3. Poverty

East Timor is regarded by the United Nations as the poorest country in Asia with over half the population living below the poverty line of \$(US) 1.00 per day.

In the lead up to the Referendum for Independence in September 1999, TNI-supported militia escalated the violence to try to intimidate the people, and then resorted to full scale violence after the Referendum. With the wholesale destruction and looting of buildings and property, most East Timorese were left with nothing. Coffee just harvested was burnt and businesses destroyed.

East Timor is potentially self sufficient in food, and revenue from oil fields will certainly help. At present, however, the new East Timorese government has no money, and a tax system is only just being introduced.

4. Health

The Women's Congress identified five particular health issues:

a) Child and maternal health: East Timor has the highest infant mortality rate in the Asian Pacific region. The Gender Unit of UNTAET (the UN Transition Authority in East Timor) established that the Indonesian occupiers had a clear policy to reduce the Timorese birthrate by giving injections to Timorese women to make them infertile. Women who were pregnant avoided the Indonesian doctors and did not get proper care for themselves or their babies.

b) Malnutrition and starvation have been major problems, again a result of policies by the occupying Indonesians to create famines and starve the people. People are no longer starving, but malnutrition is still a problem.

c) Malaria and tuberculosis are common, with many children dying of cerebral malaria or left with permanent brain damage.

d) Immunization: Community education is needed to support immunization programs.

e) Mental health: The Timorese regard mental health as a priority. Mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, depression, and bi-polar illness exist in East Timor as much as everywhere else, but with an overlay of trauma from the war and gender-based violence. The trauma resulting from sexual assault and domestic violence, in particular, is regarded as a major concern.

5. Education

Partly as a result of the TNI policy to take the young Timorese girls as 'wives', many families kept their daughters hidden at home, so they did not attend school. Consequently, it is thought that about 70% of women in East Timor

are illiterate. As East Timor emerges into a more western world this will vitally affect women's chances of accessing information and employment.

6. Housing

After the destruction and looting of September 1999, UNTAET stated that destruction in Dili was 80%. Other towns such as Baucau and Liquica suffered similar fates. The result was that many people had no homes or belongings. Reconstruction has taken place but most people still live in overcrowded and inadequate housing. This puts an added strain on family relationships, particularly in the wet season where there is inadequate shelter and travelling on the roads is dangerous or impossible.

7. Repatriation and Reconciliation

The leaders of East Timor, especially Xanana Gusmao and Ramos Horta, are promoting the return of East Timorese, particularly militia and their families from West Timor, with promises of amnesty. There are sound principles supporting this, particularly in the area of defence, as militia backed by the TNI are likely to regain their power if they remain in West Timor. The return of militia and their families is particularly challenging for their victims, especially when everyone knows who they are and what they did. This leads to the final issue.

8. Justice

With the departure of the Indonesians, the Timorese were left with no justice system. There were no East Timorese judges and Timorese lawyers were not permitted to appear in court. The law, also, was Indonesian. The law is now being painstakingly rewritten and judges, lawyers and police are being trained.

This process has been further complicated by the differences in UN law reflected in UNTAET, Indonesian law and Traditional law. For example, in UNTAET law the age of consent is eighteen, under Indonesian law it is fourteen, and under Traditional law, it would depend on menarche.

The need to see that justice is being done is important for the Timorese. The women all agreed that serious crimes should be tried by official state law and the offenders punished. However, the huge backlog of cases and the promises of amnesty and appeasement are causing angst. It is widely

considered that Traditional law should be used to deal with less serious crimes - for example, paying a fine or rebuilding a house - and much work is being done to develop these codes.

The East Timorese support the establishment of an International Criminal Court as there is no faith in the willingness of the Indonesians to prosecute its own war criminals.

Main Strengths/Supports for East Timorese Women

The main strengths for East Timorese women are paradoxical. They are the family, the Catholic Church, the clandestine movement, Falantil magic, their own extraordinary resilience, and international aid. When these systems work to support women, they are very powerful. When they are non-existent, or do not support the women, they can be disastrous.

1. The family:

East Timorese family networks are extensive and binding, an essential part of the village and community. The East Timorese staff of PRADET seem to have brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles everywhere. The women, especially, hold the families together, and births, weddings and funerals are attended by relatives from far and wide. The family is a strong support, both financially (especially for widows) and emotionally - a place to belong. It is not so good when the family is scattered or dysfunctional, and, as stated earlier, domestic violence is now emerging as a major issue.

2. The Catholic Church:

The church, its structure and its rituals are also a source of great spiritual and emotional support. Priests and nuns command great respect and were often heroes in the resistance, providing food, shelter, and a strong belief that God cared for the Timorese and they should not lose hope. All events in East Timor begin with prayers, and Mass and church services are regularly attended by the majority of the population, particularly on Holy Days. However, as elsewhere in the world, some practices are being challenged. The behaviour of some priests, the issues of contraception and abortion, the right to divorce, and the church's role in managing domestic violence and

sexual assault are being questioned, especially by women. These are difficult issues, particularly in remote areas where priests have considerable status.

The clandestine movement

...kept the resistance movement alive for 25 years. This is a strong mixture of family ties, Fretilin, community and the church. The women's groups now emerging and growing stronger are an example of this movement. One such group is called *Novi Novi*, formed by widows in Suai after many of their husbands were murdered on 9 September 1999. Another group called *Rate-laek*, meaning 'no graves', has been formed in Liquica where many husbands and sons simply disappeared. Not knowing where their bodies are is of great significance to the East Timorese who believe the souls of the dead need to be put to rest.

These local, community based groups are a powerful way to support women's rights and to encourage women to become economically independent. They can also be challenged by more conservative groups, such as church representatives and the East Timorese leaders, who see their power being eroded.

4. Resilience and Falantil magic:

The East Timorese people have demonstrated an extraordinary resilience. While the men were away fighting for many years at a time (and some women also fought with the men), many women were left, often unprotected, at home with the children. That they and their families survived, albeit very precariously, is a tribute to their resilience. This resilience stems, in part, from some of the features of East Timor society that have been mentioned previously – strong family bonds, their religious faith. This faith combines strong Catholicism with animism - a fundamental belief in the power of nature; that the land, the forests, the sea, the stars have great magic and can either harm or protect the people. During the resistance, the Falantil soldiers came to believe that there was a particular magic that protected them - for example, in their ability to disappear into the land for safety.

Women hold many secrets about the land and the spirits that guard them, and many have become traditional healers. They have a great knowledge of herbs and plants with healing qualities, often more effective than western

style medicines. Having such knowledge can be powerful, but it can also instil fear in others and lead to persecution of these 'wise women'.

International Aid

...has finally arrived in East Timor. After 25 years of virtual isolation, international aid agencies are bringing western ideas and western influences which have mixed benefits and consequences. New ideas about farming, water collection, health, law reform, and so on, often challenge traditional customs, and it is the young people who are most likely to embrace new ideas. The majority of the population is under twenty and many young people are questioning the old ways of their elders. Girls want to choose their own boyfriends, to wear western clothes, to study, to become more independent, and many are moving from their villages to the towns in search of 'a better life'. The threat to family and community life, which have been the great mainstays of East Timor, is real, and the women are very aware of this.

Western technology and ideas will have to be woven into the traditional fabric of East Timorese society with great care and wisdom. Women, who outnumber the men, have a major role to play in the future of their country. With the right international aid, and much-needed relief from war and oppression by other, much more powerful, forces, they may have a chance to succeed.

Contact details:

Mira Martins da Silva

Mobile: 0409 115 574

Email: K.Tang@unsw.edu.au

Address: PRADET Timor Lorosa'e
Veterans Compound
Rua Mercado
Taibessi, Dili
Timor Leste