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Women's Perceptions of Their Agency and Power in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste

By Alexandra T. Da Dalt¹

Abstract

Women in Timor-Leste face a variety of obstacles to full political, social, and financial inclusion. The tension between government initiatives to protect women and the reality of lived experiences is apparent in the high gender-based violence rate. Though there is strong scholarship in the quantitative-based reporting and analysis of gender and women's rights in post-conflict Timor-Leste, there is a lack of space for Timorese women's voices to directly narrate how they see these issues affecting their lives. This qualitative study expands on previous findings and attempts to bring Timorese women's voices to the center of the current conversation around gender in Timor-Leste. Findings indicate that rigid post-conflict gender roles and a strong patriarchal tradition are obstacles to gender equity, despite the apparent numbers of women in Timor-Leste pushing forward and fighting for women's rights. Themes of competition between women, gender-based violence, access to reproductive health and rights, concerns about financial stability and access to education, and women's political representation emerged during the interview process. These trends indicate the opportunity for Timorese-centered reflections and further research on manifestations of gender inequality and power in this context.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Feminist framework, Gender violence, Global South, East Timor, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Women in the small Southeast Asian island nation of Timor-Leste face a disparity between governmental initiatives for equality and the reality of lived experiences, most notably made visible by high domestic violence rates (Arunachalam, dos Santos, Niner, Tilman, & Wigglesworth, 2013). Slightly less than two-fifths (38%) of women in Timor-Leste report experiencing physical domestic violence by the age of 15 and describe it as a “normal, and sometimes, a daily occurrence” (Timor-Leste National Statistics Directorate, 2010; UN Women, 2015). These numbers are also most likely low, as men in militarized post-conflict societies frequently assert masculinity through violence as a means of control, and domestic violence tends to be under-reported because of the sensitive and personal nature of the issue (Dolan, 2002; WHO, 2001). There have been initiatives within the Timorese government to increase the number of women in National Parliament, as well as a law criminalizing domestic violence, but the lived

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reality for women and girls often differs from the stated goals of these projects (UN Women, 2015).

Timor-Leste achieved independence in 2002, following Portuguese colonial rule and a decades-long violent occupation by Indonesia. As one of the world's newest countries, Timor-Leste (often referred to by its former name, "East Timor") has spent the past thirteen years establishing its place in the international community while grappling with the conflict in its past. The eruption of violence in September 1999 following the referendum vote for Independence resulted in over 1000 deaths and the displacement of a large portion of the population. As in most violent conflicts, the effects also had a greater impact on vulnerable communities. Many women experienced sexual violence, abuse, and violence during the Indonesian occupation, and following Independence in 2002, the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR, Portuguese acronym) heard accounts that indicated men were more violent following the conflict (CAVR, 2006; Mason, 2005). The events of the past have left an inescapable imprint on Timorese lives, and the road to recovery has been a particularly bumpy one for women. Economic, political, and social hardships in the recovery have fallen harder upon the more vulnerable members of the population, and the rigid gender roles and inequality in Timor-Leste affects the life chances and opportunities available to women.

This study's purpose is to amplify the voices of Timorese women in order to determine their needs and visions for the future of their country. Opening a safe and inclusive dialogue for women to speak to their experiences is a critical step towards a deeper feminist understanding of the possibilities for gender equity. Research has articulated the valuable knowledge and skills that women bring to post-conflict recovery processes (Sørensen, 1998; Lederach & Jenner, 2002), but has largely neglected to obtain in-depth, personal accounts of how women see themselves in this process and what change they would want to enact. Hilary Charlesworth's analysis of Timor-Leste's gender politics asserts that "peace-building in East Timor/Timor-Leste under international auspices did not give adequate attention to the involvement of [East] Timorese women and has produced very limited gains for them" (2008, p. 356). To date, previous scholarship on gender and agency in Timor-Leste and other post-conflict contexts has focused on formal civic engagement and the important post-conflict peace building/reconstruction roles of women (El-Bushra, 2007; Niner, 2011; Schnabel & Tabyshalieva, 2012; Zelizer & Rubinstein, 2009). My research, using a critical theory/advocacy approach with a strong feminist lens, seeks to ask women in Timor-Leste how they perceive themselves and their agency in a post-conflict context. The research will also examine their lived experiences, perspectives, and needs.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- How do women view themselves and their capacity to shape the future in this dynamic and ever-changing political, economic, and social context?
- What are the ways in which women feel they are most able to contribute to existing knowledge and lead conversations around gender and power?
- What do they believe are the most pressing challenges facing Timorese women, and what could be done to address these obstacles and further gender equality?

Literature Review

Previous studies on gender in Timor-Leste examine the post-conflict roles of women and argue that the events of the occupation and the subsequent conflict in 1999 have pushed women into more traditional gender roles (Niner, 2011). Other studies have detailed women's gains in involvement in the democratic process (Wigglesworth, 2012; Wigglesworth, 2013), young women and Timorese civil society (Trembath & Grenfell, 2007; Wigglesworth, 2010), as well as attitudes around gender equity and gender-based violence (Hall, 2009; Taft, Powell, & Watson, 2015; Wigglesworth et al, 2015). These accounts portray the complex and precarious status of gender equity in Timor-Leste, as well as the efforts of civil society and feminist activists to make structural gains for women across the country (Ferguson, 2011). Slove et al. (2009), as well as Modvig (2000) chronicle the mental health issues that have arisen in the aftermath of the conflict, including “anger attacks” experienced by a large portion of the population. The primary groups suffering from these anger attacks are male veterans and young unemployed men living in urban areas.

Mason (2005) describes the role of women in the Timorese liberation moment, and in particular the sexual violence perpetrated against women. Rape and sexual assault were used as an interrogation technique, and also to “reward” Indonesian soldiers. Female survivors of sexual violence during the conflict also report being told the purpose of the assaults was to “breed more Indonesians into East Timor” (p. 744). The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is not unique to Timor-Leste, and Maxwell (2009) chronicles how women often experience different types of violence and trauma than men during a conflict. In Yugoslavia and Rwanda, “strategic rape” of “enemy” women by armed forces was an attempt to attack the “honor” of the community. Maxwell also argues that misogyny exists within, and is perpetrated by, military forces around the world.

Following a conflict, Cynthia Enloe (2004) writes that “militarized masculinity” can develop from violence, further entrenching rigid and restrictive gender roles. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, women perceive causes of intimate partner violence to be linked with other challenges in their lives, such as financial dependence and rigid gender expectations (Horn, Puffer, Roesch, & Lehmann, 2014). The study also found that women believed conflict played a key role in normalizing violence for men as a way to respond to frustrations and challenges in their lives. Caprioli (2003) writes that gender inequity following a conflict is not simply an issue of social justice but indicates a societal tolerance of violence that increases the likelihood of a future internal state conflict. Zuckerman & Greenberg (2004) argue that long-term, sustainable peace requires a “more permanent transformation of social norms relating to violence, gender, & power” (p.79). This shift needs to address trauma, rebuild social capital and trust between communities, and value women's roles and contributions within the society.

Feminist theory on the roles and rights of women in rigid patriarchies will be utilized to analyze the themes of the personal responses of interviewees. The study adopts Copelon's (1993) assessment of gender-based violence as torture, with its impacts being just as damaging as violence in institutions such as prisons or interrogation rooms. Though the works of Adrienne Rich and bell hooks primarily focus on the American context, both examine the ways in which women function within patriarchal systems of power and enact violence upon each other. A competitive and hostile orientation towards other women undermines the feminist value of solidarity and the ability to support others that are suffering through the effects of living in an oppressive context, including intimate partner violence and gender-based violence (Rich, 1995; hooks, 1986). “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” argues that women of the “Third World” have been largely overlooked and victimized in their portrayal by Western feminism, and argues that the categorization of women by their “victim” status is problematic (Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty

pushes for feminist discourses centered in the politics of location, and historicized according to the geographic, political, and cultural context (Mohanty, 1995).

Researcher Assumptions

The study accounts for assumptions about the way that interviewees will participate in the study, despite precautions crafted to try to ensure the comfort, safety, and trust of the participants. The first assumption is that all women will have personally experienced the Indonesian occupation and 1999 conflict and their effects (because of their age and the recency of the events) in varying levels of intensity and impact, and will likely experience a certain degree of trepidation about sharing their experiences with a stranger who is not Timorese. Additionally, the project assumes that all respondents will have a complex and nuanced set of feelings about their gender and experiences that will not be able to be fully expressed in one interview.

Researcher Perspectives

As to my position as a researcher, at the time of the study, I was a graduate student studying International Educational Development with a focus on Peace and Human Rights Education. I consider intersectional and transnational feminism to be the lenses through which I focused my studies and my work. I am biracial and was born, raised, and have always lived in large, diverse North American cities. My first language is English. My academic interests included gender and sexuality studies and environmental and sustainable development education. My coursework and professional experience included multiple projects on gender and the ways in which women and girls navigate conflict and post-conflict settings. Prior to the time spent in Timor-Leste for this research project, I had never traveled to the country or the region. I do not speak Tetun and have no personal ties to the context.

Issues of Trustworthiness

As mentioned in the “research assumptions” section of the introduction, concerns about women's honesty and openness have been taken into account due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions and potential responses. The research team understands that some interviewee experiences may have been edited, changed, or omitted entirely by the respondents due to worries about safety, privacy, and unfamiliarity of the researcher and interpreter.

Research Methodology

Overview of Methodology

In the present study, data was collected through a series of 15 interviews conducted in the capital city of Dili in July and August 2015 (see Appendix for maps). The city serves as a hub for many people from all 13 districts of the country, and I spoke with urban women of varying ages, socioeconomic class, ability/disability, and ethnic/language groups. All interviewees were over the age of 18. The study's interpreter was a Timorese law student from UNTL, the National University of Timor-Leste. Her first language is Tetun, though she is fluent in English and Portuguese, and conversational in Indonesian.

Initially, the process for choosing subjects involved posting notices in various women's non-governmental organizations; however, after an initial trial, the research team determined that this approach would exclude functionally illiterate women. The adjusted approach consisted of my translator and I approaching individuals in public spaces where women gather. We stressed that the decision to participate in the interview was a choice; ultimately, the interviewee was in control and could end the process at any time. If a woman agreed to participate, we proceeded to conduct the interview in a safe, private space of her choosing. The interview process was gender and conflict sensitive and was open to ensure that the interviewee could narrate her experience and define peace and the critical issues as she conceived of them. Questions included a focus on broader issues for Timorese women, such as, "What do you think are the biggest challenges women face in their communities?", as well as personal questions about individual experiences, such as, "When thinking about the future, do you have any worries?", and "What would make your life more peaceful?". Personal questions were included as a potential entry point for women to speak about how key gender-related issues may or may not be playing out in their personal lives, and their thoughts and feelings on these concepts on the individual level. The full research instrument can be found below.

Interview Questions

Background:

1. Where were you born?
2. Where is your home now? If you moved from where you were born, why?
3. Do you work? If so, what is your job?
4. Are you married?
 - a. If so, what is his job?
5. Do you have children?

Perspectives on Peace, Agency, and Power:

1. What brings you the greatest joy in your life?
2. What are some recent happy moments?
3. Are there times that you need to make difficult decisions about safety of you or your family?
 - a. What situations have you faced, and how do you handle them?
4. Do you feel that your needs are met? For example, for food, water, shelter, or healthcare when you get sick?
5. What do you worry about the most, day-to-day?
6. If there is a disagreement between people in the community, what happens? Who gets involved?
7. What do you think are the biggest challenges women face in their communities?
 - a. What would help women with these concerns?

Thoughts on the Future:

1. When thinking about the future, do you have any worries? What are those worries?
2. When thinking about the future, do you have hopes? What are your hopes?

Needs and Perspectives on Programming:

1. What would make your life more peaceful?
2. What government programs or NGO activities do you think would make a difference in the lives of women?
3. Would you like to be more involved in promoting women's rights in Timor-Leste?
 - a. If yes, what would you like to do?
 - b. What difficulties are preventing you from doing this today?

Closure:

1. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not already talked about?
2. Are there certain individuals or organizations you recommend I should speak to learn?
3. more about the situation of women in Timor-Leste?

All interviews were fully transcribed following their completion. The researcher then used a coding system to identify key concepts and information by question, organized by topics (subcodes) that were then consolidated into the final list of codes (overarching themes that contained multiple subcodes). Then all codes and subcodes were applied to the transcripts a second time. The coding strategy was emergent, as codes and subcodes were not predetermined, but rather identified through the process according to the frequency and emphasis that the interviewees put on the topics they brought up. Following the final round of coding, codes were classified into overarching themes in preparation for interpretation of the data.

Limitations

Due to the scale of the study, the findings from these 15 interviews cannot be viewed as conclusive results to be projected onto the larger population of Timorese women. Although there was diversity in the identities of the women respondents, the study was conducted in the capital of Dili and did not include the voices of many women outside of the urban center. The divide between the quality of life between rural and urban women, particularly rural women who are not able to visit the capital city (as some of the interviewees profiled in the research) is pronounced in Timor-Leste. Additionally, this study endeavored to examine the experiences of women across the spectrum of experiences and identities. However, due to the nature of Timorese politics around gender and sexuality, gender fluid and transgender individuals are often not as visible in public spaces due to the threat of violence (ISEAN, 2014). All women who participated in this study identify as cisgender women.

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Timorese Masculinity and Male Behavior

Interviewees in this study overwhelmingly indicated the many complicated and nuanced aspects of being a woman in Timor-Leste. There was a reported pattern of male control and domination over women that manifested in different areas of their lives and the lives of other women. Situations and stories ranged from an individual man asserting his power to men as the

dominant group that control policies and dominate narratives of the country's history. Interviewees shared information about their work and education, bodies and violence, as well as the power imbalance between men and women.

Work and Education

The relationship between a woman's level of education and the degree of agency over her body and reproductive choices is well-documented (Jejeebhoy, 1995). Higher education levels correlate with employment, and in turn, financial independence, which interviewees articulated as a key part of women's empowerment. Of the interviewees that worked, the majority expressed that they were proud to be supporting their families, as well as contributing to the country and its economy. One woman exclaimed, “based on my experience before, I just stayed at home, and I think it wasn't good for me. After I went to work... I'm happy because I can make decisions, because I do not depend on my husband.”

However, there are obstacles that stand in the way of successful studies or employment. Many interviewees also related stories of men that influence or dictate women's choices or ability to study or work. While speaking about her family, one interviewee paused, and explained, "I am worried about my sister. She wants to study at the university, but the man, her partner, told her that she didn't need to study." The interviewee explained that this man wants to marry her sister, though her sister has declined because she believes she is too young. Limiting a woman's education and opportunities to work and socialize outside of the relationship and family is a controlling behavior, indicative of male investment in control by keeping female partners in line with traditional gender roles.

Women that do manage to work outside the home often face consequences for investing in their careers. One interviewee explained the frustration of women's disproportionate responsibility for household labor: “We have the same level of education, opportunities for jobs, but when we go back home, women always do the housework.” The differing views that men and women can hold on gender and labor can translate into violence. A newspaper article titled “Husband Stabs Wife for Not Caring” in the English – Tetun publication *The Dili Weekly* details a recent domestic violence case:

The accused said in his statement to the court that he was angry at his wife for not showing any care for him and for always being busy. “When she gets home she does not care about dinner. She just has a wash then gets her laptop and keeps on working” ... The accused said this happened often and that he hurt her to get her attention. (Oliveira, 2015b)

As cited in the interviews, a lack of financial independence and a network outside of family places women in a vulnerable position. One interviewee who works with female survivors of domestic and sexual violence told researchers, “if the women has a job, it's good, but if the women doesn't have a job, it is very difficult. Every day, if she always fights with her husband, she can think she doesn't have dignity, and it's better that she dies than live with the violence.”

Even if a woman succeeds in leaving her husband, despite financial and often religious obstacles to doing so, it is well-documented that female-headed households around the world are much poorer and vulnerable than their male-headed or two-parent equivalents (Niner, 2011, p. 420).

Additionally, interviewees overwhelmingly mentioned abandonment, or *laen soe*, a term in Timor-Leste that refers to a husband suddenly leaving a female partner and any children they may have together. Though the term *laen soe* refers to a husband leaving his wife, abandonment is an issue for unmarried women as well. Interviewees indicated this is a very common and complicated issue that leaves many women in a vulnerable financial position.

Female Bodies and Violence

Many interviewees explained that Timorese women did not have the option to make educated decisions about, or to seek out reliable and safe services for, their reproductive health. Several women explained the issue of the abandonment of babies born to unwed young women. According to interviewees, the mothers are usually in secondary school, and dispose of the babies in garbage cans or waste sites. There have been 5 cases of abandoned babies in Dili between 2012—2015, the latest of which was the discovery of a newborn wrapped in a plastic bag and thrown inside a garbage container. Following this incident, Member of the National Parliament MP Albina Marcal was quoted as saying “the infanticide cases shame and affect all women in Timor,” and she additionally “called on the government to keep raising awareness so that women become stronger and don't resort to abandoning their newborns” (Oliveira, 2015a).

The problematic framing of personal “strength” as the solution to this issue, rather than the systematic lack of resources for women trying to prevent or cope with an unwanted pregnancy, is indicative of the state of women's rights over their own bodies in the country. One interviewee described the nature of reproductive rights:

Sometimes women don't know how to make decisions about children or reproducing... the decision is affected by power and gender. For example, some women, they don't have a plan to make babies, because they only do what their husbands want. And sometimes, some women want to get information about family planning, but their husbands don't allow them to.

Multiple women also spoke about unplanned pregnancies being an issue and, as previously mentioned, a catalyst for domestic violence. One woman that had moved to from a small village to Dili in order to attend university explained:

In my community, we have a problem with domestic violence. The woman is pregnant, but the man, he doesn't want to be the father of the baby. It means he doesn't want the responsibility. It is a reason for domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies.

There was evidence of loving and equal partnerships and strong models of positive masculinity in the interviews. One woman that had been married to her husband for over 25 years told the research team, “I live in peace because my husband and I always listen to each other speak when we have a problem at home.” However, many more women mentioned personal or anecdotal stories of women in their lives that faced emotional, physical, sexual abuse, and/or patterns of manipulative or controlling behavior (for instance, *laen soe*, or “abandonment” of wives and children, which interviewees often articulated as a fluctuating decision that rested on the “best option” for the man at any given moment). A study by Wigglesworth et al. (2015) on young Timorese men's attitudes around gender found that 61% of men aged 22 -24 agreed with the

statement “women should tolerate violence to keep the family together,” and 60% of men from all age groups surveyed (ages 15 – 24) believed “if a husband does not hurt her [his wife] too much, it is okay to slap or push her” (p. 323). Marriage seems to increase women's vulnerability to gender-based violence, as women are socialized to pride themselves on the ability to sustain relationships, and quietly suffering through hardships for the good of a marriage or the family is often framed as a “woman's duty” (Copelon, 1993, p. 347). In contrast to the national average of 38% of all women, 53% of divorced, separated or widowed women and 42% of women who were married or living with their partner reported experiencing physical violence (National Statistics Directorate, 2010). A study by Taft, Powell, & Watson found that women who had experienced either physical or combined forms of violence were three to four times more likely to have an STI or its symptoms (2015, p. 178).

One interviewee said, “... if we are talking about gender equity, the most unfair is domestic violence. Because everywhere, always, men are powerful.” The Timorese context is informed by historical events and cultural norms that have established and perpetuated patterns of gender-based and domestic violence. The country's time as a Portuguese colony and the following Indonesian occupation saw the implementation of rigid gender roles and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Following the conflict in 1999, as argued by Sara Niner, Timorese society is shaped by men that have been engaged in war for most of their lives and have suffered the physical and psychological effects that accompany such a conflict. This has led to influences in a society “heavily influenced by military thinking and behaviors” (2011, p. 429). Cynthia Enloe (2004) describes that, in a post-conflict context such as Timor-Leste, “persistent militarization in a postwar society serves to re-entrench the privileging of masculinity – in both public and private life” (Enloe, 2004, p. 218). Although Timorese women also fought and suffered through disturbing acts of violence during the conflict (discussed in the following section), violence and war continues to be the norm for men, and therefore the society they control. Multiple interviewees mentioned “martial arts gangs,” groups of young men that publicly fight, drink, and commit acts of vandalism and intimidation. One woman said that they rode around her neighborhood on motorbikes, and whipped rocks onto the tin roofing of many houses. She said it “scared and traumatized” her and her children. Silove et al. (2009) studied “explosive anger attacks” that 38% of the population experience at least once a month due to the trauma of the Indonesian conflict, with the two main groups identified being male veterans and young unemployed men living in urban areas.

In 2010, the Timorese government passed the Law Against Domestic Violence. The law dictates that victims of domestic violence are eligible to receive rehabilitative services, including shelter access, legal representation, medical and psychological assistance, and emergency maintenance provisions. Police officers must investigate domestic violence cases, submit the case details to the legal system, and keep them informed of the case status (Ferguson 2011). However, there is a notable disconnect between the introduction of this law and its implementation around the country. A woman visiting Dili from a rural area of a distant district explained, “In my district, many women are victims of domestic violence. When they go to justice or the police, they don't want to resolve or investigate. They are not interested in women's problems.” Having little access to the protection of law enforcement and subsequent legal recourse denies women a pathway to justice through formal channels.

On Power

When asked, “what is the biggest challenge facing women in Timor-Leste”, one young interviewee explained, “People always put women in a second position, and women don't have the

same opportunities as men.” Currently, 38% of Timor-Leste's National Parliament is made up of women, though President of Timor-Leste's Parliamentary Women Group, MP Josefa Alvares Pereira Soares, said it often is “a long process” for women “to gain trust from the government and parliament to assume positions of responsibility” (Quintao, 2015b). The push towards deeper, more meaningful representation is an ongoing process, and many civil society organizations are focusing efforts on preparing women to run in *suco* (village-level) elections, where men hold 98% of the chief positions (UN Women, 2014, p. 88).

Looking to the past, the Timorese Resistance against Indonesian occupation is valorized in the country, and many of the male leaders of the movement went on to become Presidents and influential members of the government. However, though many women struggled, fought, and died in the battle for Timorese Independence, there is a systematic lack of recognition of women's contributions, and the narratives around their involvement usually hinge on their status as passive victims (Niner, 2011). The gendered nature of the conflict can still be found today in its aftermath. Two interviewees shared their experiences as family members attempting to access the government's benefits for veterans that died in the conflict. One woman said her brother received the assistance and recognition for their father's contributions as a soldier, but that she was denied because she was a woman. Additionally, the violence women experienced during this conflict is not often spoken about, since the rape or sexual abuse of Timorese women at the hands of the Indonesian military or their militias is seen as shameful (Hall, 2009; Niner, 2011; Silove et al., 2009). Overall, interviewees responded that they believed the government should actively protect women's rights and ensure that law enforcement and the justice system treat women's concerns as equal and just as pressing of those as Timorese men.

“Some Women”: Timorese Women and Horizontal Hostility

There was an overwhelming emphasis on competition between women in interviews, whether mentioned by name as a phenomenon or directly invoked through criticism of other women and their choices. This hostility was present in multiple interviews, particularly with younger respondents, in phrases such as “women not respecting themselves,” “women don't want to work hard or help themselves,” or “women are focused on the wrong things.” One interviewee explained:

Some women, they sometimes can't think about their life or decisions. Because some women, they influence some other women in bad ways, not good ways... They are bad, but when they come with us, they hide it. But most men, they think the same about the rest of us girls, they think we are the same as her, *bikan tinan kiik* (bitches)... they wear short clothes, where they go, with men, [to] bars and clubs. Just... because, here, some women have 2 or 3... or 10 boyfriends.

The phrase “some women” began multiple statements about female behavior and subsequent commentary about other women's choices. Criticisms of “some women” in interviews spanned a variety of topics, including dress, socializing with men, sexual behavior, the decision to work, how other women raised their children, and how they behaved in a professional environment, among others. This pervasive attitude of hostility towards other women is not unique to the Timorese context. In the essay “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,” American feminist scholar bell hooks writes:

Between women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behavior. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause. Sexism teaches women woman-hating, and both consciously and unconsciously we act out this hatred in our daily contact with each other. (1987, p. 129)

Though bell hooks is an American feminist whose work primarily focuses on the intersections of sexism, racism, and classism within the U.S. context, her writing on the way women are threatened by each other is echoed in interviewees' responses. The idea that some women hide their innate "badness," and, as a consequence, men then believe damaging things about other women, implies that a select group of women are to blame for men's inappropriate and/or abusive behavior. The suggestion that "some women" can "have 2 or 3... or 10 boyfriends" is indicative of an androcentric, shame-based approach to women's sexuality. A number of interviewees explained that male politicians and other older, married men in positions of power frequently had sexual relations with young women. The same interviewee did not criticize the older, married men for pursuing girls in secondary school, but rather blamed the young women and the men's wives. She explained, "some women, they are teenagers and they go with other girls to find other people's husbands, *astuka* (rich married men, "sugar daddies") ... then wives go and physically fight and use bad words against the girls."

Feminist scholar Adrienne Rich uses the term "horizontal hostility" to describe the "contempt" and "fear and mistrust" of other women as normalized in sexist environments. She describes the phenomenon as a way that women "destroy ourselves," as "other women *are* ourselves," and the sense that "we become our own worst enemies when we allow our inculcated self-hatred to turn such shallow projections on each other" (1995, p. 122). These projections, in interviews, did seem to be full of contradictions—the majority of the hostility towards other women was peppered among hopes for a brighter future for Timorese women. Many of the women that criticized other women's choices also wanted to be more involved in promoting women's rights, indicating a disconnect between women as a broader social category and the way they articulated thoughts about individual women in their lives.

In interviews, the concept of competition between women did not align along class or ethnic lines. It seemed that younger interviewees were more likely to articulate that women were responsible for mistreatment by men, whereas older interviewees more often recognized the issue of institutionalized sexism and expressed that it was a problem.

Additionally, many middle-aged working women articulated that competition and jealousy between women in the workplace was very common, and often had serious effects on how businesses and offices functioned for women. There appear to be conflicts over whether women are employed or not, how hard women are perceived to work, as well as clothing choices in the office. In addition, it seems that many female business owners believe a masculine model of leadership and intense competition is necessary for financial success. The *tais* business of weaving and selling traditional Timorese textiles is primarily operated by women. Two interviewees own businesses where they weave *tais* from their own districts, trade *tais* from other districts, and sell to both Timorese and *malae* (foreign) customers. One interviewee explained:

Some women don't want me to live better, they have "social jealousy" because my husband is not here [he is living and working abroad], but I still have the courage

to continue my business. Other people tried to stop me through bad words and tried to bring me down. Finally, because of this, I had to close my business.

A few interviewees claimed that women are very critical of female parliamentarians and politicians. This lack of support of a female candidate because of their gender hampers the representation of women in positions of power. One interviewee said:

In Timor-Leste, I think big egos are dominant. And always, if we have a big event or elections, some dominant women won't support each other. If there is a woman candidate for the President or Parliamentary candidate, sometimes the women don't support other women to get good positions.

In the struggle for women's rights in Timor-Leste, it is critical to address both oppression by men, the dominant group, but also to tackle internalized oppression within women. As is true in other cultural and political contexts, women and their relationships should be viewed as an essential resource in fighting sexism and empowering women to reach full social, economic, and political inclusion.

"I have a lot of stories. I want to tell a story...."

The experiences shared by interviewees provide rich and nuanced insight into how a small group of women in Timor-Leste perceive pressing issues related to gender in the country, as well as how they see themselves and other women. In addition, how these stories were told, as well as what remained unspoken, remains as important as the experiences related to the research team. Interviewees expressed or displayed a variety of emotional reactions to participating in the interview process, ranging from nervousness to excitement. At the end of one interview, the respondent apologized, "I want to say sorry if something I said doesn't match with the questions." Several women remained silent or replied, "I don't know" to questions about their personal lives, such as "*What would make your life more peaceful?*".

However, there was also excitement to share stories and experiences. When one woman was asked if she had anything else to add at the end of the interview, she replied, "I have a lot of stories. I want to tell a story...." and shared several instances of abandonment and verbal abuse that women in her life had experienced. A number of interviews went well over the allotted 45 minutes, with interviewees sharing much more than the interview protocol asked for. Both silences and the excitement to speak could indicate a lack of spaces to share experiences and have them be heard and responded to in a way that validates their significance. Interviewees were aware that their stories would eventually be compiled in a paper that they would receive in hard copy, delivered to them by the project's translator once the article was finished.

With the recognition that there are a variety of interventions that need to take place in order to realize gender equality in Timor-Leste, there has been some pushback in Timor-Leste around feminist ideas, as opponents aim to paint discourse around gender equity as a foreign import (Niner, 2011). However, this is far from the truth, as Timorese feminists have been working long before international norms of gender power were introduced into the country. Within the structure of a rich civil society, many dedicated Timorese feminists have won many victories for the women of the country, including access to healthcare, education, the establishment of International Women's Day in Timor-Leste, and disrupting norms around domestic violence (Durnan, 2005;

Hall, 2009; Trembath & Grenfell, 2007; Wigglesworth, 2010). The *Rede Feto* network of women's organizations serves as an umbrella for efforts around gender empowerment to be synergized. One of these organizations, *Movimentu Feto Foinsa'e* (Young Women's Movement), is committed to creating “friendly spaces” for women, and the coordinator of the program spoke to the importance of this program, explaining “many young women commit suicide because they have nowhere they can turn to support” (Quintao, 2015a). There is clearly a strong network of passionate women's rights activists that have made enormous gains in the country; this proposal seeks to build on this work, amplify the voices of Timorese women outside of the local context, and provide suggestions for more locally-driven initiatives for women's empowerment.

Building Solitary Through a Feminist Consciousness

As theorized by bell hooks:

...before we can resist male domination, we must break our attachment to sexism; we must work to transform female consciousness. Working together to expose, examine, and eliminate sexist socialization within ourselves, women would strengthen and affirm one another and build a solid foundation for developing political solidarity. (1986, p. 129)

It appears that women are willing and eager to share experiences and support with others. In interviews, women were interested in helping others realize their full potential. One woman voiced, “In my neighborhood, if girls just stay at home, I will ask why. So I maybe support them... not just give up because they are women.” Eleven women said that they would like to help further women's rights in the future, though of those women, many explained they did not know how to do so. In interviews, there were also notable differences between the attitudes of younger women vs. older women, rather than between women of different class status or ethnic/language group. This indicates that there would be value in sharing different experiences across identities, and bonding could take place between women that face disparate challenges in their experiences.

Grounded efforts to address the systematic oppression of women in Timor-Leste would also be locally based and run by Timorese women. The specific Timorese context and history is a key piece of understanding the current state of gender equity in the country. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, transnational and postcolonial feminist scholar, writes:

“the experience of the self, which is often discontinuous and fragmented, must be historicized before it can be generalized into a collective vision. In other words, experience must be historically interpreted and theorized if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle, and it is at this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial.” (1988, p. 82)

The shared recognition and experience of the past is necessary. Therefore, any program should also be crafted with the recognition that Western forms of feminism cannot address the experiences of all women around the world (Mohanty 1995). Mohanty also writes, “male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, in order to understand it better, as well as in order to effectively organize to challenge it” (p. 339). Non-Timorese women or actors should not be dictating the dialogue nor solidarity-building processes for the women in these safe,

collaborative spaces, as the collaborative discovery of priorities and validation of experiences is key. Interviews also provided unique insights into drivers behind domestic violence and other important issues in different locations around the country, indicating that assumptive or generalized content that does not address the specificity of location would miss critical opportunities for action. The dialogue process and space in which to interact with other women in an uncompetitive environment with the goal of developing solidarity could establish bonds over strengths and experiences. Freirian *conscientização* education could create spaces conducive to achieving the bond of sisterhood that bell hooks imagines:

Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the women-bonding the feminist movement should encourage (1986, p. 128).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Placing Timorese women's voices at the center of this study is an effort to shift the way in which issues of gender in Timor-Leste have been discussed in the international context. This study prioritizes and shares the experiences and perspectives of the women in Timor-Leste in order to hear their views on gender, agency, and power. A main theme that emerged from the interviews was women's competition and hostility towards other women. The lack of support and solidarity between women, accompanied by the suspicion of other women's behaviors and motives, is indicative of the male-dominated nature of Timorese society and the rigidity of gender roles in the country.

Women criticized others on their dress, socializing with men, sexual behavior, the decision to work, how other women raised their children, as well as how they behaved in a professional environment. Another key theme was control by men over different areas of women's lives, including work and education, violence and female bodies, and power. Women reported decisions made on their behalf, or a silencing of their voices, by either individual men in their lives, or by a system and society that privileges male power. These findings corroborate research by Niner (2011) and Hall (2009) on the rigidity of gender roles for Timorese women and the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in this context.

Possible directions for future studies include incorporating more voices in a larger and more expansive study, such as addressing the divide between rural and urban Timorese women. Interviews and other studies have indicated that women living in isolated rural *sucos* face distinct challenges in accessing services and obtaining information (Wigglesworth, 2012). Additionally, since a significant amount of the Timorese population is young, with over 40% of the population under the age of 15 (UN Women, 2014, p. 2), it would be interesting to examine how young women and girls under the age of 18 see themselves and gender in the future of Timor-Leste.

While recognizing the universality of struggles with women around the world, this study emphasizes the specificity of the Timorese context and the need for locally based, community-generated dialogue on key issues determined by Timorese women. There are 13 distinct districts in Timor-Leste, and each community has different needs and perspectives within it. Interviewees

in this study overwhelmingly displayed generosity and trust in sharing their stories and experiences and provided a nuanced and personal perspective on many of the issues affecting their lives. Any future programming or intervention by organizations, domestic or international, should refrain from prescriptive approaches to gender equity and instead place the power in the hands of affected women to develop tailored, sustainable change around gender roles in Timor-Leste.

A key area for future focus would be a survey of the ways in which Timorese women in specific communities feel programming would be best suited to their lives. Though not articulated in this study's interviews, it would be worth examining how women view divisiveness from other women and what remedies they see as possibilities for the future. For program design, it is critical to engage with women who have less power and experience marginalization — in Timor-Leste, this could encompass a variety of identities and lived experiences. In “Moves to Decolonize Solidarity Through Feminist Popular Education,” Walters and Butterwick write:

Building feminist decolonising solidarity is, to some extent, a feminist standpoint perspective, where those on the margins or in lower positions of hierarchical power relations have a clearer vision and understanding of injustices as well as their remedies (2017, p. 30).

For non-governmental and women's organizations, as well as policymakers, there exist genuine opportunities for community-informed work grounded in the life worlds of women in Timor-Leste. Key to transformative programming and education will be the incorporation of the lives, perspectives, and needs of Timorese women.

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APPENDIX: Map of Interviewee Origins & Interview Locations

Figure 1: Map of Origins of Interviewees

[Note: home of interviewee that immigrated from Indonesia not included]

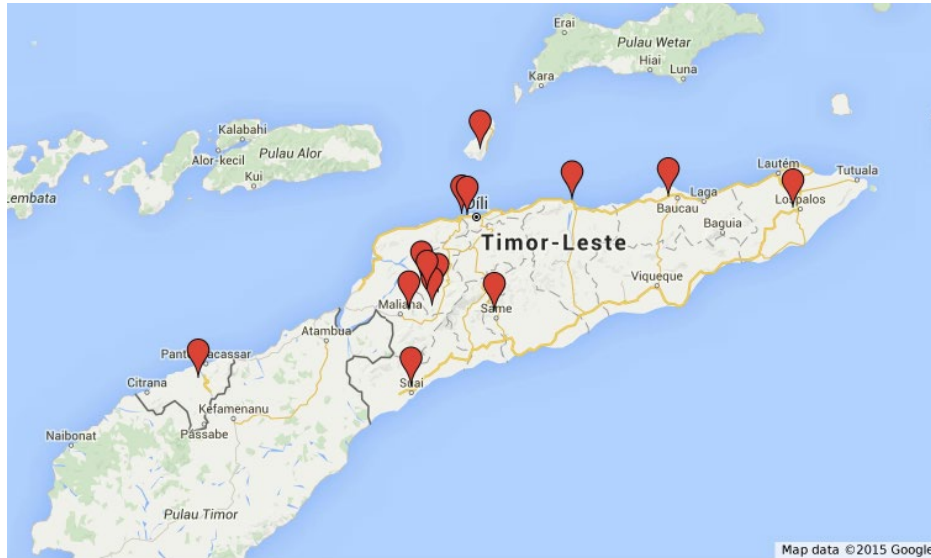


Figure 2: Map of Interview Locations around Dili



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