

‘Untitled’

by Anna Trembath

Recently in Dili I was sitting outside an NGO ready for a meeting with a female staff member to discuss the forthcoming forum in Melbourne. I chatted with a group of all-male staff. We began to discuss the forum, and from what these men were telling me, it was apparent that this NGO had experienced some difficulties working with international advisors. The staff related how international advisors sometimes set directions for the NGO without sufficient cooperation with the local staff, and complained that particular necessary tasks were beneath them, such as helping with translating material for funding applications that needed to be written in English. There appeared to be a tendency for unequal relations between some international advisors and East Timorese, where the knowledge and skills of East Timorese staff had been undervalued and where there had been a clear power hierarchy between foreigners and East Timorese.

Yet once the conversation turned specifically to East Timorese women, I was told that while women had displayed certain ‘capacities’ during the resistance period, since independence women had been largely bereft of appropriate skills. For this man, a conference in Australia represented an important opportunity for East Timorese women to “increase their skills”, “develop more capacity”, and learn from non-Timorese participants.

On the one hand he seemed critical of a particular power dynamic created by some advisers, of a ‘we know better than the Timorese, they can learn from us’ kind of attitude. Yet when it came to East Timorese women, this man believed that women needed to learn and develop capacities through the experience of working with foreigners. It seemed as if the same criticism suggesting a need for a more equal and two-way relationship between foreigners and East Timorese was not being extended to include East Timorese women. Women in Timor-Leste, it appeared, only had to gain from internationals, but didn’t have much to contribute.