

## **Challenges and Possibilities – International Organizations and Women in East Timor**

### **Oxfam and Partners in East Timor - Creating a Voice for Women, and Carving a Space for that Voice.**

#### **A. Introduction**

My Name is Mario Araujo.

I work for Oxfam Australia in Timor Leste as the National Program Coordinator and am also a founding member of a Timorese network of NGOs working with men against violence. I am also a Timorese man with a wife and 6 children.

I am here today because I received an invitation from the organizers of this conference to speak on the topic: Challenges and Possibilities: International Organisations and Women in East Timor

You may ask the question, ‘Why was I invited instead of other men, because there are many men, with a strong voice in TL. You may ask why a man is speaking at all in what should be a forum for women?’

I offer today fifteen minutes of my world..... as a man working for a better world for women in Timor Leste. From the voice of a Timorese person working for an International Organisation working in Timor, and that of a local organization playing by donor rules there. I would like to illustrate what I see as the issues for Timorese women, and explain a little of the work we have done, both as international and national NGOs to address these; both the successes we have had, and the challenges we face in bringing the foreign concept of gender equity to Timor.

#### **B: What are the issues faced by Women in Timor?**

Women make up over 50% of the population of Timor Leste and are disproportionately impacted by the country’s extreme poverty (PERWL, 2005). Women make up the majority of illiterate people and the maternal mortality rate, at around 840 per 100,000 births, is among the highest in the world (Poverty for a new nation, 2003:75).

Domestic violence against women represents approximately half of all crime reported to the police and is exacerbated by traditional roles of women in the community. Women tend to play a traditional role in the family, taking responsibility for domestic duties, as well as agricultural work and income generating activities. Men make most of the major decisions in the family, community and government.....there are differing opinions with respect to whether men or women control the household finances. Approximately 25% households are headed by women; either widowed or divorced (Poverty in a New Nation, 2003:92)

The Traditional, subservient role of women in Timorese society is reinforced by the system of balaque’ - a bride price system whereby the husband’s family must make a

‘payment’ to the wife’s family. This practice often leads to the belief that the wife is then ‘owned property’ of the husband to do with what he likes, which can also contribute to mistreatment within the family.

There are low levels of women’s political participation, particularly within local governance at the ‘Suco’ (village) and aldeia (sub-village level). In some places women are allowed to participate in the traditional judgments, but only for giving opinion, never for making decisions, in other places they are not allowed to participate even with their opinion. (Oxfam, 2003)

A survey conducted by Oxfam in Cova Lima (2003) district identified reasons for low participation rates of women including: no available time because of workload at home and in the fields; the lack of experience in discussing political issues, and men’s ideas that women still don’t have the capacity to political participate because of their low educational level.

### **Is Gender a Malae Concept?**

The Independence of TL has seen it swamped with International Aid Organisations, UN and bilateral funding from across the globe. They come with money, technical support and experience that we need to strengthen our nation and ultimately find our own road to a democratic country where men and women enjoy benefits that are rightly ours.

Of all the areas in which we are working as International and Timorese civil society, many see the area of gender equality the most difficult to actualize – an area in which for many people, both in Timor and elsewhere – the objective of strengthening the role and voice of women, signifies the erosion of culture destruction of society.

Traditionally in Timor, Gender is seen as a Malae concept that foreigners are imposing on people as a trade off for support in terms of funding and technical assistance. Along with terms such as ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy’ the term gender sits on a bookshelf with a donor logo plastered on front.

Others are stronger with their criticism – there are those who believe that empowering women in East Timor is merely breaking Timorese culture and causing men to be more violent and angry as women defy them.

### **This is demonstrated with in the following quotes:**

‘Because there is now so much talk of Gender equality - the number of rapes in Dili has increased’ – Gender advisor - Lian Maubara, 2002 – In an article written by the gender advisor.

‘Women’s rights have taught women to wear short skirts’

‘Now we need to decide to what level we will give women rights’ – An educated government employee during a meeting discussing CEDAW in Timor Leste.

‘Can those long haired members of our community really offer us the security we need as a community?’ – A village Leader from Bobonaro district during the lead up to the village elections, 2004.

‘We beat our women because we love them’ – Quote from community consultation on domestic violence.

Part of the challenge of working for gender equity in Timor Leste is bringing concepts of gender equity into a forum in which people will see the value of men and women being equal in community and society.

### **C: Oxfam Australia – working for women’s rights in Timor Leste.**

Oxfam began working In Timor Leste in 1997-1999. In 2000, it recommenced in the emergency phase in 2000 and continues to work on development in Timor until now. I have been an Oxfam staff member for three and a half years – both as an advocacy program officer and more recently in the position of National Program Coordinator.

Oxfam works using a rights based approach to development. This means that Oxfam believes that every human being has rights. These rights are inalienable, universal, indivisible and interdependent. For every human right there is a corresponding obligation to fulfill, protect and respect that right.

Most of Oxfam’s work in Timor Leste is implemented through partners: NGOs, community groups, student groups and government - working together with different sectors to support Timorese people to realize these rights in newly independent nation.

The overall aim of Oxfam’s work in Timor Leste is to strengthen the capacity of East Timorese men and women to be active in the development of their nation. A focus of this work is to mainstream gender equity through all Oxfam programs. Oxfam has supported a number of organisations (particularly women’s organisations) on the promotion of the rights of women in Timor-Leste. In addition, Oxfam supports a number of groups, including the East Timorese government, in an overall strategy to reduce gender-based violence in Timor Leste.

### **The Impact of Oxfam in Timor Leste:**

In the area of politics, Oxfam began to work with civil society in 2000 to form a group to ensure women and men had equal rights under the Constitution in Timor Leste and to promote participation of women in national politics. As a result of the work of this group articles 16-17 and 47 in the constitution of RDTL address equal rights for men and women in the development of Timor. In The National parliament 23 of 87 seats are held by women. There are two women ministers in cabinet and a number of vice ministers.

During Timor's first Village Level elections currently being conducted, Oxfam has supported civil society groups to support female candidates to stand for council in local government. To date, there are 1326 women sitting on village councils throughout Timor, and 7 female village chiefs who will lead their communities. With two districts left to hold elections, our next challenges in supporting and legitimizing these leaders' roles in their villages.

In education, Oxfam supports local NGOs to teach literacy to women and men at a sub district level and worked with the Ministry of education to hold Timor Leste's first literacy conference on 15 September 2003.

We support the economic and social empowerment of women in Timor through our work with communities and with NGOs. Whereby women in East Timor are have access to more than security – but have a stronger place and voice within their families and communities. We also support men to learn to accept the empowerment of women – by facilitating workshops on topics such as 'How men and women can work together'.

#### **D: A new approach : AMKV**

AMKV was founded by 20 concerned men from around the country, the majority of whom who had participated in an international exchange on gender-based violence held 2002. The exchange organised by a national NGO (La'o Hamutuk) and Oxfam Australia, brought Timorese men into contact with Puntos dos Encuentros, a men's group from Nicaragua that is working against violence in a post conflict, machismo culture. During the exchange Puntos dos Encuentros conducted training with 38 male participants from around the country on gender, violence and masculinity. This workshop encouraged the participants to confront and reflect on their behaviour towards women in their families and as a society.

The vision of AMKV is to build a democratic, independent, and just society, free from violence and discrimination. It aims to raise the awareness of men and women about gender-based violence and eradicate such violence from all levels of society. It seeks to achieve this by running community-based education and discussion forums, undertaking advocacy, and building an effective network bringing together community groups, national non-governmental organisations and the government. As part of a network of organisations it conducts mediation and counselling for separated couples.

AMKV's main activity is to conduct weekend discussion forums in communities and high schools, always involving participants from both sexes. Before the forums started we were apprehensive as to how people would receive us and whether we would be able to influence their beliefs or behaviour – especially among male participants. We were acutely aware that men are usually the perpetrators of violence, so would they feel threatened? Would they be willing to change? We reflected on our own behaviour; we used to be like that, and then slowly, with guidance from other men's groups and each other, we changed. The answer was simple "If we can change, then so can others."

We use common situations that would be familiar to the participants and we talk about our own personal experiences of change. We always promote examples of practical and realistic behaviour change so that on leaving the forums participants have the knowledge to make immediate changes in their own lives. During the discussions there are often heated debates, but there is also a lot of humour and good will as participants reflect on the origins of their traditions, beliefs and behaviour around gender differences.

In 2004 and 2005 AMKV have reached over 700 men as weekend warriors carrying what is a 'foreign' approach to the cultural norms in Timor. Initially, these activities generated some criticism and ridicule from men in different sectors. Ridicule was directed at our sexuality and it was common for people to think that we are gay. Criticism came from colleagues and friends that believe that we should have been using our energy or influence to tackle other more pressing developmental issues such as poverty, livelihoods and economic empowerment.

Over time there has been a change in attitude to the work that AMKV does. We increasingly receive positive feedback from key national figures such as the President, Members of Parliament, Police and Departmental Ministers as well as students, civil society groups and communities themselves.

Some of the traditional views that AMKV is helping men to question are:

- The traditional practice of men asking 'brideprice' for their daughters.
- Acceptance of women in leadership roles in the community.
- Violence as a means of release in the home.
- Women can also go to university.

At the community level, there are men who are responsive and willing to be involved however in general at all levels of Timorese society there is still a high level of disinterest and apathy around gender and gender-based violence.

### **E: Impact of International Organisations on women - A Message.**

For me - in my experience of working with International Organisations here in Timor I believe that many of the changes we have seen for the better for women would not have been possible without the presence of International Organisations in Timor.

Through the work and support of organizations such as Oxfam in Timor Leste there is greater gender equality in our country; women are now in leadership roles, people are questioning traditional patriarchal roles in the community, and many women and other marginalized groups feel empowered to stand up against violence.

Through the work of AMKV, and support from international organizations, men, particularly the youth, who represent the future of Timor, are beginning to carve a space for their female counterparts – slowly...but there are changes.

But we are also still young as a nation, and there are still many obstacles that will continue to prevent women from accessing their rights for many years.

From a place in the middle somewhere I also clearly see that this process is slow, that sometimes Internationals in Timor do get it wrong; approach, expectations, assumptions, miscommunication... I guess this is all part of development.

I leave you with a few points I see as important to remember - as an international organization working in East Timor – perhaps you could call them ‘a guide’.

1. Be Patient
2. Think in terms of sustainability
3. Listen to us
4. Speak in Terms we understand

The strong culture of patriarchy has developed over a long time in Timor Leste....but it can change...If concepts from outside Timor can be translated into concrete examples relevant to people in their everyday lives....and both men and women can see the benefit – then the impact must be positive.

Let's make gender Inequity History!!