

## **Empowerment is participation in power.**

*The idea of power is at the root of the term empowerment. Power must be understood as working at different levels, including the institutional, the household and the individual. Empowerment is sometimes described as being about the ability to make choices, but it must also involve being able to shape what choices are on offer. Empowerment corresponds to women challenging existing power structures, which subordinate them. As such, what is seen as empowering in one context may not be in another. Empowerment is not about reversing existing power hierarchies but rather about empowering women and/or women's groups to make their own choices, to speak out on their own behalf and to control their own lives.<sup>1</sup>*

The Challenges and Possibilities events have highlighted the importance of forums where different points of view, experiences and ideas can be shared without disapproval and condemnation. The encouragement of dissenting views is important because it is often through conflict that we move into different, more appropriate forms of social relations.<sup>2</sup> For this reason it is essential to create spaces where the language of diversity and difference is not undermined and silenced; where sensitivity to particular community contexts is respected and appreciated- however challenging this may be.

The Friday evening forum and the participatory nature of the Saturday workshops at the Challenges and Possibilities seminar created such spaces. Women and men from local and international communities came together to share stories, experiences, opinions and ideas, and to collate these into a draft set of principles, which if adopted, will inform the approach and practices of individuals and organisations working with women in East Timor. These principles will hopefully encourage the development of sustainable and equitable programs that allow women to participate in power processes and be involved in the decisions that impact on their lives. However, a narrow commitment to certain assumptions, organizational arrangements and specific ideologies will undermine alternative approaches.

Writing in 1997 at the height of the celebration of the New Economy and NGO participation in globalization, the veteran scholar activist James Petras sounded a cautionary note. NGOs, he wrote, 'emphasize projects, not movements; they "mobilize" people to produce at the margins but not to struggle to control the basic means of production and wealth; they focus on technical financial assistance of projects, not on structural conditions that shape the everyday lives of people...linked to a framework of collaboration with donors and government agencies that subordinate practical activity to non-confrontational politics...'<sup>3</sup>. Petras argues that a political world is created where the rhetoric of empowerment cloaks the reality of subordination with international and national structures of power, structures that many women are excluded from, not only in East Timor but elsewhere. This is not to discount the reality that NGOs operate in difficult circumstances, but whether or not you agree with Petras, notions of empowerment are often overlooked as important

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<sup>1</sup> (Wieringa, 1994) <http://www.awid.org/ywl/glossary/?term=Empowerment>

<sup>2</sup> **Kenny, Sue** (1999:27) *'Developing Communities for the Future'*, Nelson Thomson Learning, Victoria

<sup>3</sup> Petras, James (1997) *'Imperialism and NGO's'*, Monthly Review, <http://www.theorganizer.org/Globalization/NgosImperialism.html>

principles that underpin practice, particularly within large, bureaucratic organisations with top down management- as Balbina da Conceição's experiences reveal.

The Challenges and Possibilities seminar was the first time that Balbina was presented with the opportunity to tell her story in a public forum. Some participants at the seminar may have been unfamiliar with the early beginnings of the Taibesi project and the experiences of the veteran women involved. Consequently, many were surprised, particularly by Balbina's frankness- myself included. Her candid description of her experiences during her 16 years with the clandestine movement illustrated the sacrifices women made to end the occupation. Her unguarded exposition of the difficulties, as a director of the Taibesi project, she and her activist friends faced in 2003, will I'm sure, cause further debate. Sadly, these difficulties stemmed from being prohibited to participate in power processes such as management choices and executive decisions. Balbina spoke of months of apprehension, anxiety and heated dialogue, and how she and her friends exercised their democratic right and began to inform the broader community including parliamentarians, the veterans association and the president's office about what was occurring in the project. Other incidences like this have occurred in East Timor the difference is that rather than accept exclusion and blurred management processes, Balbina and her friends spoke out. Actions Kenny argues that are key manifestations of an empowered community, such as access to open and democratic community structures, collectively deciding on the future directions of their community and belief in the right to control their own destiny<sup>4</sup>.

The women's actions were not surprising considering the part many played resisting a brutal occupation. What was unexpected were the reactions of many internationals and the large donor agency that was supporting the project, who saw the confrontations in a negative sense rather than an application of civil rights, part of democracy building and an opportunity for dialogue, to learn and understand why the Timorese women were restless. Interestingly, supporters of the women were labeled as 'leftie unionists', yet many of the internationals who disapproved and declined to lend a hand claimed to be supporting political and social empowerment of women in East Timor. In this sense, it is important to recognise that independence was the first phase in a national transformation, and it therefore follows that political gains must extend into the social and economic spheres- not simple service provision but true participation in power. Encouraging people to participate in the continual processes of shaping their society, their communities and their identities- empowerment- must be championed and played out in reality not just in rhetoric.

Balbina also spoke about the difficulties illiterate women face in East Timor, particularly from people who fail to acknowledge that even though they can't read, women have potential and an ability to comprehend what is occurring in their name. The most interesting issue to be revealed in her powerful presentation was the definition of orphan children. Balbina asserted that the western understanding of orphan children has further disadvantaged children who come from families with a living parent yet live in extreme poverty. Discussing this notion was in keeping with the theme of the events which aimed to explore the assumptions of international organisations.

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<sup>4</sup> **Kenny, Sue** (1999: 156) *'Developing Communities for the Future'*, Nelson Thomson Learning, Victoria

Natalina Ximenes, herself an orphan of the occupation, and like many other presenters, spoke about the need for responsible and responsive economic development, particularly for young women in East Timor. Natalina is a designer and seamstress and through her work, supports many people in her community. She was also working at the Taibesi project through all the unrest and decided to stay to support her friends. What occurred was very unfortunate but didn't take place just to prove a point about empowerment. There were also many complications and misunderstandings, and not to mention missed opportunities for all those involved.

Balbina, Natalina and their colleagues are now managing the enterprise on their own. The major problem they face is finding sustainable markets for their product. Their skills are amazing but they have years of catching up to do as mechanized textiles production has come so far it almost mimics the uniqueness of hand made cloth – almost. The one thing it will never do is replace the solidarity between people who acknowledge the value of 'hand made' items and make a conscious decision to purchase goods made under Fair Trade. In this we feel hopeful that ETWA's fundraising and product development initiatives here in Australia will give the women enough breathing space to build sustainable enterprises.

East Timorese textiles are produced, as they have for centuries, using back strap looms. Back-strap weaving is incredibly time consuming and physically demanding, but for many women it's the only means they have to earn a living. For example, Filismena is a war widow. She is about 40 years old and has 3 school age sons. She is an accomplished and proficient weaver, regarded as a 'professor' by those who know her. She has managed to sustain her family and educate her sons by producing textiles however she suffers chronic back pain as a result. Without access to targeted health care weaving will become so painful that she'll have to stop. Consequently she'll lose her income and the affects on her family will be enormous. This is a story that's repeated all over East Timor and is yet another barrier to women's economic development. ETWA hopes to first research the health of women at the project and with their assistance develop programs that target their health issues.

Weaving on back strap looms produces textiles that are as varied and unique as the women that produce them. ETWA members are aware that product must be developed that integrates and balances both the cultural distinctiveness and the commercial application of skills. Early in 2006 we will launch 'Design Incubators' intended to create textile and product designs that maintain cultural elements and create economic opportunities for weavers, sewers and artisans in the world's newest nation. We're committed to strengthening the manufacturing base of East Timor while trying to ensure that economics isn't separated from the spiritual and psychological dimensions of life. We're also careful to ensure that the local economy is supported by providing funds to purchase materials locally.

To support rural women, the group in Dili has established three weaving groups in isolated communities. These initiatives aim to decentralize manufacture and allow women to remain in their communities. A point that was reinforced by rural women is the importance of maintaining cultural practices through the generational transfer of techniques and designs. When we were in Timor in July 2004, a mother presented us with three delightful scarves woven by her 9-year old daughter. My first thought was that this young girl wasn't at school; an assumption rooted in western priorities. However, the little girl's shyness and pride in her work was so obvious that I quickly changed my mind. I also realized that the relationship between this young girl and her mother were probably enriched through such exchanges of skills and knowledge.

As ETWA is based in Melbourne, we often work in a kind of vacuum, separated from the reality of the lives of women in East Timor. Equally, the women we work with in East Timor have no context within which to understand our work. The weekend gave ETWA members and all participants opportunities to share experiences, listen and discover. Although many ETWA members were busy ensuring the events ran smoothly and couldn't participate in the workshops, we hope to adhere to the principles developed by participants. We also hope to adhere to the community development principles of valuing diversity, collective responsibility, sharing of resources and most importantly, cooperation. We would like to encourage other organisations to do the same and we welcome people to become involved in our work.

Sadly, I missed many of the presentations at the forum and the seminar. As part of the organising collective, I was busy chasing blue tack and taking photos. However, people who were present have since shared their delight, experiences and satisfaction. To everyone who assisted, presented, translated and participated in the Challenges and Possibilities events, particularly Balbina, Natalina and the many other East Timorese people present, thank you!