

Workshop Five Summary

The group discussion commenced with the participants introducing themselves and giving a brief statement about their involvement or interest with women in Timor Leste. The group was composed of a variety of people who belong to organisations that work with Timorese women, or have travelled and worked in Timor Leste, or are planning to go there. The participant's interests covered the areas of health, education, fundraising, promoting women's issues, working with grass-root NGO's, and working with children in Timor Leste.

The group then divided in half to discuss experiences working with women in Timor Leste. Positive and negative experiences were discussed to try and find some way to find out what works best in a particular situation. The issues discussed dealt with some basic guidelines to follow when working with Timorese women and the difficulties that the participants have faced through their experiences whilst working in Timor Leste. The discussions in the groups raised some very sensitive issues and overall it was a fast moving and complex discussion.

The group discussion began with the question, "What was the most pressing problem facing the women of East Timor?"

In response to this, the issue of domestic violence was rather quickly brought to our attention by one of the group members. They pointed out that domestic violence is not a new issue as it predates the Portuguese and was exacerbated during Indonesian occupation. One participant made the point that domestic violence had not been properly addressed in their own organisation, she felt that many International organisations do not give high priority to this very sensitive issue and went on to note the difficulties in trying to get International organisations to latch onto ideas and developments that are occurring at the grass-roots level.

Domestic violence is not an issue that East Timorese women would raise with an 'outside' organisation. Rather, it was suggested that it is something that they feel they must deal with themselves. When events of domestic violence do occur, women don't tell anyone about it as they think it is part of their own culture, and women don't want

to report these events because when they return home they will be in big trouble. At the moment organisations are trying very hard to work with Timorese women to raise this issue and to solve it.

The questions then asked in the workshop were what can International Organisations learn from this experience? What are the insights they can gain to help improve the way in which they work with women in Timor Leste? Essentially, what can these organisations do to help the Timorese women who are experiencing domestic violence?

Some participants in the workshop shared the experience that Timorese women are learning a lot from International Organisations that train them in languages and they are learning about how to deal with experiences of domestic violence. Organisations are teaching the Timorese women how to work on their own, without men, so if they are in a dangerous situation they are able to survive without men.

Subsequently, some general rules or observations were made when dealing with Timorese women.

Listen and be attentive to the culture of Timor Leste. The way that Timorese women dress up is important. Respecting the way that the women dress is important, and it is helpful if foreigners learn some basic conversation (in Tetun). Giving workers a course in Timorese culture was stressed as an important point. Learning a culture is much like learning a language, not just for International organisations, but also for friendship groups working with women in Timor Leste.

Many of the mistakes that foreigners make when working in Timor Leste are done by accident, because they don't have a proper understanding of the cultural norms. The East Timorese women don't expect for you to dress up like them, but if you wear inappropriate clothes it can be seen as an insult and therefore will make it very difficult for you to actively work with the women.

It is imperative to follow Timor's agenda, don't try to push your ideas onto them, let the ideas and developments flow naturally. There are a few things that were outlined as the type of things one should never do when working in Timor Leste. These were:

“Never promise something that you can not deliver. Say that you'll try or that you will do your best, but never promise.”

And

“Don't ask for something that you are not sure you need or want, because if you don't use it, it will be seen as huge insult. This also goes for information as well.”

One of the participants asked a question to the East Timorese women that were in the group. It was a rather significant question and was received with an extended response.

“Is there a particular way of thinking or mentality that groups should have when working with women in Timor Leste?”

With the reply, after translation “Timor Leste has just started to rise up from the worst destruction. In terms of knowledge, it is very low. So at the moment they are very open to accept any help, they accept any sort of help in culture and learning. In Indonesian time, school was not open up for girls and women and for everybody. International organisations can help financially by helping women and girls at least to write their own name and try to get girls to go to school by sponsoring them to go to tertiary and teaching school.”

It is good to ask questions of the Timorese, ask lots of questions rather than just looking around and talking to the other foreigners. Especially when working with women's groups, you have to be patient and not expect fast results, it takes time. The most important thing to do is to help them develop management and administrative skills so that they can keep track of funding they receive.

The workshop groups came together and shared the learning experiences that they had each discussed. These were placed on the wall so the group could begin to make the

way from the experiences shared to developing six draft principles. The two groups were rather similar with the learning's they came up with, and they are as follows:

- Respect the process, don't expect too much too fast, be patient.
- Ask questions and engage
- The importance of establishing long term people-to-people friendships and delivering.
- Focusing on specific groups and people who have the knowledge and skills of local environment and community, working with just them to reach the wider community
- Focus on literacy for women and girls.
- Don't ask for something if you aren't going to fully use it because it may seem as an insult to do so, including in regards to the use of information
- Difficulties in balancing accountabilities and standards with the local community.
- Understand the cultural context.
- Follow the Timorese direction, rather than imposing your own agenda and processes.
- Have to build strong interpersonal relationships and friendships, and respond quickly.
- Never promise anything unless you can deliver.
- Learning about a culture is very difficult; it is like learning a language.

- Recognize the diversity of women, don't assume they are all the same, and avoid stereotypes.
- Need to acknowledgement and understanding of cultural expectations relating specifically to children and women.
- Be aware of our colonial mindset as visitors.
- Respecting dress, speaking and basic language skills, at least learn basic conversation of language and dialect of the people that you are working with.
- Follow Timor's agenda not your own.
- Building capacity not just skills, but also resources.

From this point the objective was to get to a set of draft principles. There were obvious themes and commonalities throughout these which included cultural understanding, capacity building, recognizing diversity, and leadership.

After much discussion and debate the following six draft principles were developed which reflected upon the issues discussed earlier in the smaller groups.

1. Build on skills that are already present.
2. Commitment to person to person relationships.
3. Respect Timorese culture and leadership.
4. Have realistic expectations. (Related to resources, skills,ect.)
5. Focus on capacity building
6. Respect the diversity of the people we are working with.