

Women of Timor-Leste: Seeking freedom in a free nation

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The Indonesian military occupied East Timor for 24 years, during which time they had strong control over people's ability to speak out about their situation. Timorese women suffered from various kinds of violence. A lot of people talked about human rights and the brutality of the military towards Timorese people especially toward men, but there was little information regarding women's suffering. At that time, there was no women's organisation or NGO that paid attention to the situation of women. In 1997, about 15 men and women tried to break the silence by establishing a new NGO called Fokupers (Communication Forum for East Timor Women).

Fokupers has assisted 467 women victims of violence such as sexual abuse, rape and interrogations, as well as widows and mothers who had lost their children as a result of the Indonesian military occupation. Fokupers conducted individual and group counselling and provided economic support during the emergency period. Up until now Timor-Leste people, especially those who had lost their children and husbands, are still waiting for justice.

Fokupers and domestic and sexual violence

The Indonesian occupation is over now, but Timor-Leste women continue to face violence. The patriarchal system still dominates the society. Where tradition and customary law favour men over women, this means that men own property, men inherit and men make all the important decisions. As a much higher percentage of women are illiterate, they become subordinated and economically dependent on men. The consequences are that Timor-Leste women are victims of violence that very often occurs inside their own homes, and are victims of decisions made both in the home and by the state.

One step forward is that women have started to break the silence of domestic violence and are now ready to go to the police station or an NGO to report it. In 2003 there were 179 domestic violence cases and 42 sexual violence cases (rape and sexual harassment) reported to the Dili District Police. But 104 cases against the accused were dropped on the women's initiative. In 2004 there were 246 domestic violence cases and 45 cases of sexual violence (rape, attempted rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment) (see Bere paper).

During 2003 Fokupers assisted 35 domestic violence and 25 sexual violence cases. In 2004 Fokupers dealt with 30 cases of domestic violence and 24 of sexual violence and up until May 2005, they have assisted with 16 domestic violence and 12 sexual violence cases. These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg. We must not think that domestic violence didn't exist during Indonesia's occupation, as it has existed in Timor-Leste for a long time, but was largely hidden from public view or discussion.

Why domestic violence is hidden from public view

The reasons women give for domestic violence being hidden include:

- family pride and status;
- the mentality of patriarchal system is ingrained;

- lack of information;
- not enough security in the government system;
- women are economically dependent;
- domestic violence is regarded as a private matter;
- no law yet that protects women as victims;
- lack of support from other institutions; and
- people/family will blame the women.

All of these factors contribute to strengthening the cycle of violence and lead to a growing number of women and children living in fear and injustice.

Support that Fokupers offers to Timor-Leste women

Fokupers recognises that women alone cannot answer and solve the problems. That is the reason why its motto is *give a hand together to end violence*. This is the spirit with which we work to realise our vision of a world with gender equality and justice between men and women. Our mission is to promote women's rights and strengthen the socio-economic capacity of Timor-Leste women, through assistance/accompaniment, policy, advocacy and community organising.

In cases of helping female victims of violence, Fokupers Accompaniment Division offers support through counselling, shelter, therapy, legal advice and preparing victims for court. Fokupers recognises that it is not enough to help women deal with violence, but that we should offer a hand to address the root causes of such violence.

Fokupers advocacy includes activities such as public discussions, on television and face to face, preparation of publications and articles in the print media, workshops and group discussions with women and with men, training, including with police and with public servants, and advocacy on legislation with members of parliament and others.

Community organising

Working for women and children not only requires knowledge, but also our hearts and our love. And it's also not really enough to work by ourselves. For that reason Fokupers is looking for partners who want to support us giving a hand to help develop and improve the social and living conditions in Timor-Leste, especially for women, and to cut the cycle of violence by supporting Fokupers' activities with warmth and partnership.