

Women's Rights in East Timor (2001)

Since 1975, when this predominantly Catholic nation was forcibly annexed by Indonesia, women have been working side by side with men in the struggle for Independence and freedom. They had played important roles during those difficult years when East Timor was wracked with human rights violations committed against their people by the Indonesian invaders. They helped run the camps, managed supplies and smuggled information. If not directly involved in the fight for liberation, East Timorese women were either furthering their education in exile or holding fort at home. As exiles some has been valuable sources of information for the outside world on the real situation inside east Timor.

After regaining their freedom, veteran women freedom fighters and women's rights activists worked for the continued and active participation of East Timorese women in the country's development processes. They don't want to return to their traditional roles. But culture hampered their efforts, and now they believed that they are being sidelined in the country's transition to full independence.

For instance, while their attempts to ensure representation in the 34-member National Council, an advisory body to the United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor, had been warmly appreciated all of their carefully chosen nominees were completely ignored. This action was viewed by many as typical of East Timorese men's low regard of women's opinions.

One women NGO leader cited present cultural and political structures as the culprit in the women's low status in the East Timor society, especially for women at the grassroots where tradition keeps men in the most powerful community positions. The country's long turbulent years under its colonial masters (i.e., Portugal and Indonesia) saw the creation and maintenance of traditional social and political structures that are hierarchical, undemocratic, and divisive. These structures are also patriarchal, marginalizing women and giving men most decision-making powers.

Illiteracy continues to be a serious problem in East Timor. Approximately 60% of rural women in East Timor are illiterate. According to Fokupers, most educational investment is made in boys. To educate a girl is seen as spending money on her future husband's family. If girls are sent to school, it is usually for just a few years. Higher education, the key to women accessing roles of influence, is even less accessible.

Although, there is no gender-based employment discrimination being reported, it is widely accepted practice that women defer to men when job opportunities arise at the village levels.

Fortunately, there are a growing number of women's organizations that are truly working for women's participation in the national development processes. Some have started new community literacy programs, community-based health initiatives and small income generating projects for women. Progressively, more women are organizing for bigger roles in community decision-making and national policy.

Domestic violence against women is a significant problem in East Timor. It is alleged widely that TNI-backed militias raped numerous women during the September 1999 violence in East Timor, and kept many as sex slaves. Kirsty Sword Gusmao, wife of East Timorese independence leader Xanana Gusmao, reported to the international press in November that 33 pregnant East Timorese women returned to East Timor and claimed that they had been abducted and forced to serve as sex slaves for the TNI in West Timor, Indonesia. Rape is a punishable offense, as specified by Indonesian law. Few cases of rape have been prosecuted in the courts, although there was one indictment and numerous charges during the year. The NGO FOKUPERS offers some assistance to women who have been victims of violence.

Customary practices in East Timor discriminate against women. For example, in some regions or villages where traditional practices hold sway, women may not inherit or own property. More importantly women's groups are concerned that the CNRT is encouraging women to resolve rape and domestic violence cases through traditional rules, which usually provide only for compensation to be paid to the victim. UNTAET regulations implement the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; however, discrimination complaints were not a priority during the year, and no cases are known to have been reported. There were no reports of gender-based employment discrimination during the year. Women usually deferred to men when job opportunities arose at the village levels.

East Timor Women against Violence (ETWAVE) is an East Timorese human rights NGO that advocates on behalf of women. FOKUPERS, a women's organization, has set up a women's and children's shelter for victims of domestic violence and incest.

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