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*Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.*

## East Timorese Women On Their Way Up

By Curt Gabrielson

FEBRUARY 1, 2002

BAUCAU, East Timor – I recently overheard my partner Pamela describing the situation of women in East Timor to a friend who had just arrived. She went through the various successes that women's groups have had in recent politics, the constitution-writing process, and the efforts to stop violence against women. Then, to wrap up she said, "So, the way things stand, the situation is not horrible."

After some thought, I realized that "not horrible" is indeed the best that can be said right now. There is great hope, and much progress has been made, but the situation is still unacceptable for many, many women. True equality and justice are still far in the distance for the women of East Timor.

In my previous newsletter I outlined the prevalence of violence against East Timorese women and the increasingly insistent efforts to stop it. I pointed out that violence against women is a logical place to start when considering the condition of women (or justice) in any society. As long as women are confined to their homes by fear of men's violence, as long as a woman can think that enduring violence is a necessary or normal part of her burden in life, as long as there is no support for a woman victim of men's violence, and as long as political leaders refuse to take violence against women seriously, equality, justice and yes, democracy, are out of reach.

Violence, however, is by no means the only way that men keep women down. Laws, both written and unwritten, made by ancestors, by the church, by various colonizers and even some of those laws currently being drafted, create a system within which women must struggle just to exist with anything like autonomy over their lives and bodies. Many of these laws insure, explicitly or not, that women are unable to attain positions equal to those of men. Women in East Timor today are chipping away at these legal walls that have restricted them for so long. In this newsletter, I will lay out what I have observed about the status of women in East Timor, and some of the progress that they have made in their fight for equality.



*Women weaving the traditional East Timorese tais. These women are part of a local women's weaving cooperative.*

Looking at a society with an eye for where women are and aren't is a simple

and illuminating way to get a basic idea of the position of women. In East Timor, women aren't driving, except an occasional scooter. Women are in the kitchen, without men. Neither women nor girls are gathering informally on street corners or parks. Women are with the kids, almost exclusively. Women aren't doing heavy construction, transport or "trades" jobs. Women are in the fields, working hard. Women are rarely at the beach, but often at the market. Many women run small shops, but few run large businesses. Women are hauling water, washing clothes and cleaning the house. Women are working together to weave baskets and cloth, mend clothing, hull and winnow rice, prepare vegetables to cook and preserve, and make candles. Women are not sitting listlessly about like the swarms of men and boys I see daily.

Official statistics add to the story. Since the middle of last year, women have comprised a steady 25 percent of all East Timorese civil servants. The foreign-affairs department has the highest percentage of women: 40 percent. Women make up only 30 percent of the teaching force. In all my school visits and teacher trainings, I've encountered only five women physics teachers. The new physics department at the university, in which I teach, is about 25 percent women, same as the university as a whole.

East Timor's Constituent Assembly, a governing body elected last August with the task of creating East Timor's constitution, is 27 percent women. The previous legislative body, the National Council, appointed by leaders in the United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET), was 38 percent women. Women cabinet ministers within the national government number two out of ten.

Many are excited about these numbers, because they are, in essence, "not horrible." True, the numbers are high in comparison with the U.S. and many other countries, but they hardly represent equality when it is remembered that women make up 51 percent of the world's population.

UNTAET's Gender Affairs Unit was formed early in the UN mission to promote equality between men and women in the transitional governments. This work is part of a broader commitment by the UN to gender equality.

The stated objective of the Unit was advocating gender equity and equality and for a society in which women are "equal partners with men in the promotion of sustainable development, peace and security, governance and human rights." As a basis for its work here, it followed various UN charters related to the status of women as well as the East Timorese Woman's Platform of Action, which was adopted at the first East Timorese Women's Congress in July 2000.

The UN Gender Affairs Unit existed within UNTAET until late 2001. At that time, a corresponding office, called



*My colleague Terezinha, the only physics teacher in East Timor with a bachelor's degree, flanked by her cousins Veronica and Eloira*

the Office for the Promotion of Equality, was created within the embryonic East Timor government, called the East Timor Provisional Administration (ETPA). Before its closure, the UN Gender Affairs Department carried out many capacity-building workshops for women and government offices. It compiled and made available statistics on gender issues and provided a "gender analysis" of existing as well as proposed legislation. It also worked to establish and support networks, locally and globally, to increase women's participation in the governing of East Timor.

Maria Domingas Fernandez, known as Mana ("Sister") Micato, directs the Office for the Promotion of Equality. Mana Micato was a founder and long-time activist with Fokupers, the women's organization I described in my last letter.<sup>1</sup> She ran as an independent candidate in last August's election, but was not elected.<sup>2</sup> In her present

<sup>1</sup> Fokupers is the short form for the Bahasa Indonesia, "Forum Komunikasi Perempuan" meaning "Woman's Communication Forum." Fokupers' mission is to provide services and advocacy to women survivors of violence.

<sup>2</sup> As explained in CG-11, independent candidates had to win the same number of votes as entire political parties in order to gain a seat in the election for the Constituent Assembly. None of the three national independent candidates was successful.



*Mana Micato in her office*

position, she has the opportunity to push the new government to commit itself to improve conditions for women in East Timor.

Currently Mana Micato administers three international staff members (who formerly worked with the gender-affairs unit) and four East Timorese staff, with two more local staff to be hired soon. She has not received a budget beyond normal office expenditures so, until further shifts in the governing structure, has to rely on UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and foreign-government aid agencies for financial support needed to execute any programs. At this time she works with UNIFEM, the UN agency for the promotion of women, to carry out workshops in the districts to educate women about her office and the various organizations serving women in East Timor. She works with UNFPA, the UN Fund for Population Activities, to organize a series of workshops on women's rights for the police, various staff personnel in the justice system, government officials and the staff of related NGOs. She works with AusAID, the Australian government's international-aid organization, to create a manual for future gender-awareness training, and to train future trainers.

Mana Micato commands great respect in the East Timorese community. She has been working to boost the status of women since the early 70s, the last days of Portuguese rule in East Timor. At that

time she worked with the women's branch of the largest political party, Fretilin (*Frente Revolucionara do Timor Leste Independente*), which was called OPMT (*Organizacao Popular da Mulher Timorese*). She and the other women of OPMT organized literacy courses for women and daily political discussions. She knows well the critical role women played in the resistance to Indonesia's occupation. She has seen that women are capable of educating themselves and developing community cooperatives to promote health and local economy, and believes that today women need to find ways to continue this grassroots organizing as well as demand inclusion in community decision-making and national policy-making.

One of Mana Micato's principal goals is to increase the strength of women's voices in the process of development and nation-building. She tells of a backlash that has taken place since the departure of Indonesia: whereas in the past women were strongly encouraged to take part in the struggle for independence and their contributions were truly valued, now male leaders are much less inter-





(Left) The t-shirt designed by the Gender and Constitution Subcommittee. The hands beat a small traditional drum played exclusively by women. Along the side is written the Tetum for "Listen to our voice," and at the bottom, "Constitution," with the symbol for woman in the O.



(Right) A poster encouraging women to vote and run for office. Made with support from USAID and The Asia Foundation, a US NGO, it proclaims: "Women's voices are very important in the election!" and, "Women also have the right to vote and be voted for in the election on August 30, 2001."

ested in women's voices being heard or considered.

This sour story is nothing new. After both World Wars, women in the U.S. were discouraged from continuing in their newfound professions and encouraged to go back to being good homemakers. Black women in the US Civil-Rights movement were told many a time that Black rights would come first and women's rights later. Leena Z. Khan, ICWA Fellow in Pakistan, reports a similar phenomenon in post-partition Pakistan: male leaders did their best to usher women back into the kitchen and nursery after having made great use of them in the national struggle. In China, Chairman Mao encouraged women to participate in the development of China, saying that women hold up half the sky, but his calculation was slightly off. Women who took on men's roles in the factories and fields of post-revolution China were also expected to continue their full-time jobs as homemakers, thus holding up far more than just half of the sky.

Many educated women in East Timor expected this sort of behavior and braced to fight it. A broad spectrum of women's organizations came together for the first East Timorese Women's Congress in July 2000, only half a year after the departure of Indonesian forces. The Congress led to the formation of *Rede Feto Timor Lorosa'e*, meaning

"East Timor Women's Network," with the goal of forming a united front for the women of East Timor. One of *Rede Feto's* early initiatives was a proposal to the National Council that would have ensured that 30 percent of the Constituent-Assembly members' seats be reserved for women. The proposal was criticized as unnecessary and discriminatory and was not passed. Today the network continues to lobby for women's rights.

In late 2001, the newly elected Constituent Assembly began to debate various proposed constitutional models for East Timor. While the Assembly was not formally required to accept input from outside, many groups began to lobby the Assembly members. One group was the Women's Political Caucus, a small group of women dedicated to the monitoring and advising of politicians, especially women politicians. One of the members of the Caucus is nearly always present at the ongoing Constituent Assembly sessions, carefully watching the process by which the constitution is created, and pushing where they can to improve the place of women.<sup>3</sup>

The Constitutional Working Group was formed by various segments of East Timor's civil society (nongovernmental individuals and organizations) in order to keep the Constituent Assembly well aware of the opinions of

<sup>3</sup>The constitution is called *Lei Inan*, meaning "Mother Law" in Tetum, East Timor's lingua franca.

this sector. Several *Rede Feto* women formed the Gender and Constitution Subcommittee of the Constitutional Working Group. With support from UNIFEM and Oxfam Australia, the Subcommittee has been a powerhouse of action. The group created and distributed thousands of posters and t-shirts bearing the message that women must be represented both in the constitution itself and in the process of government. The women of the Subcommittee made their presence and objectives known in radio interviews and in local newspapers. They have led intense lobbying both for and against various constitutional proposals being introduced.

The most important move made by the women of the Subcommittee was the introduction of a proposed "Women's Charter," a list of 10 articles on women's rights and status in East Timor. The Charter includes language prohibiting prostitution, slavery and exploitation as well as language upholding the rights of women to equal access to education, employment, health care, personal security, political opportunities and social position. In addition, Article 8 of the Charter guarantees equal rights to inheritance and prohibits East Timor's traditional system of bride-price from causing violence against women.

The Constituent Assembly voted to accept the entire Women's Charter, with the sole exception of language about East Timor's bride-price traditions. Very popular and well-respected men on the Assembly have even proposed that East Timor's traditional laws be accepted as national law. This move is seen as very patriotic and honorable, but as Constituent-Assembly member Ms. Ajiza Magno commented during the debates, in many cases, this would effectively freeze the status of women at some primitive slave-like level. There has yet to be closure on this issue in the Constituent Assembly.

East Timor's system of bride price, called *barlake* in Tetum, is complex and deep-seated. It varies from place to place throughout the country. I have had it explained to me by several people, and here I will try to convey its basic elements. In East Timor, when a couple wants to get married or a marriage is arranged by their respective families (both of which routinely happen), a payment is negotiated by a *lia-nain* or "spokesperson" from each family. Payments go both ways, but most of them go from the groom's family to the bride's. It is important to realize that here "family" means the broad, extended family. An uncle acting as *lia-nain* may put out the call to each of his nephews to come up with two cattle for *barlake*, and they must do so.

The purpose of the payment was described to me as follows: to recognize and honor the spirits so that this new couple can live a good life in peace and prosperity, to solidify and legitimize the marriage and to form new

bonds between the two families. In days of old, the gifts were more specific: special swords, carvings, jewelry and clothing. Today, this still exists to a lesser extent, but the main two currencies are now cattle and money.

When my friend Ines recently got married, her family received 12 cattle, US\$1,200, two gold hairpieces, and one goat. One cow is worth around \$300 if sold for meat. (Cattle are also killed at funerals for meat, and are thus a very important cultural element. If your family is unable to get a hold of a cow when a family member dies, you are known to be very poor.) For its part, Ines' family had to deliver one large pig and several *tais*, traditional woven cloth, to her man's family.<sup>4</sup> She remarked that the price her family set on her was actually quite a modest request. She told of families routinely asking for 30 or more cattle and \$3,000.

Thus, the situation in East Timor is opposite to that in India and other places where dowry is practiced: families with many daughters can become wealthy. At some level, this elevates the status of girls. But as is the case in Indian and also Chinese culture, when the woman goes to live with her husband, she breaks ties with her family; she no longer belongs to her family, but to her husband's. All her work and effort go to the benefit of her husband

and his family, and they have control over her. Ines gave the example that when the wife's parents die, she must seek permission from her husband and his family before going to the funeral activities. If she does not receive their blessing, she cannot go.



*Ines at her workplace*

Despite the woman's obvious sacrifice in this arrangement, the man and his family frequently get angry about the burden of the high price of a woman. Sometimes he or

his family will beat or otherwise abuse the new bride, saying that she was not worth the price, or that her family demanded too much. It is this violence that the Women's Charter in the new constitution attempted to outlaw.

Ines, a university-educated woman, was not at all in agreement with her family about her *barlake*, but she said she also wasn't interested in trying to protest it. She said her husband and she will live in Dili, away from the controlling grasp of their families. She also said that *barlake*

<sup>4</sup> Ines is from Manatuto and her man is from Ermera. I asked if the man's family would actually ship 12 cattle from Ermera to Manatuto, a three-hour drive. She assured me that they would, adding the cost of hiring several large trucks to the man's family's burden.

was between the two families, not between her and her husband. Other friends have confirmed that to me, one laughing at the thought: “The couple? They are completely irrelevant to the operation! They are way off on the sidelines! The *lia-nain* do the dealing and make the decisions, and the new couple may even be forgotten at times throughout the *barlake* process.”

Ines mentioned that there are some aspects of *barlake* that are positive for the woman. As examples, she pointed out that the two families are tied together by tight social bonds, and anything that happens to the woman will be known by all members of both families. She said it makes marriage a very serious thing, not casual and fleeting. In addition, she said that if a man decides he wants to leave his wife for another woman, his family would be required to pay twice the original price in order to send her home.

Others confirmed that, but also told me of rich regional kings who just put out cattle and money and acquired wife after wife. It seems the penalty is only in effect if you do not have the power to ignore it. In addition, it is common knowledge, even to Ines, that husbands and their families often treat wives very poorly. Domestic violence is rampant in East Timor. Apparently tight social bonds can exist side by side with domestic abuse.

Even more pertinent is that while the man gets a housekeeper and child rearer, amounting to even more freedom for him, the woman can be effectively caged by



*In the foreground of this photo you can see about 12 cattle (Asian water buffalo), a herd equivalent to the cattle portion of Ines' bride price.*

her *barlake*. The important concept pointed out by Ajiza and many other women is that many traditions leave the woman vulnerable under the law, having no rights similar to a man's.

A male friend of mine tried to explain that *barlake* makes a man respect his woman even more. The husband is made aware of how much his wife is worth and how much his family had to put out for her, so he will value her greatly. To my western feminist thinking, this theory smacks of the objectification of women. If a woman's value can be summed up with cattle, jewelry and cash, the underlying meaning is that she

is merely an item of wealth for trade, that is, less than human. I have found, however, that my friend's idea is widespread among both men and women. Another friend told me of women he knew that were dissatisfied with the amounts their families requested for their *barlake*. He said that many women feel that the *barlake* amount reflects on their self-worth.

None of the intellectual East Timorese women I know have this view. In fact, some are involved in educating and raising awareness among women in rural districts in order to change this mindset. They strive to let girls and



*Ines and her group of popular educators. Each focuses on a different area of education for local women, such as health, religion, local economics and literacy.*



*A few of the girls in Maria Lourdes' "Secular Institute of Brothers and Sisters in Christ" learning a dance. The girls in this institute learn religion and service to their communities.*

women see their value as humans, how the system is set up against them, and how to work together to change things.

The *barlake* issue underlines the vast distance between life in "the mountains" (as East Timor's small villages are collectively called) and life in the cities. Pamela and I went to the district of Covalima last year and met with many people to find out about the current situation. Two women we met left a big impression on me.

One was a member of the women's organization, OMT (*Organizacao da Mulher Timorese*)<sup>5</sup>, in a tiny mountain village called Fatululik. We have forgotten her name. Actually, Pamela and I started out talking to a group of village leaders that were all men. By and by, Pamela asked about the women's organizations operating in the village. The men described the women's activities, commended them highly, and went on talking about other village issues. After a bit of insistence, Pamela got one of the men to lead her to the house of the OMT woman, who turned out to be his wife. There the three of them sat and Pamela began to chat with the woman, who seemed very nervous, and tried to make her feel more comfortable. But every time Pamela asked her a question, the man would immediately speak up with the answer. Pamela took on the strategy of looking directly only at the woman and only minimally acknowledging the man's answers. The woman looked only at the man, and gave only the shortest of answers as the man continued his verbose description of the situation of women in his village.

After a time, Pamela hit upon another strategy. She

asked the man if he would mind leaving for a while so she could talk about a few "personal woman's issues" with his wife. He agreed and left the room. Though bad dynamics had already been established, Pamela tried her best to end the interview atmosphere and talk woman-to-woman. The local woman was very hesitant to talk about anything.

When Pam ran out of ideas, she thanked them both and began walking back to where I was still meeting with the men. The couple came behind her, the man talking anxiously to the woman. A bit later, the man approached Pamela and said his wife had something to ask Pamela. The woman hemmed and hawed and looked at her toes and eventually spoke up very softly. The village OMT needed a sewing machine, she said. Could Pamela get them one? The man, who had been standing by watching carefully, then jumped in and elaborated on the great need.

In stark contrast to the woman in Fatululik was another woman we met in the city of Suai, capital of Covalima district. Maria Freitas is the head of OMT for the district and was one of the National Council representatives from Covalima. We met her in her home which had been burned by the Indonesian military-led militia in 1999. We sat on simple wooden chairs in a bleak room with a dirt floor and talked with Maria for quite a while. She was impressive. She told us harrowing stories of her narrow escape from the militia in 1999, and about various programs the OMT was planning and implementing in Covalima. She told us how the village chiefs (men) would often siphon off money sent for women's projects in their villages and various other problems women in

<sup>5</sup>Set up in 1998, OMT was the women's branch of CNRT (Conselho Nacional Resistencia Timorese), an umbrella organization for all East Timor's political parties. I described the rise and fall of CNRT in my newsletter #5 of May 2001. Many OMT women came from the much older OPMT, and many continue to work with OPMT. Both were very active in the clandestine resistance movement. Today the two organizations still exist, though in many places they have merged.

her district faced. All the while, she was nursing a baby hanging in a cloth sling around her shoulder and ordering her various siblings and cousins around to bring us coffee and snacks. Dinner was being prepared in the kitchen out back, and she was obviously in charge of that operation too. Her husband came through on his way out and spoke with us for a few minutes. I got the immediate impression that they treat each other as equals, an impression I have seldom had here in East Timor.

With a population of less than 20,000, Suai is no metropolis, and Fatululik is only a five-hour walk or a three-hour drive from Suai. Still, the distance between the lives of these two East Timorese women is enormous. For the women of Fatululik and other mountain villages to gain the same social status and personal power as Maria will require monumental change.

Mana Micato and others I've spoken with are not optimistic about possibilities for rapid change, or the new government leading such change. They speak of the weight of thousands of years of history and tradition, men still well in charge of most community affairs, and the fact that the new government will not be trusted or respected until it has proven itself.

At the same time, there are many reasons for optimism. The Woman's Charter is a powerful bit of legislation — more powerful than anything women have written into United States law books. At nearly 30 percent, the women on the Constituent Assembly are a significant minority and have plenty of support from groups in society. Programs to raise women's consciousness and education level are progressing steadily, if slowly, in many areas. My woman students appear just as dedicated and serious as the men. Many of the NGOs and UN agencies supporting women's rights and women's projects are not leaving with the end of UNTAET this May, and there is no sign that international solidarity with the women of East Timor is waning.

As Martin Luther King Jr. fiercely insisted, change does not happen automatically with time. For change to come, there must exist will to make change and there must be creative pressures against the status quo. I see in the women of East Timor incredible will, and I see the men of East Timor experiencing a sharp steady pressure. I feel sure change will come. □



*Women of my university physics class finding out about heat conduction in metal*

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