

THE ALOLA FOUNDATION

Organizational Overview and Approach to Gender

The Alola Foundation is a large, high-profile East Timorese NGO based in Dili. It was founded by the First Lady of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL), Kirsty Sword Gusmão, in 2001.

Inspiration for the Foundation's name and mission comes from the story of Juliana dos Santos, known as 'Alola'. In 1999 14-year-old Alola was abducted by militia and taken from her hometown of Suai to West Timor. There she was incarcerated and subject to repeated rape. She continues to be held in West Timor. Ms Sword Gusmão has been involved in advocating for Alola's rights to cross-border reunion with her parents and free choice about her future. Upon establishment, the Alola Foundation's most immediate priority drew directly from this case: campaigning and building public consciousness about violence perpetrated against women and girls in Timor-Leste.

Motto of the Alola Foundation: Strong Women, Strong Nation

Vision of the Alola Foundation: Empowering women in Timor-Leste through cultural, economic, human and community development.

Alola Foundation, *Alola Foundation Strategy*, 2006.

The Alola Foundation's current mission extends beyond this initial focus on gender-based violence. Its overarching concern is with the needs, participation and status of women and children in the development of the East Timorese nation, as expressed in its motto, 'strong women, strong nation'. The organization primarily directs its work through the family unit, with a strong emphasis on women's roles as mothers, and through women's community organizations such as small enterprise collectives and mother's groups. The aim of this work is to encourage women's leadership and their ability to effectively act upon their needs based on current realities, rather than a radical transformation of women's gender roles.

The Alola Foundation utilizes a women's empowerment approach, positioning women as active agents able to work together in order to decide upon, articulate and fulfil their own needs. Alola's program areas have been developed in response to direct contact with women. Much of the organization's work looks to realize some of the most basic and immediate needs of women and children in Timor-Leste—for example, maternal and child health requirements and income—often where formal political processes are unable or unwilling to operate.

While significantly based in Dili, the Alola Foundation works across the 13 districts of Timor-Leste through its various networks, including Mothers' Support Groups, weaving co-operatives, the 'Friendship Schools' project and granting scholarships to female students.

The Alola Foundation employs East Timorese and foreign staff. While the majority of the 14 program staff are East Timorese women and men, the organization is headed by an Australian CEO, Anne Bunning, while Kirsty Sword Gusmão is the Chairwoman of the Board of Directors. The Board includes other high-profile names such as Maria Olandina Caeiro Alves,

women's rights activist currently working with the Indonesian-Timor-Leste Truth and Friendship Commission, and Milena Pires, UNIFEM Country Director in Timor-Leste.

As an East Timorese NGO the Alola Foundation is in the unique position of being founded and supported by Ms Sword Gusmão, who has strong access to both East Timorese and international communities, with Australia providing a strong fundraising and support base. Alola is also able to draw financial support from individuals through its online donation and regular direct debit facilities. A variety of other organizations provide funding for particular program activities, from large United Nations agencies such as UNFPA and UNICEF, to small community organizations and NGOs in Australia and beyond.

Programs

Since its establishment in 2001, the Alola Foundation has developed and refined five program areas: maternal and child health, education, economic development, advocacy and management. Each of these program areas has been strategically designed to answer to key aspects of the Foundation's mission. Alola also has various partnerships with East Timorese women's community groups and NGOs, providing them with funding and other forms of support.

The Alola Foundation has obtained new funding and 2007 will see several new programs, as well as the enhancement of existing activities such as Alola's Economic Development program. Alola will also introduce a new small grants program to enable women to run health projects in their communities. These grants will be primarily directed towards Alola's existing networks; for example, the Mothers' Support Groups. Moreover, Alola recently expanded its office space and added new childcare facilities. This childcare is offered to Alola staff to complement the organization's policy of three months' paid maternity leave and to encourage the continuation of breastfeeding. Furthermore, childcare workers will be trained to carry this childcare model into other organizations.

The following is a short summary of Alola's current programs:

Maternal and Child Health

This program area is primarily concerned with addressing Timor-Leste's high maternal and child mortality rates through health service provision, community organizing and educational campaigns. One key initiative is the promotion of the breastfeeding of infants, partly by encouraging the formation of Mothers' Support Groups across the country. The 'Maternity Packs' project represents another major activity, primarily based in Dili and Baucau. In this project, packages of basic goods, such as clothing and sanitary items, are distributed to pregnant women. These are designed to encourage women to give birth in hospital, thereby receiving professional medical support.

Education

The Alola Foundation seeks to increase formal and informal educational opportunities for women and girls in part via co-ordinated provision of three-year scholarships for around 800 female school and university students, particularly from rural areas. The 'Friendship Schools' project links schools in Timor-Leste with partner schools in Australia in order to facilitate

learning between communities. Schools in Australia are provided with materials to ensure the inclusion of learning about Timor-Leste in the curriculum.

Economic Development

The aim of the Economic Development Program is to ‘empower women to achieve economic independence’ (Alola Foundation website, ‘Economic Development Program’, February 2007). In terms of program activities, Alola seeks to support women’s small enterprise as well as help to maintain cultural traditions, particularly through women’s handcrafts such as the weaving of the traditional Timorese fabric *tais*. Alola now has a small handcrafts shop at the rear of its main office in Dili.

As an organization, Alola positions itself as a leader in the field of women’s economic development, providing employment opportunities and ensuring its staff are supported in their roles as family carers. Employment in program activities is created where possible, such as the twenty positions supporting the production of maternity packs, or the ten women employed to produce the reusable sanitary pads distributed to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps during the 2006 crisis.

Advocacy

The Alola Foundation advocates for women’s rights, health, opportunities and access to humanitarian assistance. It has focused its advocacy activities through its Women’s Resource Centre. Alola supports annual campaigns and advocacy opportunities such as 16 Days of Activism Against Violence and International Women’s Day. As part of the 2006 16 Days of Activism Against Violence campaign, Alola held a public ceremony with widows of the crisis, mainly comprised of women who had lost husbands from the police and armed forces. The widows presented a statement of their needs to the then-Prime Minister, Dr Jose Ramos Horta. The Government has recently committed to providing ongoing pensions for the widows. In May 2007 Alola and the widows launched ‘Memory Books’ which capture the stories and voices of the women who lost loved ones during the PNTL massacre, one year before. Alola continues to facilitate monthly meetings of these women.

The Women’s Resource Centre is a public space available to women. It contains a library of resources, two public computers, opportunities to develop particular skills, from using a computer to leadership. Further, it acts as a network focal point for women’s advocacy. Through the Women’s Resource Centre the Alola Foundation also distributes humanitarian assistance in the form of goods to women in need. In February 2007 the Women’s Resource Centre moved into a new, larger space. It is hoped that this will provide greater opportunity to move away from a model of humanitarian assistance to encouraging women’s groups with particular interests, such as the widows of the crisis, to meet together and act upon their own needs. The meeting space will also be freely available to existing women’s networks.

From April 2007 the Advocacy program has employed six District Support Workers (DSWs) to support and build stronger connections between Alola-associated women’s networks across the country, such as Mothers’ Support Groups and Handcrafts groups. These co-ordinators will work in Lautem, Viqueque, Baucau, Liquiça, Ermera and Manatuto, with Alola having a view to expanding to the seven remaining districts over the next two years. This DSW initiative aims to strengthen the capacity of women’s groups to actively participate in the leadership and development of their communities.

Management

This program area is focused on the structures and practices of the organization itself to ensure responsiveness to women's needs, transparency, efficiency, effective management and concern for staff.

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