

## **FOKUPERS (Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Timor Lorosa'e)**

### **Organizational Overview and Approach to Gender**

FOKUPERS (Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Timor Lorosa'e, or East Timor Women's Communication Forum) is a high-profile East Timorese NGO, one of a small group of women's national organizations that began prior to 1999. It was established in 1997 by around 15 women and men from various organisations as part of the existing human rights organization Yayasan HAK (Yayasan Hukum, Hak Asasi dan Keadilan or the Foundation of Law, Human Rights and Justice). Prior to the referendum held in 1999, FOKUPERS primarily worked with women who were victims of forms of violence related to the independence struggle, in instances where violence had been perpetrated against the women or against their husbands.

In the post-referendum environment FOKUPERS gained significant access to funding from international organizations. Consequently it separated from HAK in December 1999 to become an NGO in its own right. While FOKUPERS has maintained support for female survivors of violence in pre- and post-1999 contexts, the organization now primarily concentrates its efforts supporting those who have suffered forms of violence within the East Timorese community, particularly domestic and sexual violence.

FOKUPERS views its focus on violence against women as part of a broader struggle for women's liberation from patriarchal structures and for women's rights. While the organization considers that this struggle has been greatly enabled by national independence, there is still much work to be done. In particular, the organization wants to foster a mentality in women where they work to liberate themselves; however, FOKUPERS is of the view that this liberation cannot occur without the support of men and broader community structures. As such, for FOKUPERS there is a great need to ensure that East Timorese communities understand that the pursuit of gender equality necessitates the involvement of and changes in both women and men.

During its history FOKUPERS has had several high-profile leaders. These include Maria Domingas Alves (known commonly as 'Micato'), who was the Office for the Promotion of Equality's first Advisor to the Prime Minister until 2006, and Manuela Leong Pereira, who began working voluntarily with FOKUPERS' safe room during the Indonesian occupation. Rosa de Sousa is FOKUPERS' current director, replacing Manuela at the beginning of 2007.

FOKUPERS is based in Dili and undertakes work in several other districts, as outlined below.

### **Programs**

#### ***During the Indonesian Occupation***

FOKUPERS was established at a time when there was increasing civil-society organizing around human rights and women's rights in Timor-Leste. This was often undertaken by a younger generation of independence supporters educated in the Indonesian system and was influenced by a range of international factors, including the *reformasi* period in Indonesia and greater access to international human rights discourses.

After attending a workshop about women's reproductive rights and sexual violence committed by the Indonesian military, some individuals saw a need to pay particular attention to these issues, not least as the independence movement was not paying attention to them. These activists became the founding members of FOKUPERS.

Prior to the independence vote of 1999, FOKUPERS' members (volunteers, many of whom were civil servants) concentrated primarily on giving forms of support to female victims of the independence struggle. This included victims of Indonesian military violence, female ex-prisoners and women whose husbands had been incarcerated or had lost their lives. FOKUPERS ran a secret safe house in Dili directly opposite an Indonesian military compound. They also worked to disseminate information regarding women's rights and forms of violations, including through a regular bulletin. By focusing on working with women, FOKUPERS was able to move between clandestine and open activity.

In November 1998 FOKUPERS and other women's organizations held the first East Timorese women's conference, the Conference on the Image of East Timorese Women. Topics for discussion included violations of women's rights committed by the Indonesian military and domestic violence. FOKUPERS quickly followed this conference with a large seminar in Tetun and a public demonstration about violence against women to coincide with the United Nations Day against Violence against Women, on 25 November.

### ***The Post-Referendum Environment***

In September 1999 FOKUPERS' office and all its documentation were destroyed. After reorganizing following the violence and destruction of 1999, the members travelled to each of the thirteen districts, gathered testimonies from women who had suffered rights violations during the Indonesian occupation and offered counselling and other forms of support. FOKUPERS concentrated on the areas that its members regarded as having the heaviest caseloads of female victims, namely Maliana, Liquica, Suai and Ermera.

As well as enabling its organizational independence and salaries for previous volunteers, the new nation-building environment meant important changes for FOKUPERS in terms of program priorities. A focus on Indonesian military violations of women's rights was superseded by a need to critically address the conditions within East Timorese society so as to enable the liberation of women. Whereas domestic violence within East Timorese society was rarely publicly discussed as a problem during the Indonesian occupation, FOKUPERS decided to make this one of their new priority areas. This shift in focus was influenced by a new socio-political environment, particularly the attention given by the United Nations transitional authority to women's rights and gender issues.

### ***Current Programs***

FOKUPERS has three current program areas, as follows:

#### ***To Accompany and Support Women Who Have Experienced Violence***

FOKUPERS provides counselling, safe house or shelter facilities for longer-term stays, community mediation, and guidance and support throughout formal legal processes. It is part of the Gender-Based Violence Referral Network, which has been formed to co-ordinate

organizations that provide support to victims (including the Vulnerable Persons Unit of the police, PRADET's Fatin Hakmatek and JSMP's Victim Support Services).

### *Publication Education Activities*

Part of this work is targeted at groups of victims and community groups in the districts. It is focused on human rights, women's rights and gender, including discussion of gender-based violence. The other aspect of the public education program is directed more broadly at the East Timorese national community, through discussion forums, workshops, a monthly bulletin published in Tetun and a regular radio program.

### *Supporting the Community Organizing of Women's Groups*

FOKUPERS supports groups in Ermera, Liquica, Maliana and Suai that run safe houses, which provide shelter and assistance to women who have experienced violence. Through training, FOKUPERS has helped to facilitate a voluntary community organizer in each of the locations. FOKUPERS encourages each of the groups to carefully identify the problems they face and to find resolutions themselves. Until the groups are ready to operate on their own, a FOKUPERS staff member works with the community organizer for three weeks every month.

FOKUPERS has attempted this model across a number of locations with much success and some frustration. The extent of success is attributed to the self-sufficient spirit of the local communities and their histories of dependence on national and international organizations. Particular success has been experienced in Liquica, Maliana and Suai, where groups of survivors of violence have organized themselves into strong, cohesive units. They may, for example, work with their community on agricultural activities and share the profits. In Suai and Maliana survivors of violence now provide assistance to other women experiencing violence, sometimes accompanying them to the police or referring them to organizations such as FOKUPERS. At other times they may instead sit with the parties involved to assist with the mediation of the conflict. These women are seen in these communities as sufficiently skilled and experienced to adjudicate local problems or to offer constructive advice to those in mediation positions, such as the *xefi suco*. Some of the groups have also undertaken advocacy activities, including a successful campaign to have a nurse assigned to their local community.

### **Contacts**

Tel: (670) 332 1534  
Email: fokupers2003@yahoo.com  
Address: Rua Gov. Celestino da Silva 27, Farol, Dili

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