

ORGANIZAÇÃO POPULAR DA MULHER TIMORENSE (OPMT)

Organizational Overview and Approach to Gender

Organização Popular da Mulher Timorese (known by its acronym OPMT or in English as the Popular Organization of East Timorese Women) was the first East Timorese mass women's movement. It was established as the women's arm of the Fretilin political party on 28 August 1975, directly following the civil war between Fretilin and UDT. OPMT was founded by young radical women, often educated in Portugal, including Rosa Bonaparte and Isabel Lobato, the wife of Fretilin president Nicolau Lobato. Founding members identified a need for an organization that could complement Fretilin's struggle against the effects of colonialism with a struggle against patriarchy. Bonaparte and Lobato, along with other OPMT members, were killed within the first two days of the Indonesian military invasion.

OPMT's overall mission was the liberation of women. Prior to Indonesian invasion, OPMT worked to respond to the emergency conditions that followed the civil war and to assist the politicisation of women in relation to colonialism and patriarchy. Issues such as polygamy and *barlaki*, the 'bride price' associated with marriage practices, were identified as areas of social life requiring change. Programs included literacy campaigns, childcare and political socialisation of Fretilin's ideology amongst women.

After the Indonesian invasion OPMT worked closely with Fretilin and its armed wing Falintil. Some women joined male Falintil fighters and took up arms; others played critical roles in the clandestine and armed struggles through ensuring access to food and medical treatment, and creating reliable information flows. Many OPMT members suffered greatly for their involvement in the struggle, including being subjected to rape, violence and killings at the hands of Indonesian military.

Previous OPMT programs in the areas of literacy and health also managed to continue during the time of Indonesian occupation. Portuguese was and continues to be the language of choice for OPMT. While OPMT established a substantial presence across Timor-Leste during the occupation, women's access to leadership positions within Fretilin remained limited.

In 1998 East Timorese organizations and parties seeking national independence came together under an umbrella organization led by ex-Fretilin member and Falintil leader Xanana Gusmão. This organization was named Conselho Nacional da Resistência Timorese (CNRT or the National Council of Timorese Resistance). A women's arm of CNRT was formed, the Organização da Mulher Timorese (the Organization of Timorese Women or OMT), designed to be similarly non-partisan and inclusive.

OPMT agreed to be subsumed within OMT. However with the dissolution of CNRT prior to the Constituent Assembly elections held in 2001, OPMT reformed as part of Fretilin. Subsequently, many former members left OMT to return to OPMT. OPMT's current mission is similar to its original position—the emancipation of women in all aspects of life, achieved particularly through education and community organizing. OPMT recognises that patriarchal systems and gender inequality has continued after independence. However it views women's formal political representation, including the formation of the Office for the Promotion of Equality and policy initiatives of the Fretilin government, as being indicators of good progress.

Currently OPMT is in the unusual position of being an arm of the party forming government from 2002 to 2007 and being registered as an independent NGO. It seeks to integrate its program with the Government's and the current Secretary-General of OPMT is a Fretilin member of parliament. The organization's leadership has displayed little desire to become an independent, non-partisan organization, arguing that their history is tied up with Fretilin and that they have sufficient autonomy and decision-making freedom. According to OPMT leadership, being a party-affiliated NGO has had both advantages and disadvantages. Disadvantages include donors being reluctant to fund what they regard as a partisan women's organization. Advantages include access to the government.

OPMT's structures extend from the national level to the aldeia and suco level. At national, district and subdistrict levels there are co-ordinating councils and an executive secretary. At the national level there is also a secretariat and a finance committee, while at the aldeia and suco levels there is one co-ordinator and two vice co-ordinators. Program direction tends to be decided and communicated from the national level, with national members travelling to local communities or requesting local OPMT members to travel to Dili for participation in events or training. OPMT states that it does not know how many members it currently has, though numbers can still be considered significant given that female Fretilin members are usually by default also OPMT members.

Extensive information about OPMT's current programs is difficult to access. As well as supporting Fretilin's electoral campaigning, OPMT undertakes sewing and literacy programs in local communities. The sewing program is implemented by OPMT volunteers who teach skills to vulnerable women, such as widows and orphans, as a means of encouraging income generation. OPMT has partnered with government bodies to undertake women's literacy programs in different districts of Timor-Leste.

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