

# *Oan Kiak*: Women and Independence in Timor-Leste

**In the most isolated areas of Timor-Leste, women are providing a powerful counterpoint to the apparent failure of independence, write Anna Trembath and Damian Grenfell**

Men are so often identified as the dominant agents in the process of nation formation, not least through their relationship to public performances of violence in moments of war and revolt. This pattern appears to have continued in what is so often referred to as ‘the world’s newest nation’, Timor-Leste, which has over recent times experienced a tremendous level of political and violent turmoil. To a world watching via a globalised media, the images of clashes in the masculinised domain of the urban street and the gun battles by military and police serve to typify the kind of nation Timor-Leste is becoming: a violent and unpredictable place where women are shown only as victims or with their agency limited to their role as carers.

The relationship between nation formation and gender is, of course, a complex one, and certainly much more so than that suggested when images of a divided military apparatus act as a reductive framing of Timor-Leste as a whole. In narrow coverage of spectacular violence these narratives only speak in one way of what has been happening in Timor-Leste since the Indonesian withdrawal in 1999. To denounce Timor-Leste’s attempts at national independence on the basis of volatile state institutions overlooks many narratives of successful transformative processes, not least the agency shown by many women to ensure that national independence has also meant an opportunity to address patriarchal structures in society.



**Spokesperson Theresa de Jesus Fernandes (right) with Oan Kiak members in their kiosk. Photo: Anna Trembath and Damian Grenfell**

Few who have not visited Timor-Leste itself would realise the considerable activity of women’s organising. While of course, constrained by patriarchal structures, East Timorese women, from the political elite in Dili to rural women in the most remote areas, have found ways to foment change. In Timor-Leste, a striking level of public campaigning, policy development and activism has been taking place on the subject of gender; seemingly a far greater importance is attached to the subject in East Timorese public discourse than is the case in Australia. In practice, as elsewhere, gender-focused activity overwhelmingly means addressing the conditions of women’s lives. Largely based in Dili, a variety of East Timorese civil society organisations, such as the Alola Foundation, PRADET and FOKUPERS, promote programs to support women in diverse areas including literacy, maternal health care and support for those who have suffered different forms of violent abuse.

International non-government organisations (NGOs) such as Oxfam, Concern Worldwide and Caritas, and a range of United Nations agencies such as UNFPA, UNIFEM and UNDP, extend considerable resources to gender as part of their broader programs and policy advocacy. With the government’s Office for the Promotion of Equality, the women’s network Rede Feto, and FONGTIL (in English, the NGO Forum), there is a further complex array of organisational forms that often work together in various

policy-planning, programmatic, training, campaigning, advocacy and funding ways, and with local partner organisations throughout Timor-Leste. This complexity of gender-focused organisational activity is further extended by a complex set of ideological positions, political affiliations and histories, relations between locals and foreign workers, differences between East Timorese women, donor politics and a constant friction between modern and traditional social structures within East Timorese society.

Although much gender-related activity is driven from Dili, the political centre of the nation is not the sole domain for the expression of women's agency. Beyond the formal political rituals of the capital, a politics that seeks to change and improve the condition of women's lives can be found in many small rural communities 'out in the districts' (the euphemistic phrase used to describe those areas of Timor-Leste beyond the capital, ignoring that Dili itself is actually a district).

Maria Domingas Alves Soares, now Adviser to the Prime Minister on Gender Equality, has written of how:

[m]ore and more, women in rural areas are organising and demanding a voice in community decision-making and national policy-making ... show[ing] that women have the strength and skill to take leadership and contribute significantly to the development of a new, independent East Timor.

One of the most isolated rural communities in Timor-Leste is Barikafa, an *aldeia* (village) in the sub-district of Luro, located in the mountains at the eastern end of the island. A local women's collective, *Oan Kiak*, began in this community in 2003 and now has approximately thirty members. While a literal translation of 'Oan Kiak' is 'poor or orphaned child', culturally the phrase carries the meaning of 'the poor people of Timor'. A spokesperson for the group, Theresa de Jesus Fernandes, explains that they chose the name because the group 'had nothing, just the people'.

That the women had nothing, only themselves, is evident well before reaching Barikafa. Leaving behind all the noise of Dili — of taxis, DVD shops, newspaper and telephone card sellers — and all the restored grandeur of Portuguese architecture, it quickly becomes apparent that the reconstruction effort undertaken in the wake of the 1999 Indonesian withdrawal has been concentrated in the capital and, to a lesser extent, several major towns. From the narrow main road that skirts along the coast from the capital towards the east, a virtually unseen dirt road veers sharply off towards the island's mountainous interior. This road, a challenge to a four wheel drive even in the dry season, is dotted with remnant electricity poles, long stripped of their wiring by retreating armed forces. Tetun (one of the two national languages alongside Portuguese) is not widely known here, necessitating three-way translations for those unfamiliar with the local languages.

Barikafa is a spread-out collection of buildings that includes the more frequently used bamboo, wood and corrugated iron houses along with the distinctly traditional four-stilted homes for which the eastern end of Timor is renowned. Women across a range of ages tend the numerous small vegetable plots that fall on either side of the pathways winding between the homes. In Timor-Leste's subsistence farming communities, women carry heavy workloads — undertaking household tasks, caring for children and other dependent family members, as well as carrying out agricultural work necessary for food production. Framing and shaping the cultural parameters in which women live and work is a range of socio-historical factors that have entrenched patriarchy and have made social change to gender relations an extremely difficult task, a point made well by Emily Roynestad:

The majority [of East Timorese women] live in rural areas, in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society shaped by centuries of indigenous cultures and religious beliefs, and influenced also by the overlaying gendered impact of Portuguese colonialism and (mostly) Catholic Christianity. They have been marginalized from politics, and collective community agency has been hampered not only by cultural norms, but also by colonial and neo-colonial obstacles, felt most acutely over the last twenty-five years during the suffocating and brutal Indonesian occupation.

Oan Kiak developed initially as a tais weaving group. *Tais* is the traditional textile of Timor and while it is worn by both women and men, it is typically woven on a backstrap loom by women who pass the skills and knowledge to daughters. It can take months to produce a high quality piece, and is part of many cultural rituals, including the exchange of gifts between the families of the bride and groom during marriage ceremonies.

For Oan Kiak, the act of coming together to practice weaving skills represented a significant social opportunity. Yet sales of their *tais*, especially to foreigners who work in or visit Timor-Leste, was also seen as a way for the women to raise much-needed revenue and gain some economic independence. Given Barikafa's isolation from the capital, however, the selling of tais has proven an extremely difficult task.

In 2003, Oan Kiak was able to adapt its practices significantly due to contact with the international NGO Concern Worldwide, which was undertaking broader consultation with communities in Luro sub-district at that time. Concern Worldwide aims to reach the poorest people within national communities and to support them to become self-sustaining. For Concern in Timor-Leste, Luro had been identified as one of the most isolated communities with some of the highest degrees of absolute poverty. Oan Kiak decided to focus on starting a small kiosk rather than pursue the sole economic aim of selling *tais*. Concern subsequently provided the group with cash support of only US\$150, help in reconstructing a small building and some planning support. While many kiosks originating from microfinance schemes have struggled in Timor-Leste, the kiosk operated by Oan Kiak has been highly successful on a range of fronts. It provides local people an alternative or supplementary supply of goods that is far more accessible than the weekly market some twelve kilometres away (reached on foot). Vitality, the work by the collective has meant that money has been able to stay within the community. As the financial records publicly displayed on the kiosk walls attest, by mid-2005 the kiosk had accumulated a kitty of US\$2300.

Beyond this straightforward financial success, the small co-operative experience and profit generation gained through the kiosk have enabled the women to pursue other projects and goals. Oan Kiak later established a communal garden, developed a poultry raising enterprise and purchased a mechanical rice mill, which female members are trained to use and maintain. The community as a whole has access to the mill to process their dried rice and corn for a minimal cost, which is directed back into Oan Kiak's pool of earnings.

Oan Kiak's activities assist in alleviating the absolute poverty of such communities, allowing the group to forward-plan as well as to loan money to individual community members at the minimal interest rate of 1 per cent. This loan system has already aided community members to cover the cost of children's school fees — a sum that is often very difficult for subsistence farmers to accumulate at any one time.

While on the surface the kiosk and subsequent undertakings could be understood as meeting practical community needs, changes in material conditions have led to important cultural changes as well. Reflecting upon their group's progress, the women of Oan Kiak explain with pride that while before 1999, visitors to Barikafa would have been received only by men, now it is they who are able to introduce visitors to their community. More generally, and in an unprecedented manner, women collectively control services that are now integral to the livelihood of the community, adopting leadership positions beyond their traditional gendered roles.

The management of the kiosk has also created the demand for basic numeracy and literacy development, with the women holding regular classes to advance various skill sets. Many of the members, most with no or minimal formal education, can now write their names and use basic bookkeeping methods to keep track of the income generated (rather than placing the coin received for an item next to the type of product sold, the previous technique for recording sales).

International organisations such as Concern are able to make positive contributions by accepting that groups such as Oan Kiak will adapt and change over a period of time, rather than dictating the

implementation of programs. Moreover, Concern has been able to adjust its practices to respond to the needs articulated by the women, such as providing support for a local teacher.

While groups like Oan Kiak face extraordinary challenges, such endeavours demonstrate how East Timorese women form the centre-point in a broad, difficult and uneven social transformation of women's lives, driving the process across the day-to-day. This counters any assumption that it has been Westerners who have 'brought' modern feminism to Timor-Leste as part of 'nation-building' undertaken by international organisations.

In speaking about the development of Oan Kiak, Theresa de Jesus Fernandes explains that with national independence came the possibility to press for greater opportunities for women. That the women of Oan Kiak, like many others, saw a historical moment in which claims and changes could be pressed for, and were in turn able to adapt and draw in support from international organisations, demonstrates that these women have a clear capacity to challenge dominant social and cultural structures.

Such narratives disrupt the broader projection of East Timorese being 'unable' to govern themselves, and show that any suggestion of state-failure needs to be contained so that it does not represent all aspects of East Timorese society. Oan Kiak illustrates that even in the most isolated areas of Timor-Leste women are looking to redefine their own communities — and in turn the nation through its formative years — in ways that are inclusive of women. In a period of violent contestation over access to state power and national meaning, it would be a mistake to overlook these narratives while making sweeping conclusions about the failure of Timor-Leste's attempts at independence.

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