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To cite this article: Sara Niner, Deborah Cummins, Selver B. Sahin, Stella Mulder & Emily Morrison (2022) Women's Political Participation in Post-conflict Settings: The Case of Timor-Leste, *Asian Studies Review*, 46:2, 293-311, DOI: [10.1080/10357823.2021.1973365](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1973365)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1973365>



Published online: 22 Sep 2021.



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## Women's Political Participation in Post-conflict Settings: The Case of Timor-Leste

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### ABSTRACT

Tackling gender gaps in political representation is a key pillar of peace building and development interventions in conflict-affected environments, which has been addressed using special measures (e.g., gender quotas and reserved seats). We argue that although this is a necessary first step, these interventions privilege descriptive or quantitative indicators that may not equate to the substantive participation of women. Instead, a focus on qualitative transformation of deeply entrenched inequitable social structures is required. Our argument is illustrated by the case study of Timor-Leste, where control of political institutions is held by a small group of privileged, male leaders, legitimised by a rigidly defined social hierarchy. We argue that any special measures need to be accompanied by social change that provides equality of opportunity for participants within political parties, political institutions and electoral systems. By providing this analysis the article aims to contribute to the discussion of the ways in which gendered structural limitations can be better identified and addressed to promote more effective participation by women in politics in post-conflict settings.

### KEYWORDS

Gender gaps; gender and development; political representation; women's political participation; Timor-Leste; Southeast Asia

## Introduction

Women's right 'to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government' was declared in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which has since been ratified by nearly every UN member state. It declares that 'without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved' (UN, 1995, para. 181). CEDAW Recommendation No. 5 explicitly refers to the term 'temporary special measures' as 'positive action, preferential treatment, or quota systems to advance women's integration into education, the economy, politics, and employment' (CEDAW, 1988).

The Beijing Platform for Action was declared at the 1995 United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women and recognised the centrality of women's political representation to the attainment of peace and development objectives. Women's formal and substantive political participation in public offices and political decision-making

processes enables the inclusion of the concerns and priorities of women in policymaking and facilitates progress towards the creation of inclusive, equitable, just and sustainable societies. Building on these advances, the 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 called on member states to ensure women's full participation in national, regional and international institutions (UNSC, 2000). Yet often these global top-down pronouncements and policies do not change the culture of institutions or translate into effective action at local levels. Not only do the formal political structures need to change to include more women and extend equal opportunities to them, but the informal, social and cultural systems of custom and belief within which women politicians must work also need to be targeted. This is a much more complex task.

The extent of women's participation in political life is shaped by formal rules such as constitutions, laws and regulations, electoral systems, candidate selection procedures and processes within political parties, but also operates within informal constraints such as values, conventions, customs and codes of behaviour. The use of special measures such as legislative gender quotas and reserved seats in parliaments and political party quotas has been most effective at the formal level. Increased numbers of women have been employed in public offices; greater numbers of women have been elected as parliamentarians; and in some cases, such as in post-conflict Rwanda, even majority-female legislatures have been formed (Krook, 2009). In addition, community-focused programmes and projects have been implemented by local and international civil society organisations to transform discriminatory attitudes and norms in society, and in many cases attitudes towards gender roles, relations and violence have measurably improved (Ferrant & Fuiet, 2018). How should we consider these developments in terms of the transformation of gender-based injustices in politics and human development? We answer this question with an in-depth case study of the new nation of Timor-Leste which has implemented electoral gender quotas and as a result has more than a third of its national parliament comprised of women.

We argue that increasing the numbers of women in parliaments (or descriptive representation) privileges quantitative indicators (the numbers and percentages of women parliamentarians and leaders) and should be treated as a first step in the process. Instead, the qualitative transformation of deeply entrenched inequitable social structures, including beliefs and attitudes concerning gender roles, relations and attributes, needs to be addressed for the achievement of the substantive participation of women in politics. A wider transformation of gender power hierarchies is necessary to achieve gender justice beyond the formal legal or constitutional recognition of equal rights, creation of opportunities or access to material goods and services.

Participation takes different forms, and qualitative or substantive participation only becomes possible when citizens have the power to impact outcomes. Power does not originate from access to or possession of relevant material resources, but from an ability to exercise agency, choice and control within social and political structures (Batliwala, 1994, 129; 2019). The empowerment of women can only be achieved through structural changes in power relations, enabling greater access to resources and control by women, shifts in consciousness and the capacity to imagine and formulate strategies for change (Kabeer, 2005). Furthermore, women cannot be conceived as a coherent group of individuals with common agency (Goetz, 2007; Kabeer, 2005). Focusing solely on descriptive or quantitative indicators runs the risk of formulating strategies that may

produce new forms of injustice for some women or re-entrench existing power relations in society. We will show these complexities with our case study of women's political leadership in Timor-Leste.

Gender and development in Timor-Leste have been the subject of both academic study and policy development since the early 2000s, when the country turned into a 'test case . . . even a laboratory case' for the UN and other international agencies that hoped to see a 'utopian transformation' (Kammen, 2009) of the post-conflict environment in almost every sphere of social life. In 2006, the East Timorese parliament introduced an electoral quota of 30 per cent for women, which paved the way for the election of 38 per cent female lawmakers in the national parliament. This strong level of female representation led to several tangible achievements, the most notable of which was the passage of an internationally progressive law against domestic violence in 2010. Significant effort has also gone into raising public awareness to address the structural roots of unequal gender relations in the country that underlie the high levels of violence against women. Yet despite strong levels of activism and changes to electoral laws under an internationally supported gender and development agenda, many Timorese women continue to face persistent injustices in political representation.

By providing empirically grounded background knowledge on the structural dynamics of gender-related interventions, this paper aims to contribute to the discussion of the ways in which these structural limitations can be better identified and addressed to promote more effective participation by women in politics. The discussion and findings in this article are also influenced by the many years of research, fieldwork and participation in ongoing development and research projects in Timor-Leste by the authors (Cummins, 2011; 2012; 2014; IWDA, 2019; Niner, 2011; 2017a; 2017b; 2020; Niner et al., 2019; Niner & Loney, 2020; Sahin & Feaver, 2013; Sahin, 2014). These data and previous findings about gender relations and women's political participation in Timor-Leste have been reanalysed according to current discourse and approaches to tackling intractable gender inequality in political institutions around the world, as part of the planning and design of a gender and development intervention to increase women's political participation in Timor-Leste. The case of Timor-Leste is both informative and relevant for understanding the historical and social aspects of the emerging opportunities and remaining barriers for women's political representation and leadership in conflict-affected environments because it is the combination of formal and informal structural inequalities that determines the types of emerging outcomes.

The article begins by outlining the conceptual framework of gender and development and the theory relevant to women's substantive political participation, including a discussion of informal gendered power structures. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the implementation of relevant policy interventions in Timor-Leste since independence.

## **A Conceptual Framework of Power, Gender and Women's Substantive Political Participation**

Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere . . . Power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession. It is the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1998, 93).

Our analysis relies on the understanding of gender relations as the hierarchical relations of power between men and women that operate in all aspects of life, or ‘everywhere’ as Foucault says above, and usually favour men, most commonly within patriarchal systems. These relations operate within gendered social structures and hierarchies created by systematic categorisation of gender dualisms in the ordering and organising of social activities such as the division of labour and the allocation of resources and political positions of power (Risman, 2004). Hierarchies are culturally articulated through a discourse of differences between men and women, often represented as natural biological attributes and enshrined through customary practices. Such power relations shape people’s lives, determining ‘who does what work and how all work is gendered and differentially valorized’ (Peterson, 2011, 443). Women have a generally weaker socioeconomic position because of their greater share of unpaid work in the home and in agriculture in many societies, and their hours in feminised, devalorised, low-paid work, all of which have significant implications for their health, well-being and future opportunities.

Loci of power in societies can be found by tracing both control of material resources such as assets, land or finances, and access to and influence on political decision-making and policy. Significantly, assets that determine both control and access include access to human resources (e.g., people, labour and bodies), knowledge resources (e.g., literacy, education, access to information) and less visible resources such as the availability of and memberships in social support networks, connections of influence, and the exercise of agenda-setting capacity (Batliwala, 2007). When applied to the formation of gendered power structures, this notion of power suggests that once a group of actors gains greater control over financial and knowledge resources, they can then use this power to assert control over the action and labour of others (Batliwala, 2007). In this unequal power structure, which is justified and maintained through ideologies (e.g., patriarchy, ethnicity, race), social rules (e.g., gendered upbringing) and institutions (e.g., the family, state, market, education and media), even a poor man might be more powerful than a poor woman if he controls the woman’s body and actions (Batliwala, 2019).

A major strategy for achieving gender equality or gender justice includes increasing women’s participation in political decision-making and leadership, which contributes to the construction of the societal conditions of sustainable human development (Cornwall & Goertz, 2005; Kabeer, 2005; Rahmena, 1992; Rai, 2012). Countries with an increased number of women in their legislatures have experienced remarkable improvements in poverty reduction (Wilber, 2011), economic productivity (Baskaran et al., 2018), reproductive health-care services and protection from domestic violence (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006), and a reduction in maternal mortality rates (Bhalotra et al., 2018). The introduction of gender quotas has been one of the widely used methods to create more inclusive politics and promote social transformation. More than 100 countries have adopted some form of quota policy (such as reserved parliamentary or party seats, or legislative quotas) to increase the selection and election of women to political office (Krook & Zetterberg, 2014, 3). For instance, the Philippines legislated gender quotas in 1991, and today the proportion of female political leaders is more than double that of Japan, where no such measures exist (Gupta et al., 2019).

While Joshi and Kingma (2013) explain culture and attitudes to women’s leadership as powerful constraints on women’s formal political participation, they highlight that for women’s substantive representation to begin to occur, political institutions such as parliaments, electoral systems and political parties must be inclusive of women. Increasing

women's descriptive participation is certainly necessary but is not alone sufficient to address historically and culturally embedded forms of disadvantage for women (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). Along with quotas, additional strategies serve as an important complement, expanding the pool of potential female candidates and promoting a wider transformation in public views regarding women in politics (Franceschet et al., 2012; Krook, 2015). The degree to which substantive participation occurs depends on how it is defined and put into practice or who gets to participate and how. For instance, in South Africa the women's movement has encouraged its members to enter politics (Kabeer, 2005). Alternatively, Cornwall and Goetz (2005) advocate for 'women's political apprenticeship' through experience in political parties, civil society organisations and more informal processes so political skills and constituencies are progressively built up: 'building new pathways into politics, fostering political learning and creating new forms of articulation across and beyond existing democratic spaces'.

Hence, strategising for the social transformation of gender relations to achieve gender justice must focus on more than the formal recognition and extension of human rights, laws, quotas and opportunities or access to goods and services, because the ability to exercise rights and opportunities is shaped by much more. To ensure women's substantive political participation some adjustment or renegotiation of gendered power hierarchies must occur within the social and cultural practices and institutions in which they are reproduced, such as parliaments and political parties.<sup>1</sup> The overriding goal both of feminism and of gender and development programmes is gender equity, whereby men and women have similar opportunities – equal access to resources, education and work, and the ability (and freedom) to direct their own lives. The establishment of gender equity usually requires reforms to legislation, equal opportunity advocacy, and programmes and economic empowerment initiatives, but it also requires deep-seated changes to culture, a process that has proven much more difficult to induce. New approaches and interventions are more inclusive of men and multifarious, a condition that highlights the need to challenge existing hierarchies and relations and foster the empowerment of oppressed and marginalised groups (Oxfam, 2004, 8). According to Batliwala (2019), strategising social transformation to achieve gender justice requires recognition and addressing of visible and less visible forms and relations of power and the ways in which they are internalised or accepted by people. Existing power structures and relations do not come into being in a vacuum or without effort, so it is necessary to make visible how inequalities between men and women have contextually been produced, to whose benefit they operate, and how they have been reinforced. Batliwala (2019) offers methods and tools with which to make these operations of power clear. The analysis of gender relations and hierarchies provided in this article is one tool to challenge inequality.

Furthermore, women cannot be taken as a 'coherent' group of individuals because gender intersects with other social categories, such as age, class, economics, race, ethnicity, sexuality and ability, and produces differences in interests (Goetz, 2007), particularly political interests, between women, even though it is possible to identify some common 'women's interests' (Sapiro, 1981). Consequently, focusing on numbers or percentages runs the risk of formulating strategies that may end up producing new forms of injustices for already marginalised women, and reinforcing unequal distribution of resources and re-entrenching inequalities in society. An intersectional approach is needed with different strategies for different groups of women (Crenshaw, 1989).

## Case Study: Women's Political Participation in Independent Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste formally became independent on 20 May 2002 following two and a half years of United Nations transitional rule, 24 years of post-colonial Indonesian occupation, and four centuries of colonial association with Portugal. Women's leadership changed throughout these eras and has been influenced by original indigenous beliefs and practices, blended with other values imposed during colonial and post-colonial periods and by the new nation-state of Timor-Leste (Niner, 2011). In post-conflict environments it is common for the male elite who have been successful in the conflict to work to maintain their privileged position through ideologies and belief systems such as re-entrenching patriarchal attitudes and practices (Niner, 2020). This process in the new nation of Timor-Leste is elaborated further below, followed by a description of the campaigning for the formal recognition of women's political leadership, along with the implementation and effects of quotas. The case study finally demonstrates the ongoing need for a transformation of informal gendered power structures to ensure the substantive participation of women political leaders and their representation at the local level. Some strategies are also suggested in this regard.

### Contextualising social power structures in Timor-Leste

There remains in contemporary society a strong association of women with the private, domestic sphere, while men are strongly associated with the public sphere (Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020, 7). Ospina and Hohe (2002) describe customary decision-making structures in Timorese villages (*suku*) as the exclusive domain of senior men from a *liurai* (customary chief) or *dato* (noble) family. The power and authority these male members of the upper class exercise is derived from a claim that their family is empowered to rule by custom because they are the first or original settlers in that area. In this setting, where senior women are assigned some 'symbolic and ritual power' (Niner, 2011, 417), less powerful women are not expected 'to be outspoken and take the floor in public meetings' (Ospina & Hohe, 2002, 110).

Living in this 'highly stratified social space' (Cummins, 2011), where people's ability to have an impact on decision-making is determined by age, class and kinship, Timorese women in rural areas carry the additional disadvantage of living in a system of patriarchal inheritance of land entitlements and other possessions (Sousa, 2001). This widely accepted social hierarchy, through which the exercise of the real power and leadership authority by a small group of predominantly male elites is legitimated, is reinforced by the ability to trace family lineage. As most women in Timor-Leste 'marry out' and join their husband's family in a new village (*suku*) or hamlet (*aldeia*), they become known as *feto foun* (new/young women) who are not seen as legitimate potential leaders due to coming from another lineage (Silva, 2012).

The status of women during the Indonesian occupation (1975–1999) is a subject of contention. Women have commonly been portrayed as 'victims' and 'martyrs' during the fight for independence, yet women played extremely important organisational, logistical and political roles during the resistance, including in armed combat (Niner, 2017a, 4). Women's sacrifices and contributions to the resistance to Indonesian occupation have not been fully acknowledged in the post-conflict environment (Niner & Loney, 2020). It

is estimated that more than 60 per cent of the clandestine movement, which became far larger than the dwindling armed resistance, was comprised of women engaged in activity critical to the fight for independence who risked physical and sexual violence to keep channels of communication and supplies open (Cristalis & Scott, 2005). Yet, women are startlingly absent from the displays in the contemporary Timorese Resistance Archive and Museum (Arquivo ho Museu da Resistência Timorese – AMRT), which focuses on the senior male leadership of the *armed* resistance, particularly those who hold powerful positions in the new state. New state institutions in the independence era have been dominated by the first generation of male political elites who represent societal interests such as guerrillas, returned diaspora, descendants of *liurai* and other historically privileged groups. In contemporary Timor it remains socially unacceptable for women to publicly contest men's power. Invisible social control is exerted using ingrained customary practices, by a powerful political leadership that defines socially restricted roles for women in the new institutions of state. This also works to limit participation psychologically through an internalised feeling of subordination, social exclusion and inequality.

### **The post-conflict setting**

The violent withdrawal of Indonesian forces following the announcement in September 1999 of the results of the UN-sponsored vote for independence resulted in the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which was mandated to build Timor-Leste's self-governing democratic institutions. UNTAET and other international agencies experimented with laying the institutional foundations of a liberal democratic transformation to a 'blank slate'. The newly emerging state was not a blank slate but rather a highly contested site of social and political conflict fuelled by competition for power and resources including the distribution of aid and employment opportunities, and property disputes (Jones, 2010). In this contentious political environment, guerrilla and resistance leaders, returning educated diaspora, Indonesian-educated youth groups and other male-dominated interest groups were struggling to dominate control of state power and resources.

A wide range of international agencies entered Timor-Leste to help rebuild, and along with local civil society organisations began to work on issues of gender equality. Much of this activity was focused on reducing violence against women and girls; increasing women's access to health, particularly reproductive health, and education; and establishing economic opportunities. Much of this early work was marred by a lack of co-ordination with the local women's movement (Smith, 2018) and a lack of sincere inclusion of local women, especially by international agencies and in particular the UN. An international and national 'elite' worked together in the gender sector (Cristalis & Scott, 2005, 55), resulting in strategic gains such as constitutional statements ensuring the equal participation of women and men in political life (RDTL, 2010), the 2006 electoral quota (explained further below), and the 2010 domestic violence law. Many of the practical needs of poor, rural women nevertheless remained unmet (Niner & Loney, 2020).

The first National Women's Congress was held by Timorese women activists in 2000 as a forum 'to unify East Timorese women to promote equitable development in national reconstruction' (Rede Feto, 2000) and such Congresses have been held every four or five

years since. Rede Feto was founded as an umbrella organisation for local women's organisations at this first Congress and is the key convener for the contemporary East Timorese women's movement, largely a coalition of local women's NGOs and key women leaders and parliamentarians. Following the model set in Beijing, a 'Platform for Action' from each Congress has included recommendations for the promotion of women in political decision-making and the development of leadership capacity. The 2000 Platform for Action specifically identified women's participation in decision-making as paramount in post-conflict reconstruction. In the next section we describe the campaign for affirmative action and the introduction of gender quotas in the new parliament of Timor-Leste.

### ***The first step: Quantitative change – gender quotas***

An alliance between Timorese women and international development partners advocated strongly for temporary special measures for women in the lead-up to the first national election, proposing a 30 per cent quota for parliamentary seats (Ospina & Lima, 2006). This proposal was rejected by the UN Electoral Affairs Division on the grounds that it was not 'democratic'. In response, and in partnership with UNIFEM and Rede Feto, UNTAET provided training in political leadership to aspiring women candidates. The Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) of the UN urged political parties to put women high on their party lists and offered incentives, including increased media exposure, to parties that included women candidates. These interventions resulted in 25 women (27 per cent) being elected in the first national election held in the new nation (Ospina & Lima, 2006, 7–8; Pires, 2004). Following ongoing advocacy by the alliance between national and international 'elite' women, the government introduced a quota system in 2006 requiring political parties to nominate one woman for every four candidates on their party list (RDTL, 2006). Following feedback from the international CEDAW Committee and further lobbying by local women's organisations, the government amended legislation in 2011 to include one woman for every three candidates in recognition that one third representation is considered a tipping point for influence and change (RDTL, 2011).

Due to the quota, Timor-Leste has had the highest percentage of women in parliament in the Asia Pacific region and is in the top 20 countries globally – higher than Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (UN Women, n.d.). In 2012, women won 25 of the 65 parliamentary seats (38 per cent); in 2018, the figure remained steady at 25. Parliamentary positions are highly desired: they offer a good salary, life-long pension, many benefits, and social capital such as networks in politics and business. This relatively privileged position for women in the national political sphere can be starkly compared to the situation of their local village counterparts who hold less than 1 per cent of elected positions.

The quota system was a significant win and a necessary first step for the political representation of Timorese women, who constitute half of the population, but women parliamentarians were nevertheless allowed only limited influence (Soares, 2006). This was due to several factors. Firstly, gender quotas are regarded as a mechanism to ensure women's participation in politics, but women who enter politics this way may be considered unqualified and are often not taken seriously when working on qualitative

issues. Research conducted in 2006 in Timor-Leste revealed that most political parties, including women members, did not support gender quotas for this reason (Ospina & Lima, 2006). This results in limited influence for those women parliamentarians. Recruitment processes can become superficial, or even harmful, when women are included primarily to meet quota requirements (Sousa, 2018). Similar outcomes have been observed in other countries where electoral gender quotas have been implemented, with a lack of substantive participation and a perception of diminished legitimacy for women leaders (Dimitrova-Grajdzl & Obasanjo, 2019).

Secondly, in Timor's PR system political parties are free to determine the position of each candidate on party lists, and to date male candidates are generally prioritised. As a report by one set of official observers noted, 'Political parties just use the electoral law in order to pass the CNE [National Election Commission] requirement so that they may qualify for the election' (Alola Foundation & HAK Association, 2012, 39).

Male political party leaders also tend to select women candidates from their patronage networks, with the resulting relations of obligation. This granting or assigning of political positions to women by male leaders often results in limited political agency or 'limited empowerment' for women leaders (Niner, 2017b). Furthermore, even though Article 8 of the Law on Political Parties (Law No. 3/2004) urges parties to increase women's participation, in terms of both introducing quotas and promoting women in party leadership, this is not necessarily applied by parties (Ospina & Lima, 2006). With a law resting on political-party willingness, the quota system in Timor-Leste appears to have 'ensured dominance in decision-making of male party leaders, particularly in determining the placement of candidates on the party list' (IPU, 2018, 7), thus grounding gender discrimination throughout politics at the most basic level: the political parties. Women parliamentarians have said that party leaders responsible for the allocation of roles have not assigned decision-making, policy and spokesperson roles to them, and some complain that their participation and influence are severely constrained by both parliamentary dynamics and the requirement to be loyal to their party (Marx, 2012). Local NGOs, Alola Foundation and HAK Association (2012, 40), which were official observers of both the 2012 parliamentary elections and the presidential elections in the same year, reported that most women candidates were 'assigned as leaders for logistics for the campaigns'. They continued: 'Political parties . . . did not make any effort to ensure preparations for women to participate in politics, no capacity building and no plans to increase women's knowledge in order to participate in the campaign' (Alola Foundation & HAK Association, 2012, 39).

These findings suggest that quotas alone are insufficient to ensure the substantive participation of women; they are no 'silver bullet' (Prihatini, 2019). As noted in the Introduction, increasing women's descriptive participation is a crucial step, but is insufficient to eradicate discrimination against women in political systems. Experiences in other countries show the use of quotas is more likely to become an effective tool for participation when women are enabled to reach decision-making and leadership positions within their political parties, but these are too often treated as the exclusive domain of men (IDEA, 2005).

In 2014, the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality stated that high numbers of women alone would not guarantee their influence and that it is 'important to go beyond representation to ensuring women play an active role' (Asian Development Bank,

2014, 93). In this regard, the Inter-Parliamentary Union recommends the creation of 'gender sensitization programmes with male and female parliamentarians, and the inclusion of women at the most senior positions of political parties, and parliament' in Timor-Leste (IPU, 2018, 7). Alola Foundation and HAK Association concluded:

Even though the law guarantees the women's participation in politics, however in practice equality between men and women has not yet been achieved . . . Given Timor-Leste's history in which the patriarchal system has been adapted for so many years, this has become an impediment for women to move forward and a challenge for women to compete with men in politics (Alola Foundation & HAK Association, 2012, 11).

In Timor-Leste, where the exercise of social and political power is legitimised through an ordered hierarchy that involves kinship, age, class and gender, the political setting in the post-independence era privileges particular societal interests represented by older-generation male leaders such as Xanana Gusmão, Taur Matan Ruak, José Ramos-Horta and others, who come from the historically privileged classes such as the *liurai-dato* or *mestiços* (mixed race), and those of veterans in the modern nation-state (Niner, 2020). Even though the country was largely regarded as a success story for UN-led peacebuilding, the outbreak of the 2006 crisis, which originated within the nation's military, exposed how power struggles between competing groups permeated the institution-building process (Sahin, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

### **Urban elites and rural populations**

The alliance between national and international 'elite' women has yielded significant gains, but it has also been criticised for inadvertently reinforcing male dominance through a failure to facilitate less privileged, local women's participation (Cristalis & Scott, 2005, 55). Despite their relative privilege, even urban, educated women have struggled to obtain positions of political power, but women's representation at village level remains even more poorly addressed. On occasion the urban-rural divide sees elite urban women voting for their own sectional interests at the expense of poor rural women. In 2006, a proposal was put to parliament to deny widows of guerrilla fighters their husbands' pensions if they remarried (Kent & Kinsella, 2014). Overall, the pension system for veterans privileges male, high-ranking, long-serving combatants from the resistance army, and excludes most women from being direct beneficiaries because they are mostly not recognised as combatants – hence the importance of retaining the pension as a widow. On this occasion, elite women MPs voted with former male veterans in the parliament for the proposal, meaning veteran widows lost their husbands' pensions if they remarried. This position was justified by arguing that 'these women should have been loyal to the memory of their deceased husbands and demonstrated the same strength as other women who had not remarried' (Kent & Kinsella, 2014, 484). The alignment of the elite women MPs meant that they voted in the perceived interest of their political careers and against the interests of their gender, putting their obligations to their male political leaders ahead of their obligations to their constituents. The affected widows, who were mostly from rural areas, were severely disadvantaged: their interests were certainly not represented by the elite female MPs (Kent & Kinsella, 2014).

Hence, it is mistaken to assume that women in decision-making bodies will be committed to addressing gender-specific issues, as they may have different considerations, priorities and solutions, as in this example, to the problems of ordinary, rural women who are constrained by poverty, limited access to education and healthcare facilities, and heavy domestic and agricultural work. Given that both the nomination and position of parliamentary candidates is determined by male-dominated party administrations, it is also possible that their concern with their own political future may have taken precedence over representing the interests of women struggling in impoverished city slums or in villages.

More specifically, the adoption of quotas that tend to privilege middle-class urban women should not be taken as a proxy for progress towards gender equality. The quota system that has focused on increasing women's participation at the national level has enabled a group of Dili-based elite women to earn a degree of respect, but the stereotyped images of 'the "uneducated" and "weak" village woman' still prevail (Cummins, 2011). There have been three rounds of local elections for *suku* (village) councils since the formal restoration of independence in 2002, with each election governed by new legislation introduced in 2004, 2009 and 2016 respectively (RDTL, 2004; 2009; 2016). Each of the three *suku* laws has utilised a slightly different approach to gender quotas. Law 5/2004 on Community Authorities and Law No. 3/2009 on Community Leaderships and their Election included reserved seats to ensure representation by women and young people with provision for two women's seats and two 'youth' seats (one woman and one man) on every *suku* council – a total of three reserved seats for women for every *suku*. This was changed in Law 9/2016, with a female '*delegada*' and a male '*delegado*' elected from every *aldeia* (hamlet) to sit on the *suku* council, and a requirement that there be at least one female *Xefe Suku* (village council chief) candidate during elections (RDTL, 2016, Articles 10 and 65). Yet, being a *suku* council member is a voluntary position and members only receive a small monthly stipend to cover their expenses. Thus, only those women who have a 'good income stream' are willing to assume these roles, a situation that poses a structural barrier to participation in terms of social class (Cummins, 2011, 89).

The 2016 *suku* law introduced a profound change in that *suku* and *suku* councils were legally defined as non-state entities, with elections run by community bodies for the first time. The independent national electoral bodies now only support and guide these community bodies rather than running the elections themselves. The handover of electoral responsibility to community bodies requires strong oversight and support for local women's organisations to encourage them to speak up if they find evidence of discrimination against women candidates. Sousa (2018, 41) suggests that a good entry point to overseeing the accountability process might be to work with the *suku* Council Secretary, who is a salaried official and who in 2016 was often the principal actor and implementer of local elections.

In the 2004/2005 local elections, 66 women stood for *Xefe Suku* and seven women were elected across the country (10.6 per cent) (Alkatiri, 2017, 32). In 2009, the number of women candidates declined to only 15, of whom 10 were elected (with the subsequent appointment of one more) to the position of *Xefe Suku* (2.4 per cent). In 2016, and with the support of national civil society-led campaign '100% *Hau Prontu*' ('I'm 100% ready') discussed below, 319 women stood as candidates, with 21 female *Xefe*

*Suku* (4.7 per cent) elected to office (IWDA, 2017, 28; see also Commission of *Hau Pronto*, 2016). Women's representation at local level is increasing, but improvements are slow and hard-won.

In addition to the changed electoral process, the general conservatism of local governance has been amplified by the 2016 law. Unlike previous legislation prohibiting people who had been elected twice consecutively from running again, the 2016 law has no such limitation. Paula Cortereal, Director of local NGO Caucus Foundation, observed that the 2016 electoral law was 'unfair to women candidates as they are unable to compete with those who have had more experience in leadership' (de Sousa, 2018, 39). This also applies to inexperienced male candidates, but it is likely to have a disproportionate effect on women candidates, as incumbents are known to take advantage of their positions to 'deter or suppress women candidates' (de Sousa, 2018, 39). One mitigating factor is the legislative requirement that at least one woman must stand for *Xefe Suku* before the election can go ahead, providing voters with the option of voting for a woman, and critically an impetus for more women to run.

It is not an easy task to produce unity among women from different parties, classes and sectors, even though it has been recognised that the influence of women parliamentarians is dependent on their solidarity and capacity to unite to address gender equality issues (IDEA, 2005). Tensions can easily emerge between practical and strategic interests, as exemplified by the divides between 'less-educated rural women and middle-class urban women with a more internationally recognisable "feminist" agenda' in Timor-Leste (Niner & Loney, 2020, 895). These tensions that are seemingly focused on values are important for showing class-based differences. The provision of quotas, from the perspective of women living in villages and on the periphery of cities, has only benefitted some already privileged women who have gained access to the highest-paid positions in the country, while they are still beset by limited or non-existent opportunities. Because local governance roles are based on voluntary service, it only adds to their already heavy workload as they are financially unable to employ domestic workers for cooking, cleaning, childcare and other day-to-day tasks, and their husbands, raised in a patriarchal social setting, are unlikely to assist them with 'women's duties'.

### ***Initiatives addressing power structures, customary beliefs and gender stereotypes***

More recently, Timorese civil society has stepped in to address issues at local levels of governance, and rural women have extended themselves to take on strongly entrenched and unchallenged patriarchal social norms at the village level. But much more support and capacity is still required. Since 2009, there have been some important civil society initiatives including research into and support for women's local leadership and participation, including assisting women candidates to prepare for election. In response to extensive lobbying from civil society, the government has also supported women's local leadership by legislating for gender quotas for local *suku* council positions and, specifically, candidacy for the position of *Xefe Suku*. The *suku* law is integral in shaping the opportunities that are open to women at the local level.

The programme that has received support over the longest period is the women's national cross-party caucus, Grupo de Mulheres Parlamentares de Timor-Leste (GMPTL), supported by the parliament and UN Women. In preparation for the 2004/

2005 local elections, the Office for the Promotion of Equality (OPE), UNIFEM and GMPTL initiated an awareness-raising campaign with the Technical Secretariat for Electoral Administration (STAE). UNIFEM also launched a ‘nationwide training campaign on the concepts and principles of transformative leadership, politics, and community’ titled PERWL (Ospina & Lima, 2006, 50). Across all 13 districts, 731 potential women candidates (often referred to as *feto potensial*) were supported in *suku* elections. The aim was to identify difficulties faced and lessons learned by women *suku Xefes* and to provide support to women leaders in advancing the women’s agenda (Sousa, 2018, 62). Despite the perceived lack of confidence or fear documented in various surveys (discussed below), women were keen to be involved in training, participate in community activities, and run for election in the future.

Many said they had learned much about the rights and responsibilities of potential candidates. Most of the unelected women indicated their willingness to be electoral candidates in the future, building on the experience they gained, and added that they would like additional capacity training. Many non-elected candidates said they would continue to participate in community activities and support elected officials because they want to contribute to village development. The elected women recognised leadership as a big responsibility and were aware of the need for transparency for good governance and some raised concerns about a lack of transparency at the national level (Sousa, 2018).

This programme continued, and GMPTL launched the 2016 Strategic Framework (2016–2021) intended to mobilise female voters and candidates for the 2016 *suku* elections. The focus was on the *100% Hau Prontu* (I’m 100% ready) campaign, driven by an alliance of 15 local and international civil society organisations and government partners. This campaign identified women candidates in each *suku*, provided training and support to 319 women, and concurrently ran a campaign to increase community awareness of women leaders. One positive outcome of this campaign was the further strengthening of ties between women at national, municipal and local levels of government – generating solidarity that is critical if women are to continue making advances in politics.

As explained in the introductory context above, women in East Timor are strongly associated with the domestic sphere. A significant minority of the population is concerned about women abandoning family when they undertake political activities outside the home (Sousa, 2018, 47; Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020, 7). Targeting the whole community, including men, rather than focusing only on women leaders, is required to address concerns that while women can be leaders they must be homemakers first. *Woman Xefe Sukus* have requested civic education for men, particularly husbands of women candidates. One woman leader observed that her husband was the main support in the family, sharing household work so she could become *Xefe Suku* (Sousa, 2018, 42). A particularly innovative locally-designed programme, which built on the experiences of resistance leaders, has proved successful in doing this.<sup>3</sup>

While these initiatives are positive, the inclusion of quotas for women has not meant that women automatically became part of the decision-making structure. Similar to experiences in national parliament, not only are women *suku* members often not consulted about important community decisions in *suku* meetings, but they are also not offered the same training opportunities as men or even opportunities to be present at or participate actively in meetings (Wigglesworth, 2012). This feeds a perception that

women local leaders do not contribute actively and that ‘women’s interactions with the *suku* council were found to be generally passive’ (Plan International TL, 2015, 9). This suggests that despite women holding leadership roles at the *suku* level, these experiences do not always increase their skills and capacity as leaders (IWDA, 2017, 20) or their power to influence decisions and policy. Rede Feto (2019, 25) suggests prioritising of ‘all Municipalities to have women competing for positions and continued advocacy for legislative changes (potentially including quotas) and support for individual women candidates’.

A recent study designed to inform activities to support women’s political leadership showed that, although women in Timor-Leste might be perceived to have the characteristics necessary to be political leaders, they do not have the experience – the skills or abilities – for leadership (Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020, 7). This suggests that while people accept that women *can* be leaders, there were reservations about their capabilities to do so. A significant finding was that there was little awareness that these perceptions were informed by gender stereotypes and created an unconscious bias or prejudice against women being political leaders (Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020, 41). Expectations of women political leaders were also contradictory and more difficult to fulfil than those of men. While it is accepted that women can be leaders, they must not neglect their domestic duties. Women were commonly expected to be ‘humble’, ‘calm’ and ‘caring’, qualities not necessarily associated with political leaders (Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020, 32). The research suggests two areas of consideration for advocates of gender equality in Timor-Leste. The first of these is ‘society wide transformational change’, and focuses on working with communities to increase awareness of gender stereotypes, the differing expectations held of women and men, and the harmful consequences of these (Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020, 44). In relation to the second area of consideration, more specific structural adjustments are suggested to assist rural women to enter local political institutions (Niner et al., 2019).

## Concluding Remarks

The introduction of electoral quotas in many conflict-affected, fragile countries signifies a widely shared consensus in international policy circles that the involvement of an increased number of women in political decision-making at all levels of governance will facilitate the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies as the basis of sustainable human development. The rationale behind this consensus is the belief that with the selection and election of more women to political office the issues that limit women’s choices and undermine their ability to exercise improvements in their lives will be better represented and tackled through the adoption of necessary legislation and policy frameworks.

This article has explored the case of Timor-Leste, where women, especially those in rural areas, are seriously marginalised from development opportunities and choices even though women hold 38 per cent of the seats in the national parliament thanks to the introduction of a gender quota in 2006. This case study shows that quantitative benchmarks, such as quotas, alone are insufficient to eliminate gender-based discrimination in political participation and ensure equality of representation. Although the quota system is a necessary tool

designed to ensure a fairer descriptive representation, sheer numbers alone do not constitute a true reflection of participatory politics for three major reasons. One is that *substantive* participation (i.e., being able to affect outcomes) can only be achieved when the power to make decisions is shared, meaning that those in powerful positions must understand how their privilege operates through informal beliefs and practices, and devolve influence to those who have been discriminated against. The second is that the recognition of political rights and opportunities may not necessarily translate into improvements in all women's lives, as the ability to enjoy them is shaped by intersectional factors including age, class and social status, race, ethnicity, sexuality and ability. Gender intersects with all these social categories of difference, and the newly recognised rights and opportunities may result in new forms of injustices. Thirdly, high percentages of female parliamentarians at the national level can obscure poor outcomes at lower levels, including rural organisation of public administration and village councils. Consequently, in a country such as Timor-Leste where the exercise of tangible power by a small group of historically privileged, male leaders has been legitimised through a rigidly defined social hierarchy that recognises the exercise of 'symbolic' power by some elite women, the implementation of quotas needs to be accompanied by measures and transformational changes that have the potential to provide genuine equality of opportunity and influence for all potential candidates within political parties, as well as the national parliament and municipal and local councils.

## Notes

1. Like other regimes of power, it constitutes the domination by elites without the necessity of force and violence through the socialisation of consent although the threat often remains (Donaldson, 1993). As Antonio Gramsci (1971) theorised in the 1920s, cultural hegemony is not achieved simply through active coercion, but through the socialisation of consent of the subaltern – in this case the subordinated gender category of women.
2. Since 2008, Timor-Leste has enjoyed relative peace and stability, but from 2004 to 2008 the country made world news with violent clashes between the state security institutions and assassination attempts on heads of state and government (Niner, 2020).
3. This programme was Women and Girls' Participation (WoGiP) administered through a partnership between Plan International and local NGOs Fundasaun Patria and Asosiasaun Feto Nia Asaun ba Dezenvolvimentu Aileu (Aileu Women's Association for Action and Development). Among others, Fundasaun Patria continued this work with a similar programme in Baucau in the lead-up to the 2016 local elections. They claim this resulted in the highest women's candidature, with five women elected as *Xefe Sukus* in Baucau.

## Acknowledgements

This article has been developed from work conducted during the planning and design process for the 'Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders Research Study' conducted in Timor-Leste by Timorese women's advocacy organisation Fundasaun Alola, the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) and Monash University researchers in 2018/2019.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This study is part of an IWDA multi-country study funded by the Government of the Netherlands through the Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women (FLOW) programme (see Alola Foundation & IWDA, 2020).

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