Viva Timor-Leste: A Feminist Review of 20 Years of Independence


Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said of the violence in Timor-Leste (previously known as East Timor), “To end the century and the millennium tolerating impunity for those guilty of these shocking violations would be a betrayal of everything the United Nations stands for regarding the universal protection and promotion of human rights” (Robinson 2001).

It is now twenty years since the deployment of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET), the peacemaking taskforce that came to Timor-Leste to address the humanitarian and security crisis from 1999–2000. The UN administered Timor until 2002, and the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste remained until 2012. After the September 1999 referendum vote to separate from Indonesia, approximately 1,500 Timorese died, 300,000 were displaced to West Timor, and the infrastructure of Timor-Leste was left in ruins. However, there were serious violations against human rights long before the 1999 vote, beginning with Indonesia’s occupation of the island in December 1975 (Rimmer 2010).
On August 30, 2019, Timor-Leste will commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Popular Consultation and May 20, 2022 will mark the twentieth anniversary of Timorese independence. It is the perfect time to reflect on Cynthia Enloe’s immortal phrase: “[w]ars don't simply end. And wars don't end simply” (2002: 193). We can also reflect on Mary Robinson’s words to assess whether the UN lived up to its mandate in Timor-Leste.

Two excellent new works of scholarship released in 2018 by Sarah Smith, *Gendering Peace: UN Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste* and Hannah Loney, *In Women's Words: Violence and Everyday Life in the Indonesian Occupation of East Timor* offer a new frame for examining these anniversaries. These works remind us of the value feminist insights can offer by bringing new perspectives on the gender dynamics of invasion, occupation, resistance, democratisation and international interventions. Past scholarship in this journal by scholars such as Sara Niner (2011), Lia Kent and Naomi Kinsella (2015), Maria Costas et al (2013) and others has offered counter-narratives to the idea that Timor-Leste is a “UN success story,” that justice has been done, and that the benefits of peace have been shared equally between men and women. Instead, Timorese women have experienced much more “ambivalent gains” since 1999 (Manchanda 2001).

Moreover, these new works follow in the tradition of having Timorese voices tell their own story and allowing that direct voice to confront narratives generated in other places, including, I submit, my own scholarship generated in Australia a decade ago which should have done more in this regard. I pay my own respects to the voices of extremely brave Timorese women calling out to the world from those dark days of
international indifference, and internal censorship and repression from 1975 to 1999 through works like Buibere (Winters 1999), NGO reports (such as Amnesty International 1999), and the stories collected by Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott (2005). We must work harder to ensure that the next decade of scholarship about Timorese women is written by Timorese scholars.

*Remembering Timor 1975-1999*

The 1999 violence came at the end of many cycles of occupation and conflict for Timor. Beginning with the original Portuguese colonization of the 16th century, this violence culminated in the occupation and annexation by Indonesian forces in 1975. Timor-Leste was finally declared the 27th province of Indonesia on May 31, 1976, though Indonesia’s claim over Timor was never accepted by the UN, and was only unilaterally accepted by one nation, Australia. During their ensuing 25-year occupation by Indonesia the UN documented a series of massacres, the imprisonment of thousands of activists (most notably Xanana Gusmão in 1992), the exile of thousands more, and incidences of torture, assault and inhumane treatment perpetrated against Timorese resistance fighters and civilians, including systematic gender persecution (Godinho-Adams 2001).

*The 1999 referendum*

In January 1999, against a backdrop of economic turmoil, a new climate of political liberalisation, and sustained and mounting international pressure, Indonesian President Habibie suddenly announced that the East Timorese would be allowed a referendum to decide whether they wished to accept or reject wide ranging autonomy within the Indonesian Republic (see Dunn 2003). A referendum was held on August
30, 1999, and within weeks it was announced that 78.5 per cent of the population had voted against Timor-Leste remaining as part of Indonesia, despite the acts of political violence waged by the Indonesian military to intimidate voters. Timor-Leste was therefore to be vested with independence and granted their territory. The announcement of the ballot outcome resulted in immediate acts of violence, a scorched earth policy, looting, massive evacuations and forced deportation of the population overseen by the departing Indonesian military.

The 2005 Final Report entitled *Chega!* (Enough! in Portuguese) by Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) proves that an upper estimate of 183,000 died as a result of both killings and deaths due to privation. CAVR's estimate of the minimum total number of conflict-related deaths is 102,800 (plus or minus 12,000), through killings, disappearances, or as a direct result of displacement policies during Indonesia's occupation, which must be understood in context of an original population of just 700,000 people (CAVR 2005). The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste was then administered by the UN until 2006, a year of significant political violence, and successively hosted a UN presence until 2012. Timor now has 1.2 million citizens in 2019 and the median age is 17.4 years (UNDP 2018).

*Unsettling the categories*

Set out above are the accepted facts of what happened in Timor-Leste. Both monographs by Sarah Smith and Hannah Loney unsettle these facts and displace the idea of what “conflict” and “post-conflict” was, what security was, and who provided it by foregrounding the voice, organising and resistance of women. As Christine
Chinkin (2003, 11) writes, “[...] Not only is ‘post-conflict’ a misnomer for women, so too may be reconstruction, reintegration and rehabilitation. These concepts all assume an element of going back, restoring people to a position or capacity that previously existed. But this is not necessarily what women seek. The goal is rather societal transformation, that is, not restored dependence and subordination but rather an enhanced social position that accords full citizenship, social justice and empowerment based upon respect for standards of women’s human dignity and human rights that may never have previously existed”.

Women’s agency in the face of masculinist violence informs both Smith’s and Loney’s texts in very different ways. Both books also show innovation in methodology and ground-breaking work on feminist methods (see Hall and True 2009). Smith argues that gendered ideologies and power delimit the possibilities of building a gender-just peace and she contributes deep insight into how gendered logics inform peacebuilding processes, and specifically, how these play out through the implementation of policy that explicitly seeks to reorder gender relations at sites in which peace operations deploy. Smith focuses on the United Nations peacebuilding efforts in Timor as the centre of her inquiry and questions its purported legacy as a success or as benevolent. For example, she compares UN responses to domestic violence with peacekeeper sexual exploitation and abuse in Timor. She notes that it is not simply “the UN Missions and international donors that have produced obstacles to gender security, but the institutionalising of a patriarchal state and the power therein” (13). Moreover, Smith argues that the “predominant priority of successive peace operations in Timor-Leste remained a traditional security focus: ensuring the integrity of the state’s borders and monopolising the use of force in the state’s hands” (19).
Hannah Loney relies on oral history techniques to present a woman-centred history of Indonesian occupation. She offers an insight through many women’s stories that show “how deeply violence became interwoven into the social and cultural ‘everyday’ of life in occupied East Timor” (145). The violence experienced by East Timorese women ranged from torture, rape, and interrogation, to various forms of surveillance and social control, and the structural imposition of particular feminine ideals upon their lives and bodies. Through women, Loney argues that East Timorese familial culture was also targeted via programs to “develop” and “modernize” the territory by transforming the feminine and the domestic sphere. Loney explains the ongoing impact of the KB Programme (Program Keluarga Berencana) which turned family planning into a coercive practice during the occupation, injecting women with the contraceptive Depo Provera.

Loney adds to our knowledge on Women, Peace and Security by explaining that women experienced the occupation differently to men. This was not just because they were vulnerable to sexual violence, but also because they endured proxy violence as the military's means of targeting male relatives and the resistance at large. She highlights, through these women’s own words, the strength, initiative, and negotiating skills of East Timorese women, an excellent contribution to the literature. Many women lived in circumstances of constant negotiation and attempts to maintain order and normality, as well as to provide for themselves and their families, in a society where everyday life was characterised by violence and uncertainty.

*Conclusion and critique: “A luta continua”*
Both authors offer ways to examine Timor’s political situation today and the status of women. Smith writes that the “politics of the resistance era continue to shape developments in the country” (163) while Loney explains how “nationalist narratives relegate the contribution of women to a firmly subordinate role, placing their participation in the making of an East Timorese national identity at a level beneath that of the political” (146).

In May 2019, the political system remains dominated by a small, elite group of men drawn from the “1975 generation” with resistance credentials and heavy reliance on consensus politics, such as Fretilin’s Francisco Guterres (popularly known as Lú-Olo), Taur Matan Ruak, Dr. Rui Maria de Araújo, José Ramos-Horta, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, and Mari Alkatiri (Leach 2019).

But, Timorese women are still organizing and resisting. 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” (cited in Trembath and Grenfell 2006).

Where both texts could delve deeper is the tensions and power dynamics between diverse women and women’s organisation inside Timor, although both acknowledge the diversity of the communities and multiple roles and responsibilities of women. As one text uses the lens of the United Nations, and the other the Indonesian occupation,
we lose some insight into internal battles for power and status in Timor’s complex transitional politics between female elites, including nuns, another expression of women’s agency. For example, both books leave out figures like Ana Maria Pessoa Pereira da Silva Pinto (known as Anna Pessoa), a powerful political figure and one of the few women in the Fretilin Central Committee, as an example of many political Timorese women who lived in exile, in this case in Mozambique and returned in 1999. There are real tensions between women that deserve recognition, those who stayed and those who left, those who fought and those who did not actively take up arms, between party allegiances, between language groups, between rural and town, between organised and not.

Both texts could also engage more deeply with the impact of such deep and long impunity on Timorese society now and relations between Timorese and Indonesian women. Within Indonesia, impunity for crimes in Timor-Leste and provinces in Indonesia such as West Papua continue. Indonesian military general Prabowo Subianto ran for President in 2019, following the example of General Wiranto (Tasevski 2019). Both were named by credible reports and the United Nations as responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Timor-Leste and Indonesia. In February 2003, the UN-backed Serious Crimes Unit indicted Wiranto charging him “with Crimes Against Humanity for Murder, Deportation and Persecution in that these crimes were all undertaken as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population of East Timor and specifically targeted those who were believed to be supporters of independence for East Timor” (See further McDonald, 1999 and KPP-HAM 2002). Thus, the UN
and its member states have tolerated impunity, realising Mary Robinson's fears of a betrayal of UN human rights doctrine, and continue to do so in many places.

In sum though, with the benefit of my twenty years of reflection on the status of women in Timor-Leste, feminist scholarship like Smith’s and Loney’s is more important than ever, delving deeper into women’s stories, lives, words and strategies, countering dominant narratives, and spreading hope of resistance. Viva!

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References


