



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## Terms of Exclusion: Violence and the Impact on Women's Participation in Development

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In 2015, the Australian Government-funded [Nabilan](#)<sup>1</sup> Program (Ending Violence against Women) conducted a study on violence against women and children in Timor-Leste (Asia Foundation 2016). This was the country's first statistically significant study analysing risk and protective factors for women's experience of violence, and provided the first quantitative data on men's use of violence against women. Comprising two surveys — one nationally representative prevalence survey with women,<sup>2</sup> and one survey on men's perpetration in two municipalities<sup>3</sup> — the Nabilan Baseline Study is an important tool for those working in service provision to victims and violence prevention. The findings illustrate the extent of this issue is much greater than previously estimated, and point to its causes and consequences.

The Nabilan Baseline Study found 59 per cent of ever-partnered women aged 15 to 49 in Timor-Leste experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their male intimate partner during their lifetime, and 47 per cent experienced this in the 12 months before the study. Among women who had ever experienced intimate partner violence, 77 per cent experienced severe violence and 81 per cent experienced recurring violence. The study also found 14 per cent of women had been raped by a non-partner and 10 per cent experienced this in the past year. Additionally, almost three-quarters of women experienced some form of physical and/or sexual abuse as children.<sup>4</sup> When such a large proportion of the population has experienced severe and recurring violence, it has a detrimental impact on their ability to participate in the country's development.

Women in the youngest age group (15 to 19 years) experienced the highest rates of current violence, suggesting violence starts early in intimate relationships. Furthermore, the younger women were the first time they had sex, the more likely it was that their first sexual experience was forced or coerced. Experiencing early sexual violence discourages young women from completing their education and entering

the formal labour force. In Timor-Leste, less than a quarter of women participate in the labour force (UNDP 2014) and women have less access to paid work than men.

Intimate partner violence was more commonly experienced by women in urban, than rural, areas; by women in the capital municipality of Dili than in other municipalities; and by women who were earning cash, than women who were not. Women who reside in more economically developed regions, or who have higher incomes, are not safer; if anything, they are less safe. In the context of the study's findings on high rates of gender inequitable attitudes and justifications for violence among both men and women, it appears women's active participation in economic development may be viewed by many Timorese men as a challenge to their power.

The study's findings on the health impacts of violence against women confirm it is a major public health issue in Timor-Leste. The study found violence curtails women's reproductive choices. In addition, more than half of all women who had been injured by intimate partner violence sustained injuries serious enough to require health care, but a third of these women did not receive the care they needed. Women reported having to interrupt their work or other activities to support their family as a result of violence from their partners.

Violence was also found to be associated with serious long-term health concerns. Women who had experienced intimate partner violence were significantly more likely to have had symptoms of depression or suicidal thoughts, or to have ever attempted suicide, compared to women who had not experienced this violence. As depression is the leading cause of disease burden for women in high-, low-, and middle-income countries (WHO 2008), the potential economic impact of women's depression on Timor-Leste's health system is significant. Furthermore, the study showed that women who had been physically or sexually abused by a partner were two and a half times more likely to be at risk of disability. While in a cross-sectional survey it is not possible to identify the direction

of correlation between violence and disability, the implications of this association for women's educational and employment opportunities are important where assistance to people with disabilities is limited. For both men and women, experiences of abuse during childhood were associated with intimate partner violence, as well as with symptoms of depression and suicidal thoughts.

The study illustrates some of the challenges in achieving justice for women who experience violence in Timor-Leste. Most Timorese women who experience violence never tell anyone, including police or health workers — not because they do not know their options but because of shame and fear that it will bring a bad name to their family. Women who did not seek help from the police after their most recent experience of intimate partner violence said it was because the police were too far away or they believed the police would worsen the situation. While the majority of men interviewed were aware it is illegal for men to use violence against women, most men who had raped a non-partner woman or girl said they did not experience any legal consequences as a result. Timor-Leste's justice sector has taken steps to improve gender equality, including passing the Law against Domestic Violence in 2010. However, despite the strong laws, gender discrimination in the justice system coupled with a failure of state budgets to adequately resource services to end violence against women mean there has been a lack of substantive improvements for women experiencing violence.

Without breaking the cycle of violence against women, Timor-Leste will not be able to advance as a healthy, democratic and thriving nation. Violence against women and children poses significant challenges to developing the economy of Timor-Leste, not only in terms of the high costs of providing care to victims, but also in terms of loss of income for women and their families and decreased productivity. It also inhibits the country's social development, affecting women's access to education and political participation. Experiencing violence precludes women from contributing to and benefiting from development by limiting their choices and ability to act. The Nabilan Program is working with local civil society organisations, the government of Timor-Leste and directly with communities to try to address these issues, but significant challenges remain. Government funding to service providers needs to be increased and delivered in a timely manner. In the interim, it is advisable levels of international donor support be maintained. Adequate investment clearly needs to be made into effective violence prevention approaches addressing structural inequalities and supporting social norms change. Until this happens, Timorese women will continue to be

systematically excluded from full and active participation in the development process and this has significant implications for the country as a whole.

### Author Notes

*Xian Warner is coordinator of Nabilan's Prevention Pillar and Tamara Failor is the program's monitoring and evaluation specialist. Together, they co-managed the Nabilan Baseline Study.*

### Endnotes

1. *Nabilan* means 'to shine brightly' in Tetun and refers to the brighter future for Timor-Leste that the program aims to help achieve by ending violence against women and children.
2. The female survey had a sample of 1426 women aged 15–49 and used the World Health Organization Multi-Country Study of Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women methodology.
3. The male survey had a sample of 433 men in Dili and 406 men in Manufahi, aged 18–49, and used the United Nations Multi-Country Study on Men and Violence methodology.
4. Rates of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse were also high among men in Dili (78 per cent) and Manufahi (77 per cent).

### References

- The Asia Foundation 2016. *Understanding Violence against Women and Children in Timor-Leste: Findings from the Nabilan Baseline Study — Main Report*. Dili: The Asia Foundation.
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