

Learning Brief

# WOMEN SUPPORTING WOMEN

## WOMEN MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT PROJECT, TIMOR-LESTE



Based on the Program Evaluation by Maya Cordeiro and Santina Soares,  
November 2020



# Content

<b>Background</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Mentoring approach</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Project context</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Project objectives and MP selection</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Key activities and events</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Project results</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Gender equality outcomes</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Enablers and challenges</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Lessons learned</b>	<b>11</b>



*Timor-Leste and Australian MP Project participants*

# Background

Since 2017, International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), together with Akhaya Women in Myanmar and Caucus Foundation in Timor-Leste, has implemented women Members of Parliament (MPs) support projects. The projects responded to the growing evidence base that calls for sustained, tailored support to women once they achieve elected office to ensure their voices are heard and to increase their influence.<sup>1</sup> The projects involve matching women MPs who have a commitment to gender equality, with experienced Australian women MPs and former MPs, who share that commitment. The MP Support Projects contribute to IWDA's strategy for promoting women's leadership and political participation in the Asia and Pacific region.<sup>2</sup>

The Timor-Leste 'Women Supporting Women' Project, was designed following an invitation from the Australian Embassy in Dili and implemented with funding from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Project was implemented in partnership with Caucus Foundation (Caucus), a Dili-based women's rights organisation with experience in supporting women's political participation. Six experienced Timor-Leste women MPs were matched with six experienced Australian MPs. Project implementation commenced with a scoping study in September 2018 and concluded in March 2020. At least two of the collaborating MP partners are still in contact.

This Learning Brief is based on the findings from an independent evaluation of the MP Projects in Myanmar and Timor-Leste, which concluded in November 2020; and synthesises the results and learnings specific to the Timor-Leste project. The evaluation involved close to 30 interviews with Timor-Leste MPs, Australian MPs, local and international NGOs, political party representatives, DFAT staff and other project stakeholders.

## Mentoring approach

The mentoring approach is based on principles of shared commitment and mutual learning, and has an embedded gender equality focus. This approach was developed and piloted in Myanmar and then adapted and tailored to suit the Timor-Leste political and gender equality context.

The mentoring process commences with an initial visit, face-to-face interaction and matching of Australian women MPs with women MPs from other countries. Following this matching, MPs are encouraged to communicate on a monthly basis, with local partners providing technical and translation support where required. A detailed mentoring handbook is used to support the partnerships. Political advisers are also recruited to monitor and encourage communication between the MPs. Following the semi-structured one-year partnership, the MPs are encouraged to continue communicating informally.

---

1 Overseas Development Institute, 2015, *Women's voice and leadership in decision-making: Assessing the evidence*.

2 IWDA, 2018, *WAVE Women's Political Leadership Strategy*, [https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/WAVE\\_WPLStrategy.pdf](https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/WAVE_WPLStrategy.pdf).



## PRINCIPLES

- **Mutual learning:** Supporting mentoring partnerships that involve mutual learning and respect requires being sensitive to the power dynamics in the relationship. Both mentee and mentor bring different skills and experience to the partnership.
- **Shared commitment to gender equality:** Recruiting mentees and mentors with a commitment to gender equality increases the positive outcomes for women beyond the program and more systemically.
- **Non-partisan:** Ensuring broad representation across a range of political parties improves cross-party parliamentary networking.
- **Face-to-face, self-matching:** The matching of MPs is undertaken face-to-face. Mentees are supported to identify their preferred mentor. If a relationship is not going well, a 'rematch' will be done quickly.
- **Formal:** Signing a mentoring agreement that identifies goals and 'ground rules' for their partnership sets a clear and solid foundation.
- **Confidential:** Ensuring confidentiality is crucial for building a sense of trust.
- **Ongoing communication:** Regular communication (at least once a month) is critical. Ongoing conversations take place through phone calls, email, and social media.
- **Translated:** Facilitating communication through skilled and experienced translation support is essential to ensure effective communication and relationship building.
- **Supported:** Providing external support is critical. Regular follow-ups are undertaken by experienced political advisors and Caucus and IWDA staff with both the Timor-Leste and Australian MPs.

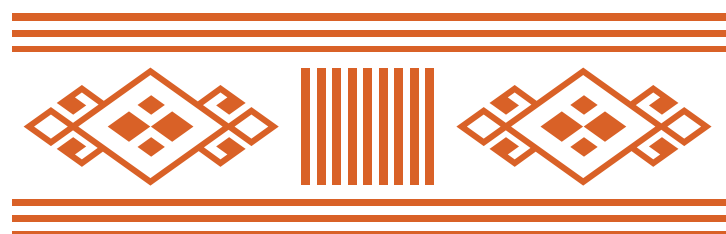
The evaluation found there are three distinctive features that set this program apart from other similar mentoring initiatives:

- The embedded gender equality focus in all aspects of the project from participant selection to connection with local women's rights organisations.
- The adaptive and developmental approach, to respond flexibly to emerging needs.
- The approach is localised, drawing upon the expertise and experience of local partner organisations and political advisors.



It is not just about a one-off meeting with other women, but really getting to the core of what makes (politics) a challenge for women. I am learning from X just as much as I am responding to her questions about dealing with male dominance.

— An Australian MP



# The Project context

Timor-Leste has one of the highest proportions of women parliamentarians in the world, with women holding more than a 30% share of parliamentary seats in the last four governments. The high level of women's political representation has been enabled by legislation that requires political parties to nominate one woman for every three candidates on their election list. This quota system was achieved with consistent lobbying from gender equality advocates including Caucus. In the most recent government – a woman (Armanda Berta Dos Santos) has been appointed as Deputy Prime Minister, the highest office a woman has ever held in Timor-Leste. There is also a women's cross-party caucus (Grupo das Mulheres Parlamentares de Timor Leste or GMPTL) attached to the Parliament that is a key point of engagement for civil society on women's rights advocacy.

However, women MPs' influence on parliamentary affairs, legislation and policies is still limited. For example, their share of decision-making roles at the highest levels of government — as Ministers, Vice Ministers, and Secretaries of State—has only increased slightly in recent years and remains low comparative to men's. Women are also rarely involved in political party leadership and some women MPs have reported that their participation and influence in parliament is at times constrained by parliamentary and political party dynamics.

Before commencing this project, IWDA undertook a scoping study to better understand the parliamentary context and determine how the Myanmar mentoring 'model' could be adapted.<sup>3</sup> A key finding was that the model needed to emphasize mutual learning, as the women MPs in Timor-Leste are as experienced as their Australian peers. In recognition of this, the Project was henceforth called Women Supporting Women (Deputadas Suporta Deputadas). The study team utilised the visit to build connections with GMPTL, political party representatives and potential civil society organisation partners. Caucus was identified as the preferred local implementing partner organisation. Caucus came to the Project with deep experience in supporting women's political leadership – they were a lead organisation in the highly successful '100% I Am Ready' campaign that saw a doubling of locally elected women leaders in 2016.

The timing of the Women Supporting Women Project situated it in a very specific context that influenced project implementation and subsequent results. Timor-Leste and Australia had just signed the Maritime Boundary Treaty and as such the bilateral relationship was entering a new phase. Upcoming elections in Australia and a political impasse in Timor-Leste, at times impacted on MPs' capacity to engage with the project. Lastly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the Australian MPs from visiting Timor-Leste as planned.

---

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, L, & Ride, G, 2018, *Program Scoping Report: Women Members of Parliament Mentoring Report Timor-Leste*, September 2018, IWDA, Melbourne.

# Project objectives and MP selection

## The objectives of the Women Supporting Women Project were to:

1. strengthen existing women MP's capacity and influence to advance women's rights;
2. strengthen connections between Timor-Leste's women's movement and women MPs; and
3. deepen political ties between Australia and Timor-Leste.

Based on the Project objectives, participant selection criteria were developed aimed at recruiting MPs committed to gender equality and with cross-party representation. The GMPTL took responsibility for nominating the Timor-Leste MPs. Of the seven political parties in Parliament, six included women MPs. Each of the six Timor-Leste parties with women MPs nominated one MP to participate. The Australian MPs were selected from the three main political parties. Two of the Australian MPs who participated in the Timor-Leste MP Project had also participated in the Myanmar project.



*Timor-Leste MPs in the Australian Parliament*

# Key activities and events

Face-to-face interaction: The Women Supporting Women Project began in earnest with a visit to Australia by Timor-Leste MPs in February 2019. This visit was intended to lay the foundations for an ongoing MP-MP exchange; and a return visit by Australian MPs to Dili was planned. However, the return visit by Australian MPs to Timor-Leste was cancelled due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting travel restrictions. One pair was able to spend time together during an Australian MP's high level visit to Timor-Leste in September 2019.

## Exposure visits:

The Timor-Leste MPs visit to Australia included opportunities to observe parliament, visit parliamentary offices and meet with senior Australian government officials in Canberra and Melbourne. The itinerary included meetings with different parliamentary committees, the Timorese Ambassador to Australia and the Timorese diaspora in Melbourne. The MPs also visited Bendigo, a major Victorian regional city.

## Skills building:

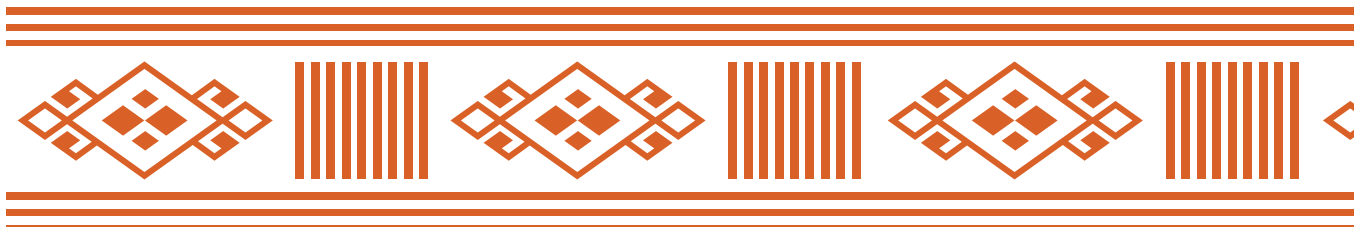
Formal training sessions were incorporated into the visit itinerary, and informal skills-sharing and professional development occurred through the MP-MP communication. The formal sessions included sessions on participating in parliamentary debates, conducting presentations and the use of social media for campaigning.

## Partnership agreements:

During the introductory meetings where the MPs shared information about themselves and their careers, the MPs were matched based on the Timor-Leste MPs' preferences, and formal goals and commitments were developed for each partnership.

## Ongoing communication:

All MPs agreed to communicate on a monthly basis using platforms such as WhatsApp or Messenger, with a focus on the goals and commitments developed for each partnership. While the regularity of communication varied, overall there was a steady exchange of support and ideas between the MPs.





# Project results

While the Women Supporting Women Project was limited by the fact that only one formal face-to-face encounter between most Timor-Leste and the Australian MPs occurred, the Project did have some immediate benefits to the participating MPs.

## **Practical political skills:**

The Project equipped participating MPs with practical political skills, through the formal training they received as well as through the informal MP-MP communication and sharing. This included skills to increase their participation in parliamentary debate, presentation skills and social media skills for campaigning. Although the participating MPs are experienced parliamentarians, in the evaluation interviews they shared their appreciation of the formal and informal skills building component of the project. The Australian women MPs said they gained practical skills such as cross-cultural communication skills. They reported using these skills in their interactions with migrant communities in their own constituencies. They also reported drawing on their experiences in this Project to further engage in international development work.

## **Understanding of gender equality:**

There is also some evidence of participating MPs advancing their knowledge and understanding about gender equality and legislation that supports women's empowerment. Some of the participating MPs had an advanced understanding of gender equality issues, but others had limited experience and exposure prior to the project. The evaluation interviews suggest that all Timorese MPs found the visit to Australia and insights into gender equality policymaking in Australia interesting and useful. The importance of gender quotas and cross-party parliamentary mechanisms were also mentioned in the evaluation interviews as useful knowledge exchanges between MPs through the project.

## **Exposure to different parliamentary and country contexts:**

Timor-Leste MPs reporting appreciating the exposure to a different parliamentary context. MPs also commented on the value of meeting with the Timorese diaspora in Australia, as well as learnings from contact with Australian non-governmental organisations.

## **Networking with DFAT, Caucus and other local women's rights organisations:**

In the short-term, the Timor-Leste MPs expanded their networks with DFAT Post, Caucus and IWDA's other local partners in Timor-Leste. This was the first high level delegation of parliamentarians from Timor-Leste to Australia after the signing of the Maritime Boundary Treaty. Since their visit to Australia, participating women MPs have had more contact with Australian diplomatic and aid personnel in Dili. For example, the participating MPs were invited to the residence of the Australian Ambassador to Timor-Leste, Mr Peter Roberts OAM, for afternoon tea. They have also had greater contact with Caucus and other local women's rights organisations and organisations representing people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. For example, the MPs have contacted Caucus to obtain data on the status of women and gender issues at the Suku (village) level.

## **MP-MP communication and solidarity:**

Finally, even in the short-term, the Project resulted in increased cross-border ties and strengthened bonds between some Australian and Timor-Leste MPs. Without exception, the Timor-Leste MPs interviewed extolled the benefits of women MPs supporting each other. Solidarity comes from the shared understanding of the

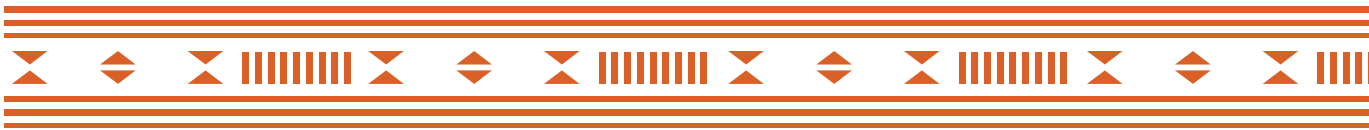
specific challenges women MPs face navigating male-dominated parliaments and parties, and balancing personal and professional lives. Timor-Leste MPs have also shown solidarity with the Australian MPs, sending messages of support during the bushfires in Australia and the pandemic. MPs from Australia and Timor-Leste have expressed an interest in remaining in contact. These initial gains pave the way for deepening political ties between Australia and Timor-Leste.



**It takes an MP to understand what another MP is going through.**

**— A Timor-Leste MP**

**Similarly, a Timor-Leste MP said that the Project provided a platform for the MPs to share their experience and learn that women MPs have common challenges.**



*Hon Olinda Guterres and Senator Janet Rice*

# Gender equality outcomes

The evaluation found that IWDA and Caucus have been able to incrementally develop and implement a mentoring approach that delivers on gender equality outcomes.

## **Strengthened gender advocacy by women MPs:**

Two MPs that participated in the Project were already strong advocates of gender equality. The evaluation suggests that these two MPs used the additional knowledge and experience gained through the Project to continue to advocate for gender issues in the Parliament. Two other MPs indicated they are engaging with more women since their participation in the Project, through activities such as establishing women's cooperative groups at the village level.

## **Promotion of gender equality legislation:**

While the promotion of gender equality legislation was not a formal objective of the Women Supporting Women Project, local women's rights organisations in Timor-Leste have engaged participating MPs in their policy advocacy efforts. For example, ALFeLa (a Timorese legal aid organisation funded by DFAT and IWDA), engaged MPs through social media, and encouraged them to advocate for the crime of incest to be a specific article in the penal code. ALFeLa staff were then invited to present to parliament, and the issue was subsequently taken up in parliamentary debate initiated by one of the women MPs who participated in this project.

## **Linking women MPs and GMPTL to the broader women's movement at the country level:**

There is evidence of MPs connecting with women's rights organisations and the influence of the Project extending to other civil society organisations who are adopting similar programming approaches in their work. Caucus organised training for potential women leaders from different political parties and invited one of the Women Supporting Women Project MPs to share her leadership journey with them. Since the Project and the contact with women MPs, IWDA and DFAT's partner Alola Foundation has organised two 'dialogues' (events) between GMPTL and women who are potential candidates for the municipal elections, using the same 'women supporting women' principle as the Women Supporting Women project. The event was covered on national television. GMPTL have also requested that Alola present the findings from the Public Perceptions of Women's Political Leadership in Timor-Leste research<sup>4</sup> (conducted by Alola and IWDA) to GMPTL – further evidence of this relationship developing in support of gender equality objectives.

Strengthening connections between women MPs and the women's movement, can serve to increase women MPs' power and influence within party structures and inform a more progressive gender equality political agenda.

---

<sup>4</sup> Alola and IWDA, 2020, *Public Perceptions of Women's Political Leadership in Timor-Leste*, <https://iwda.org.au/resource/public-perceptions-of-womens-political-leadership-in-timor-leste/>.

# Enablers and challenges

## FACTORS INFLUENCING SHORTER-TERM RESULTS

### **Participant selection process:**

The data from the evaluation reveals that the participant selection process is key to ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of mentoring projects. There are strengths and weaknesses involved in an open call for expressions of interest from women MPs based on an agreed selection criteria compared with selection by the Parliament. An open call for expressions of interest based on agreed criteria that includes a demonstrated commitment to gender equality (which occurred in the case of the Myanmar pilot project), has the benefit of attracting women MPs who meet the selection criteria, but may not yet hold a position of power within their parliamentary party. Whereas a parliamentary selection process (which occurred in the case of the Myanmar 2nd cohort and Timor-Leste Project), while ensuring parliamentary support and ongoing sustainability, may reduce the focus on adhering to an agreed selection criteria, including demonstrated commitment to gender equality.

### **Visit to Australia:**

The cost-effectiveness of delivering the MP Support Projects is impacted by the high cost of the MPs visiting Australia. Investment in the visit is beneficial in that it provides exposure to women MPs from another jurisdiction and sets the basis for deep and lasting relationships between MPs across country boundaries and with other local women's rights organisations. However, if the Project is viewed as just an opportunity for MPs to visit Australia without making a commitment to ongoing relationship-building or gender equality advocacy, the benefits of this investment are greatly reduced.

### **Face-to-face and informal interaction between MPs:**

The evaluation suggests that adequate face-to-face informal interaction, early on in the project, contributes to the development of MP-MP relationships and motivates engagement in ongoing communication, information sharing and mutual support. This face-to-face interaction should occur as soon as possible after project initiation to ensure that the Project objectives are still at the forefront of participants' minds. However adequate preparation time is also essential to ensure that the first visit itinerary aligns with the interests and capacities of participating MPs, and that all participants are comprehensively briefed on the cultural and political context of each of the countries involved. These factors were challenging in the Women Supporting Women Project.

### **Experienced political advisers:**

The women's political advisers' expertise was also critical. Without exception, participating Australian MPs recognised the work of the Australian adviser Leonie Morgan AM. Drawing on her twenty years' experience in women's political mentoring with EMILY's List Australia, Leonie played an important role in program design and actively encouraging regular communications between Australian and Timor-Leste MPs. Likewise, positive feedback was received about Timor-Leste adviser Sabina Fernandes Seac, whose connections and understanding of politics was highly valuable.



### **Language:**

The Project included strategies to mitigate against language barriers. The mentoring guides were translated, and there was interpretation support from the very start. However, while the efforts of the interpreters were appreciated, Australian MPs said that it was challenging for them to understand and translate some aspects of the functioning of the Australian Parliament to Timor-Leste MPs.

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING LONGER TERM OUTCOMES**

### **Capacity to influence key political actors:**

The active involvement and diverse expectations of various parliamentary bodies and political actors, DFAT, IWDA and Caucus, was at times challenging and resulted in delays and consequent inefficiencies in project implementation. While IWDA and Caucus staff, and the political advisors worked hard to communicate project objectives and expectations, it is likely that they were not sufficiently prepared to respond to the unanticipated political influences. However, the nature of a political mentoring program means that these challenges are at times inevitable and therefore greater investment in monitoring the political context and building relationships was required.

### **Identification of common interests:**

The MP partners that have developed close and meaningful relationships include those that were able to identify common interest areas early on in the project cycle. One pair had an existing relationship and have met face-to-face since the Australian visit and intend to continue to do so.

### **Interest in mentoring:**

IWDA and Caucus now have a growing pool of experienced mentors both in Australia and Timor-Leste who are interested in, and committed to, the concept of effectively mentoring other women MPs (or emerging leaders who are women). This bodes well for influencing women's political participation and gender equality in the longer-term.



*Senator Linda Reynolds and Hon. Elvina Sousa Carvalho*

# Lessons learned

## WHAT HAS WORKED WELL?

- The mutual learning model, given that both the Timor-Leste and the Australian MPs were experienced parliamentarians.
- Engagement of MPs from different parties.
- The political briefings and bilingual program documentation provided to MPs.
- Project design and implementation by program staff and experienced political advisors, including Leonie Morgan AM and Sabina Fernandes Seac, whose understanding of politics proved critical to build and sustain MP-MP relationships.
- Varied visit agenda, including connecting women MPs with the Timorese diaspora.

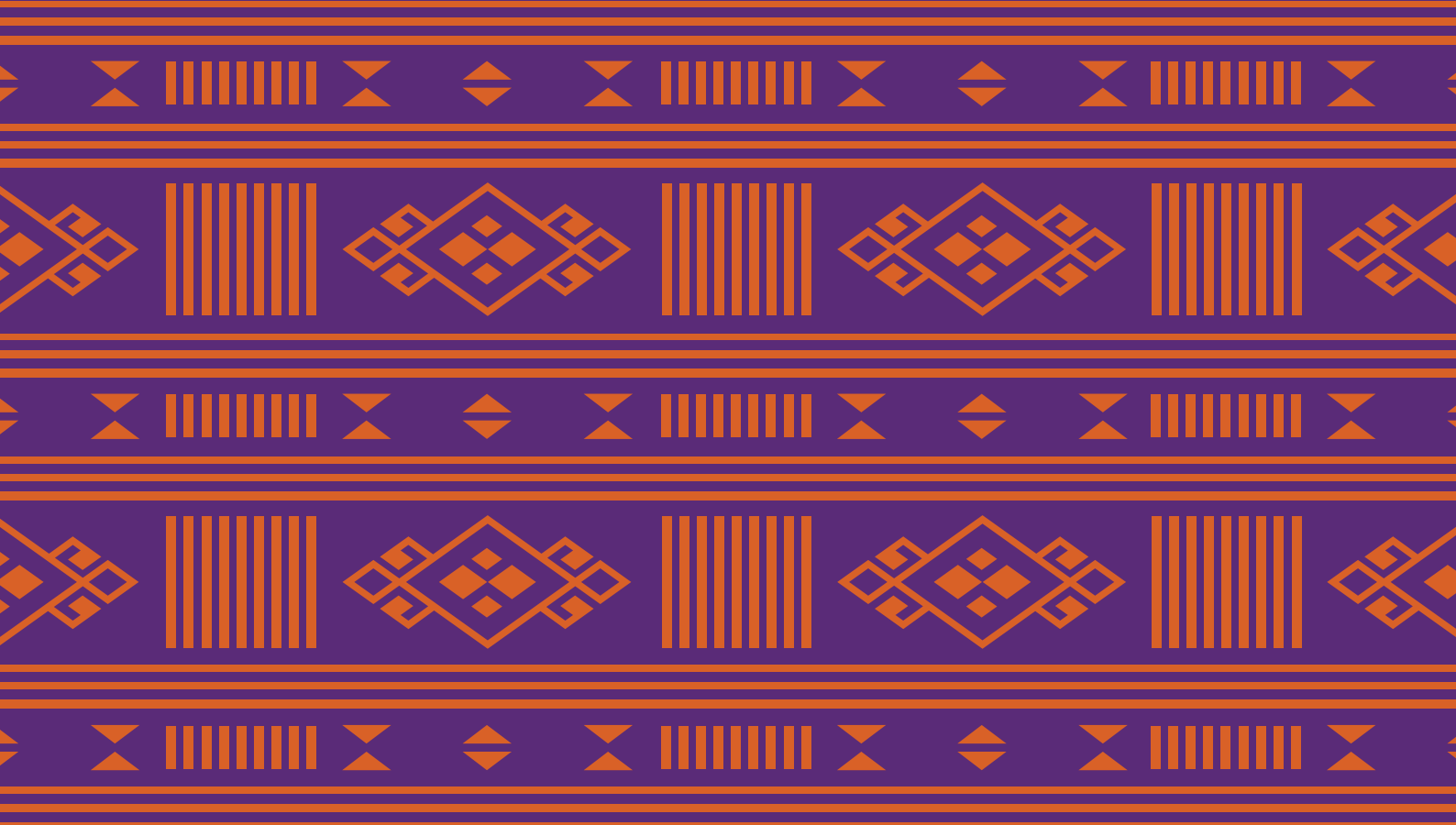
## WHAT CAN BE STRENGTHENED?

- The incorporation of a gender equality focus in participant selection.
- Deepening relationships with parliamentary bodies, political parties and other important political actors (including DFAT) in advance of any future projects.
- Timing and sequencing of visits – for example it is recommended that Australian MPs visit Timor-Leste first and that there is sufficient time between project initiation, participant selection and the first visit.
- More attention to the multiple levels and types of relationships that need to be built to strengthen women's political participation, for example within parliamentary committees, with the political party leadership and with experienced women MPs.
- More investment in monitoring the political context – both in Australia and Timor-Leste, that may impact on project success and sustainability.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The overall feedback about the Women Supporting Women Project, IWDA and Caucus Foundation, has been positive. Local partners and Australian MPs have used the lessons learned from this experience in other international work. The fact that some relationships have continued beyond the formal project lifecycle, is also a credit to the project. The broad recommendation from the evaluation is for IWDA to continue to support women's political participation in Timor-Leste, through:

- Continuing to engage with Timor-Leste MPs that are strong advocates for gender equality, with Caucus and other local partners.
- Exploring opportunities for localised mentoring initiatives that connect national-level women MPs (or former MPs) with emerging leaders at the sub-national level.
- Continuing to support with resources, knowledge exchange and lesson sharing, local partners, such as Alola Foundation, that are investing in women's leadership at the sub-national level.



**IWDA** INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S  
DEVELOPMENT  
AGENCY

Level 1, 250 Queen Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
1300 661 812  
iwda@iwda.org.au  
www.iwda.org.au