



WAVE: WOMEN AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN TIMOR LESTE- LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction and Background

The following review considers literature on women and leadership in Timor-Leste. It was originally undertaken in 2018 in preparation for the *Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders* research to be conducted by International Women's Development Agency in partnership with women's rights organisation Alola Foundation. The focus of the review is on women and political leadership, both national and sub-national. The review considers literature published in English. The content was updated in October 2019.

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste regained independence in 2002 following around 300 years of colonial rule by Portugal and 24 years of military occupation by Indonesia.¹ The population of Timor-Leste has grown rapidly from around 900,000 in 2002 to approximately 1.3 million people currently, with 69% of people living in rural areas.²

Timor-Leste has a rapidly growing economy due to exploitation of natural resources, in particular petroleum. In spite of this, it is one of the least economically developed nations in the Asia and Pacific region, with a large proportion of people living in poverty and with high rates of malnutrition throughout the country.³ Around one third of adults have not had any formal education and most people in rural areas have relatively precarious employment, mainly in agriculture.⁴

Women in Timor-Leste

Women comprise 49% of the population.⁵ The establishment of a modern nation state was seen by many as an opportunity to enshrine equality between women and men, formalised in the Constitution: "Women and men shall have the same rights and duties in all areas of family, political, economic, social and cultural life."⁶ Successive governments have made multiple commitments to promote gender equality in Timor-Leste, including in relation to political participation.

However, there are significant disparities between women and men in Timor-Leste. Women are less likely than men to have participated in formal education at all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). Women's participation in the formal labour force is significantly lower than that of men. Timor-Leste continues to have a very high birth rate, accompanied by high maternal and child death rates. Women are much less likely than men to participate in local government. Violence against women and girls is extremely high.⁷

¹ Timor-Leste had a brief period of Independence from November 28 - December 8, 1975 between Portugal ceding sovereignty and invasion by Indonesian forces. Independence was restored on 20 May 2002.

² See <http://data.un.org/en/iso/tl.html> (overall population) and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=TL> (rural population).

³ Sara Sara Niner, '*Iha lalehan nia klaran no rai* – living between heaven and earth: understanding *jender* in Timor-Leste,' in *Women and the politics of gender in post-conflict Timor-Leste*, ed. By Sara Niner (London: Routledge Publishing, 2016), pp.1-14, p.6.

⁴ See databank.worldbank.org.

⁵ See <http://data.un.org/en/iso/tl.html>. IWDA refers to designations of women and men acknowledging that these categories are not fixed and recognising diversities in gender identity.

⁶ Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*, 2002, Section 17.

⁷ See Asian Development Bank, *Timor-Leste Country Gender Assessment*, ADB, 2014, pp.xiii-xiv. <https://www.adb.org/documents/timor-leste-country-gender-assessment>.

Asian Development Bank (ADB) conducted country gender assessments in Timor-Leste in 2005 and 2014.⁸ The 2014 report was coordinated by the then Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality (SEPI) with support from ADB and UN Women and is the most recent general assessment of gender issues in Timor-Leste. The report describes Timorese society as a “patriarchal society” with relatively inflexible gender roles.⁹ It suggests that dominant social expectations for women are to raise children, produce food and take responsibility for domestic work. Social expectations for men are to work outside the domestic sphere and, importantly, to assume responsibility for decision making at community and national levels.¹⁰ The report suggests that a ‘customary’ assigning of women to the domestic sphere and men to the public sphere has been strongly reinforced over time by the values of the Catholic church, to which the overwhelming majority of the population (87%) belongs.¹¹

Academics who have explored women’s status prior to Indonesian occupation suggest there have been historical periods in which women had significant political and diplomatic power. Researchers Hans Hägerdal and Douglas Kammen describe two periods prior to Portugese colonial rule in which Timor was ruled by queens.¹² The researchers suggest that some women may also have held highly influential roles during Portugese rule. Notwithstanding these important precedents, it is well established that women generally did not hold positions of power and in fact experienced high levels of sexual and labour exploitation throughout the colonial period.¹³

The status of women during the Indonesian occupation of Timor (1975-1999) has been the subject of contention since independence. Researcher Sara Niner suggests that women have commonly been portrayed as “victims and martyrs” during the resistance.¹⁴ In truth, as local activists have argued, women played extremely important organisational, logistical and political roles in the fight for independence, in many cases risking their lives to do so.¹⁵ Political interest in documenting and formally acknowledging the role of women during this period has been low. The political leadership in Timor-Leste since 2002 is commonly described as being dominated by a military ‘elite’: men who played highly visible leadership and combat roles during the resistance.¹⁶ Feminist observers suggest that local women who similarly “played a courageous and committed role in the struggle for independence have been pushed aside, their critical ideas and contributions under-valued.”¹⁷ Sara Niner argues that the lack of formal recognition for the contribution of women to independence affects how women are perceived in present-day Timor-Leste and has profound implications for gender dynamics in the new nation state.¹⁸

A related theme in literature on women and leadership in Timor-Leste concerns the phenomenon of some political leaders promoting the idea of women ‘returning’ to ‘traditional’ roles. During the Indonesian occupation, many women

⁸ Asian Development Bank, 2014 and *Gender and nation building in Timor-Leste: country gender assessment*, 2005.

⁹ Asian Development Bank (2014), p.xiii.

¹⁰ See also Ann Wigglesworth, ‘Dreaming of a different life: steps towards democracy and equality in Timor-Leste’, *Ellipsis*, 10, 2012, 35-53, p.40.

¹¹ Asian Development Bank, 2014, p.xiii.

¹² Hans Hägerdal and Douglas Kammen, ‘The lost queens of Timor’ in *Women and the politics of gender in post-conflict Timor-Leste*, ed. by Sara Niner (London: Routledge Publishing, 2016), pp. 17-45.

¹³ Sofi Ospina and Isabel de Lima, ‘Participation of women in politics and decision making in Timor-Leste: a recent history,’ Dili, UNIFEM, 2006, p.10.

¹⁴ Niner (2016), p.4.

¹⁵ Ospina, p.7.

¹⁶ Sara Niner, ‘*Hakat klot*, narrow steps: negotiating gender in post-conflict Timor-Leste’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13(3), 2011, 413-435, p.413.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Siapno, ‘Bitter taste of victory’, *Inside Indonesia* 88, July 2007. <http://www.insideindonesia.org/bitter-taste-of-victory>. See also ADB p.8 and Ospina, p.7.

¹⁸ Sara Niner, ‘Reflection on the special gender stream: 2017 Timor-Leste Studies Association conference’, *Australian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 10 (2), 2017, 1-5, p.1.

became solely responsible for their household, agricultural production and survival of their family. This, in addition to participation in resistance activities, challenged previous gendered divisions of labour and roles in Timor-Leste. Researchers suggest that some leaders have responded to this rapid social change by advocating for domestic, family focussed or 'traditional' activities for women.¹⁹

As several writers point out, social practices referred to as 'traditional' are informed by social norms that have evolved over time and are continuing to evolve.²⁰ What is considered 'traditional' today has been shaped by non-traditional, external influences including those of colonial and religious institutions. Feminist analysts suggest that the promotion of supposedly 'traditional' roles in Timor-Leste may in fact indicate a wish for women to be assigned socially subordinate roles.²¹ Drawing on research from post-conflict states including Timor-Leste, political analyst Jacqueline Siapno describes women having to "confront their 'own' leaders in masculinist national liberation organisations, who do not value women's role in leading and healing their own society".²²

Finally, researchers of gender relations in Timor-Leste agree that the country's history of violent conflict and militarisation over time has important implications for gender relations. Sara Niner argues that the presence and use of arms and violence under Indonesian rule has had profound cultural consequences, with violence widespread in Timor-Leste in both public and private spheres. According to Niner, it is "a generally accepted notion in East Timor that the violence of the occupation and the associated trauma has resulted in a more violent society today."²³

WOMEN AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

International and national frameworks

The 2002 Constitution makes several provisions for the equal participation of women and men in political life. These include:

Direct and active participation by men and women in political life is a requirement of, and a fundamental instrument for consolidating, the democratic system.

The law shall promote equality in the exercise of civil and political rights and non-discrimination on the basis of gender for access to political positions.²⁴

Timor-Leste ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 2003. It reported to the Committee in 2008 (first report, considered 2009) and 2013 (combined second and third reports).²⁵ The fourth periodic report is due in November 2019.

The current *Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030* makes several statements of commitment to gender equality and envisions Timor-Leste in 2030 as a "gender-fair society where human dignity and women's rights are valued, protected and promoted by our laws and culture".²⁶

¹⁹ Nurima Alkatiri, 'Gender equality in Timor-Leste: the need for investment towards change of mindset.' *SOCDEM Asia Quarterly* 6(1), 2017, 30-33, p.31.

²⁰ Wigglesworth, pp.40-45.

²¹ Niner (2011), p.413.

²² Siapno, p.6.

²³ Niner (2011), p.422.

²⁴ *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*, Section 63.

²⁵ Republica Democratica Timor-Leste, *Initial Report: the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): Timor-Leste* (2007) and *Second and third periodic reports of State parties: the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): Timor-Leste* (2013).

²⁶ Republica Democratica de Timor-Leste, *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030*, p. 48.

The Government issued a statement of commitment to better recognising and supporting women, particularly rural women, on International Day of Rural Women in 2015. The *Declaration of Maubisse* conceded that the constitutional guarantee of gender equality is not sufficient and identified specific gender equality commitments from key Ministries, to be fulfilled by 2017.²⁷

The government has established a range of mechanisms for gender mainstreaming, including a body to provide strategic support for this work. This agency is currently known as State Secretary for Equality and Inclusion (SSEI, previously SEPI and SEIGIS).²⁸ The role of SSEI is to advocate for gender equality in policy development and programming and to report on progress towards international commitments. This is essentially a monitoring and coordination role, with responsibility for implementation assigned to ministers.

There are references in the literature reviewed to a women's caucus in parliament (Women's Parliamentary Group of East Timor, or GMPTL) and to 'Parliamentary Committee F,' a body working on issues of gender equality and gender mainstreaming.²⁹ The current status and activity of these two groups requires further research.

The most significant intervention for women's participation in national leadership in Timor-Leste is legislation requiring political parties to include women on their parliamentary election candidate lists, discussed below.

Women in parliament

The system of government in Timor-Leste comprises a single chamber parliament with a presidential head of state. There are 65 seats covering 13 municipalities (also known as districts). Members of Parliament are drawn from a popular vote for candidates based on political party membership (in addition to a small number of independent candidates). Parliamentarians do not represent specific geographical areas and act on behalf of the entire population. There have been five parliamentary elections and six presidential elections since independence.³⁰ The most recent parliamentary election (May 2018) was unplanned and a consequence of political impasse in parliament in late 2017.³¹ The usual term of government is five years.

Registration for voting in Timor-Leste is compulsory for people from age 17. The electoral system is based on votes for parties rather than individual candidates. Voter turnout for parliamentary elections to date has been relatively high, between 75-80%.³²

The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) provided an interim peacekeeping and executive administration from 1999-2001. UNTAET established a National Consultative Council as "the primary mechanism through which the representatives of the people of East Timor shall actively participate in the decision making process during the period of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor, and through which the views, concerns, traditions and interests of the East Timorese people will be represented."³³

Local women's groups and international development partners advocated strongly for temporary special measures for women to be put in place in the first national election, proposing a 30% quota for parliamentary seats. UNTAET

²⁷ Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *Declaration of Maubisse*, Maubisse, 15 October 2015.

²⁸ See <http://seii.gov.tl/>.

²⁹ See Asian Development Bank (2014), p.92.

³⁰ Parliamentary elections have taken place in in 2001, 2007, 2012, 2017 and 2018.

³¹ See http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2369_E.htm.

³² See <http://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/63/>. Details on voter turnout for the 2018 election were not available at the time of writing.

³³ United Nations, *UNTAET Regulation no. 1999/2 on the Establishment of a National Consultative Council*, 1999, Section 1.

promoted the inclusion of women in national decision making more broadly, establishing a Gender Affairs Unit and supporting the first National Women's Congress in Timor-Leste in 2000.

Despite these efforts, the National Consultative Council rejected the proposal for a parliamentary quota. In response, and in partnership with UNIFEM and local women's organisations, UNTAET provided training in political leadership to aspiring women candidates. The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General urged political parties to put women high on their party list and offered incentives, including increased media exposure, to parties that included women candidates. Twenty-five women were elected in the first parliamentary elections for the nation of Timor-Leste. Analysts have suggested this was likely the result of the UNTAET interventions and advocacy by local women's groups following the rejection of the quota proposal by the National Consultative Council.³⁴

A different quota system was subsequently introduced in 2006 as part of the *Law on the Election of the National Parliament*. This law required political parties to nominate one woman for every four candidates on their election list. Following feedback from the CEDAW committee and lobbying by local women's organisations, this legislation was amended in 2011 to include one woman for every three candidates:

In following a world trend among modern electoral law, the present law provides a concrete incentive to the political participation of women through their mandatory inclusion in the lists of candidates and their replacement by candidates of the same gender in case of vacancy.

The lists of effective and alternate candidates shall include at least 1 (one) woman candidate for every group of 3 (three) candidates, under pain of rejection.³⁵

This remains the current legislation in relation to national elections.

The history of women's national representation from 1999-2006 has been documented in detail by researchers Sofi Ospina and Isabel de Lima on behalf of UNIFEM.³⁶

As a consequence of the quota, the proportion of women in parliament in Timor-Leste has been relatively high globally and the highest in the Asia Pacific region.³⁷ Since becoming a nation, Timor-Leste has had between 27% and 38% women in parliament, frequently higher than Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, for example. Twenty-six women won seats in the May 2018 election. One woman member has subsequently departed, leaving parliament with 25 women members (38.5%) at the time of writing.³⁸

This level of representation is a significant achievement and commonly referred to as an indicator of women's voice in Timor-Leste. Many of the writers reviewed, however, recommend a degree of caution in making assumptions based on numerical representation. Researchers cite women MPs in Timor-Leste reporting that their participation and influence in parliament can be severely circumscribed by parliamentary and political party dynamics.³⁹ The Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality suggested early on that the number of women alone would not guarantee influence and that it would be "important to go beyond representation to ensuring women play an active role."⁴⁰ The Inter-Parliamentary Union recently described the quota system in Timor-Leste as one which, paradoxically, has "ensured dominance in

³⁴ Ospina and de Lima, pp.7-8.

³⁵ The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *Law No. 6/2006 of 28 December: Law on the Election of the National Parliament*. Version including 2017 amendments available at <https://www.laohamutuk.org/Justice/2017/EIPar/Law%209-2017en.pdf>.

³⁶ See footnote 13.

³⁷ See <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/timor-leste>.

³⁸ See <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=9&year=2019>.

³⁹ Susan Marx, 'Can Timor-Leste's gender quota system ensure women's participation in politics?' Dili, Asia Foundation, 2012.

⁴⁰ Asian Development Bank (2014), p.93.

decision making of male party leaders, particularly in determining the placement of candidates on the party list.”⁴¹ For these reasons, the effectiveness of the quota system in giving women a strong voice in Timor-Leste is much debated.

Analysts of the broader institutional mechanisms for women’s participation in leadership are similarly circumspect. SEPI’s own assessment in 2015 was that “[c]ompeting priorities and limited tools and skills impede government capacity to learn and apply technical skills in gender mainstreaming” and that “challenges remain in the implementation and commitment from top management to take gender mainstreaming seriously.”⁴² The overall view expressed in the ADB gender assessment is that the mechanisms established to date require significantly more political support and evaluation to be effective.

Interviews with political party leaders and members of parliament conducted by Sofi Ospina several years ago suggest that very few interviewees had a clear understanding of the need for affirmative action to increase women’s political agency.⁴³ Sara Niner suggests that social norms relating to gender have been significant obstacles to the implementation of CEDAW commitments.⁴⁴ More recently, Timorese activist Nurima Alkatiri has argued that policies towards gender equality are not having sufficient impact because “customary or traditional practices are still very common and seem to have been strengthened across the country since it became independent.”⁴⁵ She agrees that the concepts of gender equality and gender mainstreaming are not well understood at government level and are commonly seen as “women’s issues to be dealt with by women.”⁴⁶

Work by women’s organisations and international agencies

A wide range of civic society organisations and international agencies has been working on issues of gender equality since independence. Much of this activity has related to women’s health, justice, access to education and reducing violence against girls and women. A focus on women’s participation in local governance is more recent.

The first National Women’s Congress took place in 2000 as a forum “to unify East Timorese women to promote equitable development in national reconstruction.”⁴⁷ Rede Feto, now an umbrella organisation for women’s agencies and “the key leader in advocacy in women’s rights and gender issues in Timor-Leste” was founded following this congress.⁴⁸ The National Women’s Congress has taken place ever 4-5 years since, with the next Congress due in October 2019.⁴⁹ The ‘Platform for Action’ from each congress has included recommendations for the promotion of women in political decision making.

The role of political parties

As noted, observers of politics in Timor-Leste have argued that the number of women in parliament alone is not a sufficient indicator of women’s political influence at national level. Concern about the current quota system is based on the belief that some political parties include women candidates on election lists in order to comply with legislative requirements but do not provide women with real decision making power. Research by former Asia Foundation country representative Susan Marx reports women MPs expressing the wish for their parties to make a greater commitment to

⁴¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in parliament in 2017: the year in review, p7.

⁴² Asian Development Bank (2014), pp.xvii and 105.

⁴³ Ospina and de Lima, p.72.

⁴⁴ Niner (2011), p.426.

⁴⁵ Alkatiri, p.31.

⁴⁶ Alkatiri, p.33.

⁴⁷ See <http://etan.org/et2000b/june/11-17/14first.htm>.

⁴⁸ See <http://redefeto.tl>.

⁴⁹ The National Women’s Congress has taken place in 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2013. The Congress planned for 2018 was postponed until 2019.

them as leaders, including supporting them once in parliament. Sofi Ospina similarly reports on women leaders who have raised issues of gender equality within their political party but have not experienced their party as being supportive of these.⁵⁰

Commissioned to observe the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections, local NGOs Alola Foundation and Hak Association reported:

Even though the law guarantees the women's participation in the 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.⁵¹

Following interviews with a large group of political leaders, all of whom said they believed in gender equality, Ospina summarised their concerns about quotas as follows:

- i. Leadership should be about the capacity and quality of the candidate, not their gender (the most commonly cited concern).
- ii. It is difficult for political parties to achieve the number of women candidates required by law.
- iii. The quota system calls into question the capacity of all women politicians.
- iv. The quota system discriminates against men.⁵²

Ospina argues that the quota system was not understood by interviewees as a process for achieving gender equality in parliament. Further, it was unclear what party leaders meant by 'capacity' and 'quality' and why this concern was only raised in relation to women candidates. Ospina points out that, whilst there is further legislation in place urging parties to increase women's participation and promote women in party leadership, these are guiding principles only and are not necessarily applied by parties.⁵³ In the 2012 elections not one political party went beyond the minimum requirement to include more women on their list.⁵⁴ Alola and Hak Association reported:

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. (...) They did not have any effort to do some 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.⁵⁵

When the researchers leading these observations asked women candidates why they were not acting as spokespeople for their parties, women replied that party leaders were responsible for the allocation of roles and had not assigned these roles to them. Most women campaign members were "assigned as leaders for logistics for the campaigns."⁵⁶

More recent commentary suggests some of these dynamics may be relevant in the present. Required only to nominate one woman in three candidates, political parties are free to determine the placement of individuals and, commonly, prioritise candidates who are men. The Inter-Parliamentary Union concludes:

⁵⁰ Ospina and de Lima, p.87.

⁵¹ Fundasaun Alola and HAK Association, 'Observation Results: Women's participation in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections,' Fundasaun Alola, Dili, p.11 (slightly edited). Available from IWDA.

⁵² Ospina and de Lima, pp.73-75.

⁵³ Ospina and de Lima, p.72.

⁵⁴ Asian Development Bank (2014), p.89.

⁵⁵ Fundasaun Alola and HAK Association, p.39.

⁵⁶ Fundasaun Alola and HAK Association, p.40.

This highlights the continuing need for gender sensitization programmes with male and female parliamentarians, and the inclusion of women at the most senior positions of political parties, and parliament.⁵⁷

Analysts agree that in present-day Timor-Leste the public face of leadership remains overwhelmingly male.⁵⁸

Women and local government

The administrative divisions of government in Timor-Leste are, in order of decreasing scale:

- national government
- districts or 'municipalities' (13 including Dili)
- sub-districts (67)
- *suku* (village, also known as *suco*, 498)
- *aldeia* (sub-village or hamlet).⁵⁹

Discussion about women's political leadership at the sub-national level in Timor-Leste to date has focussed on the *suku*. Literature discusses women's participation in *suku* councils and, in particular, the election of women as *suku* chief. There is no equivalent to the national quota for women's political representation at the sub-national level. Currently 5% of chiefs at the *suku* level and 3.8% of chiefs at the *aldeia* (hamlet) level are women.⁶⁰ This is a significant increase from the previous election and follows advocacy by local women's groups.⁶¹ Nevertheless, this is a serious level of underrepresentation.

Three pieces of legislation are important in relation to the participation of women in local governance. These are:

- *Decree-Law No. 5/2004 on Community Authorities*
- *LAW 3/2009: Community Leaderships and Their Election and*
- *Law No.9/2016 – Law of Sucos.*

Until recently, the *aldeia* was not considered a formal administrative division of government. This appears to have changed in the 2016 legislation. The *aldeia* is defined as:

- i. The population cluster united by family links, traditions or cultures and historically linked to a Suco in a rural area
- ii. The population cluster formed through social and historical processes marked by the migration of different ethnical groups and historically linked to a Suco in the city.⁶²

To be elected to the *suku* council, a woman must be a 'delegate' of her *aldeia*. In effect, the *aldeia* is therefore the level of administration at which women must first be seen by community members as having leadership capacity. Prior to the *aldeia* being formalised as an administrative unit, researcher Deborah Cummins wrote about this level of governance as

⁵⁷ IPU, p.7.

⁵⁸ Sara Niner, 'Women and power in Timor's elections,' New Mandala, 21 July 2017.

⁵⁹ Figures shown on the Government of Timor-Leste website at the time of writing: <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=91&lang=en>.

⁶⁰ Figures (22 women of 452 *suku* leaders) supplied by Alola Foundation October 2019. The 498 *suku* figure provided on the Government's website is in contention.

⁶¹ In the 2009 elections women gained 2.5% of *suku* leadership roles and 1% of *aldeia* leadership roles. See Fundação Pátria, Asosiasaun FADA and Plan International Timor-Leste, *Women's Participation in Suku Level Governance*, 2015, p.43.

⁶² Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *Law No.9/2016 Law of Sucos*, Article 25.

the site of 'customary' authority.⁶³ This is the level at which discussions about individuals and their access to resources, health and wellbeing, personal circumstances and family conflict have historically taken place. Whilst it may not have been formalised as such, the *aldeia* has therefore been experienced by community members as the "first layer of governance."⁶⁴ The recent formalisation of the *aldeia* as the smallest unit of government is part of the national government's long-awaited process of decentralisation. This process recognises that forms of governance have existed in Timor-Leste prior to and outside 'state' administration. The co-existence of customary and formalised forms of governance is commonly referred to as 'hybrid' and is seen by many writers as central to understanding socio-political legitimacy in Timor-Leste.⁶⁵

It is commonly stated that *suku* councils were established by the national government through the 2004 legislation referred to above. This legislation did formalise the *suku* as a vehicle for central administration. However, historical research shows that the *suku* and the *suku* chief role have existed in some form for many centuries, including during Portuguese and Indonesian rule. The *suku* chief role was used by those administrations in various ways over time. The 2004 legislation is therefore perhaps better understood as legitimising these historical structures of power.⁶⁶ The historical importance of the *suku* is acknowledged in the 2016 legislation:

Sucos have had throughout history a determinant role in our cultural identity and in the mobilization of our local communities for the collective effort of national reconstruction.

Besides the aforementioned important functions, Sucos currently play a determinant role in the mobilization of our local communities for the achievement of projects of collective interest, in the preservation of peace and social stability, in the mediation of disputes and controversies that oppose individuals, families or village and contribute in an indelible way for the improvement of the life conditions of the populations and the socioeconomic progress of the country.

The central importance of Sucos in our national life cannot go without recognition and affirmation, namely through the development of a legal framework that can allow the community organizations to respond to the expectation that are deposited on them and, in this way, contribute to the appreciation of the authority functions that are traditionally associated to them.⁶⁷

The duties of the *suku* council listed in the 2016 legislation show how important and immediate this level of administration is to people's everyday lives:

- i. Contribute to the cohesion of the community members and to the national union.
- ii. Guarantee the peace and social harmony in the community.
- iii. Promote a solution to litigation occurring within the community or between the Aldeias of the Suco.
- iv. Defend, ensure and promote the traditional customs and practices of the community.
- v. Defend and represent the general interests of the community.
- vi. Promote the wellbeing and full human development of the community members.

⁶³ Deborah Cummins, 'Democracy or democracy? Local experiences of democratization in Timor-Leste,' *Democratization*, 17 (5), 2010, 899-919.

⁶⁴ Cummins (2010), p.908.

⁶⁵ See Cummins (2010) and Anne Brown, 'Entangled worlds: villages and political community in Timor-Leste,' *Local Global*, 11, 2013, 54-71.

⁶⁶ Decree-Law 5/2004 states: "it is important to legitimise the role so far played by community leaders and bodies through elections, in accordance with Law No. 2/2004 passed by the National Parliament. In fact, the prominent role played by community leaders and bodies in organising communities should be recognised by the State without further delays." Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste Government, *Decree-Law No. 5/2004 of 14 April 2004 on Community Authorities*, 2004. p.1.

⁶⁷ Law No. 9/2016, pp.1-2.

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- vii. Collaborate with the Public Administration bodies and services in the pursuit of the public interest in the sphere of the community.
 - viii. Promote the socioeconomic development of the community, taking into consideration gender equality.
 - ix. Ensure the efficient management of the community assets.⁶⁸

Literature in English on the history and dynamics of local level governance in Timor-Leste has been produced by Australian researchers Deborah Cummins, Anne Brown and Ann Wigglesworth. Each brings a feminist perspective to understandings of local governance both before and since independence. These researchers concur that socio-political authority at the village level is derived from both historical sources and contemporary or 'official' sources of power. They agree that there are "complex, socially embedded forms of local governance, shaping social order and everyday life in varying ways around much of the country."⁶⁹ These are based on networks of extended families, kinship ties and historical events. The authors argue that these historical sources of political legitimacy at the village level remain significant and that communities in present-day Timor-Leste engage with 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of authority simultaneously.

Anthropological and political research suggests that the basis of these historical forms of institutional power is *lisan*. These are the customary rules guiding the lives of village members, the "unwritten but nevertheless formal structures through which obligations within and between kin-groups are created and maintained."⁷⁰ The writers reviewed suggest that *lisan*, as a system of local power relations but also a form of governance embedded in "an ancient unity with ancestors, the natural world and the unseen world of spirit", is well understood and respected by communities.⁷¹ It is integral to social order and cohesion at the village level, so much so that the "stability of the state depends to a significant extent upon this fundamental level of social order continuing."⁷² Deborah Cummins suggests that, whilst it is important not to romanticise previous forms of socio-political authority, "*lisan*, with its emphasis on maintaining and balancing the community, is foundational because it has kept the community together despite massive social upheavals."⁷³

The social guidelines associated with *lisan* have evolved over time and in ways specific to the local context. As a consequence, *suku* structures throughout Timor-Leste are said to express "an extraordinary variety of accommodations and experiences" of socio-political power.⁷⁴ That is, they are not uniform in their workings. Within this context, 'customary' leaders in Timor-Leste have continued to have significant authority within communities. In this sense, the 2004 legislation 'establishing' *suku* councils, whilst it included some 'modernising' elements, was really a "co-opting of existing local authority structures" rather than a truly new layer of government administration.⁷⁵ As noted, the 2016 legislation explicitly acknowledges the customary sources of authority at the village level.

This context is important for understanding the potential for women to be in leadership roles at the village level. The 2004 legislation required two of five reserved seats on the *suku* council to be held by women. As in other discussion of gender quotas, writers reviewing women's participation in *suku* councils have been circumspect about their influence. Reviewing women's participation in the decade following this legislation, Deborah Cummins has argued that women "are often excluded from the more substantial work of the *suku* that occurs outside the *suku* office."⁷⁶ Ann Wigglesworth has similarly suggested that local power dynamics can compromise democratic processes on *suku* councils and significantly

⁶⁸ Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *Law No. 9/2016*, Article 5.

⁶⁹ Brown, p.58.

⁷⁰ Cummins (2010), p.901.

⁷¹ Brown, p. 60.

⁷² Brown, p.57.

⁷³ Cummins (2010), p.912.

⁷⁴ Brown, p.57.

⁷⁵ Cummins (2010), p.902.

⁷⁶ Cummins (2011), p.89.

limit women in their role. She cites examples of women members being excluded from *suku* meetings, not being offered the same training opportunities as men and not being consulted about important community decisions.⁷⁷

The 2016 legislation makes greater provision for women's participation and influence with the composition of the *suku* council requiring at least one woman delegate from each *aldeia* and, importantly, at least one woman candidate for the *suku* chief role.⁷⁸ The introduction of this legislation has seen a notable increase in women coming forward as candidates in the most recent *suku* elections (2016), with 319 women participating (compared to 15 women in 2009 and 66 women in 2004).⁷⁹ The number of women elected as *suku* chiefs in 2016 was 21 or 4.7% (compared to 11 women in 2009 and 7 women in 2004).⁸⁰ Whilst this is a significant and very positive increase, the proportion of women in local leadership in Timor-Leste is still extremely low.

The literature reviewed suggests that the likelihood of women being elected at local level, and their influence once elected, "must be supported by broader understanding of local political environments."⁸¹ Whilst writers agree that *lisan* is important to social stability, feminist researchers also point out that the 'customary' rules for social order are not favourable to all people. Specifically, the complex networks and historical ties embodied in *lisan* are founded in institutionalised forms of power and social dynamics that are commonly not inclusive of women.⁸²

The area of authority often cited in this context is that of family and community dispute resolution. Historically, women have not been permitted to participate in this activity, with responsibility for mediation between families and clans seen as the responsibility of older men.⁸³ This has profound implications for both the likelihood of women being elected and their influence in the local community if elected, especially since dispute resolution is a key responsibility of *suku* councils.⁸⁴ Writers suggest that women's institutional power can be undermined by this and other forms of cultural exclusion:

If gender quotas are intended to empower women, empowerment must mean something more than formal political positions: it must mean the potential to exercise real power within the *suku*. While gender quotas are potentially significant instruments for change, gender quotas without real empowerment run the risk of further entrenching existing stereotypes surrounding rural women and their capacity to exercise local leadership.⁸⁵

Whilst the researchers reviewed are in agreement about the importance of *lisan* and localised legacies of 'customary' practices, they also suggest that the idea of modern democracy is extremely important to people in Timor-Leste. Conducting extensive interviews, including in remote areas of Timor-Leste, Deborah Cummins found that community members expressed a high degree of attachment to the idea of Timor-Leste as a modern nation-state:

Together with independence, both *lisan* and democracy are proudly claimed by the Timorese as part of their cultural heritage, that for which people fought, suffered and died.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Wigglesworth, pp.577-578.

⁷⁸ Law No. 9/2016 the 8 of July Law of Sucos, Article 10 and Article 65.

⁷⁹ International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), Alola Foundation and ALFeLa, *Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) Timor Leste Baseline Report*, 2017, p.28.

⁸⁰ Alkatiri, p.32. Since 2016, the number of *sukus* has increased from 442 to 452 and the number of women leaders has increased from 21 to 22, giving the current proportion of 5%.

⁸¹ Cummins (2011), p.88.

⁸² Brown, p.59.

⁸³ Wigglesworth, p. 573.

⁸⁴ Decree-Law 5/2004 sets out "peace and social harmony" as the first area of activity for *suku* councils.

⁸⁵ Cummins (2011), p. 93.

⁸⁶ Cummins (2010), p.907.

Anne Brown similarly suggests that *suku* elections have been embraced by communities because they are seen as both a formalisation of customary authority *and* a key expression of the ‘modern’ nation state. She suggests that this dual interpretation of local elections can present both challenges and opportunities for women:

In this situation, the election of women for example does not necessarily give them authority or a platform, unless they already have significant standing from other sources (such as customary sources) in the community.⁸⁷

The ‘other’ sources of authority available to aspiring local leaders - reputation derived from resistance activity, economic power and political party affiliation - tend to favour men. Deborah Cummins has characterised the local governance environment in Timor-Leste as one in which the ‘old institutional figures’ (men with these credentials) have been empowered to operate in both the ‘traditional’ and modern spheres, whereas the ‘new institutional figures’ (women and young people) are limited to the modern sphere.⁸⁸

The writers reviewed nevertheless suggest that the current legislation covering *suku* elections has made new dynamics in village elections possible. Anne Brown suggests that cultural ideals of leadership as requiring cooperation with communities - “the kind of cooperation that has enabled survival through hardship, natural disaster and political upheaval” – are prevalent throughout Timor-Leste.⁸⁹ She argues that there is a desire for leadership that embraces both historically familiar practices and the principles of a modern state. In this context, Brown and others suggest that the new legislation creates the potential for “a new, unpredictable element” in leadership dynamics.⁹⁰

LITERATURE ON VOTER CONSIDERATIONS OF WOMEN AS POLITICAL LEADERS

There is limited English language research on public views of women as political leaders and the quota system in parliament. The Alola/Hak 2012 election observation results refer to the impact of ‘patriarchal’ values on voters’ assessment of candidates. The report also draws attention to the low numbers of women voters who voted for women candidates and recommends further research into this.⁹¹ Surveys conducted by the Asia Foundation between 2013 and 2016 are relevant.⁹² A national public opinion survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2016 includes questions on women and leadership and provides useful contextual information. There is further valuable content on voter considerations of women as leaders in the ‘Baseline report’ produced by IWDA, Alola Foundation and AlFeLa in 2017.⁹³

Asia Foundation surveys

The Asia Foundation conducted a series of surveys of public opinion in Timor-Leste, initially in 2001 and subsequently between 2013-2016. The first of these, the *East Timor National Survey of Voter Knowledge*, was conducted in partnership

⁸⁷ Brown, p.64.

⁸⁸ Cummins (2011), p.91.

⁸⁹ Brown, p.67.

⁹⁰ Brown, p.64.

⁹¹ Fundasaun Alola and HAK Association, p.41. Observations results for more recent elections were not identified during research for this review but may be available.

⁹² Surveys were conducted in 2001, 2013, 2014 and 2016.

⁹³ See footnote 77.

with local forum Kelompok Kerja Pendidikan Pemilih (KKPP-Voter Education Working Group). Later surveys were conducted in partnership with Timorese NGO Belun and were known as the *Tatoli!* ('message') surveys.⁹⁴

The 2001 survey was the first English language study of political knowledge and opinion in Timor-Leste. It was designed in anticipation of the impending democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. Based on interviews with 1,558 people across the 13 districts of the country, the survey reported on 'national mood', knowledge about voting and political parties, use of media and languages spoken. One question related to women and leadership:

Do you think that political leadership positions should be mostly for men or do you think that women should be just as active? Why do you say that?

The data collected is reported as follows:

- 83% of men and 80% of women supported the idea that women should be as active as men in positions of political leadership
- there was little difference in the likelihood of men or women saying that political leadership should remain mostly for men (13% men, 14% women)
- while the data suggest that women were marginally more supportive of politics remaining a male domain, age was a more important factor than gender for this question
- 76% of people under the age of 25 and 78% of students thought that women should be as active as men in positions of political leadership.⁹⁵

Responses to the 'why' question are summarised as follows:

- 35% of people who thought politics should be 'mostly for men' cited cultural differences as the reason why. 26% said that men and women are different
- 55% of those who said that political leadership should be reserved 'mostly for men' qualified this opinion by also saying that the rights of men and women are equal
- 96% of those who said that positions of political leadership are for men and women equally referred to the principle of equal rights to support their opinion.⁹⁶

This report provides interesting data and is the only research of its kind to have been conducted in English just before independence. However, there is no discussion of the socio-political context of the survey and issues relating to conducting research with people who may have had limited familiarity with this method. Implications for interpretation of the data are not explored.

The *Tatoli!* surveys (2013-2016) involved between 819 and 1,239 respondents, randomly selected from all districts. These surveys have several core themes: views on the future of Timor-Leste, the performance of the government and local issues of importance to respondents. Each survey has additional themes particular to issues current at the time. Reports for all five of the surveys have been published in Tetun and English.⁹⁷

The first *Tatoli* survey included one question relating specifically to women:

What is the biggest problem facing women in this area?

⁹⁴ The eight year Nabilan 'health and life experiences' study funded by the Australian Government and implemented by The Asia Foundation is relevant for research design considerations. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/the-nabilan-health-and-life-experiences-study-fact-sheet-1/>

⁹⁵ The Asia Foundation, *East Timor National Survey of Voter Knowledge (Preliminary Findings)*, 2001, p.36.

⁹⁶ The Asia Foundation (2001), p.37.

⁹⁷ See <https://asiafoundation.org/tag/timor-leste-public-opinion-poll/>.

Responses are represented graphically and categorised from most to least common as: ‘lack of skills/unemployment’, ‘family economy’, ‘health care’, ‘family responsibilities’ and ‘food and agriculture’. There is no reference to political participation.

The following three *Tatoli* surveys did not include any questions relating to women and political leadership. The fifth and final survey (2016) asked four questions on this topic. Interpretation of the data collected is somewhat brief with high level percentages given in-text but no charts provided except for the fourth question.⁹⁸

The questions and reported findings are as follows⁹⁹:

In your opinion, would it be good or bad for Timor-Leste if more women entered politics?

86 percent of all respondents believe that it would be “good” if more women entered politics in Timor-Leste.

In your opinion, why are more men than women in high office?

Nearly a third of total respondents (32%) believe that the main reason for the dearth of female political leadership is that ‘there currently are no qualified women.’ Nearly a quarter of respondents (22%) felt that ‘women aren’t interested in becoming political leaders.’

In your opinion, what is the highest elected office that a woman could/should be elected to?

Only half (50%) of respondents believe that a woman could/should be elected to the office of President/ Prime Minister or ‘any public office. One in six respondents (16%) feel that the highest office a woman could/should hold is that of minister or member of parliament, while 12 percent of respondents believe the highest office a woman could/should hold is that of *xefe suku* (village chief).

In your opinion, what is the most important issue facing women in Timor-Leste today?

Overall, ‘violence against women/domestic violence’ is reported as the most common issue selected by respondents, followed by ‘safety and security’ and ‘access to water and sanitation’. There are important variations according to respondent location (Dili or rest of the country).

The 2016 survey includes a question seeking respondents’ views on whether it is time for the current leadership (characterised as former independence fighters) to ‘hand over’ to younger leaders. Data relating to this question is not reported. Findings would be relevant to considerations of women’s chances as candidates.

International Republican Institute (IRI) 2017 Public Opinion Poll

This survey, conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research in partnership with Dili based INSIGHT Lda, involved 1,200 respondents across all districts, interviewed in 2016.¹⁰⁰ The question set is similar to those of the *Tatoli* surveys and covers national mood, household economic situation and the performance of government. Respondents were also asked to identify ‘the most important issue/problem facing Timor-Leste’, report on their voting decisions in the 2012 national elections, indicate their voting intentions in 2017 and disclose their political party affiliation.

The questions relating to voting and elections provide interesting contextual data on how well informed respondents have felt, both in relation to voting (*How much information do you have about the upcoming elections?*) and candidates (*How much information do you feel you had about the presidential candidates when you voted?*). The survey includes a

⁹⁸ The Asia Foundation, *Timor-Leste Tatoli! Public Opinion Poll*, Dili, 2016, pp.30-33.

⁹⁹ The Asia Foundation (2016), pp.30-33.

¹⁰⁰ International Republican Institute, *National Public Opinion Survey of Timor-Leste*, 2017. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2017-6-15_timor-leste_poll.pdf.

section on 'women and youth' in which respondents were asked to comment on a number of statements. Results are summarised below.

Which statement comes closest to your own opinion?

Women are more capable than men to serve in elected positions in government	6%
Women are as capable as men to serve in elected positions in government	82%
Women are less capable than men to serve in elected positions in government	7%
Don't know	6%

If there are two candidates running for office and they have the same qualifications aside from the fact that one is a man and one is a woman, which candidate are you more likely to support?

Man	26%
Woman	24%
Makes no difference to me	47%
Don't know	3%

These questions are helpful for gaining an understanding of respondents' stated support for women as political leaders. Finally, the IRI survey seeks respondents' views on whether political leaders 'understand' issues of importance to women.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Politicians do not listen to the needs and ideas of women.

Strongly agree	10%
Somewhat agree	6%
Somewhat disagree	30%
Strongly disagree	50%
Don't know	4%

Both the 2016 Asia Foundation report and the IRI survey suggest that a large majority of voters base their selection of a candidate on their understanding of this person's role in the independence movement rather than on the candidate's "specific experience or qualifications to hold office."¹⁰¹ This too has significant implications for women candidates.

FURTHER RESEARCH ON WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN TIMOR-LESTE

This review of literature on women and leadership in Timor-Leste has suggested an environment of strong and institutionalised domination of the political space by men, both nationally and at the local level. This environment is informed by complex historical and social dynamics which need to be understood in order to be addressed. Tension between the legislated representation of women in national political leadership and women's experiences of having influence is an important theme.

¹⁰¹ Tatoli! (2016), p.35.

The review suggests that advocates must engage with how gender equality is understood and spoken about both generally within Timor-Leste and by political actors in particular. Gender has been represented as an 'imported' concept in some political discourse and work towards gender equality has been seen to threaten 'traditional' culture.¹⁰² Sara Niner suggests that this work is hampered by the absence of a shared understanding of the concept of gender.

The population surveys provide contextual information on public perceptions of political leadership and women as political leaders. The overall finding of high stated support for the idea of equality between men and women accords with other research about the value placed on 'modern' ideals of equality and democracy. However, the surveys do not provide insight into the specific issues and personal experiences that may inform individuals at elections and how these influence outcomes for women at the local level.

This review suggests a number of directions for further research on women and leadership in Timor-Leste. Research is underway both within Timor-Leste and internationally in some of these areas.

- i. How 'gender' is understood as a concept in Timor-Leste, both broadly within the community and more specifically within political circles.
- ii. The relationship between the existing quota legislation and other aspects of the electoral and political system in Timor-Leste.
- iii. Voter considerations of women and men candidates in parliamentary elections.
- iv. (Future research) Women's participation in and experiences of *suku* elections following the introduction of the *Law No.9/2016 Law of Sucos* legislation.
- v. The nature of local power dynamics (relating to land, kinship relationships, historical events) and how these relate to gender dynamics.
- vi. Women's activism and political work during the Indonesian occupation.¹⁰³
- vii. The prevalence of politically powerful women in Timorese history to respond to claims that "contemporary Timorese 'culture' does not support women's political leadership."¹⁰⁴
- viii. The historical and current influence of the Catholic church on discourses relating to gender in Timor-Leste.

¹⁰² Niner (2016), p.2.

¹⁰³ Sara Niner cites current research in this area by Teresa Cunha. See Niner (2016), p.4.

¹⁰⁴ See Niner (2016), pp.2-6 for this and the following point.

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