



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beyond Fragility & Inequity

Women's Experiences of the Economic Dimensions
of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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This report identifies the socio-economic factors that impact upon the choices women make when determining if they should remain in an abusive relationship. The economic dimensions of domestic violence do not sit in isolation; they are in fact situated within a broader web of other societal pressures, obligations, and relationships. Given that, this research focuses on the intersection between economy and violence, while drawing together broader factors that help us to understand women's decision-making when in abusive relationships. This research was undertaken in three districts of Timor-Leste —Baucau, Covalima, and Dili— during the first half of 2014. Research findings were complemented by an analysis of existing survey data and a literature review. A total of 339 respondents were involved in the field work.

The challenges of ending violence against women and children are immense in Timor-Leste and domestic violence is frequently seen as a private issue with interventions from outsiders resisted. The use of violence has become all too commonplace and is often socially tolerated; police are ill-equipped; women are often stigmatised for reporting abuse; both customary and modern systems of justice have been reluctant to afford appropriate recognition to victims and to ensure basic needs are met; and, there is a lack of political will at the national level to provide the necessary financial support to victims.

In 2013, East Timorese NGO, the Judicial System Monitoring Programme (JSMP) reported that domestic violence cases have increased in recent years, and now constitute the largest category of criminal cases that they monitor. According to JSMP, domestic violence cases are often treated as unduly light infractions, and that in the majority of cases courts remain eager to 'suspend' a prison sentence or substitute it with a fine in cases where the defendant is found guilty. The *perceived* economic dependence of women upon their husbands and partners was clearly a factor in many of these court decisions, and both judges and prosecutors are often reluctant to send men to prison for violence because of this perception.

Timor-Leste's economy is heavily influenced by gender and markedly unequal. There is a general lack of resources, and men tend to benefit more from those resources that do exist. Furthermore, a variety of factors reduce a woman's levels of mobility and her bargaining power in instances where she is in an abusive relationship, including:

- A woman's income-generating activities and general livelihoods production often remain contingent upon access to land and a house;
- Women's skill sets tend to be of lower market value, and so it is difficult to utilise these skill sets elsewhere;
- Women often lack access to sufficient savings to enable them to relocate, and,
- Being bound to the domestic sphere makes it harder for women to connect to outside support, for their situation to be effectively evaluated, and for effective interventions to take place.

These inequities become pivotal when considering the economic dimensions of domestic violence and the relatively constrained room for women to leave abusive relationships.

A woman's ability to leave an abusive relationship is also influenced by other factors, including her reduced income-generating capacity, whether she is caring for children (particularly young children), and the levels of anticipated familial support. Women also tend not to have access to larger sources of income generation or savings that can be accessed in emergencies, which may be an important consideration in leaving.

Women are engaged in constant, diverse, and low-level income generation activities leaving them relatively immobile, and fearful that disruptions in their routine or sources of income would quickly leave them and their children with no safety net whatsoever. The relative confinement to specific spaces has other limiting effects on women beyond domestic violence, limiting their access to the flow of information and reducing their prospects to build social networks beyond the family.

The tendency for women to 'hold the money' within many households should be considered as part of the general gender dimensions of the economy. However, the management of household funds by women can often be a two-edged sword: it gives them an important measure of influence, yet can also place them at risk of violence when they are not seen as sufficiently compliant by an abusive spouse. In instances of severe violence and what we classify as 'severe controlling abuse,' the nature of a woman's economic role within the marriage is often marginalised, including through how money is managed.

An area of common controversy and debate in Timor-Leste is that of *barlake*, a marriage custom that relates to an agreement of exchange between the bride-groom and the bride's family in order to allow the marriage to occur. There was little sense from this research that *barlake* is a cause of domestic violence, although it is often part of a discursive repertoire of violence that a husband can draw from (in the same way that other justifications might be made, such as sources of income or ownership of land).

A key factor in the decisions made by women as they weighed separation was the level and kind of abuse that they experienced. For some of the women interviewed, multiple forms of abuse, coupled with severe levels of violence, ultimately resulted in a tipping point for women to leave. This was particularly the case if the severe controlling abuse involved forms of economic abuse, and the women themselves had the capacity for livelihoods production.

Of the 18 victims of abuse that were interviewed, nine of the women had separated from their partners. Of these, six women felt that their personal finances had improved since they left their partners, and one woman felt that her situation was relatively similar. While the small sample of interviews for this study should not be interpreted as suggesting that all women who separate from their husbands will see their economic situation improve, it does suggest that the prevailing assumption that women cannot support their families post-separation should to be challenged.

In terms of justice in Timor-Leste, much of the existing literature categorises the options for justice into one of two groups: informal/traditional or formal/modern justice. The customary system is most frequently depicted as the site of injustice, a domain dominated by men where women's voices are not given adequate space or weight. The research for this project suggests that the reality looks somewhat different, and that justice is not necessarily perceived by women as having a clearly defined split between the two systems. In other words, women view the two legal systems within a continuum of options, and not as two distinctly separate processes.

Lastly, findings from this research illustrate how limited access to services and limited long-term support both serve to intensify the containment of women to a domestic sphere and reduce women's bargaining position within a relationship where abuse is occurring.

