

EVAW Learning Lab 1: Economic Dimensions of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste

Why do the research?

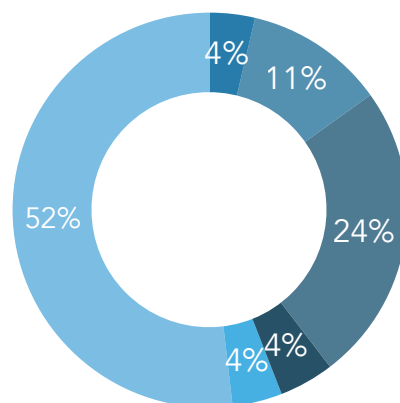
Many people assume that women who experience domestic violence do not seek help or cannot leave their husband because they are economically dependent on him or the woman (and her children) will be in a worse situation if they leave. This is an assumption that exists in many countries. In Timor-Leste, this assumption means that people responding to domestic violence may encourage a woman to stay with her partner. This is also frequently cited as a reason for the courts to hand down suspended sentences to men who abuse their spouses.

“MEN, AS THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY [...] THE COURT NEEDS TO ALSO LOOK AT THIS. IF THIS PERSON IS SENT TO PRISON, WHAT ABOUT THE ECONOMIC CONDITION OF THE FAMILY.”

– JUDGE ¹

Evidence from research: JSMP reports that of all decisions in domestic violence cases monitored between July 2010 and June 2013, 52 percent (52%) have been suspended sentences and a further 24 percent (24%) of all known decisions resulted in the issuing of a fine to the perpetrator.

Suspended sentence, suspended sentence and fine, suspended sentence and compensation for victim: 52%



Admonishment: 4%
Acquittal: 11%
Fine: 24%
Mediated/case closed, mediated with compensation for victim: 4%
Prison sentence, prison sentence and fine, prison sentence and compensation for victim: 4%

This research examined the economic situation in married households in general to understand more about women’s situation. The purpose of the research was to understand more about economic issues within married families and the factors that can be involved when women are abused and have to make decisions about what to do.

¹ JSMP, ‘Law Against Domestic Violence: Obstacles to implementation three years on’ (2013) at 34.

The researchers spoke to groups of women at Aldeia level in six Sucos in three districts (Baucau, Covalima, Dili). These were general groups of women, chosen because they could give an idea about the situation of women in 'normal' relationships. To understand more about how women who really have experienced domestic violence made their decisions, the researchers also interviewed 18 women who had experienced domestic violence. This research cannot represent the situation across the country, but it can provide important information because there has not been much research done on these questions.

Some findings from the research

Women living in the 'married economy' face inequalities even when they are living with their male partner. The research found that women spend a lot of time working (including domestic care), but this does not mean that women have economic security or equal power or equal opportunity in their household or their community.

Women have a dual economic role. Women did most of the domestic and caring work in families. They also did other kinds of work (such as small scale gardens, sale of consumer items and kiosks, preparation and sale of food and drinks) to generate income for the family. They earned more money regularly, but in smaller amounts. The research also found women spend most of their money for the family, while men spend most of their money for themselves and social activities.

"WOMEN MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT THE HOUSEHOLD NECESSITIES SUCH AS RICE, SPICES, OIL....BUT MEN HAVE MORE POWER THAN WOMEN TO MAKE DECISIONS."

– WOMAN, FGD

The research found women in rural areas had more options for generating income than women in urban areas. This may mean that women in urban areas are more dependent on their husbands than women in rural areas.

Evidence from research: The majority of women in Dili who participated in the research said that they were not involved in income generating activities.

Connections between economic issues and domestic violence

This research was not intended to prove whether poverty causes domestic violence. The research does show that because of gender differences in the economy, a woman's economic role is usually in the 'domestic sphere'. This can have an impact on her power within the relationship, and also her ability to move around and have contact with other people. Some of the reasons for this are:

- a woman's care-giving responsibilities especially for children
- a woman's income generating activities and general livelihoods production are reliant on access to land and a house

- the skill sets that a woman has are usually of low market value, and it is difficult to utilise these skill sets elsewhere
- a woman has low access to higher amounts of money that could enable her to relocate, and
- because she must stay close to the house/family/land 'domestic sphere' a woman's situation may not be known by other people and it may also be more difficult for a woman to ask for help.

Because women have less equality in the married economy and are tied to the 'domestic sphere', this can then reduce a woman's ability to leave an abusive situation, or to try to change the power dynamics in her relationship. It can also make it more difficult for service providers and other people to provide assistance.

The research did not hear from women that *barlake* was a cause for violence. The researchers heard though that *barlake* may be used by men as a threat or talked about by men who are abusing women. The research found that adat practices can make it more difficult for women to leave a violent relationship because they are afraid of the consequences. The fear of adat was seen as the problem, not *barlake*.

"WHEN HE HAS NO CIGARETTES
THEN I NEED TO GO SELL
SOMETHING IN ORDER TO BUY
CIGARETTES FOR HIM, IF I DON'T
HE BEATS ME."

– WOMAN VICTIM, BAUCAU

Women who have experienced domestic violence

In instances of severe domestic violence, the woman is already in a vulnerable situation while still living with her husband. Women in this situation may already be limited in their economic role and decision making in the household as a way to avoid conflict and violence. Or, women may be under more pressure to find income if their husband has a problem with gambling or drinking.

Participants said that the most important factors in a woman's decision to separate from an abusive partner are:

- the level of support from her family
- the age and number of children (older and fewer making it easier to separate)
- the ability to find income generation opportunities, and
- severity of the abuse.

In interviews with women who had experienced domestic violence, we heard that women left their partners only when domestic violence was very severe. In these cases, leaving her partner was more about survival than about choice.

In interviews with women who had separated from their partners due to domestic violence, many had a better economic situation (6 out of 9 victims).

These women were from rural areas and were more active in income generation before their separation and after. Only 2 of these women received support from the Government or Service Providers. Only 1 of the husbands was providing any support to the family after separation, but 2 of the men had suspended sentences which required them to provide support.

This challenges the assumption that women leaving their partners are always dependent and will be in a worse situation economically.

Women's own words

"When I lived with my husband I felt bad because we would struggle for everything, we had problems so often. Every day he would drink palm wine until he was drunk then come and make problems with us and beat me. When he would work in the fields he would sell all the produce, sometimes when it was almost time to harvest the rice he would borrow other people's money and they would come and clean the fields taking everything. I would plant tomatoes and other crops and sometimes when they were ripe people would come and take everything from me."

- Woman from Baucau explaining economic violence

"I do everything, I sell chickens, sell coconuts, borrow from the micro finance organisation, sell peanuts in the market, make 'pisang goreng' [fried food] and katupa [rice wrapped in palm leaves], sell bananas, oranges and pineapples. Sometimes when there are no tangerines I buy from other people and re-sell them (for more). I have a little kiosk where people buy supermi, oil and washing powder and I weave tais when people put in orders."

- Women who separated from her husband explaining her economic situation

"Domestic violence happens when there are problems within the household, when the man doesn't work he comes home and says everything has to be the way he wants it, the food must be cooked and the woman feels 'everyday you don't work, and we live like this ... how are we to find money? If you [the man] worked, then the woman is here to prepare food but when the man doesn't work the woman feels that it is unfair 'you go out to spend time with your friends and come home to expect the food to be prepared'... then the man says something to offend the woman, enough, they are angry already and violence happens very easily."

- FGD, Dili

Global view - economic empowerment of women

The research looked at the range of factors and realities which Timorese women perceive to enhance or detract from their position; what 'enables' them to leave or forces them to stay in an abusive relationship. The research suggests some factors which may influence a woman's bargaining strength in Timor-Leste:

- access to employment and other income-earning means
- control of household expenditure and decision making over purchases
- access to and control over assets and resources
- level of education and access to education
- number of dependents
- access to communal resources such as village commons and forests
- access to traditional social support systems such as of patronage, kinship, caste groupings, and proximity to one's own family structures
- level of support from and proximity to NGOs and service providers;
- level and type of support and proximity to the State
- social perceptions about needs and contributions (are women's needs and contributions undervalued by others and themselves)
- social norms
- access to information, and
- legal and policy structures surrounding marriage.

International research also show that there are some key approaches which show long-term promise for empowering women:

- efforts to strengthen women's rights to property, inheritance, labor force participation, divorce
- expanding social services for women and children (e.g. counselling, legal aid, shelters, etc.) through public-private partnerships that include government ministries and non-governmental organisations
- micro-credit programs for women that explicitly address the implications of gender-based violence (GBV), and
- attention to women's needs and priorities within transport and infrastructure projects.