

UNIFEM: Making a difference

by **May Lamont, UNIFEM**

Wherever in the developing world UNIFEM sees an opening for new opportunities for women to promote their rights, they take full advantage of the new situation. This so often happens in the aftermath of conflict, in the rebuilding phase of a country. It is at this time that opportunities arise to advance women's equality and empowerment. It is at this time that UNIFEM can be most visible on the ground, bringing its expertise on gender to its work with government members, institutions, international, national and local organisations alike. Timor-Leste is one of the countries benefiting from their extensive experience.

Our meeting with several members of the UNIFEM staff took place at the Alola Foundation, where we were given reports on some of the major UNIFEM programs being implemented in the country. UNIFEM has worked extensively in Timor-Leste since it gained its independence. Under its overarching framework, the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, UNIFEM's focus has been on women's political participation, women in peace-building, and prevention mechanisms on all forms of violence against women.

Supporting women in politics

Working on the premise that all women have a role to play in democratic politics, whether as members of parliament, candidates for election or voters, UNIFEM's program on *Women in Politics and Decision Making* has already contributed to a significant difference in the representation of women in Timorese political life. At the National level there are already a significant number of women parliamentarians who have formed a women's parliamentary caucus, and who are very involved in all parliamentary and community discussions to ensure women's voices are heard.

We were given a briefing on UNIFEM's progress in the latest phase of electoral reform at the village or *suco* level. Just listening to the extent and complexity of this work in one of the poorest countries in the world, working through four major languages—Portuguese, Indonesian, English and Tetum—and many dialects, given the logistics of reaching any centre outside Dili where few roads are paved and many are largely unformed tracks, where the literacy rates are very low, and attempting to change cultural norms and practices—I found it simply daunting. Yet this was what was being tackled and achieved through community forums, the establishment of project



■ *May Lamont with the UNIFEM team*

teams, the production of training materials, the training of facilitators, encouraging, training and supporting women candidates themselves, all with the aim of ensuring that the provision of three reserved seats for women, as included in the electoral law, could be met.

Hau Bele—I Can

As is always their practice, UNIFEM worked in partnership with existing NGOs, in this case with FONGTIL—the umbrella body for Timorese NGOs, and Rede Feto—the umbrella group for women's organisations. Confidence-building is a large part of their promotional focus. As well as making great use of radio and TV to raise awareness of the issues for women, they spread the message that women can overcome discrimination. "*Hau Bele*" (I Can) has become a powerful theme.

For me, it was particularly interesting to hear about this work first hand as the UNIFEM Australia National Committee has contributed funds raised from the *IWD Breakfast Programme* towards this project. It is good to know that our funds are making it possible for Timorese women at the grass roots to make their voices heard.

Increasing awareness of CEDAW with government and civil society workers, and deepening their understanding of the underlying principles of equality, then building capacity to use CEDAW to protect women's rights was another programme on which the UNIFEM staff briefed us. Timor-Leste has ratified the Convention and presented its first report to the Convention Committee



■ *A weaver at the market*

■ *Beautiful tais products at the market*

in June, 2009. As is probably not surprising for such a young conservative country, it received a very long list of recommendations for further work to be done to achieve equality for women.

REDE also submitted an Alternative CEDAW Report to the Committee. The details of both of these can be found on the CEDAW website.

Building peace, stopping violence

A third programme the UNIFEM staff discussed was another to which UNIFEM Australia had contributed funds. They reported on a pilot project, to support community-led initiatives to promote women's involvement in peace-building and prevention of sexual violence in conflict situations. This is part of a more extensive UNIFEM Programme encompassing Rwanda, Liberia, Uganda, Afghanistan and Haiti. This initiative builds on UNIFEM's work on conflict resolution and peace-building undertaken over many years. But now there is a specific focus on engaging men to partner with women to end the violence against women. A campaign on violence against women was launched and supported by the President and Prime Minister and training modules on domestic violence prevention have been produced for village councils.

The UNIFEM staff members are involved in many other aspects of the rebuilding of this tiny nation. They provide technical assistance to all the government's national machinery to ensure that gender perspectives are taken into consideration in all policy and program planning. A Gender and

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