

## Women's Activism in Timor-Leste: A Case Study on Fighting Women

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Whilst much attention has been drawn to Timor-Leste's twenty-four year struggle for independence from Indonesian military occupation, there is a paucity of scholarship which describes the roles that women played in the struggle. Widely endorsed, national narratives of resistance tend to glorify the efforts of male guerrilla fighters,<sup>2</sup> or focus predominantly on the contributions of prominent male resistance fighters and international figures, such as Xanana Gusmão, Bishop Belo, Mari Alkatiri and José Ramos-Horta.<sup>3</sup> Such methods of representation have been useful in internationalising Timor-Leste's struggle, establishing a strong sense of national unity, and in cultivating a global solidarity movement which contributed to the withdrawal of Indonesian troops in 1999. However, there is little space within such a discourse to portray the everyday life of the movement, or the experiences of its women. Within most accounts of the struggle, women's experiences are treated as a side-issue to the wider nationalist movement and the unfolding story of Indonesian oppression.<sup>4</sup> Literature which does engage with women's experiences tends to portray them predominantly as victims of mass human rights violations,<sup>5</sup> or focuses on women's nurturing or feminised roles in relation to the struggle.<sup>6</sup> Whilst these texts constitute a necessary inclusion to literature on Timor-Leste's path to independence, such tendencies prevent the inclusion of women within national narratives of heroism and sacrifice, and present only a partial story of their experiences of occupation and resistance.

This paper therefore seeks to present an alternate story of women's experiences of the Indonesian occupation, by exploring their active participation in the armed front of the resistance: an element of their involvement in the struggle which has thus far been neglected or under-represented. The paucity of women-centred documentary material on the struggle, as well as patriarchal and traditional perceptions of the roles of women, has perhaps prevented extensive discussion of women's involvement in this front in the past. Oral testimony will therefore be used quite extensively within this assessment, in an attempt to counter such neglect by shedding light on women's lives as they themselves experienced them. In writing about Timor-Leste's past, oral testimony constitutes a unique and valuable source for broadening the scope of narrative voice, and for recovering the perspectives and experiences of female fighters in particular, whose voices are not often heard. Several collections of oral testimony have been collated in recent years which are particularly gender-friendly, and this paper will draw quite extensively from several of these accounts.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The epitomic text here is the new Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, glorifying the heroic struggle for national liberation. See Section 11: Valorisation of Resistance, Constituent Assembly of East Timor, in the Constituent Assembly of East Timor, *Constitution of the Democratic Republic of East Timor*, English translation, 17 April 2002, [http://www.constitution.org/cons/east\\_timor/constitution-eng.htm](http://www.constitution.org/cons/east_timor/constitution-eng.htm), viewed 1 March 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Xanana Gusmão 2000, *To resist is to win! : the autobiography of Xanana Gusmao with selected letters & speeches*, ed. Sarah Niner, trans. Jose Luis Perestrelo Botelho, Ana Norunha and Palmira Pines, Aurora Books with David Lovell Publishing, Richmond, Vic.; and Arnold S. Kohen 1999, *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor*, St Martin's Press, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Some historical works which demonstrate elements of gender exclusion include James Dunn 1983, *Timor: A People Betrayed*, The Jacaranda Press, Milton; and Bill Nichol 2002, *Timor: A Nation Reborn*, Equinox Publishing, Jakarta.

<sup>5</sup> See Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR) 2005, *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste*, CAVR, Dili.

<sup>6</sup> See Christine Mason 2005, 'Women, Violence and Nonviolent Resistance in East Timor,' *Journal of Peace Resistance*, 42(6): 737-749; and Emma Franks 1996, 'Women and Resistance in East Timor: The Centre, as They Say, Knows Itself by the Margins,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19(1-2): 155-168.

<sup>7</sup> See Rebecca Winters (ed) 1999, *Buibere: The Voice of East Timorese Women*, East Timorese Support Centre, Darwin, N.T.; Michele Turner (ed) 1992, *Telling: East Timor, Personal Testimonies 1942-1992*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney; Jill Jolliffe and the Association of Prisoners of East Timor (AESPPOL), *Living*

These rich and relatively untapped sources of information will be analysed alongside written documentary material, such as contemporary news media and solidarity bulletins, obtained through extensive archival research within both Australia and Timor-Leste.

This paper will initially provide an outline of the ideology of FRETILIN (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* or the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) in 1974, which created a great window of opportunity for East Timorese women to step outside their traditional roles played and spaces occupied, and to engage in all fronts of the resistance. The difficulties in actualising such notions of equality will be analysed, particularly in the context of armed combat. The readiness of some women to fight if they were required will be emphasised, alongside the training in guerrilla tactics received by some women. This paper will put forth the view that FALINTIL (*Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste* or the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor-Leste) commanders were very hesitant for women to actually engage in armed conflict and to physically signify women as combatants, particularly if there were men readily available to fight instead. Whilst female fighters were not common during the struggle, there were cases of women joining FALINTIL, fighting as ordinary soldiers, and even some women leaders that are remiss in most accounts of the struggle. Women also provided invaluable behind the lines support for the guerrilla fighters, and this paper will touch on the types of activities in which women engaged in support of the armed resistance. Women's contributions to the armed struggle have existed on the periphery of accounts of the resistance, and they are often absent within public forms of memory and commemoration. Their absence is demonstrated most explicitly by the fact that there is only one public site in Timor-Leste that commemorates the role of women in the struggle.<sup>8</sup> This paper therefore attempts to distance women from the discourse of victimhood and passivity in which they are most commonly situated within accounts of this period, by exploring some of the various ways in which women participated in the armed front of the resistance. This study therefore aims to reposition women as active agents within the resistance, and to open up new ways of understanding the way in which the struggle was fought that are more attuned to the roles of women.

In 1974 when FRETILIN articulated a new vision for Timor-Leste, women and gender equality were at the centre of their plans for national unification without sexual discrimination (CIET 1974, 1). A women's arm of FRETILIN, the OPMT (*Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense* or Popular Organisation of Timorese Women) was brought into being after the Civil War in August 1975 to facilitate women's participation in the struggle and to fight general discrimination against women (Bonaparte 1975, 7). The organisation's secretary, Rosa 'Muki' Bonaparte, released a statement in 1975 which outlined her proposition for women's roles with regards to combat:

Timorese women, as active participants in the revolution, also participate in battle in full affirmation of their dedication to the cause of liberation of the exploited and oppressed of our country. It is incredible that in a country where more than 50 per cent of the population consists of women, that they would not take part in the liberation struggle. To participate in combat does not just mean to take up arms, though this is superior. The participation of Timorese women in the fighting takes various forms: gather information about enemy movements, their fighting potential, and so on (Bonaparte 1975, 7).

Within this statement, Bonaparte stresses the logic of women's involvement in the armed front as a manifestation of their commitment to national liberation. The actualisation of such ideals to involve women in all fronts of the resistance was however not easy, particularly the incorporation of women into the armed front. Then member of the FRETILIN Central Committee and Commander-in-chief of FALINTIL, Rogerio Lobato, encapsulates such hesitancy in a 1978 interview with a special correspondent of ETNA, emphasising the gap between creating political ideals and changing prevailing attitudes:

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Memory Project 2011, Southeast Asia Digital Library, <http://sea.lib.niu.edu/inst/living.html>, viewed 1 March 2012; Jude Conway (ed) 2010, *Step By Step: Women of East Timor, Stories of Resistance and Survival*, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, NT.

<sup>8</sup> This is the *Jardim Rosa Muki Bonaparte* (Rosa Muki Bonaparte Garden) in Dili.

Many people cannot understand that women should take up arms against the Indonesians. They see women as only in traditional roles; looking after the house, rearing children, and so on. But women form half the population and they must be involved in the struggle on all fronts, including the armed struggle (*East Timor News* 27-28 March 1978, 5).

Despite the gender-inclusive nationalism promulgated by FRETILIN, Lobato recognises that perceptions of women's traditional roles in society may create obstacles in translating such ideas of gender equality into practices on the ground.

There is evidence to suggest that many women were however ready and willing to take up arms if need be, attesting to their courage and determination to be actively involved in all fronts of the resistance. Despite his hesitancy to act on such desires, former FALINTIL Commander-in-Chief, Xanana Gusmão, acknowledged that 'there were courageous women ready to render such high service to the nation' (Gusmão in Niner 2009, 49). Clandestine leader, Constâncio Pinto, similarly claimed that women were prepared 'to use weapons when necessary' (Pinto 2007, 49). From the perspective of women, there appears a sense that their readiness to fight was conflated with an embodied commitment to national independence. Mana Bisoi, who was a female fighter with FALINTIL, insisted that women 'can be as patriotic as men' (Bisoi in Cristalis et al 2005, 40). There are also reports of groups of women actually going to FRETILIN Central Committee representatives to demand weapons and offer themselves as fighters, such as that observed by Jill Jolliffe in 1976 (Jolliffe 1976, 17), which further attests to the readiness of women to engage in armed conflict.

Many women travelled with FALINTIL fighters, and whilst assisting in more traditional support roles, many were trained in guerrilla strategies as well. Margarida Gonçalves, who retreated with her family and other guerrilla forces to the jungle after the invasion, describes being trained to disassemble and reassemble rifles, to load bullets and operate rifles, as well as to make gunpowder and hand grenades (Gonçalves in Abrantes et al 2010, 14). Madalena Bi Dau Soares, an OPMT member, tells of similar training experiences and notes that there were 'a significant number of women' with such skills (Soares in Abrantes et al 2010, 39). She also describes being taught how to conduct an ambush, and how to shoot when engaged with the enemy 'in order to kill them' (Soares in Abrantes et al 2010, 39).

Despite such training, however, women were often not called upon to fight unless men were not readily available to do so, demonstrating a clash between political rhetoric and practice. FRETILIN founder and former President, Francisco Xavier do Amaral, told in an interview with Sofia Ospina about a female fighter, Maria Tapo, who was taught by her husband to use a machine gun, yet it wasn't until her husband was killed that she took over his gun and died defending herself in 1975 (do Amaral in Ospina 2006, 22). Within this account, Maria demonstrates a strong survivor instinct and sense of utility. Xanana Gusmão explained that FALINTIL command did not want women carrying weapons; telling them: 'If we all die, you can, but for now, let us' (Gusmão in Cristalis et al 2009, 121). Often, it was only when the male guerrillas were sick, wounded, in dangerous situations, or security was needed during an ambush, that the commander would authorise for the women to carry a weapon (Gonçalves in Abrantes et al 2010, 14). Madalena Bi Dau Soares recalls being told that it would only be that 'if all the men die, women [would] have to carry weapons' until independence was achieved (Soares in Abrantes et al 2010, 39). Such testimony reveals that national liberation remained an overarching goal to be achieved at all costs, yet an established gender hierarchy still operated within the armed front of the resistance.

The prioritisation of men within the FALINTIL structure extended to more practical privileges as well. Mana Bisoi describes the unavailability of military clothing to many fighters, recalling 'we were lucky to possess two changes of clothes each' (Bisoi in Cristalis et al 2005, 40). Clothing was often taken from deceased Indonesian soldiers, which were first given to the male FALINTIL, in part because they fitted better, but also because 'the men, especially the commanders, did not want to give us [the women] uniforms' (Bisoi in Cristalis et al 2005, 40). This account demonstrates the discomfort of FALINTIL command with signifying women as combatants.<sup>9</sup> That some women participated in conflict as ordinary

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on this, see Cynthia Enloe 1983, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarisation of Women's Lives*, South End Press, Boston, Mass.

soldiers or 'arma branca' (Gusmão in Turner 1992, 129) – not members of FALINTIL but still engaged in combat – advances the notion that there was hesitancy to include women within the FALINTIL structure, though they could perhaps engage in conflict if there was no other alternative.

There were cases of women fighting alongside men during combative situations. These were, however, more likely to be groups of ordinary soldiers as opposed to members of FALINTIL. For example, a report published in an international support newsletter in 1982 in Australia stated that 'over 200 East Timorese, including some women, were involved in an attack on Indonesian forces north of Lacluta in March this year' (*Timor Information Services* 38 September/October 1982, 2). The women were described as having 'a strong spirit of resistance', and emphasised the competence of the female fighters (*Timor Information Services* 38 September/October 1982, 2). In addition, Mária de Fátimo Pinto was part of a group involved in an assault on Dili on 10 June 1980, and then went on to lead an attack herself on Dili (de Fátimo Pinto in Abrantes et al 2010, 59). Though rare, there are other reports which tell of the establishment of women's army brigades and units under female command. An Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) Report from 1975 mentioned a women's army unit of 100-strong under a woman commander that had formed (ACFOA 1975, 9). The military unit was also mentioned in an Australian solidarity newsletter as fighting in the front lines of the border battle against Indonesian attack (*National East Timor Winter Mobilisation* 15-16 July 1977, 3). In 1976, José Ramos-Horta reported that the first woman's army detachment of 100-strong led by a woman commander was receiving 'full military training' near the border village of Tapo, though this may have been the same group (*International News* n.d., n.p). Ramos-Horta states that the women had 'played a heroic role in defending their village' by driving 'off an Indonesian attack and captured some of their weapons, while the village men were away fighting in the Batugade-Balibo area' (*International News* n.d., n.p). Ramos-Horta describes women within glorified language of national struggle, yet notes that the women defended the village only because the men were fighting elsewhere.

These accounts are however rare; stories of women's participation in the armed front tend to focus more on the support and auxiliary roles of women, as opposed to their direct engagement in armed combat. OPMT in particular, functioned as an organising mechanism to facilitate women's support for the guerrilla fighters. Many women were involved in organising supplies for the guerrillas, providing them with food or shelter. Former political prisoner and OPMT member, Genoveva da Costa Martins talks of meeting with OPMT members to plan and collect food, medicines and clothes to send to the guerrilla fighters (da Costa Martins in *Living Memory Project*). Elizabete Lim Gomes, an East Timorese woman now living in Melbourne, recalls how her grandmother supplied FALINTIL with dry foods and dry medication (personal communication, 22 September 2010). Domingas Coelho commented in an interview for *TAPOL* that women were often required to liaise between FALINTIL, FRETILIN and the clandestine network (Coelho in *TAPOL* June 1991, 13). Such communicative functions were of critical importance to the resistance. Therefore, whilst not engaging in direct combat, many women still provided behind-the-lines assistance. To view guerrilla warfare as simply composed of those fighting on the front lines therefore, is to disregard the integral preparation and support provided by many women and to misconstrue how the resistance effectively operated.

Most accounts of Timor-Leste's struggle for independence tend to under-represent the involvement of women. Accounts which engage with women's experiences tend to portray them solely as passive victims and bystanders. This paper has attempted to counter such trends by drawing attention to one particular aspect of women's involvement which has been left out of most accounts of the struggle, that being their participation in the armed front of the resistance. Though there are only a few accounts of women who actively engaged in armed conflict, women were a central force behind the armed front, which held out against the occupying Indonesian army for such a considerable period. The inclusion of women's experiences adds a necessary dimension to recent East Timorese history. Personal narratives and oral accounts in particular, tell a viable and important story of the invasion and occupation, and deserve a special place in the telling of women's history in Timor-Leste. I argue that a more pronounced feminist perspective needs to be employed in East Timorese resistance literature, so as to open up new ways of writing and understanding the past, and to insert new perspectives into the nation's narrative of resistance.

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