



Submission No 23

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

Organisation: YWCA Australia

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee



Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into *Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste*.

About YWCA Australia

YWCA Australia is the national association of YWCAs in Australia and is part of the World YWCA movement. We are a women-led organisation that achieves positive change by providing advocacy, programs and services for women, families and communities.

YWCAs undertake advocacy and deliver services and programs that develop the leadership and collective power of women and girls, support individuals, their families and communities at critical times, and promote gender equality and community strengthening.

In 2004, YWCA Australia formed an Australian-based Timor-Leste Committee (**TLC**) to advocate for greater support for young women and girl's services in Timor-Leste, and to work towards the development of a YWCA in Timor-Leste.

YWCA work in the Asian and Pacific regions

YWCAs in more than 120 countries work to improve the lives of women, especially young women, through programs that build local capacity, develop young women's leadership, raise awareness of women's social, political and economic rights and through the delivery of vital services to create safe and secure communities. In the Asian and Pacific regions, YWCAs operating in over 24 countries have been working and collaborating for many decades to improve the well being of women and their communities.

Ten years ago, the idea of establishing a local YWCA in Timor-Leste was developed through the collaborative efforts of YWCAs in Australia, the World YWCA, Pacific wide YWCA meetings including in the Solomon Islands, PNG, Fiji, and Samoa, and individual Australian women (including leading Australian academics teaching and researching in gender and development studies in Timor-Leste).

This vision was underpinned by insights into the status of women in Timor-Leste and an understanding that a YWCA organisational framework and linkages would provide a useful vehicle to nourish young women's leadership development in a supportive and secure way and meet local community needs.

The need for a membership-based association such as the YWCA with branches and clubs at local level became evident when YWCA members realised the way in which rural women, in particular young women, have been excluded from decision-making in existing structures, even in existing women's organisations. This has resulted in poor health (as evidenced by high maternal mortality in comparison with Pacific Island countries) and lack of access to basic education and adequate village technology such as improved cooking stoves (Hill 2010). The YWCA sees itself as part of complementary non-formal education, operating in a

strategic way to address those learning needs ignored by the formal schooling system in many countries (Hill 2006).

Key points

- Young women in Timor-Leste face multiple and complex challenges, including poverty, inadequate education and employment opportunities, pervasive inequality and discrimination, and gender-based violence, yet few programs give sole focus to young women's programs or development.
- Recognising the principle of self determination for the people of Timor-Leste and the critical role of young women who will raise the next generation in the fast growing population of Timor-Leste, young women are uniquely placed to contribute to the development of Timor-Leste as future decision-makers, community leaders and active citizens. Supporting young women and developing their leadership can have social, economic and political benefits for individuals, communities and Timor- Leste as a whole.
- There is a unique opportunity for Australians to contribute to young women's empowerment as a key development issue through the YWCA movement.
- The YWCA of Timor-Leste is still in its development phase, depending on voluntary contributions, and the strength and commitment of both Timorese and Australians for time, expertise and funds, with very little donor or government support.

Our recommendations

We recommend that:

- That a human rights based framework be used to support young women and girls in Timor-Leste. The approach to building young women's leadership must be grounded in the mechanisms devoted to improving the status of women and girls, most notably the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (**CEDAW**), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (**CRC**) and the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**), to which Timor Leste is signatory, as well as the Domestic Violence Law passed in 2010.
- That the *Pacific Young Women's Leadership Strategy*¹ be used as a model for developing and supporting young women's participation and leadership in Timor-Leste. The Strategy outlines that to build their leadership skills, young women need to be **safe, respected, included, connected, and skilled**.

¹ www.worldywca.org/media/files/Pacific-Young-Women-s-Leadership-strategy

- That AusAID make available small flexible innovative funding for young women's leadership to influence the future development of rural communities and support and nurture young women of Timor Leste and their children to achieve a future free of poverty and violence. We recommend that this include grants for study visits and exchanges for capacity strengthening through Australian-Timorese civil society relationships.
- That the Australian Government recognise and provide ongoing policy and financial support for strengthening Australian-Timorese civil society relationships and facilitating cross border exchanges more generally as part of promoting Australia's national interest in the region. Developing Australian Timorese organisational partnerships as well as understanding between Timorese and Australian individuals will engender support for Timorese organisations and bring in required leadership, management and administrative skills to build capacity at minimal cost.
- As part of facilitating cross border exchanges, the Australian Government ensure that young Timorese women who have been sponsored by a reputable organisation to visit Australia are given assistance to obtain the necessary travel documentation and are not harshly questioned by customs and immigration officials when arriving in Australia.

Timor-Leste Context

Since independence, Timor-Leste has experienced a period of rapid change, framed by national policies that embrace international principles of equality and a Constitution which provides that "women and men have the same rights and duties in all areas of family, political, economic, social and cultural life" (RDTL 2002 Section 17). Within rural communities, however, customary practices continue to dominate the way of life. Most of the population lives by subsistence agriculture in the traditional way with allegiance to customary leaders. Customary practices dictate distinct gender roles for men and women. Women's work is focused on the domestic sphere while men are the principle decision makers. While there has been much attention to both gender and youth issues in independent Timor-Leste, there has been little specific focus on the distinct issues facing young Timorese women (Wigglesworth 2012).

Timorese place a high importance on having children and childbearing starts immediately following marriage. Timorese women have large families and statistics published in 2007 indicate Timor-Leste had the highest fertility rates in the world with an average of 7.8 children per woman. A more recent survey, the Demographic and Health Survey 2010, suggests a drop in fertility rate, but it is still high at 5.7 (NDS 2010:51). Timor-Leste's population is young with 62.5% of the population under 24 years old. 45% of the population are children 14 years or under.

More than two-thirds of Timorese women have become mothers by age 25 (NDS 2010:56). Today's young women will therefore play an influential role in the wellbeing of the fast growing generation of infants and children.

The provision of sustainable livelihoods for this young and rapidly growing population is a major emerging policy issue for the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste (República Democrática de Timor-Leste – RDTL). The majority of the Timorese population and 77% of the labour force live in rural areas, where subsistence agriculture predominates (RDTL 2006:7). Timorese women are active in the agricultural and non-formal sectors, in selling and marketing agricultural produce managing kiosks (small shops). They play a major role in producing food and food products as well as traditional forms of cloth and craftwork. Thus women play a central role in providing for their families through food production and supplementary economic activities.

Domestic violence is a critical issue for women in Timor-Leste, and one of the issues most frequently mentioned by women. Women who marry young or have a low educational level are at significantly greater risk of violence by their partner, which applies to most women in Timor-Leste. Young people have observed that domestic violence is just as common among young couples today as it was in previous generations (Wigglesworth 2010:129). A staggering 86% of women believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife for reasons such as going out without telling him, arguing with him or neglecting the children (NDS 2010:214).

Ameerah Haq, Special Representative for Timor-Leste and Head of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (**UNMIT**) has said that:

local women's stories and work helped her understand that if the United Nations were to make a lasting contribution to peace and stability in Timor-Leste, it would be by building on the initiative and resilience of the women and helping them become fully involved in determining the country's future.

Women's involvement in decision making is particularly important in Timor-Leste, where men and women are building the economic and social foundations of a stable society and resilient institutions (UN Website 2013).²

In this context, YWCA Australia believes it is important to establish opportunities for young women to build their skills and confidence in such a way to be able to take some control over their lives.

How the YWCA can continue to benefit Timor-Leste

The YWCA movement has the capacity and commitment to make a tangible contribution to improving women's lives in Timor-Leste, particularly young women.

Building local capacity

Investing in the leadership of women and girls is one of the core activities of the YWCA movement around the world. The lives of women, their families and communities are

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www.un.org/wcm/content/site/chronicle/home/archive/issues2011/pursuingpeace/roleofwomeninmakingandbuildingpeace (March 12 2013)

improved through grassroots projects and programs, training and advocacy that are suited to local communities.

Developing Young Women's Leadership

Always at the forefront of young women's empowerment and abiding by its movement-wide constitutional commitment to ensure that at least 25% of decision making positions are held by young women 30 or under, the YWCA relentlessly advocates for young women to become leaders both within the YWCA movement and in the wider community. YWCA leadership development builds the confidence of young women; allowing them to participate in and influence local, regional and global policy spaces, and encourages intergenerational dialogue, peer training and experience sharing.

The objective of the YWCA of Timor-Leste is to encourage young women in leadership skills, decision-making, collaboration, recreation and education and advocate for human rights and gender equality. The YWCA of Timor-Leste has developed the following Vision, Mission and Objectives:

Vision

For the young women of Timor-Leste to be equipped with leadership skills, have power to be involved in decision-making, grow in self-confidence, and recognize their abilities to advocate for human rights and have equal opportunities as others in work and in recreation.

Mission

The purpose of the YWCA in Timor Leste is to encourage young women in leadership skills, decision-making, collaboration, recreation and education.

Objectives

- To achieve cultural, economic, political, religious and social justice for all women and girls.
- To develop and sustain women's leadership, and to promote women as decision makers in all spheres of public life.
- To advocate for the human rights of women and children, women's health, world peace with justice and sustainable development (including women's economic justice and the environment).
- To provide opportunities for young women's participation and leadership.
- To promote the principles of diversity, inclusiveness, tolerance, mutual respect, integrity and responsible accountability within our volunteer movement and within our community.
- To advocate for the self determination of women and girls in all areas of life.
- To provide leadership which improves the status of women and girls around the world.
- To empower the women to make decisions about their own future.
- To promote awareness and respect for the environment among all Timorese, including members.

As a membership movement, the YWCA often works through young women's clubs for active learning and community engagement. The YWCA of Timor-Leste is starting to develop local young women's clubs at community level which will build leadership, solidarity

between young women and provide an opportunity for them to discuss issues of mutual concern.

History of YWCA Australia's involvement with Timor-Leste

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) of Timor-Leste has been evolving since 2003, when several Timorese students in Australia attended the 2003 World YWCA Council in Brisbane. In 2004, YWCA Australia formed an Australian-based Timor-Leste Committee (TLC) to advocate for greater support for young women and girl's services in Timor-Leste, and to work towards the development of a YWCA in Timor-Leste.

Some of the work to date includes:

- Supporting a young woman from Timor-Leste to attend the YWCA World Council meeting in Nairobi in 2007 and in Zurich in 2011 to familiarise Timorese partners with the YWCA movement (with assistance from the AusAID International Seminar Support Scheme, private donations from Australian women and partnership grants).
- YWCA Australia providing technical support in the early childhood area, which is ongoing. Two training programs, in January and August 2012, covering fundamental practices in early childhood were facilitated to approx 30 staff of Fokupers and Alola crèches, nannies and the Atauro pre-primary school. This was enhanced through fundraising efforts resulting in 12 boxes of culturally appropriate educational toys and resources being sent for distribution to Fokupers, Atauro pre-primary school and Alola Foundation in 2009 and 2011.
- In August 2011 a decision was made to establish the YWCA of Timor-Leste to pursue opportunities to fill a gap in building skills, confidence and leadership amongst young women with a focus on sub-districts and districts.
- During 2012 the YWCA Australia TLC identified young women's clubs as a way to address constraints that many young women face such as limited training and recreation opportunities, opportunities for individual pursuits or just to leave the house and socialise. Local groups will be directly based in the local communities and will enable young women to have a voice.
- Self funded visits by Dr. Ann Wigglesworth, Dr. Helen Hill, Ana Joaquim-Pedruco, Gordana Morphett, Heidi Zajac, Diane Goodwillie, Ruth Lechte and a student placement by Victoria University Melinda Sloan have provided technical assistance to the newly formed YWCA of Timor Committee to develop a constitution and register with FONGTIL (the NGO co-coordinating agency in Timor-Leste).

Funding and donor support for the formation of a YWCA in Timor Leste

YWCA Australia has provided support to Timor Leste since 2003 with little or no financial support from government or aid donors except for small grants from AusAID. YWCA Australia has given technical and capacity building support to establish the YWCA of Timor-Leste as well as technical and financial support for child care activities. YWCA Australia has an ongoing commitment to the YWCA of Timor-Leste, and currently holds a small budget derived from fundraising specifically for YWCA of Timor- Leste activities.

In 2013, the World YWCA supported a Timorese leadership workshop for young women, facilitated by YWCA Solomon Islands, with financial support through an AusAID Pacific Leadership Program (**PLP**) development grant for women's leadership. Planning for the workshop was facilitated by the voluntary efforts of a Timorese scholarship student studying in Melbourne, and the YWCA Australia TLC contributed the airfare and small incidental allowance for the student.

We would like to commend the flexibility and creativity of the Pacific Leadership Program and the World YWCA as the Timorese leadership workshop will contribute greatly to the exposure of a wider Timorese population to the needs of young women and the newly established YWCA of Timor-Leste.

Travelling to Australia

We would like to express our concern that the Australian immigration system can be a barrier for young women from Timor Leste participating in cross-border/cultural exchanges. The documentation associated with obtaining documents to travel to or transit through Australia can be extremely complicated for young Timorese women to deal with. Further, young Timorese women that YWCA Australia has sponsored have in the past been harshly questioned by Australian immigration officials about their reasons for travel on arrival in the Australia, despite having a clear purpose for travel and being sponsored by a reputable organisation. Sensitivity and support for these young women is required.

More information

We would be pleased to provide further information about anything outlined in this submission.

Yours sincerely

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