

IDP camp closure and gender inequality in Timor-Leste

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The goal of humanitarian assistance in Timor-Leste during a series of crises from 2006 to 2008 became increasingly focused on IDP camp closure, with the assisted return of IDPs to their communities or to alternative living situations.

From 2006 to 2008, over 150,000 people were displaced into over 65 IDP camps and transitional shelters. During this time, there was a rise in the number of cases of domestic violence and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) for reasons intrinsically related to changing social relations, family breakdown, a destruction of trust and economic hardship. IDPs suffered loss of property and housing, separation, insecurity, the threat of violence and ill health. The last camps and transitional shelters were due to close at the end of 2009 but a recent World Bank Study on Dili, Timor-Leste's capital city, reported constant levels of violence, with up to 40% of returning IDPs in one city ward stating that they continue to experience conflict. Camp closure is not a panacea.

IDP camp closure, gender inequality and violence

Cases of forced sex, sexual assault and rape were reported in the early months of IDP life in 2006, as were instances of 'unwanted' pregnancies from these incidents. Some of these were expressions of male frustration over loss, dislocation and uncertainty, often exacerbated by increased alcohol abuse. These were characteristically domestic violence cases, sometimes including incest. IDP women's concerns over contributory physical factors such as the lack of electricity at night and camp insecurity – combined with a lack of security generally – were taken up. Attempts were made to rectify these problems, although little could be done to redress the lack of privacy in two-family tents.

Women's Committees formed in some of the camps – supported by Rede Feto¹ – did much to change reactive to proactive policies and planning. Subsequent media campaigns on domestic and SGB violence and on trafficking used posters, theatre performances and radio programmes in the camps. These played an important role in reducing violent incidents. Local NGOs, international NGOs, civil society organisations, UNDP and the government all promoted these strategies.

However, de facto family breakdown often occurred as a result of camp life, with mothers and their very young children having to live in one camp while late primary, pre-secondary or secondary school children lived in another, close to their schools. Often the father was in yet another camp or in rural areas outside the capital, often moving between the family's former damaged or destroyed house and the other members of his family in their

respective IDP locales. Polygamy was also reported to be rising.

This separation of family members, combined with the closure of many schools in Dili for long periods of time in 2006 and 2007, resulted in a breakdown of domestic life and a rupture in the established routines

is too young to marry and cannot assume responsibility for the young woman and her child/children. Some deny paternity. The young woman and her family have stark choices. The Judicial System Monitoring Programme (JSMP), an East Timorese NGO, can provide legal advice and support to take the issue to court

Government payments to returning IDPs

As the IDP camps closed, kiosk owners called in debts for payment. Many women IDPs had asked for credit for the small necessities of life. In some cases, having been incurred over a period of more than three years, the amount owed was considerable. Women had every reason to fear as the kiosk owners reported the magnitude of these debts to unknowing husbands or partners. What women assumed and hoped was that part of the 'return' packet provided by the government could be used to settle such debts.

This situation on top of all the other uncertainties of IDP camp closure heightened the feelings of frustration and powerlessness of IDP men. The dependency culture of IDP camp life fed into a destructive dynamic of gendered family mistrust that remains unresolved. These resentments have accompanied family members as they resettle. On the whole, women have not been the ones to receive the returnee payments, either to use for debt repayment or to assist themselves and their children to resettle after leaving the camps.



Returnees leave their IDP camp in Dili.

and patterns of school and work. Even when schools re-opened, often there was no possibility of resuming schooling; it was too expensive.

Some 'unwanted' pregnancies in the IDP camps came from 'boyfriend-girlfriend' relationships in the unusual and exceptional circumstances of camp life. Such relationships were previously uncommon because of the traditional pressures and values exerted by parents, neighbours and community in 'normal' times. These new friendships naturally formed in the IDP camps as old neighbourhood attachments and pastoral support were interrupted. This presented a particular challenge to the mothers and fathers of adolescent and young adult daughters. Pregnancies occurred, with some young women now with one child and a second unwanted pregnancy as they left the IDP camps.

This has several social outcomes for all concerned. In many cases, the boyfriend and his family say he

but the judicial process is slow, due to the backlog of cases, and the potential outcome is uncertain, so this prospect is daunting. Often, it is also logistically and financially impossible. The family of the young woman suffers a loss, in the sense that the prospect of *barlake* (bride-price dowry) traditionally paid to the bride's family, has now been foreclosed unless the young man and his family agree through traditional forms of mediation to make payment.

Additionally – partly due to the crisis – in many cases these young women have not completed their education and have no skills. Their prospects for further education and training are complicated by the responsibility they have for their infants. They return to their birth families with their dependent children and thus constitute an additional burden on their families in the context of ever-scarcer resources with IDP camp closure. Where are they to go, and what can they do to support themselves? Some have turned to sex working.

The settlement offered by the government to returning IDPs upon re-verification of the level of destruction of their former homes was paid to the male heads of households. The incidence of polygamy has increased with men's access to cash, leading to poor family relations, loss of trust, men refusing family responsibilities, and sometimes the abandonment of women and children. As there was nothing to stop them, the numbers of cases of men disappearing with these funds have risen. This has also created a burden on state services.

The sharp rise in the purchasing power of men was reflected in the recent acquisition of large numbers of cars used as taxis and motorbikes. Tailbacks and traffic jams in Dili were evidence of this. Cock-fighting, gambling, the consumption of alcohol and other gendered leisure pursuits also markedly increased, as did the incidence of domestic violence. Quarrels over access to money and its use continue to be reported by women in many of these cases of

violence. As the funds were not being used for shelter, homelessness could result, creating more gender tension and further hardship, particularly for women and children.

In the Eastern Districts, the resettlement payments were paid into banks but there was no possibility of women being joint account holders, or sole account holders in the cases of female-headed households. This presented a particularly gendered inequity for women as wives, women who are heads of households and women as grandmothers who have responsibility for dependent daughters with children or unwanted pregnancies. The need for gender parity in these resettlement payments was discussed but did not become part of the planning and policy decision making by government.

Domestic and SGB violence cases continue to increase in Timor-Leste due to physical and economic insecurities – unemployment, family breakdown and continuing cycles of residential upheaval due to migration and forced migration. Service providers and advocacy groups struggle to provide support to women and children who experience domestic and SGB violence but human and financial resources and continuity of staff, service provision and effective advocacy are lacking.

While funding was already in place for the transition from IDP camps, the global financial crisis has seriously impacted donor capacity to continue aid support. It is a constant challenge to secure guaranteed long-term funding to make outreach sustainable and especially to expand and to monitor these badly needed services both in the capital and in all 13 districts. Funding by donors continues to dwindle but is still greatly needed.

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1. Rede Feto (Women's Network) is an umbrella network of 17 national organisations, established in 2001 as a direct result of deliberations at the First National Women's Congress in 2000 to promote gender equality and women's rights and to support women in development.