Women’s Economic Empowerment in Timor-Leste

Women weaving a better future through better business

Timor-Leste is the youngest country in Asia, and became a sovereign state in 2002. Thirteen years after its independence, it remains one of the poorest and most oil-dependent countries on earth, with more than half of the population living below the poverty line and 40 percent living outside the market economy. Though the country receives revenue from offshore oil and gas reserves, little impact has yet to be felt by villages. As a result, the majority of the population, both men and women, still rely on subsistence farming. The national economy, as well as the economics of marriage in Timor-Leste, are also both highly gendered and unequal. Women in Timor-Leste often participate in diverse income-generating activities, including weaving, although these activities tend to generate less cash revenue than those typically engaged in by men. However, studies have shown that income earned from women’s economic participation is more likely to be spent on women’s families, in particular their children.

The Asia Foundation’s programming

In addition to economic hardship, violence against women and girls is a complex and deeply entrenched issue in Timor-Leste. Violence against women was widespread during the Indonesian occupation in Timor-Leste, and evidence shows that has not abated since independence was restored. The Asia Foundation’s 2015 survey on violence against women in Timor-Leste found that three in five (59%) women aged 15-49 years, who have ever been in a relationship, reported having experienced some form of physical or sexual partner violence, or both, by a male partner in their lifetime. Women often identify money or poverty as a stressor that can lead to arguments and conflict in the household.

Within this context, the Foundation recognizes economic empowerment as a key aspect of a comprehensive array of services that should be offered to women who experience violence. In 2009, local organization the Alola Foundation, in partnership with Indonesian NGO Yayasan Pecinta Bebali, conducted research on Timor-Leste’s artisanal industry. The research revealed that artisanal products have the potential to contribute to the country’s economic development. Yet while sufficient materials are available for artisans, they often lack the capacity to improve the quality of their products, and the ability to diversify and innovate new products to be competitive in the market.

With the generous support through a United States Department of State grant, the Foundation is working with women artisans to promote their economic advancement, and contribute to the evolving non-oil economy of the country while

Around 140 women weavers will be involved in this project through the Foundation’s local partners Empreza Diak and the Alola Foundation.

The project will work with women weavers in Ainaro, Baucau, Bobonaro, Covalima, Lautem, Viqueque and Oecusse districts.
also supporting the protection of women and girls by increasing awareness of support services and referral pathways for victims of violence. This project also aims to help promote cultural tradition of Timor-Leste through the modernization of marketing strategies and development of collectives for traditional tapestries.

The Foundation will lead market research and market access identification activities, and provide guidance on preventing violence against women and girls. With its partners, Alola Foundation and Empreza Di’ak, the Foundation will support women’s collectives to produce a more diverse range of high-quality woven products, with enhanced labeling and packaging to meet and build demand for artisanal products. Through trainings, workshops, and internships, women’s collectives will increase their awareness of and access to local and international markets, allowing them to enhance revenue and build savings. The project will support collectives to strengthen their business practices and financial management, as well as establish a mechanism to support scholarships for adolescent girls who often face pressure to terminate their schooling early. The project will mentor adolescent girls and young women and provide internships within the collectives.

The 24-month project will ultimately help increase the quality and range of the collectives’ products, and consequently the revenues generated by the collectives, towards more sustainable incomes for women artisans. This in turn will promote girls’ continued education and financial independence.

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