It’s not personal; it’s just business: the economics of being a woman in Timor-Leste

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• Longstanding economic disparity between men and women and men’s contemporary dominance of the economy is a significant issue for democracy and equal rights in TL.

• The system of state wealth distribution through various social welfare and investment schemes is extremely gendered, partially due to the lack of recognition afforded to women for their service to the independence struggle.

• In 2016, Timor-Leste was rated 125 out of 144 countries—at the bottom of the Asia Pacific region—in the Global Gender Gap Index.

• The ranking reflected improved ratings in women’s political representation and education, but a significant gender gap in the Economic Participation and Opportunity indicator dragged down the score.

• An alternative pro-feminist economy might do a better job at not just assisting women, but also the poorest citizens.
WHAT DO WOMEN DO IN RURAL TIMOR-LESTE?

110,000 women in Timor-Leste work in agriculture = 1 in 3 women

1 in 4 women are underweight = reduces productivity

Women own 40% of micro-businesses = 2 in 5

On average women spend 3 hours a day collecting water = 1/5 of waking hours

The average woman will have 6 (live) children which increases risks of malnutrition = 1/2 children malnourished

WHAT DO WOMEN NEED IN RURAL TIMOR-LESTE?

Training on farming and nutrition
Access to maternal healthcare and nutrition services
Better farming resources and access to finance
Land-ownership rights and access to justice
The gender gap in income

• In Timor-Leste women earn an eighth of the income of men (ADB/Unifem 2005) and have higher levels of malnutrition and illiteracy (UN 2010 MDG Report).

• 70,000 paid employees earning a total of US$ 12 million dollars per month, women received as little as US$ 3 million (UNDP 2011).

• 2010 National Demographic Survey: 44 percent of married women were employed over the previous twelve months, mostly in agriculture, either for themselves or family, the vast majority (80 percent) did not receive any payment (NSD 2010: 203).

• Overall women earn lower salaries, receive fewer benefits and opportunities to advance in their professional careers and are less likely to be promoted (Costa, Sharp, and Elson 2009).

• the deeper systemic social change required for men and women to have equal opportunities in daily life remains a challenge and the economy is key.
FIGURE 3.2

Employment Status, Population Ages 15–64, by Gender, 2015

Note: NEET = not in education, employment, or training.
Gender relations in contemporary Timor-Leste

- Gender relations in contemporary post-conflict Timor-Leste are a result of many historical and political events and cultural influences.
- To appreciate gender relations a political economy analysis must also be included: this illuminates much gender disparity.
These concepts are based on indigenous cosmology and the understanding that men and women’s roles are complementary and fixed by tradition or customary practice—that men do the ‘heavy’ or ‘hard’ work and women do the ‘light’ or ‘easy’ work. It is believed that men and women work in equilibrium as part of a whole harmonious social system.

Similarly in anthropology the roles of women and men in Timor are described as ‘complimentary’ and ‘interdependent’ but this does not mean the same thing as gender equity as advocated in ‘gender and development’ (GAD) programs.
Timorese women activists strategically seized the opportunity of the open political space post-1999, to leverage advantages for women during the establishment of the new democratic state.

Gender equity was enshrined in the national constitution and women’s formal political participation was ensured by positive discrimination strategies.

A formal gender quota was mandated in the 2007 National Election Law, establishing that one in every four candidates should be a woman, amended in 2011 to one woman in every three candidates (EUEOM 2012).

In 2012 elections women won 25 out of 65 seats (38.46%) the highest percentage of women representatives in parliament in Asia and the Pacific, and 16th highest out of 140 countries surveyed in 2013.
Local Village-Council *suco* elections 2016

New Chief of Village Campo Alor, Alcina Carvalho Dos Santos won with 563 votes against her opponent 325.

- 442 sucos elect *Chefe Suco* new Timorese law requires 2 candidates (min) inc. 1 woman.
- **100% Hau Prontu** (100% I’m Ready) campaign identified women leaders & prepared 319
- 2004: 1.6%;
- 2009: 2.4%;
- 2016: 4.7%=21 women elected
- Alliance between government partners, civil society organisations (Alola) and international agencies (UN Women)

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The 2017 celebration of International Day for Rural Women in Timor-Leste, with the theme "Empowering Rural Women, Strengthening National Development", comprised various activities spanning weeks. It consisted of a market of local products from 14-15 October, community consultations in the 5 municipalities, a 2-day leadership training and culminated in a dialogue between 6 women representing the rural areas consulted with the Prime Minister on their experiences and recommendations for future action, which took place on 22 November 2017.

These activities are the result of the collaboration between Rede Feto, the Secretary of State for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (SEIGIS), UN Women, WFP, USAID AVANSA, and the Government of Australia's programmes TOMAK and Partnership for Human Development.
Neoliberal women economic empowerment (WEE) programs

- Promoting the economic empowerment of women, through WEE programs or microfinance has been referred to as ‘smart economics’ and is tied to a neoliberal version of feminism (Prugl, 2015, p. 619) that is based on an economic rationale for gender equality making it explicitly instrumental rather than a basic human right to equal treatment.

- Criticisms of current WEE development policy describe an ongoing narrowing of development ambitions from transforming the structural or societal inequalities that oppress women, to a focus on individual women’s economic empowerment only (Gerard 2018).

- This is apparent in the targeting of policies and programs at individual women such as access to finance, markets, skills training, business development services and social protection as opposed to training on the law or unions and ensuring fair employment and conditions.
• standard approaches or “development as usual” (market stimulation; microfinance programs) are criticised for being implemented too quickly with vulnerable populations.

• Introducing neoliberal economic policies in post-conflict contexts has often led to elite capture and corruption. IFI policies have also been shown to exacerbate inequalities and violence in the “clandestine economies of war”.

• These policies are based on the commonly criticised neoclassical economic assumptions that the economy will distribute resources efficiently

• These approaches designed to attract foreign-owned commercial interests to kick start economies, primarily benefits men, markets and commercial profits.

• More inclusive economic growth may avoid these problems.

• Feminist political economists show that neoliberal reconstruction programmes are detrimental to women and inherently gendered because they generally focus on rebuilding physical rather than social infrastructure (health, education, social solidarity etc.).

• Feminist economists argue that human well-being should be the central concern of any economy not financial growth. They believe economic policies should be based on: human rights, social reproduction and sustainability.
The most recent UNDP Human Development Report on Timor-Leste gives the most compelling reasons for women’s greater inclusion in the economy:

- The lack of access to secondary education and to sexual and reproductive health services among girls and women is a key driver of gender inequality. … Societies that discriminate against women and social groups obstruct the economic potential of large shares of their populations, which hinders economic growth and limits poverty reduction. Pervasive discrimination and wide gaps in equality are also associated with greater risks of conflict and violence. (UNDP 2018:16)