

A Research Report on the Lives of Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Transgender Men in Timor-Leste

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Rede Feto is a network of women's organisations working to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Timor-Leste through advocacy, networking and capacity building. It envisions women in Timor-Leste to be free from discrimination and effectively participating in the sustainable development of Timor-Leste.

ASEAN SOGIE Caucus is a regional network of human rights defenders advocating for the protection, promotion and fulfilment of the rights of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). The organization envisions a SOGIESC-inclusive ASEAN community.

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Foreword

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”
MARTIN-LUTHER KING

“I was raped by my own uncle who believed he can change my sexual orientation by pushing me into (a) heterosexual relationship. I got pregnant but I (found) traditional medicine to get it aborted. After that I left my home and live with friends.”

“I was forced to drink chicken blood so as to turn heterosexual and leave my woman partner.”

“I have never received any love and care from my family since I came out to them. I am regularly beaten up and not allowed to go out. Even when I had tried to kill myself and end(ed) up hospitalized, my family left me alone and never visited me in hospital.”

“I was discouraged to continue my education as my family believed that someone like me was not worthy of any formal education as I would not be able to find any suitable job.”

The words of women and girls recalling the use of corrective rape, physical and psychological abuse, ostracism, discrimination and marginalization are real. Regrettably, these are the experiences of Timorese lesbians, bisexual, transgender and intersex women, who have suffered at the hands of close family members – parents, siblings and uncles and are examples of how our society encounters those who do not conform to societal norms. The study documents the experience of lesbians, bisexual, transgender and intersex women and the pain and suffering of these individuals because of their sexual orientation.

Whilst Timor-Leste’s struggle for independence was based on the inalienable right of people to self-determination and our Constitution enshrines equality of rights and non-discrimination before the law for all citizens and equality to exercise the same rights as well as being subjected to the same duties, the study shows that this does not happen in practice.

As a new nation Timor-Leste has much to be proud of as we have travelled far in reconstructing a broken society and laying strong foundations for state building. The experiences documented in the study are a call to attention and reminder that the dream of freedom which we aspired to and fought so hard for, has not been achieved by all.

The study is an important reminder to duty bearers - the policy and decision makers, legislators, and service providers of our collective responsibility to continue to work towards inclusiveness, each in our respective areas and within the role entrusted to us, so that we can bridge the gaps and strengthen our legal and policy frameworks and government programs to ensure inclusiveness and the protection and enjoyment of the fundamental rights of all.

As a society, we need to use our individual freedoms and the space available to us, to engage in deep reflection on the meaning of our Christian and religious values, to be able to discuss how we can nurture and raise our children so that they may reach their full potential and undertake all that is within our reach to do to ensure that we can build an inclusive, tolerant, fair, peaceful and harmonious society where all citizens feel a sense of belonging and self-worth. We need to make sure that the education system and educators are able to provide a conducive environment to learning that is free from discrimination and that the rights of lesbians, bisexual, transgender and intersex young women and girls are protected so that they may be free from bullying, discrimination and any type of hate crime.

In essence the challenge before us is to closely take note of what this study is telling us, so that a person’s value is not measured by who they are and who they chose to love.

MILENA PIRES
Permanent Representative of
Timor-Leste to the UN
11 August 2017



Acknowledgement

We feel humbled for being part of this meaningful and necessary work, which would surely go down, as extremely important, in the history of Timor-Leste.

First of all, we would like to give our gratitude to the five courageous LBT women who came forward and became the torchbearer and young investigators for this research. They were able to bring along other lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women who, before this research, have never been approached empathetically. They were the pivots of this research and without them we couldn't have imagined taking this up.

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Once again, thank you all for being part of this work.

Best wishes,

IRAM SAEED and BELLA GALHOS
Dili, Timor-Leste

Executive Summary

This report is the culmination of a small research project undertaken in two districts of Timor-Leste, Dili and Bobonaro. The research sheds light on some of the concerns and challenges faced by LBT women. It is a pioneer study as there is little research done on LBT women in Timor-Leste.

The study covered 57 young lesbian, bisexual and transgender women respondents, 9 from Bobonaro and 48 from Dili, with more than half under 30 years old and still dependent on families and parents for financial support. All respondents were assigned female at birth but more than 52% of identified as men. 61% identified as lesbian and 39% identified as bisexual. The researchers were unable to interview older LBT women as they were more likely to be settled and may not want to open up about their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) for fear of being disowned by their families and communities. Most of the respondents were found looking for avenues to gain financial independence so as to live their own lives. All are keen to support LBT women's rights.

Half of the respondents were open about their SOGIE to friends and more than half had opened up with their families. But this was followed by a series of violence and brutal attacks inflicted on them by their families. Alarming, 86% of the respondents shared experiences of both physical and psychological violence, with zero intervention by any outside agency. Information from in-depth interviews conducted also highlight the sufferings of LBT women, especially the violence they endure. Key factors like shame, social embargo and fear of abuse were identified by respondents as the reasons for large number of LBT women in hiding. For example: 33% of the respondents have same-sex partners, but live separately for these reasons. Many cases of forced relationships and marriages were also reported by respondents, many ending with unwanted pregnancies and children.

The study also points to the fact that many LBT women may still been living in hiding due to various social and economic reasons. Lack of knowledge about constitutional rights, lack of access to support services (e.g. counselling and legal aid), and poor medical services (e.g. sexual and reproductive health services) were cited. The lack of safe spaces for LBT women who have come out was also identified, wherein LBT women only have friends to fall back on if families kick them out of their homes or decide to leave home to maintain their dignity. The findings showed positive solidarity among the groups of LBT women. They support each other by listening, lending small amounts of money, and sometime offering short stays at their homes.

Recommendations made hope to find ways to strengthen existing mechanisms and other efforts to respond the challenges faced by LBT women. The belief which guided these recommendations was that LBT women must be empowered, confident, and fearless. These include obtaining more detailed insight into the issues of LBT women (e.g. the forms and types of discrimination) and providing opportunities for LBT women to learn new skills and information to address these issues. LBT women should also be supported to take up leadership roles in groups which can take up both support and advocacy roles for policy changes and better implementation of rights-based responses by state and non-state actors. Also recommended is for stakeholders to increase efforts to create strong support systems for LBT women that uphold their dignity as human beings and protect them from violence and discrimination. There is also a need to create secure environments for LBT women by steering community-based awareness initiatives towards sensitizing service providers and policy makers so as to support LBT women's efforts to claim their human rights.

Introduction

Section 23 of Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste calls for the interpretation of fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).¹ Article 2 of the UDHR, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, forbids discrimination of any kind.² From these two provisions, linking the country's constitution to the UDHR and its declaration of non-discrimination, one can argue that discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) should in principle be prohibited in Timor-Leste.

Regrettably, the 2002 Timorese Constitution, which has a specific section that guarantees human rights for all, does not explicitly include SOGIE. Sexual orientation was introduced into the draft of the Constitution by several members of the Constituent Assembly, two of them renowned human rights activists Aderito and Milena Pides, and they advocated strongly to retain it to ensure the Constitution would be inclusive. The vote to keep the sexual orientation in the text failed, with 13 voting in favor, 52 voting against its inclusion, and 14 abstaining. Proponents of deletion of sexual orientation had argued that “it will create conflict with the church”, that there was “lack of readiness in Timor-Leste to deal with this subject”, and “it will give people ideas.”³

That said, recent efforts show that Timor-Leste is in its convictions to stop discrimination on the basis of SOGIE. In a recent statement, His Excellency Rui Maria de Araújo, the Prime Minister of the Timor-Leste, stated that everyone has the potential to contribute to the development of the nation, including members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. He stated further that “discrimination, disrespect and abuse towards people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity does not provide any benefit to our nation.”⁴ (However, it was unfortunate that during the recent parliamentary elections held in July 2017, there was no mention by any major political party

regarding the human rights issues of LGBTI people.) And in the law, the definition of aggravating circumstances in Article 52 of the 2009 Penal Code includes crimes motivated by “discriminatory sentiment” relating to sexual orientation.⁵

At the international level, Timor-Leste also showed its commitment to upholding the rights of LGBT persons. In December 2008, Timor-Leste signed a statement on human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity in which, together with 65 other UN Member States, reaffirmed that human rights apply to all human beings and called on all states to protect these rights, expressing deep concern about violations of rights on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.⁶ During the plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly in December 2010, the government of Timor-Leste through its representative again affirmed this commitment to promoting equal rights for all its citizens without prejudice:

“Mrs. Borges (Timor-Leste): Timor-Leste takes this opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights for all individuals without distinction. As enshrined in my country’s Constitution, all people are equal under the law and enjoy the same rights and protections. Furthermore, Timor-Leste reiterates its position as a signatory to the statement read out in the Assembly on 18 December 2008 (see A/63/PV.70 and A/63/635, annex) on sexual orientation and gender identity, which condemned violence, harassment and all forms of prejudice that undermine the integrity and dignity of all people. We are deeply concerned by human rights violations based on sexual orientation, as such practices subvert the integrity and dignity inherent in all people. We condemn such violations.”⁷



Group photo with LBT participants after a safety briefing session (photo by Bella Galhos)

This was followed by Timor-Leste signing a joint statement entitled ‘ending acts of violence and related human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity’, which was issued at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2011.⁸ A few months later, Timor-Leste co-sponsored the first ever resolution of the UN Human Rights Council calling on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to document discriminatory laws and practices as well as violence against persons based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁹ Years later, in December 2016, Timor-Leste voted in favour of the newly established mandate of the Independent Expert on the protection against violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁰

Most recently, in March 2017, Timor-Leste informed the Human Rights Council that it had accepted two recommendations on SOGIE made during the November 2016 Universal Periodic Review of the country’s human rights situation. The recommendations were on strengthening the country’s the legal framework to ensure gender equality and ban discrimination on the grounds

of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as the development and adoption of legal and administrative measures to investigate and punish acts of discrimination, stigmatization and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. The government commented that the country “attaches great importance to promoting equality and combat discrimination. The Timorese law explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. All the citizens are equal before the law and have the same rights, and public authorities must not discriminate citizens on any ground, included on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.”^{11,12}

However, despite the legal protections and political commitment to the cause of non-discrimination on the basis of SOGIE, there is a scarcity of support mechanisms for LGBT people and a scarcity of information on LGBT people’s lives in Timor-Leste in general. This is especially the case for LBT women who continue to hide in the absence of support. The conservative nature of Timorese society makes it very difficult for them to open up about their



SOGIE. Social practices take precedence over legal provisions. Lack of strong community-based organisations (CBOs) for LBT women make it all the more challenging for them to access basic services such as jobs, healthcare services, counselling, and protection from physical and psychological violence. There is also little record of concerted efforts by individuals and organisations who advocate specifically for LBT women. Many are still in hiding and endure violence within their families and communities. Those who come out about their SOGIE are at risk of being harassed and ridiculed.

This study is a pioneer effort to document the challenges faced by LBT women. It is a preliminary effort to document discrimination related to LBT women's lives in Timorese society, such as social stigma and access to basic services, and to raise awareness among civil society and government who are currently working towards the empowerment of women. The study also seeks to help form the basis of informed action on issues concerning LBT women and their relationship with families and communities, particularly on the issue of violence, for advocacy purposes.

A few published and unpublished documents that deal with LGBT issues in Timor-Leste were consulted before undertaking the study. One study, prepared by Kaleidoscope Australia with Sexual Rights Initiative focused on positive steps taken by Timor-Leste to end any kind of violence and discrimination against anyone because of their sexual orientation. It also highlights the failings of government agencies, at the ground level, to implement the provisions of various laws and treaties to protect LGBT persons. It rightly observed that "bias based on gender identity and intersex status is not treated as an aggravating factor in sentencing, and transgender people are not able to have their gender legally recognized in identity documents". It also discussed what needed to be done at the ground level for effective implementation of various provisions, including the amendment of Article 52 of the Penal Code to include bias based on gender identity and intersex status as aggravating factors in the commission of a crime, and



Flag of Timor-Leste beside the rainbow flag

enactment of legislation that allows transgender persons to have their gender identity legally recognized.¹³

An unpublished report carried out by UN Women and CODIVA discussed the challenges faced by gay and bisexual men, men who have sex with men (MSM, a term used in HIV/AIDS advocacy), and transgender women in Timor-Leste. It did not discuss LBT women's issues. However, few responses collected from the gay men highlighted that lesbian women face more threats and live with more fear because of the lack of any support system or support groups. The report recommended that CODIVA also mainstream LBT women's issues in their work at the national and international levels.¹⁴

Another report produced by ASEAN SOGIE Caucus with the assistance of local LGBT activists sought to understand the various contexts affecting LGBT people in Timor-Leste and identify the issues and challenges faced by them. It highlighted the issues around lack of awareness and participation of LBT women, as well as the lack of funding and other forms of support for LBT women. It recommended creating a consolidated national response to identify the needs and concerns of all LGBT people, mainstream of LGBT issues in broader public programs such as education, and investment in Timorese youth.¹⁵

Objectives and Methodology

The objective of this empowerment initiative is to give visibility to LBT women's issues, giving space to discuss their needs and concerns, and to offer information to guide action taken. To do this, this project sought to achieve the following:

- To conduct a short research study on the challenges and concerns as faced by LBT women;
- To understand what kind of services are available to LBT women based on these challenges and concerns; and
- To share the findings at the local and international levels towards asserting the rights of LBT women.

A major component of this initiative was the orientation of a select group of young LBT women. Their training was organized at Maubisse to ensure confidentiality. It was aimed at this group to prepare them for the research, which included familiarization of existing terminologies and the use of the research tools. Most importantly, the training was also used as an opportunity to open up about themselves and share their own stories.

This group approached their network and identified respondents. In order to ensure confidentiality, the respondents were contacted when other members of the family were absent. In other cases, researchers invited the respondents into their homes for the study. The researchers also prepared journals for themselves to take down notes.

Two research tools were used. A questionnaire was administered to fifty-seven (57) young LBT women, nine (9) from Bobonaro and forty-eight (48) from Dili, the two districts of Timor-Leste. In-depth interviews were conducted with four (4) respondents selected from the pool of respondents, on the basis of their availability. Researchers could not interview more respondents due to time limitations. These two districts were identified for convenience: these were where the principle investigators first got in touch with LBT women, and that these women also had contacts in these districts who were willing to be part of the study.



Findings

1. Demographic Profile

Age, Education, and Financial Status

65% of respondents were ages 21-30, mostly because respondents were pooled from the networks of the researchers, who were themselves young adults. This helped them establish rapport with their peers. However, the same researchers found it difficult to get in touch with older LBT women. The experience of one of the researchers highlights that one reason for this might be that older LBT women are still in hiding for fear of being socially boycotted by their families and communities:

“Ha’u hakbesik ba fetu ida ne’ebé ha’u hatene nia bi-seksuál. Nia idade liu tinan 45 maibé nia lakohi ha’u atu grava maske nia laiha problema atu ko’alia de’it. Nia ta’uk katak nia la’en bele hatene.”

“I have approached a lady who I know is bisexual. She was more than 45 years of age but she refused to be recorded though she was alright to chat with. She was afraid her husband will know.”)

About a quarter of respondents managed to finish high school, with a quarter of respondents enrolling into secondary school. However, many could not finish the secondary level of schooling. The number of women reaching university level is very low: in this study, only 4% reached university. There are many reasons for this, including poverty, early marriage, and discrimination by either the family or the school. 39% of respondents dropped out of school due to economic reasons, wherein they were compelled by their families to discontinue their

education to do odd jobs (e.g. selling fruits and vegetables, selling snacks along the road, etc.). Some quit school willingly and started working. As shared by one respondent:

“Hafoin ho tama parseria ha’u lakon interese ba ha’u-nia estudu.”

“Once I got into a romantic relationship I lost interest in studies.”)

Some respondents also shared that they were never comfortable in the school uniform provided for girls (i.e. skirts). They felt trapped in a girl’s body and were always comfortable when dressing as men. The school rules were strict and many times they were punished for not conforming to the dress codes. They were so traumatised by these experiences that they discontinued their education. A few of them also faced discrimination due to visible differences from other children due to their SOGIE, which led some to withdraw from school. One respondent explains:

“Ha’u mós dezenkoraja atu kontinua ha’u-nia edukasaun tanba ha’u-nia família sira fiar katak ema hanesan ha’u laiha folin atu tuir sistema edukasaun formál tanba ha’u sei labele hetan empregu apropiadu, liuliu iha fatin governu nian.”

“I was also discouraged to continue my education as my family believed that someone like me was not worthy of any formal education since I would not be able to find any suitable job, especially in government.”)

Other respondents recounted other situations that led them to withdraw from school:

“Ha’u-nia família balu baku ha’u tanba ha’u lakohi hatais vestidu atu bá eskola.”

“I got beaten up by my family members for refusing to wear a skirt to school.”)

“Ha’u husik eskola tanba moe atu ko’alia ho ema kona-ba ha’u-nia orientasaun jéneru iha comunidade no eskola.”

“I left school because of shame as people talked about my gender orientation at community and at school.”)¹⁶

However, it is heartening to know that not all are completely out of the educational system. Despite the odds, 21% of respondents are still completing their education. One respondent recounts an experience:

“Ha’u-nia profesór koléjiu rekuza atu asina ha’u-nia pontu-kréditu tanba ha’u-nia fuuk badak. Ida-ne’e halo ha’u atu lakon interese ba edukasaun. Ha’u-nia belun sira tulun ha’u atu lori ida-ne’e ba Diretór. Depois sira bolu ha’u atu filafali ba ha’u-nia edukasaun.”

“My college professor refused to sign my credit points due to my short haircut. This made me lose my interest in education. My friends helped me to bring this to the notice of the Director. Then I was called back to continue my education.”)

In terms of finances, more than half relied completely on family, mainly parents and partners. Of these, 58% depended on their parents, who were either not married (to a man), had no female partners, or had walked out of forced heterosexual marriage. Culturally, it is acceptable for women to depend on parents in these cases. Around 23% are gainfully employed in the public or private sector, or own businesses or properties that are rented out in their own names. About 19% depend on friends for survival.

Regarding monthly income, 66% of respondents earn less than USD100 a month. A closer look at the data suggests that a whopping 96% earn less than USD250 a month. Only four percent earn more than USD250 per month. Only 2% have income above USD1000/month through property rental money. Many of the respondents are still looking for opportunities to become financially independent:

“Ha’u hakarak atu hetan serbisu atu ha’u bele hela hamutuk ho ha’u-nia parseiru la fó todan ba ema seluk.”

“I am a man trapped in a woman’s body. My family never accepted me for who I am. I am regularly beaten up and kicked out of home. I have no family to count on, no money, no future. I didn’t finish my school. But I learned a lot, and start to see that there might be a light of freedom coming my away.”



“I want to find a job so that I can live with my partner without having to be a burden on anyone.”)

“Ha’u hakarak atu hamri’ik mesak no loke kios ki’ik oan ida, atu nune’e ha’u bele soe liman ho kolega LBT sira seluk atu ami bele hare hamutuk kios ne’e , maibe ami laiha osan atu halo.”

“I like to stand on my own feet and open a small mini-market, and perhaps I can join hands with my other LBT friends to run this mini-market but we have no money to do so.”)

“Ha’u hakarak kontinua ha’u nia edukasaun, hanesan ha’u hatene katak edukasaun mak save atu muda ha’u nia moris. Maibe ha’u laiha suporta. Ha’u gasta tempu barak liu sai pasiar ho kolega LBT sira, ha’u hatene katak ida ne’e hanesan gasta tempu de’it. Ha’u nia hakarak iha futuru ha’u bele halo osan, no suporta ha’u nia an atu bele fila fali ba eskola. Ha’u hakarak atu sai doutor, hodi realiza ha’u nia mehi ne’ebe mak ha’u iha desde ki’ik.”

“I want to continue my education, as I know education is the key to change my life. But I have no support. I spend a lot of my time hanging out with my LBT friends, knowing that this is a waste of time. I hope in the future I can make money, and support myself to go back to school. I want to be a doctor, which has been my dream since I was young. ”)

The data in relation to financial independence of the respondents presents a grim picture. Mostly, it is the parents who are supporting them currently. Although most respondents are of working age, the reality is very different.

Many factors affect the financial independence of these young LBT women. Low levels of education and struggles within families and communities due to SOGIE also contribute to this dependency. The experience shared by one respondent highlights an example of discrimination in workplaces:

“Ha’u besik atu liu selesaun ba serbisu manorin iha eskola-infantil maibe maluk manorin sira-seluk la gosta ha’u nia maneira hatais no hatete katak ida-ne’e sei kria imajen konfundu ba labarik sira. Ha’u sai hirus no deside atu la simu serbisu ne’e.”

“I was almost selected for a teaching job to be a nursery teacher but my fellow workers objected to my style of dressing, saying it will create a confusing image among children. I got angry and decided not to take up that job.”)

Almost 62% of the respondents have been living with their parents. 67% have female partners but only 16% of respondents live with these partners. But there are some respondents whose female partners live with their families, at times without the family knowing of the relationship. It is a great fear among parents to have pregnant daughters, which is perceived as shameful and embarrassing to the family. So at some level there is tolerance if one girl joins another girl’s family to stay together, where they are seen as “best buddies”. One respondent explains:



“My family hates me for being me. I was stabbed in the face, beaten up, almost killed, and forced to drink chicken blood to “cleanse” myself. Physical attacks by my own brothers and sisters are regular: they punch me, pull my hair, and undressed me to remind me of what is in between my legs: “You are a woman, do you see it?” I was forced to have a sexual relationship with a man, and I became pregnant with a daughter. She is 9 years old now. But I am who I am. I can’t change me. Take me for who I am.”

“Ha’u-nia família sira la hatene katak ha’u hela hamutuk ho ha’u-nia parseiru, sira hatene nia nu’udar ha’u nia belun di’ak.”

“My family doesn’t know that I live with my partner; they know her as my best friend.”

One issue that also needs attention is that none of the respondents live with their husbands (as perceived in traditional societies) despite the fact that almost 30% of them have children. This reflects that at some point they were forced into so-called “normal relations” to “lead normal lives” where they bore children as well. However, they managed to break free from such relationships. In the words of one respondent, whose statement highlights the plight of those forced into relationships with a man when their families did not accept them as LBT and tried to “fix” them:

“Ha’u laiha domin ba mane ne’ebé hamutuk ho ha’u hahoris oan.”

“I did not have any feelings for the man with whom I had a child.”

Sexual orientation, gender identity, and families

All respondents were assigned female at birth.¹⁷ Of the 57 respondents, 22 identified as bisexual and 35 identified as lesbian. More than half identified themselves as men, most of whom have transitioned socially (e.g. living out life as a man such as wearing men’s clothes, short haircuts and conducting themselves in ways that are culturally identified as male). None have transitioned medically (e.g. undergoing hormone replacement therapy or surgical procedures altering one’s physical sex characteristics, etc.).¹⁸ Many have been looking for an opportunity to undergo such procedures but are unable to due to lack of financial support and medical facilities. To hide their breasts, many respondents use household cloth as binders or wear loose shirts.

Many of them developed feelings, that they were different, from very young age. To quote one of the respondents:

“Ha’u foin hatene katak ha’u mak la hanesan. Iha momentu ne’ebá, ha’u besik tinan 13.”

“I realised I was different. At that time, I was around 13 years old.”



Unfortunately, this difference has led families to treat LBT women differently: as embarrassments to the family. Two respondents shared:

“Ha’u-nia família la gosta ha’u atu mai iha bainaka sira-nia oin no hakarak ha’u atu subar iha kuartu laran to’o sira sai ona.”

“My family does not like me coming in front of our guests and rather that I be inside the room until the time they leave.”

“Dala barak ha’u labele hatais ho rounpa tuir ha’u-nia hakarak no obriga atu hatais ho vestifu bainhira ami sai tuir festa família.”

“Many times I am not allowed to wear clothes of my choice and am forced to wear skirts when we go out for family functions.”

That said, many respondents expressed discomfort about the bodies they were born with and want to have a body of a “man”:

“Ha’u hakarak lasan hanesan mane envezde susun sira. Ha’u sempre hatais ho rounpa ne’ebé subar ha’u-nia susun sira.”

“I would rather have penis like a man than having breasts. I always wear lose clothes to hide my breasts.”

“Ha’u la gosta raan kada fulan tanba halo ha’u sente hanesan feto. Ha’u iha mehi atu iha penis (lasan ka manu-oan)”

“I hate bleeding every month because this makes me feel girly. I have fantasies of having a penis.”

One respondent shared light-heartedly, while giggling:

“Ha’u-nia loron di’ak mak atu hadeer dadeer-saan no deskobre katak ha’u nakfila sai mane.”

“My best day will be when I get up in the morning and find myself turned into a man.”

More than half identified as lesbian. Also, for many, the lack of knowledge of various terms used to describe a person’s SOGIE (e.g. “LGBT”) limited them to calling themselves lesbians.¹⁹ Another 39% identified as bisexual. Most reported “succumbing” to family pressure and entered into heterosexual relationships with men in past, but now have women partners. Some continue to have male partners (such as through marriage) but have visiting female partners. One respondent explained her situation:

“Ema baku ha’u no obriga ha’u atu kaben ho mane ida. Maibé bainhira ha’u sai isin-rua ami fahe-malu tanba nia halo relasaun ho feto seluk. Hori tempu ne’ebá ha’u halo relasaun ho de’it feto sira. Ha’u-nia família sira fó-sala ba ha’u tanba ha’u halo sira moe. Maibé, ha’u hela nafatin ho ha’u-nia parseira feto ne’ebé ha’u hadomi.”

“I was beaten up and forced to marry a man. But when I got pregnant we separated due to his extramarital affairs. Since then I’ve dated only women. My family blame me, that I brought shame to them. However, I continue to live with my woman partner, whom I love.”

The fear of rejection due to their SOGIE was the major reason for not coming out for 71% of respondents. This was followed by fear of violence or of being ostracized and weak social and legal support. But despite these, many of the respondents have had the courage to tell one or more family members about their SOGIE. 57% of the respondents had the courage to open up about their SOGIE to their families, though 21% have not disclosed. When not shared to the whole family, often to their sisters and mothers, respondents reported that female cousins were often their confidants. 10% were open to one friend and 51% were open to all friends about their SOGIE.

However, this disclosure did not come easily. The discriminatory and often violent behaviours of their families in response to their SOGIE were highlighted by many respondents. Many of them shared about brutal beatings from family especially elder brothers, upon coming out to their families. Outside the home, things are not always better: besides facing discrimination at family level, 32% of respondents reported facing discrimination in various government facilities such as schools and health centers because of their SOGIE. The respondents speak for themselves on this. Two respondents shared experiences of physical violence:

“Ha’u-nia maun rasik baku ha’u halo lilimetan. Nia baku ha’u la para. Buat hotu ne’e mosu iha ha’u-nia inan-aman sira-nia oin, no sira la koko atu hapara nia.”

“I was beaten blue and black by my brother. He was merciless. All this happened in front of my parents who made no effort at all to stop him.”)

“Ha-u-nia inan-aman no maun-alin sira baku ha’u tanba ha’u lori ha’u-nia doben mai uma. Sira hakarak ha’u atu kaben ho mane ida-ne’ebé ha lakohi. Sira hanaran ha’u ladi’ak no hanaran ha’u ‘feto bere-mane’.”

“I was physically beaten up by my parents and siblings because I brought my partner home. They wanted me to marry a man which I had refused. They call me names and called me ‘tomboy woman’.)

“Ha’u-nia maun rasik baku ha’u todan tanba ha’u-nia orientasaun jéneru. Ema ko’alia beibeik ha’u iha família no aldeia laran. Ema duni ha’u sai hosi uma beibeik.”

“I was physically beaten up badly by my brother due to my gender orientation. I am a regular topic of conversation within my family and the neighbourhood. I am frequently asked to leave the house.”)

“For so long, I suffered at the hand of my oldest brother and sister. I ended up in a hospital three times. My chest was bleeding due to a hard kick from my sister with her high heels on. I was tied up and pulled by the car by my brother, strangled with a hose, and pushed inside a water tank for hours. I tried to end my life a few times. My biggest dream is to continue my education.”



“Ha’u-nia biin rasik lakohi la’o hamutuk ho ha’u iha dalan tanba nia moe ha’u la’o hatais hanesan mane.”

(“My sister refused to walk with me on the road as she was ashamed by my dressing up like a man.”)

Two other respondents shared experiences that, while not physically brutal, were cruel:

“Ha’u-nia família sira haree ha’u hanesan feto-buan no haketak ha’u beibeik tanba sira fiar katak ha’u sei estraga ha’u-nia alin sira.”

(“I was considered a demon by my family and most of the time I was isolated as they believe that I could sexually attack my siblings.”)

“Ema fiar katak ha’u gosta hola-malu ho labarik sira, no nune’e labarik hotu iha família laran sempre dook hosi ha’u.”

(“It was believed that I like to have sex with children and all children in the family were kept away from me.”)

“Sira la fó fatin ba ha’u atu simu belun sira iha uma-laran no ha’u-nia família sempre husu sira atu sai ho liafuan kro’at.”

(“I am not allowed to have friends coming to our home and my family asked them to leave, rudely.”)

“Ha’u-nia família fó-hatene comunidade sira hotu atu halo ha’u moe.”

(“My family outed me to the community just to humiliate me.”)

One respondent, who had other LBT siblings, shared the violent dynamic in their family:

“Ha’u iha maun-alin na’in sia, feto na’in ualu, mane na’in rua. Hamutuk ho ha’u iha alin-feto na’in tolu hanesan ha’u (bere-mane). Maibé hosi sira-ne’e ida mak obriga kaben tiha ona, rua seluk subar nafatin tanba ta’uk, tanba sira hatene buat ne’ebé ha’u-nia maun boot mak halo hanesan baku ha’u beibeik.”

(“I have nine siblings, we are eight sisters and two brothers. Besides me there are three other sisters of mine who are like me (tomboy). But out of them one already forced herself to get married, other two are still in hiding due to fear as they know what my oldest brother done to me by beating me as a routine.”)

As for one other respondent, her experience of being out to her family has never been good, as she explains:

“Ha’u nunka simu domin no kuidadu hosi ha’u-nia família hori kedas tempu ha’u fó-hatene sira. Sira baku ha’u beibeik no la fó dalan ba ha’u atu sai. Nune’e mós bainhira ha’u koko atu oho-an no baixa ospital, ha’u-nia família husik ha’u no nunka mai vizita ha’u iha ospital.”

(“I have never received any love and care from my family since I came out to them. I am regularly beaten up and not allowed to go out. Even when I tried to kill myself and ended up hospitalized, my family left me alone and never visited me in the hospital.”)

In the experience of the respondents, the mothers were often more supportive than others in the family. Sadly, while it was shared that mothers were more understanding, social norms on the guarding their families honour by 'not allowing anything which bring shame to the family' prevented mothers from openly supporting LBT family members. Three respondents explained:

“Ha’u-nia inan rasik hatene no laiha problema ho ha’u-nia orientasaun seksuál. Maibé, ha’u labele ko’alia laran loka ba membru família sira-seluk tanba ta’uk sira atu soe ka duni ha’u sai hosi uma-laran.”

“My mother knows it and has no issue with my sexual orientation. However, I cannot open up to other family members for fear of being disowned or thrown out of the house.”

“Ha’u-nia inan fó osan uitoan ba ha’u bainhira ha’u subar hosi ha’u-nia maun-alin sira. No dalaruma nia sai ba li’ur buka ha’u se kuandu ha’u la filafali mai uma durante loron balu nia laran.”

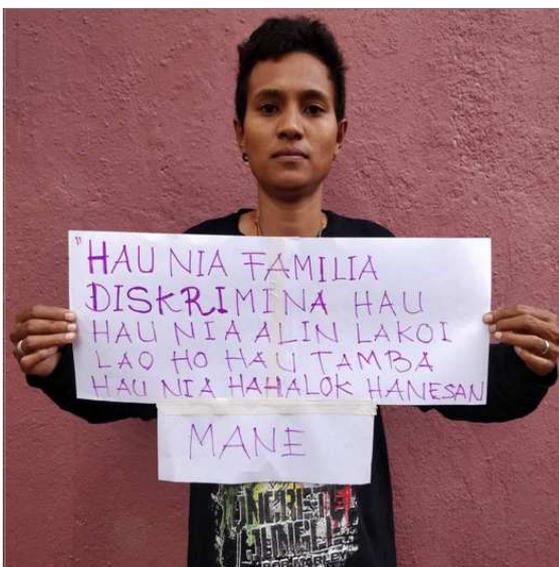
“My mother sometimes gives me small money while hiding from my other siblings. And sometimes she goes outside searching for me if I don’t come home for days.”

“Ha’u hatene ha’u-nia inan rasik hadomi ha’u, maibé nia ta’uk ha’u-nia aman ne’ebé la gosta ha’u tanba ha’u-nia identidade jéneru.”

“I know my mother loves me dearly but she is afraid of my father who dislikes me because of my gender identity.”

But other respondents explained that their families, after learning about their SOGIE, became indifferent to them:

“Ha’u-nia família simu ha’u bainhira ha’u filafali mai uma depoizde ha’u halai sai tinan tolu, no ha’u taka sira-nia ta’uk katak bainhira ha’u pasiar ho mane sira maibé la sai isin-rua (ne’ebé mak sira nia ta’uk boot liu). Agora sira la haree ha’u ho di’ak ona.”



“I am a transman, hated by my sisters. Every day I wake up in the morning, and hear the same words: “Put woman’s clothes on, stop behaving like a man, stop shaming the family, get a man and get married.” My sisters refused to walk with me on the public roads. I carry my pain inside; I wish nothing more than to have them accept me for whoever I am. I am determined to transform myself to be a real man someday, to be the happiest ever.”



“My family took me in when I returned home after running away for three years, and I dismissed their fears that while I hang out with boys more but didn’t get pregnant (which was their biggest fear). Now they don’t care for me anymore.”)

Majority of respondents also know of people who are still in hiding about their SOGIE. 90% know of someone in their circle who is like this: respondents know between one to ten persons who have not come out about their SOGIE.

Respondents’ awareness of LGBT issues and access to services

Most respondents reported not knowing or understanding the meaning of various terms often used in advocacy, such as “LGBT” and “homophobia”. That said, when “homophobia” was defined to them, 86% strongly felt that it existed in Timorese society, though they didn’t know the word to describe it. All respondents have felt homophobia firsthand within their homes and communities, and they know it well. One respondent shared:

“Ha’u hatene ha’u-nia família di’ak. Sira fiar liu Igreja. Ami-nia família fiar ema relijiozu tebes. Ha’u sempre hatene katak karik ha’u fó-hatene ha’u nia família kona-ba ha’u-nia orientasaun seksuál, ha’u sei hasoru problema.

“I know my family too well. They are way too orthodox. Ours is a very religious family. I always knew that if I were to disclose my sexual orientation to my family, I would be in trouble.”

Knowledge about laws that protected them against discrimination was weak: few know of any legal provisions (e.g. the Penal Code) providing for protection on the basis of SOGIE, and some said that there were no such provisions. In general, knowledge of legal issues as they affect LBT women was very low, which is alarming given that they are directly affected by these issues. Respondents from both the Bobonaro and Dili districts felt that they could use information on aspects relating to the reporting of human rights violations perpetrated specifically against LBT women. Though there were few respondents who tried to seek legal assistance, they did not receive any substantial help. One respondent shared:

“Ha’u nia biin-alin sira ko’alia ha’u aat no haketak ha’u. Ha’u-nia família baku ha’u no ha’u-nia kazu hato’o ba polísia maibé sira la halo buat ida.”

“I was insulted by my sisters who call me names. I was beaten up by my family. My case was registered with police but nothing much happened.”)

On the issue of reproductive health, most respondents shared that they were in good health, although they could do with more information on this subject. When it came to knowledge about support services available to them for physical and mental health, there were multiple answers. Services respondents mentioned included counselling, short-stay residential facilities and safe houses, rehabilitation for victims of violence, HIV and AIDS testing and counselling among others. But in the absence of such safe spaces where they can be themselves, LBT women continue to suffer: in cases where they are kicked out by their families or ran away themselves to escape assault and humiliation, they have no safe place to go.

Most respondents also felt strongly about acquiring knowledge about economic activities and greater English language skills to improve their lives. They felt that financial independence was very important for them to survive in a hostile society. As aspired to by one of the respondents:

“Ha’u hakarak buka serbisu atu nune’e ha’u bele hel;a hamutuk ho ha’u-nia doben atu lalika fó todan ba ema seluk.”

“I want to find a job so that I can live with my partner without having to be a burden on anyone.”

Discrimination, harassment, and violence

As was discussed earlier, numerous forms of harassment and violence were shared by respondents in this study, which highlights the continued suffering of many LBT women in Timor-Leste. Respondents report being targeted both by members of the community and their own families due to their SOGIE, with 87% reporting experiencing harassment and violence at some point in their lives. This is itself alarming especially in the absence of any preventive or support services. But more horrifying was the frequency of these experiences: 72% of respondents reported experiencing these more than once, while 11% of them say they experience it almost daily. Most of the reported abuse happened within the home, but they also occur in public spaces.

And during the separate interviews that were conducted selectively, the horror stories came out more prominently.

Although not many respondents felt comfortable talking about these issues openly, during interactions with them in small groups some particularly vicious forms of violence surfaced, with their families as the key perpetrators. This reiterates the culture of silence around issues of violence against women in general in Timor-Leste. Unfortunately, the normalization of the violence against women has been rationalized as a tool to educate wives, partners, and sisters and punish them for non-conformist attitudes and behaviours. In this research, the respondents reported a variety of experiences, which they bravely shared with us:

“Ha’u nia maun-alin no biin sira baku ha’u beibeik. Sira sempre ameasa atu oho, baku no sona. Ema hotu-hotu iha familia laran baku ha’u kle’ur ona. Agora daudaun sira la baku ha’u ona maibé dala ruma sira duni ha’u sai hosi uma laran.”

“My brother and sisters physically attacked me many times. I was regularly threatened to be killed,, beaten, and stabbed. Everyone in family had beaten me up for a long time. Nowadays they don’t beat me up but sometimes kick me out of the house.”

“My sisters and I are lesbians. Both of us suffer discrimination and violence from our family on daily basis. Our lives depend on friends. We move from house to house for shelter and food. Our family thinks we are freaks. Am I wrong to be what I love to be? I just hope someday, my life will change. I want live a life just like everyone else: happy and respected.”



“Kesi iha karreta kotuk, no rastra iha dalan ba ema hotu-hotu atu haree.”

“I was tied up in the back of the car and dragged across the road for everyone to see.”)

“Ema ko’alia ha’u naran aat no tolok ha’u dehan ha’u nakfila an sai mane.”

“People called me names and insulted me saying that I turned myself into a man.”)

“Ha’u-nia maun buti-kakorok ho mangeira.”

“I was strangulated with a hose by my brother.”)

“Obriga ha’u atu hasai rounpa iha ha’u-nia parseira nia oin.”

“Forced to undress in front of my partner.”)

“Sira kesi ha’u no tau iha tanke bee durante oras barak nia laran.”

“I was tied up and put inside the water tub for hours.”)

“Ha’u-nia bin sira ta ha’u ho katana. Ha’u nafatin iha kanek-fatin iha ha’u-nia oin.”

“I was hit with a machete by my sisters. I still have scars on my face.”)

Attempts have also been made to change the SOGIE of LBT women, which we consider as a form of violence. Two respondents share their experiences:

“Ema obriga ha’u atu heman raan manu nian atu halo ha’u nakfila sai eteroseksuál no husik ha’u-nia doben-feto.”

“I was forced to drink chicken blood so as to turn heterosexual and leave my woman partner.”)

“Sira obriga ha’u atu hakru’uk iha Inan-Feto Maria nia oin no halo ha’u promote atu la haree ha’u-nia doben fali no atu haree nia hanesan biin-alin.”

“I was forced to kneel down in front of the statue of Mother Mary and forced to promise not to see partner ever again and treat her like sister.”)

There were cases of sexual violence as well, specifically what is known as “corrective rape”.²⁰ Two respondents shared their experiences:

“Ha’u-nia tiun rasik viola ha’u tanba nia fiar katak nia bele muda ha’u nia orientasaun seksuál liuhosi obriga ha’u atu halo relasaun eteroseksuál. Ha’u sai isin-rua, maibé ha’u hemu ai-moruk tradisionál atu halakon ona ne’e. Hafoin ha’u halai sai hosi uma no daudaun ne’e hela ho belun sira.”

“I was raped by my own uncle who believed he could change my sexual orientation by pushing me into a heterosexual relationship. I got pregnant but I found traditional medicine to get it aborted. After that I left my home to live with friends.”)

“Ha’u-nia família obriga ha’u atu hola-malu ho mane ida, ida-ne’e mosu foin laron ida sira dudu ha’u ba kuartu laran no xave-metin odomatan hosi li’ur. Nia halo violasaun seksuál hasoru ha’u. Ha’u-nia família fiar katak

liuhosi ida-ne'e sei bele 'haloos' ha'u-nia orientasaun seksuál."

("I was forced by my family to have sex with a man, which happened when one day they pushed me inside the room with him and locked it from the outside. He sexually assaulted me. My family believed that by doing so it will 'correct' my sexual orientation.")

During an interview, one respondent shared about her inability to continue to live with her family due to the constant violence. She had to leave them to settle down secretly, in a new place:

"Ha'u nafatin sente moe no moras. Daudaun ne'e iha ha'u-nia uma rasik, ha'u sempre hanoin-barak kona-ba ha'u-nia família hetan ha'u maske ha'u muda hela-fatin."

("I still feel humiliation and pain. Now even when I have left my home, I am still always worried about my family finding me some time despite changing where I stay.")

And in another interview, a respondent shared her inability to to simply live:

"Ha'u-nia maun baku ha'u beibeik atu dalabarak ha'u lakon konxiénsia. Ha'u kole ona baku beibeik ne'e atu ha'u koko oho-an pelumenus dala haat ona."

("My brother continues to beat me regularly so much that on many occasions I have even lost consciousness. I was so fed up with the beatings that I attempted committing suicide at least on four occasions.")

Meet-ups, Safe spaces, and Well-being

Almost all of the respondents said they wanted to know more about safe spaces where they can meet other LBT women without fearing for their lives. There is lack of safe spaces to meet their woman partners or other LBT friends, and the need for safe spaces was very important given the constant threats on the respondent's physical and psychological wellbeing. Despite current challenges being faced by LBT women, almost all the respondents stated they would like to meet other LBT women at safe places. One respondent shared her experience of being found with another LBT woman in an unsafe space:



"I work as a sand digger in Comoro River. I was raped by my uncle who believes he could "correct" me. I don't have anyone in the family who love or care for me. My friends are my family. What is bad: loving other human beings, or hating them? I continue dreaming that someday I will live free just like everyone else."



“Sira rastra ha’u hosi ha’u-nia doben nia uma bainhira ha’u bá haree nia tanba la haree nia semana balu ona. Hafoin sira hatene, ha’u-nia família sira baku ha’u no hasai ha’u-nia rounpa iha ha’u-nia doben nia oin no dudu ha’u nia oin ba nia lulik-fatin atu haree katak ha’u nu’udar feto, la’ós mane atu toba ho feto seluk.”

“I was dragged out of my partner’s house when I went to meet her as I didn’t see her for weeks. Once found out, my family beat me up and undressed me in front of my partner and pushed my face down to my vagina to say that I am woman, not a man to sleep with another woman.”)

One participant, in the context of her romantic relationship, shared how this lack of a safe space extended even to communications:

“Ha’u-nia família sira tau-matan besikbesik ba ha’u, sira bele loke ha’u-nia telemovel, nune’e ha’u labele ko’alia ho ha’u-nia doben.”

“My family kept a close watch on me, my phone can be checked anytime, so I cannot meet/contact my partner.”

Respondents were also asked about where they met LBT women. Interestingly, the most popular place for respondents to meet other LBT friends was in the home of a common friend. This was followed by the home of the partner, their own home, and other spaces such as sports clubs, recreational centers, the public park, and the markets. But even in these places it is not always safe: some respondents explained that their families would trace them when they stayed at the homes of their friends or partners.

Another important aspect related to knowledge and information was about support groups for LBT women. When asked if they knew friends connected to such support groups, many respondents shared that their friends were. But it is reassuring that 79% of respondents said they have someone to get support when needed. That said, while 87% of respondents said other LBT women have approached them for help, the only support they are able to offer was listening to them (84%) followed by some small financial help and providing stay facility when they move out or are kicked out of home.

Respondents feel it is important to have a circle of friends who would support them in need without any biases and prejudices. As expressed many times, friends were the only support they had when kicked out of their homes or escaping run away to save them for physical or sexual assault. As one explains:

“Ha’u kontente atu iha família seluk hosi comunidade LGBT. Se laiha sira-nia apoiu, ha’u sente ha’u lakohi moris tan ona.”

“I am glad to have my other friends from the LBT community. Without their support, I am not sure if I can survive another day.”)

Another respondent shared their experience, particularly when having a circle of friends means sustaining oneself for basic needs:

“Ha’u laiha edukasaun atu sustenta ba ha’u nia moris, no iha tempu ne’ebe hanesan ha’u lakoi atu depende ba ema seluk, no iha momento ne’eba ha’u mos laiha opsau. Ha’u nia kolega LBT sai hanesan ha’u nia familia. Ami fahe hahan, no ami empresta osan ba malu, maske ami laiha liu. Ha’u haree ba possibilidade atu iha bisnis ki’ik oan ida hanesan loke fatin ki’ik oan atu fase kareta no motor.”

“I have no education to sustain my life, and at the same time I don’t want to depend on anyone. However, at the moment, I have

no choice. My LBT friends are my family. We share food, and we borrow money from each other, even though we don’t have much. I am looking at the possibilities of having my own small business like open a small place to wash cars and motor bikes.”)

It is interesting to note that almost all the respondents showed a high level of compassion when asked why it is important to work with LBT women. 32% shared that it is important to support and strengthen the community against violence, 21% shared that they continue to advocate for their rights and share their experiences to others, 19% shared that they actively support those in hiding, and 5% are engaged in work to fight discrimination. Respondents also said that they would be happy to connect with the groups who are part of this research.



Training session with researchers for this research project (photo by Bella Galhos)

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aims to highlight the issues and concerns faced by LBT women in Timor-Leste. Despite a strong political commitment at the national and international level by the government to put an end to all kinds of discrimination on the basis of SOGIE, there is not much affirmative action at the ground level. The implementation of policies and various constitutional provisions remain on paper. As reflected in the findings of this research, LBT women continue to suffer in the absence of strong support systems. Further, the vicious cycle of lack of education due to poor economic conditions, coupled with cultural norms regarding the role of women in society, also results in low incomes, a major factor in many LBT women's reasons for not coming out. The fear of being socially ostracized, ridiculed, and physically assaulted are some of the very real threats being faced by LBT women. It is also extremely important that safe spaces and platforms be created for LBT women where they can express themselves and seek support whenever needed. But more than creating opportunities to aid LBT women, it is even more important to create opportunities to empower them: to give them the means to seek out their own strengths and build their own capacities as they work together for a stronger community.

Based on the findings, we give six broad recommendations:

1. Create a strong evidence base

This initiative can be moved forward by reaching out to LBT women in other districts for further insight. Mapping would also help in better understanding issues not addressed here at length, such as the kinds of violence experienced by LBT women and their resources for addressing them, the availability of support networks in various districts, and the state of LBT women in other districts in general. Building a strong evidence base will be useful in undertaking advocacy both at national and international levels.

2. Strengthening responses to physical and psychological violence

The existence of violence of various forms experienced within the homes and the larger communities was a key finding of this study. However, what this research has captured seems to be only the tip of the iceberg. There is a need to understand this with greater depth, and to explore questions regarding violence with the objective of creating more effective responses to them. For example, what are the specific impacts of these experiences to the psychosocial wellbeing of LBT women, and what kind of practices would be helpful in responding to these? Perhaps more importantly, another question could be what resources and capacities LBT women already have with them, and how can they be strengthened to help them become more resilient to these issues as the larger LGBT community advocates for their rights?

Another important question that needs to be answered is: within the various social settings in Timor-Leste, such as schools and public institutions, what systems and practices are in place that support or can potentially support LBT women? The experiences of respondents highlight the need for various things, such as services for LBT women dealing with hostile families, support for young LBT women to maintain their social relationships and continue their education, training for dealing with issues of coming out and trauma, and so on. Before highlighting the absence of resources, it is important to first know what resources are already at hand, and to see how these resources can be better utilized.

3. Create environments towards ensuring the human rights of LBT women

One solution that can be acted on short-term is to bring all key stakeholders – including members of government, civil society organizations, international groups working within the country, and others – to work together in creating a common strategy for ensuring the human rights of LGBT people. The true implementation of equal rights, provided under the constitution of Timor-Leste, must prevail. To do this, there must be opportunities to facilitate dialogues and build awareness among all involved, ensuring that everyone's right to live, learn, and share without prejudice or threat. In addition, LBT women specifically must have opportunities to enhance their own capacities to help make them active and capable advocates for their own rights.

4. Build safe spaces to support LBT women and end social isolation

LBT women still struggling with their SOGIE and experiences of rejection from society require places to meet with their peers. There is, to the knowledge of the researcher, no such place in Timor-Leste. The creation of such safe spaces to meet, share, accept, validate, and connect with others will contribute to the eventual end of the phenomenon of social isolation among LBT women. For example, for LBT women facing discrimination and direct threats to their lives, especially from their immediate families, must be able to have support ready to provide immediate safety. In these places, those managing the space should be trained and sensitized to the issues of LBT women. Overall, these safe spaces must also be guided with the purpose of challenge the normalization of violence against LBT women in Timor-Leste.

5. Facilitate leadership-building opportunities and support groups for LBT women

Currently, there is only one organization in Timor-Leste working on LGBT rights: CODIVA.²¹ Currently however, capacity is limited and this agency is unable to take up these efforts at a larger scale. There is also no constructive plan, as far as the researchers understand, to create support groups working for LBT women's issues.²² There is a need identify individuals who are willing to be trained and groomed as future leaders in the struggle to fight for the rights of LBT women. There is also a need to support willing LBT women to come together and support one-another. The emergence of a well-organized network of LBT women would also create funding opportunities to promote LBT issues in the country. These support groups could develop linkages with existing national and international agencies and networks to enhance their capacities, as well as share platforms to share their experiences and challenges, with the goal of advancing the human rights of LBT women in Timor-Leste.

6. Initiatives for skill-building and income-generating opportunities for LBT women

The research highlighted, among other things, the shocking prevalence of violence and trauma among LBT women. For many respondents, this is exacerbated by their economic dependency on their families – who are the perpetrators of violence – and is a major factor in their current situations. For others whose education was compromised by experiences of violence and discrimination, this has obstructed their ability to find gainful employment, particularly in the government. For these respondents, there is a need to develop skills for economic empowerment and financial independence. Financial independence could be a game-changer, such as that it will allow them better leverage in dealing with hostile families.

NOTES

- 1 For the full text of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, see: <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=37&lang=en>.
- 2 For the full text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, see: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
- 3 Devereux, A. (2015). Timor-Leste's Bill of Rights: A Preliminary History. ANU Press. Retrieved from <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/timor-lestes-bill-rights>.
- 4 For the full statement of Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo on LGBT acceptance, see: <https://aseansogiecaucus.org/news/external-news/106-official-statement-of-his-excellency-prime-minister-of-the-democratic-republic-of-timor-leste-on-lgbt-acceptance>.
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- 16 According to the researchers, “orientasaun jéneru” (“gender orientation”) was the phrase used by respondents. This is synonymous to “identidade jéneru” (“gender identity”), which is the phrasing used in UN documents.
- 17 “Assigned sex at birth” is a term that is now often used as an alternative to “sex” because it clarifies that a person is merely assigned male or female but that their bodies, particularly in the case of intersex people, can display physical characteristics which do not neatly fall under typical sex categories. It is also more accurate scientifically since genital sex (i.e. the penis or vagina), which is normally used by medical professionals to assign a person's sex, is not the only means a physical body expresses sex characteristics.
- 18 We make a distinction between “social transitioning” and “medical transitioning” because it is important to clarify that there are many ways that a transgender person can transition, and that there is not one “genuine” way of transitioning. A person may transition socially by dressing in ways that affirms their gender identity, and for many this is often enough; for others, it is not enough and they may opt to alter their bodies in certain ways. However, what is important is that we affirm their gender identities regardless of how they have or have not transitioned.
- 19 We acknowledge that there are many words and definitions for describing people of diverse SOGIE in Southeast Asia, and it is not limited to “LGBT”. In the case of our respondents, the word “lesbian” is familiar to them, although in Timorese society “lesbian” can mean more than sexual orientation (i.e. a woman attracted to other women) and can also have connotations of gender expression (i.e. a woman who behaves in ways that are cultural identifiable as masculine).
- 20 “Corrective rape” is a term used to describe a form of sexual assault committed against an LGBT person, often with the support of their own families, in order to make that person “straight” (i.e. heterosexual or gender-conforming). It is described widely in anecdotes and documented stories among LBT women in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.
- 21 CODIVA (<http://codiva-tl.org/>) has many community-based organizations where self-identified gay men, transgender women, and men who have sex with men (MSM, a term used in HIV/AIDS advocacy) meet and support each-other. One example of a safe space run by people connected to CODIVA is a salon, owned by a gay man, in the Baucau district. But LBT women have no such safe places where they can meet and share. They feel they have no support groups specifically for them. It is more than having a safe physical place, including having their own group with a name.
- 22 One of the principle investigators in this research, Bella Galhos, is the lone activist raising issues of LBT women in the country. The researchers explained that CODIVA is the only organisation working on LGBT issues in Timor-Leste, but has not yet worked in a more focused way on LBT women. Under their current HIV/AIDS funding, CODIVA's focus is on gay men, MSM, and transgender women. Currently, there are no plans within this program for the inclusion of LBT women into existing strategies.



During 2017 Timor Leste Pride March (photos by Hatutan Youth Network)





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