

## **Our Work Our Lives Conference – Darwin 2010**

**Title: *Women and Work in Timor – Leste***

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Timor-Leste is a small country with a large history, with a total population of around 1.1 million. Colonised by Portugal over 400 years ago, invaded and 'incorporated' by Indonesia for 24 years and now independent, the impact of this past on the women of Timor-Leste is significant. During colonisation by the Portuguese there was fundamental discrimination of women; women could not receive an education, so for over 400 years they were effectively denied the opportunity to work as a teacher or have any involvement with decision-making in Timor-Leste.

At that time in Timor-Leste, women were living in a patriarchal society; most of the parents did not send their daughters to school, instead maintaining the traditional belief that women are responsible for the house and having children. During the Indonesian occupation, there was great change, during which time parents allowed their daughters to attend school, giving her the opportunity to work in different areas and for some women the chance to gain a position as a decision-maker within the government or private sector.

Since independence in 2002, many women have become active, and have gained employment in the government, UN, International agencies, national NGO's and in the private sector. Most women work in the agriculture sector (78.5%) and other various areas (48.8%).

Women in Timor-Leste have moved quickly to fight for their rights. It was shown in 2004 a woman known as Rede Feto organised the country's second congress and recommended to parliament, the government and the President to consider a 30% quota for women to have seats in parliament and also to consider 3<sup>rd</sup> November as Timor-Leste's National Women's Day. This day was proposed to commemorate Maria Tapo who was the first woman to stand up and open gun fire against the Indonesian military and say that she was a Timor-Leste woman and would not be a slave any more. These recommendations were well received by the three institutions, so the election office drafted the regulations in regard to having a 30% women quota for parliament in time for the 2007 elections. Since that year Timor-Leste has had a parliament made up of 30% women.

In order to promote work for women, we need to address the following:

- Women's rights at work
- Opportunities for women
- Women need to participate in decision making and all other aspects within the government, parliament, international agencies and the private sector
- Ensure that women are treated the same way, with respect and are gaining recognition for their work

Case example: In 2008, the director of NGO Forum, Maria Angelina Sarmiento Lopes was prevented by the board members even though she was on maternity leave, to continue in her position. This was not raised as an issue by any women's organisations in Timor-Leste because there are no women's organisations focussing directly on women worker's rights.

While the trade union movement in Timor-Leste is in it's infancy and still quite small, it is

dynamic and growing. The introduction of new workplace laws will provide some protection for women workers. Many women, however, remain non-unionised. There is much interest in setting up a Working Women's Centre in Dili to address the needs of the most vulnerable women workers. I have been talking to many women's organisations in Timor-Leste in regard to the establishment of a Working Women's Centre; they are very keen on this idea. The Timor-Leste Trade Union Confederation (KSTL) is now in the process of recruiting one woman to work as an organiser for a women's committee and she will be based at the same office as KSTL.

This presentation will examine the employment and workplace issues that women in an emerging democracy are facing, and will provide an update on work being done to recognise and strengthen women's economic security.

**Profile:**

**Elisabeth de Araujo** has been the Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA Co-ordinator in Timor-Leste since 2001 after working as a journalist, human rights investigator and development officer in Timor-Leste. As country co-ordinator she runs the local office in Dili plus a range of development projects. Elisabeth completed the Anna Stewart Trade Union training for women in Adelaide in 2008, spending time at the Working Women's Centre SA.

**Sandra Dann** is the Director of the Working Women's Centre SA. In 2009 she travelled to Timor-Leste with an APHEDA study tour.

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