CHAPTER 14

The Veterans' Valorisation Scheme: Marginalising Women's Contributions to the Resistance¹

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As women, we are offended and upset that on national days the leaders mention all the heroes' names to honour them, but forget our women leaders who gave their lives to liberate this nation

*Maria Tapó, Bi Lear, We-We, Muki, Soimali, Mariazinha,
Bi-Doli-Mau and others.*

It is now ten years since we have restored our independence but the leaders have forgotten the contribution and values [that women brought to the independence struggle]. Will it be that these women's participation ended with their deaths? Or for those who are still alive, that they will only receive recognition as the wife of a deceased combatant or cadre? If so, this is unfair, particularly when we want to create a complete history of our people.

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2 Speech of the OPMT Secretary General, Lourdes Maria A.M. Alves de Araújo at a fundraising event for the OPMT documentation project, 6 August 2010.

Introduction

It is well known that East Timorese women played critical roles during the 24-year Resistance struggle (the Resistance) against the Indonesian occupation. As large numbers of men took up arms against the Indonesian military and were imprisoned and killed, women took on new responsibilities. Some hid in the mountains and forests with FALINTIL (*Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*; Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor)—the military wing of FRETILIN (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*; Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor)—where they played important logistical roles: they collected food, cooked, mended clothing, took care of the wounded, acted as guards, and managed munitions. When under fire, women guerrillas would prepare supplies for removal in case of retreat, or salvage ammunition, weapons, or other supplies from the bodies of dead soldiers on both sides. Women were also engaged militarily against the Indonesian forces and took part in raids on Indonesian security posts and exchanges of fire (Alves, Abrantes and Reis 2003: 25–27; Conway 2010). More commonly, women were involved in the *frente clandestina* (clandestine front)—the network of civilians based in the villages and towns that supported, and greatly outnumbered, the FALINTIL forces. It has been estimated that women comprised 60 per cent of *clandestinos* (Cristalis and Scott 2005: 39), acting as couriers, supplying those on the frontlines with food and other necessities, seeking support within the church and local communities for the independence struggle, and hiding senior members of the Resistance. Women were also active in the diplomatic front of the Resistance. Urban-based student activists often living in exile worked with international solidarity and women's networks to raise awareness about human rights violations, and to ensure the outside world did not forget their struggle. Members of FRETILIN's *Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense* (OPMT; Popular Organisation of East Timorese Women) and the *Organização da Mulher Timorense* (OMT; Timorese Women's Organisation) played a critical role in the lead up to the 1999 referendum for self-determination, providing civic education in preparation for the referendum (CAVR 2005a: part 3, para 514–16).

Through a case study of the veterans' valorisation scheme (veterans' scheme), this chapter argues that women in independent Timor-Leste have been insufficiently recognised for their diverse and critical contributions to the Resistance. Specifically, it shows that the scheme, established in 2006 to provide symbolic recognition and material benefits to veterans of the 24-year Resistance, has discriminated against women. Given that the veterans' scheme has become a key nation-building pillar, consuming a significant amount of state resources and helping to shape social, political and economic status in independent Timor-Leste, this has significant implications for East Timorese women and, indeed, for the society as a whole.

Drawing on interviews with politicians, veterans and representatives of women's organisation, along with a close reading of the veterans' legislation and pension statistics, we shows the scheme's increasing orientation towards meeting narrowly defined 'stability' goals has been to women's detriment.³ We then demonstrate that the scheme's emphasis on rank and time served within the Resistance has marginalised women's contributions, while provisions within the scheme—particularly those relating to remarriage, second wives and vulnerability criteria—add another layer of discrimination. We then make some suggestions as to how the veterans' scheme could be adapted to better recognise women's roles in the Resistance, acknowledging that any attempts to widen its existing parameters are likely to encounter significant opposition from powerful male veterans. Nonetheless, we argue that the marginalisation of women within the scheme represents a lost opportunity to recognise women's agency in the Resistance struggle, and, in doing so, to potentially improve women's social and economic standing and status in society. The marginalisation of women's contributions also has consequences for the nation as a whole by narrowing the way the Indonesian occupation is remembered and represented, and further promoting a militarised construction of citizenship.

Background to the veterans' scheme

The marginalisation of women within the veterans' scheme can be traced to the establishment of a series of commissions by the then President Xanana Gusmão from 2002, to identify and register veterans of the Resistance. The commissions were intended to avoid the improper use of veteran credentials to obtain political and material benefits, to placate the growing number of disaffected members of the Resistance who were threatening to rearm, and fulfil the constitutional requirement to valorise the Resistance (Rees 2003). The first two commissions—the *Comissão para os Assuntos dos Antigos Combatentes* (CAAC; Commission for the Issues of Former Combatants) and the *Comissão para os Assuntos dos Veteranos dos FALINTIL* (CAVF; Commission for the Issues of FALINTIL Veterans)—were established in September 2002 to register veterans of the armed struggle. Only 13 women (out of a total of 36,959 names) registered with the CAAC and CAVF during the initial registration phase, and these 13 names were then omitted from the final list. At the time, the justification given for the exclusion was that they had acted in support roles to FALINTIL and that they had held political (as opposed to military) positions within the Resistance structure. While this may have rankled with women who had spent years as an

³ Interviews were conducted by Naomi Kinsella, Natalia de Jesus Cesaltino and Manuela Leong Pereira in 2011.

integral part of FALINTIL in logistics and intelligence collection roles, there is evidence to suggest that the women were placated by President Gusmão, who instructed them to wait for a third commission, which would register veterans involved in the clandestine front (Ospina 2006: 24).

The *Comissão para os Assuntos dos Quadros da Resistencia* (CAQR; Commission for Matters of Cadres of the Resistance) was established in 2004 to register former *clandestinos*. It was far more successful than the previous commissions in gaining women's participation; indeed, 25 per cent of those who initially registered their names with CAQR were women. At the completion of the various presidential commissions' mandates, a total of 76,061 former members of the Resistance had been registered.⁴ This included 10,337 women (13.5 per cent of the total).⁵

Following the completion of the first phase of registration, an ad hoc parliamentary commission was established to develop legislation on 'valorising' the Resistance. Unfortunately, the draft law was completed in July 2005—before CAQR had finished its work. This meant that the commission involving the largest number of women had little impact on veterans' policy formulation. The 2006 Statute of the National Liberation Combatants defines a 'National Liberation Combatant' (NLC) as a Timorese citizen who participated in the independence struggle for more than three years (or less than three years if killed due to their participation in the struggle), and was 'part of the structures or organizations of the Resistance'. Benefits for NLCs under the legislation include various forms of symbolic recognition, including medals, the right to funeral honours, and presidential decorations. NLCs, their spouses and children also have the right to access state health and education services free of charge, and a later decree law has established scholarships to assist with uniforms, books and tertiary education fees for veterans' children.

The valorisation process also provides for entitlements to pensions for a select group of veterans. Initially, pension eligibility was based upon 'vulnerability' criteria. Elderly and disabled veterans were prioritised, while widows, orphans, elderly parents, or tortured siblings of deceased veterans were eligible for a 'survival pension'. Later revisions to the law have, however, raised pension amounts and shifted the beneficiary emphasis. It is clear that length of service and rank within the Resistance structure are now key factors in determining

4 Two different technical commissions were created in 2004 and 2006 to respectively verify the previous commissions' data and consolidate it into a single database. See the press release, H.E. President Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão has sworn in the Commission of Verification of Data's (CVD) Monday, 15 November 2004; Presidential Dispatch 1/2006, Extension of the Mandate of the Data Consolidation Commission (CCD) of the Timorese Resistance and National Liberation Combatants, 9 December 2006.

5 March 2011 statistics from the Secretary of State for National Liberation Combatant Affairs.

pension amounts.⁶ A combatant's years of service are considered to be the sum of all periods of deportation, detention and work in 'exclusive dedication' to the Resistance ('exclusive dedication' meaning that individuals were not engaged in study or regular waged labour).

The manner in which the scheme attributes monetary benefits has led to tensions between the clandestine front and FALINTIL. A key issue concerns the requirement for 'exclusive dedication' to the struggle, which makes it extremely difficult for former *clandestinos* to gain access to pensions. This is because clandestine front activities were often only possible by concealing one's activities behind study or work, or using one's position within the Indonesian Government, police or military to pass on intelligence to the Resistance. This definition has also excluded large numbers of women, not only because there were more women in the clandestine front than FALINTIL but because women tended not to hold official positions or titles within the Resistance structure despite carrying out important clandestine work. Other tensions have emerged due to difficulties in verifying who is a legitimate veteran for the purpose of the scheme. Despite the establishment of special committees to 'verify' veterans' claims, complaints of exaggeration or under-recognition of years of service are common, in some cases giving rise to violent disputes (see Belun and CICR 2013; ICG 2011).

Rising pension amounts

Since the introduction of the veterans' valorisation scheme, veterans' pension payments have risen steadily. In 2010, US\$23.1 million (3 per cent of the state budget) was allocated to veterans' affairs, most of that for the payment of benefits (RDTL 2010). By 2011, this amount had risen to US\$82.7 million, or 6 per cent of the 2011 state budget (RDTL 2011). Although payment amounts may have peaked in 2012 at US\$109.7 million (or 9 per cent of the budget), they remain a significant allocation of state resources (IPAC 2014: 12). As Wallace (this volume) observes, more money is now spent on veterans than on health or education, and the lowest veterans' payment of US\$276 per month is many times higher than the average East Timorese income.

6 Law 3/2006 as amended by Law 9/2009 of 29 July 2009, Article 26 'Special Retirement Pension', Article 25 'Subsistence Pension', Article 28 and Article 29. Veterans with more than eight years of full-time dedication to the struggle are eligible for monthly pensions, those with four to seven years' full-time service can apply to receive a one-off payment and a superior pension has also been created for a small number of 'prominent figures' within the liberation struggle. The family of deceased veterans can receive either a survival pension or one-off payment depending upon their relationship with the veteran. The survival pension is payable to only one heir, with the spouse receiving first priority followed by parents, children and siblings who have suffered torture as a result of the veterans' militancy. Once this individual dies, the right to a pension is extinguished.

The significant size of the veterans' pensions indicates that the Timor-Leste Government has relied on the scheme as a means of 'buying' political stability. In the wake of the security crisis of 2006–07, for instance, the veterans' scheme has been used as a means of placating those who could become potential threats to the state (UNHCHR 2006). This, in turn, makes it difficult to reign in pension amounts. In January 2008, for example, when the government attempted to reduce pension amounts due to budgetary constraints, the opposition party accused the government of 'insulting veterans' and the proposed reductions were never made.⁷ The orientation of the scheme towards meeting narrowly defined stability goals also means there is likely to be little interest among the political leadership in making it more inclusive of women.

What is clear is that, at the time of writing, the primary beneficiaries of the scheme are men who can claim to have been high-ranking and/or long-serving combatants. In addition to pensions and recognition of their past roles, these men are being rewarded with significant respect and power. Veterans' views carry weight in parliamentary debates, election campaigns and within local politics. Veterans are also benefiting financially through the preferential allocation of government contracts (IPAC 2014: 13), and continue to play a variety of informal security roles, such as intelligence gathering and personal protection (ICG 2012: 14). All of this suggests that the veterans' scheme is bolstering the power and influence of a militarised male constituency—an issue that is problematic, not only for East Timorese women but for the society as a whole.

Problematic assumptions within the veterans' scheme

Behind the marginalisation of women in the veterans' scheme is the implicit assumption that the Resistance was an overwhelmingly male struggle. A prevailing view held by prominent male Resistance figures is that given men were the primary participants in the armed front, a program to valorise veterans will necessarily include a higher proportion of men than women. While readily agreeing that women played an invaluable role in the struggle, and suffered in gender-specific ways as a result of this contribution, a number of senior Resistance figures interviewed for this study suggested that the valorisation scheme was intended to recognise a persons' contribution to the struggle regardless of whether they were a man or woman, and was, therefore, non-discriminatory.⁸

7 *Timor Post* 8/1/2008. Government Asks the Parliament to Alter the Veterans' Law, Fretilin: AMP Insults Veterans.

8 Interviews with the Secretary of State for National Liberation Combatant Affairs, Marito Reis, 21 March 2008; *Parliamentarian Cornelio Gama (nom de guerre L7)*, 12 April 2011; *Parliamentarian Faustino dos Santos (nom de guerre Renan Selak)*, 13 April 2011; former Resistance member and member of the CAAC and CAVE, Andre da Costa Abel (*nom de guerre L4*), 26 March 2011.

While this argument appears logical on the surface, a deeper reading suggests that it is based on erroneous and gender-stereotypical assumptions about the roles of East Timorese women. Key among these is the implicit view that women's contributions to the Resistance were not as important as the roles of male combatants. This view ignores the way in which the Resistance effectively operated. As is well known, FALINTIL relied heavily upon the clandestine network for its survival, and civilian-led demonstrations, diplomacy and advocacy were vital to the ultimate success of the independence struggle.

Assumptions that downplay women's agency as political and military actors are reflected in criteria upon which veterans gain access to pensions under the scheme. Roles such as bearing arms against the enemy are elevated over the contributions women made to the Resistance as logisticians, couriers, cooks, nurses, *clandestinos* and international activists. The reliance on tallying up the years of 'exclusive dedication' to the struggle and a person's formal position within the Resistance hierarchy in determining access to decorations and pensions further excludes women. While this definition also excludes men who made non-armed contributions to the Resistance, women are particularly disadvantaged because they are far less likely than men to have held formal positions within the Resistance hierarchy and be able to prove an uninterrupted, full-time period of service.

Specific provisions in the veterans' scheme further discriminate against women. For instance, one provision precludes spouses of deceased veterans from receiving a pension if they have remarried. The implicit assumption behind this provision seems to be that women should have been 'loyal' wives awaiting the return of their men from the battlefield. It also seems to reflect a view that women are not independent persons but the property and responsibility of their husbands. The deeply entrenched nature of this assumption was evident during the parliamentary debate on the 2006 NLC statute, when some women parliamentarians raised a motion to amend the law, allowing widows of Resistance members to be entitled to pensions regardless of whether they had remarried or not. They argued that in many cases these women were left vulnerable to sexual abuse by the Indonesian security forces and their militia after their husband disappeared, died or fled to the jungle. Remarriage was often the only way they could avoid this abuse. The motion was defeated as former male commanders, with the support of a number of female parliamentarians who were widows of FALINTIL, argued that these women should have been loyal to the memory of their deceased husbands and demonstrated the same strength as other women who had not remarried.

The veterans' scheme also excludes women who suffered sexual violence as a result of their work for, or connections with the Resistance. Although the veterans' scheme is not intended as a reparation program for victims of human

rights violations during the conflict, it does purport to support veterans and their immediate family who were left vulnerable as a result of their contribution to the Resistance. Factors such as an individual's age, disability, and their experiences of detention and torture are, therefore, taken into account within the scheme. The issue of sexual violence, however, never entered into parliamentary discussions on the veterans' legislation. This is despite the fact that women associated with the Resistance were particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse during the occupation, and often became proxy targets for male family members who were fighting in the mountains or who had fled abroad (CAVR 2005: ch. 7; see also Carey 2001: 258–59).

Another aspect of the veterans' legislation that discriminates against women is its neglect of second wives. It is well known that many male FALINTIL fighters took on second wives—often referred to as *feen ailaran* (bush wives)—while remaining legally married to their first wives. Under the NLC legislation, the survival pension must be equally divided among heirs with equal claims, such as the veteran's parents or his/her children. Although spouses receive priority over parents and children in relation to receipt of a survival pension, in the event that multiple wives come forward to present their claims only the legally married spouse is entitled. This ignores the reality that former Resistance fighters had multiple relationships and children with women who they subsequently abandoned. It also serves to reinforce the gendered stereotype that these 'bush wives' were women of low morals and not legitimate wives as they had been 'living rough' with male FALINTIL fighters in the bush. The extent to which 'bush wives' continue to be held in low regard was reflected in the attitudes of policymakers interviewed for this study. The prevailing view expressed was that it was up to the woman herself to negotiate with the legal wife on sharing the pension. A 'bush wife' who seeks to claim veterans' benefits is, therefore, dependent upon the largesse of a woman and family with whom she has no links and, therefore, no leverage.

This is not to suggest that the veterans' scheme has not benefited some women. At the time this study was conducted, 38 per cent of those in receipt of a veterans' pension were women. However, of these women, 97.5 per cent were receiving a Survival Pension, which means they were not receiving a pension in recognition of their own contribution, but that of a family member. This means that the underlying gendered assumptions about women's roles during the conflict are not being challenged. Nonetheless, that a significant percentage of pension recipients are women suggests that, in theory, the scheme has had some empowering possibilities for those who were widowed during the conflict. Given the tenuous position widows occupy in society, particularly those without the support of extended families, more research is needed to gauge the extent to which women are truly benefiting from the survival pension.

Towards a more inclusive veterans' scheme?

At a purely technical level, a greater recognition of women's contributions to the Resistance could be accomplished relatively easily. Possibilities could include amending the legislation to allow second wives to claim a part of their former husband's pension and allowing remarried spouses to claim the pension. There is also scope within the existing veterans' legislation to award the title of National Liberation Combatant (NLC) to women who provided logistical support, medical services or intelligence to FALINTIL or the clandestine networks for a minimum of three years. It would also be relatively easy and affordable to award women the honorific title of 'Supporter of the National Liberation Struggle' if they do not have the necessary years to qualify as an NLC, but they did provide valuable support to the Resistance. A special award could be created to recognise *women's* roles within the Resistance, as was done for young people who were involved in the Santa Cruz demonstration of 1991.

Of course, given what is at stake for existing male veterans in terms of financial and symbolic power, any attempts to broaden the parameters of the veterans' scheme are likely to encounter significant resistance. Little is likely to be accomplished without the active involvement of women's NGOs and women parliamentarians. None of the male former Resistance figures interviewed for this study saw it as their role to advance the interests of their female *camarada* (comrades), and, at the time of writing, women's NGOs had been noticeably absent from any debates surrounding veterans' policy and legislation. One notable exception was the successful attempt by women's groups to advocate for honorary military decorations, including 'The Order of the Guerilla' to be bestowed upon women who were stationed with FALINTIL in the jungle. Although the women maintain political rather than military titles, that this award recognises them as part of the armed front is significant. Yet, even this relatively modest initiative has encountered resistance. One former senior member of FALINTIL complained that women 'who just sat there' have been provided with the same level of symbolic recognition as men who directed military strategy.⁹ Given the powerful nature of the veterans' lobby, it might be necessary for women parliamentarians, OPMT, OMT and women's NGOs to form a strategic partnership to enable women to exert more influence over veterans' policy. Insisting on women's representation from FALINTIL and the clandestine and diplomatic fronts, and within the proposed Consultative Council of NLCs, could be the first challenge of this partnership.

9 Interview with former senior member of the Resistance, 21 March 2011.

Of course, for those seeking to promote gender equality in Timor-Leste, it may also be problematic to place too much faith in a strategy that seeks to recognise more women as veterans. What is clear is that the veterans' scheme is bolstering a vision of citizenship that is based upon a militarised identity. It perpetuates the idea that a person's role in the (armed) Resistance is a key factor in determining their status to speak as a 'legitimate' East Timorese and, consequently, their access to political and economic power. East Timorese women's organisations and others pursuing a gender equality agenda need to carefully consider the extent to which they want to 'buy in' to this vision of citizenship or seek to promote a more inclusive vision. Energies might be better spent, for instance, advocating for an expansion of the existing social safety net system to address the needs of vulnerable East Timorese regardless of whether they participated in the struggle.

Conclusion

The marginalisation of women within the veterans' scheme has consequences not only for East Timorese women but also for society as a whole. It means that the economic benefits that flow from the veterans' scheme are accruing mainly to men. Second, given that social status in Timor-Leste is inexorably tied to an ability to establish one's credentials within the Resistance, women are missing out on the respect that is accorded to veterans and the social capital that accrues from this. In this sense, the veterans' scheme represents a missed opportunity to promote women's agency and strength, and to help improve their social status. Third, the elevation of the role of armed men is further privileging the voices of former male combatants above others, and, in doing so, contributing to a militarised construction of citizenship. This construction of citizenship also fosters an environment in which violence against women is condoned. Finally, the representation and remembrance of the conflict as an armed (and predominantly male) struggle against the Indonesian occupiers represents a missed opportunity to create a national narrative that is inclusive of the diverse and complex experiences of men, women and young people. To do justice to these experiences, and to work towards gender equality, it would seem that long-term and creative efforts are required both within and beyond the veterans' scheme.

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