

Bisoi—a veteran of Timor-Leste's independence movement

... What is very upsetting is that the discrimination is from our own partners in the struggle... (Bisoi Interview 2010)¹

Rosa de Camâra is better known by her *nom de guerre* or code-name of Bisoi, a sad reference to being discarded, or perhaps disregarded. Born in 1963, Bisoi is a political activist who fought both for the self-determination of her people and equality for women. She is one of the surviving women who served the armed wing of the nationalist movement of Timor-Leste as a combatant with the guerrilla army Falintil from 1975, when Indonesia invaded and occupied her homeland, until the UN-sponsored ballot of 1999 which delivered the territory's independence. One journalist who interviewed Bisoi over a number of years described her as feisty, yet felt she hid her secrets and feelings behind a faint smile, dubbing her the 'Mona Lisa in fatigues' (Cristalis 2009:179). Today, Bisoi is a well-known member of the national parliament and continues to fight for women's rights in Timor's post-conflict society and for improved treatment of women combatants like herself.² The treatment of women combatants is emblematic in the life of Bisoi because they have not been recognised or rewarded on a par with their male colleagues. This issue will be discussed here with some analysis about the implications for society in Timor-Leste today.

This biographical chapter provides an exploration of Bisoi's political and military involvement from her own perspective, illuminating the experiences of women in the nationalist movement of East Timor, a small country of about a million people. This chapter will trace her personal story along with supplying the historical context for her comments and including a gender analysis of this evidence. She sees three clear phases to her biography and this chapter is organized accordingly:

I want to point out three phases of my life: firstly the Portuguese time when women didn't have right to do anything. Secondly the resistance period, when women suffered a lot compared to men; and thirdly the independence period when some women are still not yet free, such as those who have no education. (Bisoi Interview 2010)

Portuguese Timor (pre-1975)

In 1944, anthropologist Mendes Correa, described the Portuguese colony of Timor as a 'Babel... a melting pot', and a diverse mix of traditions is still strongly felt today. Although there are many differences between the distinct ethno-linguistic groups, most share similar cosmological beliefs and social structure. The largest Malayo or

Austronesian groups are the Tetum (100,000), the Mambai (80,000), the Tokodete (63,000), the Galoli (50,000), and the Baikeno or Antoni people who live in the western enclave of Oecussi (20,000). The main groups of Papuan or Melanesian origin include the Bunak (50,000), the Fataluku (30,000), and the Makassae (70,000) living in the eastern end of the island.³ Bisoi comes from a village in the District of Vikeke which is dominated by Makassae people, who have a reputation as particularly fierce warriors.

These diverse indigenous societies and their kingdoms cross the spectrum of matriarchal and patriarchal organisation. Women are accorded a sacred status within Timorese cosmology and the divine female element is prominent in much indigenous belief. The sacred world is dominated by female spirits while the secular world is dominated by men. Therefore, while women may hold power in a ritual context they generally do not have a strong public or political voice. According to this indigenous logic women and girls are consigned to the internal or domestic sphere, rather than the external or public sphere. Consequently, domestic duties and care of children are the sole domain of women and may explain the formidable positions some women hold within households. Yet this position carries the full burden of domestic chores and childrearing, excluding women from a place in the wider society and in leadership roles. While the roles of women and men in indigenous society are understood as complementary and interdependent by anthropologists, it cannot be inferred that these roles are equal or equitable if we analyse them from a modern gender perspective. It is also an important observation that senior or elite women are powerful and any gender analysis in Timor must be modified with this class awareness. Class, or caste, is very strictly observed, even today, so that elite and middle-class women are invested with much more power and privilege than the men who fall below them in the social hierarchy. Women's experience in the resistance may also be defined by class (Niner 2010), as illustrated by the experience of Bisoi.

Timor's Portuguese colonisers brought the Catholic Church to the island which has had an enormous impact on Timorese culture. While other domains have been discussed (see Harris Rimmer 2005) it remains unmeasured how much Catholicism degraded women's sacred power within indigenous religion and replaced it with its own more demure version of femininity and the impact this has had on indigenous women's status. The argument advanced here is that the late colonial-era status of women, which Bisoi was brought up with, had been altered by colonialism and Catholicism and it was a weaker one. The Portuguese influence had done little to improve the lives of women.

A famous Timorese rebel, Dom Boaventura, led an armed uprising against his Portuguese colonizers in 1911. One of his main grievances was over the sexual abuse

and exploitation of Timorese women by Portuguese men. Due to such exploitation the idea of protecting women and keeping them safe at home could only have become more firmly entrenched. For most of the 20th Century, East Timor was ruled directly from Portugal by the fascist dictatorship of Salazar and the colony remained neglected and closeted from any modern liberalising trends such as the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.

By the early 1970s, the Timorese independence movement Fretilin, inspired partly by Dom Boaventura, had begun opposing Portuguese colonialism and its racism and discrimination, while developing a revolutionary program that included the emancipation of women. Rosa 'Muki' Bonaparte was one of the founders of Fretilin, in fact she was the only woman to hold a position on the Central Committee, which set political direction in the movement (Ospina 2006: 18). She was also leader of its women's organisation OPMT.⁴ A statement of Rosa's from the early 1970s reads, 'The creation of OPMT has a double objective: firstly, to participate directly in the struggle against colonialism, and second, to fight in every way the violent discrimination that Timorese women had suffered in colonial society' (Hill 1978: 192).

Bisoi recalled her early days and OPMT's part in her political awakening: 'During Portuguese times and because of Timorese culture, East Timorese women were not allowed to express their ideas and say what they want. It was a challenge for me to contribute to and fight for women's rights...' (Bisoi Interview 2010). Bisoi relates that her childhood during Portuguese colonial times was affected by the lack of opportunities for women. She relates that Timorese indigenous culture combined with Portuguese influence precluded East Timorese women from expressing their ideas or from joining political parties.

The main problem is there was no opportunity or equality for women. I saw the existence of inequality for East Timorese women compared to men. This is from our ancestors. Our traditional customs mean that women can't go out and achieve anything. Women and girls must marry even if they don't love the person: the parents agree to an amount and the daughter must marry. The political leaders [in 1974-5] were starting to talk about these issues and I thought, 'this is a good moment for me to join with their campaign and political activities'. During Indonesian times to the present women's participation in meetings is limited because of lack of support from the family, especially for married women. Their husbands do not allow them or give them opportunities to participate. (Bisoi Interview 2010)

The decolonisation period in 1974-5 was the first time Timorese women became involved in political issues. Bisoi remembers it was still very difficult for women to become involved in politics and that from her first moment as a political activist she felt she was criticised by her community and her own family (Bisoi Interview 2010).

Invasion and resistance: the first phase of the struggle (1976-9)

After the Indonesian invasion of 7 December 1975, much of the population of East Timor, including Bisoi, retreated to the mountains with Fretilin and became part of the resistance to Indonesian occupation. The ongoing conflict shifted women's economic, social and political roles, as war has done repeatedly around the world, and many women were challenged to act more independently than they had previously. In East Timor the war forced many women to take up roles outside the domestic sphere for the first time. Not only did women lose husbands, fathers, brothers and sons to the war, necessitating that they provide for their families and enter an economic sphere previously closed to them, but they also became a significant component of all the resistance fronts: military, political, civil and diplomatic.

Bisoi was twelve years old when Indonesian forces attacked her village in Vikeke and killed her mother (Cristalis 2009: 179). Her education was halted and she is still saddened that she only had the opportunity to reach the second grade of primary school. By her own account Bisoi was involved in the nationalist movement from the time of the Indonesian invasion (Bisoi Interview 2010). She ran to the bush and ended up in the care of her uncle, the well-known Falintil Commander L7 Foho Rai Boot, and she eventually became a Falintil soldier also (Cristalis and Scott 2005: 40; Cristalis 2009: 179).

From about 1977, when she was 14, after listening to campaigning by Fretilin activists she became more directly involved in the independence movement and became a member of OPMT. Fretilin's social and political programs were predicated on an ideological revolution to overthrow colonial and traditional power structures, including gendered ones, in conjunction with a mass mobilization in a guerrilla-style military resistance. Bisoi travelled around as a 'barefoot' teacher to illiterate farmers (Cristalis 2009: 180). Women were encouraged to become part of OPMT rather than to take up roles within the central committee of Fretilin which was almost entirely staffed by men. Revolutionary rhetoric had had little time to impinge on traditional male-dominated power-structures. Many of OPMT's roles were stereotypically gendered ones such as teaching, running crèches, providing food and clothing, but it was also committed to literacy classes for women and banning indigenous customary practices which it believed led to the oppression of women. In these first revolutionary years women were also trained in the handling and firing of weapons.

Bisoi says she 'came down' to surrender in 1978 (Bisoi 2010), meaning she was one of the hundreds of thousands of East Timorese who surrendered after a systematic Indonesian annihilation campaign had encircled the remaining resistance

leadership and 140,000 civilians on Mt. Matebian in the east of the island. After three years of war, by November 1978 this was the last stronghold of Fretilin and Falintil and they were no longer able to protect civilians. Trapped and unable to retreat any further, the weakened resistance advised civilians to surrender and they were placed in prisons and 'resettlement camps' set up by Indonesian forces (Niner 2009:34-37).

Bisoi's resolve to work towards the independence of her country, and particularly for the liberation of East Timorese women continued (Bisoi Interview 2010). She was one of a dwindling number of women who had worked with Falintil since the beginning of the war. Bisoi says the number of women who lived and worked directly with the resistance guerillas in the mountains varied.

In 1974-1975, everyone was involved so it is difficult to know the number of women, but from 1980-1990 it was more or less 130 people. By 1996, only 40 or 50 remained and by the time of the UN Referendum in 1999 there were only around 10 remaining. Perhaps 30 or 40 were captured and killed by the enemy. Every region knows well about their women who were involved in the war. (Ospina 2006: 22)

Reorganizing the Resistance (1981-99)

Bisoi recounts that her involvement during the years following the destruction of the resistance in 1978 was in reviving resistance networks. She describes being part of starting a new *Milicia Popular de Libertacao Nacional (Miplin)* group in 1980, in the Central East Region, where she had relocated, which became part of the newly emerging resistance. One of her main objectives in establishing this group was to build links between Falintil and the Indonesian military and work towards a peace plan (Bisoi Interview 2010).

The Fretilin network of *Miplin* had been created prior to the 1975 invasion to assist Falintil and was slowly being revived (CAVR 200 Chap 3: para 203:54; para 273:71; Chap 5 para 147:42). Unlike most clandestine groups, *Miplin* had a military-type structure. Recruits were organised in unarmed teams and platoons. Taur Matan Ruak, a senior military leader in the Central region (currently head of the new national army) explained *Miplin*'s role:

The mission of those known as militia was usually to relay information about spies in their midst to prevent [the spies] from doing any harm, and about Indonesian army movements. Normally that is what we called a militia. But it wasn't necessary for them to carry weapons because there were no arms [to give them]... *Miplin* is a concept we created and it is difficult to compare it to the classic understanding of the term [militia]... We did not have arms...we used [the militias] to motivate the population to remain alert. (CAVR 2005 Chap 5 para 148:42)

In the early 1980s, a new leadership was emerging including Ruak. Most of the original Fretilin Central Committee leadership had been eliminated and their

revolutionary politics, including the ideal of the emancipation of women, disappeared along with them. The revived resistance of the early 1980s had no such program and little capacity to think beyond basic survival. They relied on traditional family and clan networks to survive and revive the resistance, and the position of women in these networks remained very traditional and was based on indigenous gender roles.

The much more nationalist, rather than revolutionary, struggle was led by Xanana Gusmao and he established a series of national resistance councils as platforms to unite various resistance factions to work together: CRRN from 1981, CNRM from 1986, then CNRT from 1998.⁵ No women were to hold senior positions within these elite male hierarchies, just as it was uncommon before. Xanana's attempts to accommodate other groups caused ongoing tensions with the surviving Fretilin leadership (Niner 2009:103-106;111-119). It is still not yet documented what effect these political tensions had on OPMT, which remained the women's organisation associated with Fretilin, but it continued to operate locally and clandestinely to support the politically expanding resistance councils throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Women held political positions such as deputies, assistants, and coordinators. Bisoi was one of them, re-joining the political front after 1981. In addition to their accepted roles as mothers, carers, community workers and educators, women performed a range of other roles during the occupation. Women played a large role in the clandestine networks: they collected and couriered intelligence and documents, they supplied medicine, uniforms and ammunition and hid guerrillas in their homes. One generally accepted 'guess-timate' of women's participation in clandestine organizations is 60 percent (Cristalis and Scott 2005:39).

With the change to CNRT in 1998 there also developed a new women's arm *Organização Mulher Timorense* (Organisation of Timorese Women or OMT) and most OPMT women co-joined this organization as well to demonstrate political solidarity at this crucial time of negotiating for a UN-sponsored referendum. By 1998 OMT claimed 70,000 members in 3,000 secretariats in every little village in the country.

Despite the generalised conservative gender culture, and in the disruption of war, Bisoi was able to circumvent these restrictive roles and carved out a different life for herself, though she avoided questioning outright traditional gender position. Bisoi spoke about what it was like for women balancing their political and domestic roles during resistance times:

If I was organising OPMT activities that was my responsibility at that time but when I left this activity and returned to my normal [family] life then I had to act as a normal

woman. These two lives were separate. When I did political activities I concentrated on those political issues and when I was doing normal things I concentrated on that. I received support from my family: when I had an activity at night they always said, 'That is her task, let her do this.' They never intervened in my political activities. (Bisoi Interview 2010)

In March 1983 a regional ceasefire was agreed upon by Xanana Gusmao and Indonesian military representatives. However the negotiations faltered by August and the ceasefire was broken by the Timorese with an uprising in Vikeke. Hundreds of Timorese members of Indonesian-sponsored militias rebelled and deserted, taking their weapons up to the mountains and jungles, rejoining the few remaining guerrilla forces. The Indonesian military retaliated with the brutal Kraras massacre, killing the entire male population of that village. By September 1983 the Indonesian military had declared a state of emergency and launched a new offensive.

Women also returned to the mountains with the rebel soldiers—including Bisoi. She became a soldier again. 'In the difficult times there was no food,' she says, 'but many refused to go back to the city—they stayed put. We can be as patriotic as men, you know. We knew we could do as men did: we stayed. We wanted to show that women, too had a strong sense of duty' (Cristalis and Scott 2005:40). Bisoi remembers:

We returned to the forest on 8 August 1983 to join Falintil again and immediately got involved in all operations of Falintil. The situation became difficult. The Commander [Xanana] released the statement [about the], '*Guerra dura e prolongada*' [the Long War] and announced that children and women should return to the town. The women all refused. Better to fight to the death in the forest. But the Commander's decision was for the children. It was decided also that elderly and pregnant women should be sent to the town.

In 1983 we again made contact with Indonesian army battalion 713 and started to set our minds to delivering our small children to the battalion in Venilale. There were 27 children, the eldest about five years... This time was very difficult. When the parents agreed, their children were handed over and [the parents] returned to the military battle. We only handed over the old and our children. Then we again set about trapping and shooting the Indonesian military. (Opsina 2006: 23)

Bisoi became a 'second wife' to a senior Falintil commander and had a child with him during her time in the mountains. Bisoi relates that while she was pregnant she was shot in the stomach and believes the later safe birth of her daughter was a miracle. She says when the baby was born the bullet was found to be lodged in her wrist and remains there today. As was the custom for guerrilla women, Bisoi placed her baby daughter, *Lekas Susar* (meaning 'quite a handful'), in the garden of a local convent where the child was brought up by the Sisters (Cristalis and Scott 2005:41; Cristalis 2009:179). The women who made these heart-breaking choices for the nationalist

movement and the resistance army they were part of have received little acknowledgement for their roles and sacrifices.

After the collapse of the dictatorship of Suharto in Indonesia, B.J. Habibie was appointed President and agreed to let the Timorese decide their future in a ballot. In the August 1999 referendum nearly 80 percent of East Timorese voted for independence by indicating the CNRT flag on the ballot paper. Extensive military and militia slayings followed the announcement of the vote and an estimated 2,000 East Timorese were killed and over 200,000 forcibly displaced into Indonesia. Approximately 80 percent of all infrastructure was destroyed. Following the massive violence, Timorese struggled to find housing and food and look after their families while recovering from the mayhem.

As part of the agreement to hold the ballot Falintil was cantoned in several camps around Timor. Bisoi was living at the Uaimori camp with most of the senior leadership of Falintil including her uncle L7 who was to become marginalised in the Falintil hierarchy. In the cantonment camp she was the only woman active in political work and the only one to carry a weapon. All the other women in the camp worked in either the clinic or the kitchen (Cristalis 2009:180).

Women's role and discrimination in Falintil

During the Indonesian occupation OPMT provided women with a vehicle through which they could join the nationalist struggle, either militarily or as civilians. OPMT provided support and supplied the resistance with what it needed as far as possible and women in the main acted in these roles. It was clear to all that women made huge contributions under extraordinary circumstances. They understood the dangers of their actions but persisted and many died or were captured and tortured as a result. As Bisoi says above, 'We can be as patriotic as men.'

Although women fighters like Bisoi were respected and appreciated as OPMT members and gained a form of 'second class' status within Falintil as military support and occasional combatants, they were not acknowledged as soldiers and there were no women in the Falintil command structure. There was little thought amongst the male commanders about ideas of equality for women. Bisoi elaborates why she and other women did not lobby for change:

During the guerrilla war we never knew for sure if we were going to live or die and every single man and women only concentrated on how to survive. In that time we

had lost everything and because we were on the move we had to leave the kids behind and just keep going. When the enemy wounds us, man or woman, the consequences are the same. We had to concentrate on surviving and our activities to support and encourage Falintil, so they would not lose their spirit to fight for independence.

The difference between the occupation and the independence period is that during the guerrilla war everything was limited, including information about equality and women's rights. We did not receive any information about women's rights during this time. At that time we didn't care about these issues and only concentrated on how we would survive if the Indonesians attacked. For this reason women were put in a secondary role with specific tasks. I knew how to organise things and everyone treated me well within the movement. (Biso Interview 2010)

Throughout the occupation OPMT was treated by Falintil as a women's auxiliary for the war effort. Certainly no women were invited into senior positions in the resistance hierarchy. However, many motivated women like Biso exceeded these expectations. This significant minority of women challenged the gender roles of women in Timorese culture. During resistance times, however, 'at many levels these changes remained symbolic—the exception rather than the rule. In general women had no freedom to move and men continued to make the decisions.' (Cristalis and Scott 2005: 42)

Biso believes that today many male guerrillas have failed to acknowledge the role of the OPMT women in the military struggle and that this is still a story that needs to be told (Cristalis and Scott 2005:41):

This inequality existed in the resistance movement and Falintil. The contribution of women to Falintil is obscured by the male Falintil. There were also women fighters but the activities of the male fighters are more popular. (Biso Interview 2010)

A small number of women, like Biso, served Falintil for most of the entire 24 years of the resistance. Many of the women engaged in armed conflict acted as assistants to their guerrilla fighter-husbands or partners in the military camps and sometimes took up arms if their husbands were disabled or killed. Biso recalled that they were taking care of what was termed 'nucleos' of injured soldiers, the children and the sick and were responsible for their security and food supply. These women, like men, who were discovered by the Indonesian authorities faced imprisonment, torture and death with the added terror of sexual abuse (World Bank 2008:5).

During Falintil military assaults, women were often part of the 'second wave' of an assault with the duty of recovering weapons and other valuable items such as uniforms. Their instructions were to shoot only if they came under attack. The situation during the conflict was very fluid, especially during military engagements. Duties were performed according to capacity and conditions. Women whose main

duties may have officially been logistics and support often swapped to combat duties when the conditions warranted.

Bisoi spoke about one incident of killing several Indonesian soldiers at Mt Matebian. She was resting in a camouflaged spot when she realised she had been surrounded by about fifteen Indonesian soldiers. She believes the soldiers had been tracking her but had not realized they were so close. She shot at the soldiers with a machine gun, and believes she must have killed up to five of them but because she fled she will never know (Cristalis and Scott: 2005:41).

Bisoi was wounded several times:

The worst phase was the second period [of the Indonesian occupation 1979-1980s]. It was a black moment that has not really been covered until now. Women were killed and suffered a lot. I was shot, eight bullets in my body and stomach and one in my foot. Only in 2002 I had an operation to take out some of the bullets, but I am still suffering a lot until now. (Bisoi Interview 2010)

Yet the role played by women in these armed forces was undervalued. One clear indication that they were regarded as 'second class' soldiers was in the allocation of uniforms as experienced by Bisoi:

Life was very basic—we were lucky to possess two changes of clothes each, and had a bath about once a month. We got our clothing quite often from the bodies of Indonesian soldiers we had killed. Uniforms were first given to the male Falintils—they fitted better, and in any case the men, especially the commanders, did not want to give us uniforms. (Cristalis and Scott 2005:40)

Hence women were given political space and role but only as dictated by the male leadership. The appreciation of their specific role and contribution in resistance was also skewed from the standpoint of the masculine experience. Despite documented evidence to the contrary, the official position of much of the resistance leadership and veterans' recognition bodies today is that women only fulfilled civilian roles, with its attendant practical and material implications. Bisoi recounts her contemporary experience of discrimination in the national parliament in gaining access to state-sponsored medical treatment for her war wounds in comparison to the treatment received by male veterans.

In 2008 when I became a Parliamentary member I used my own money to get medical treatment in Indonesia to take out bullets from my body. Then I found that discrimination exists also in Parliament. For example—Parliament provides allowances of \$1500-2000 to Parliamentary members to have medical treatment but for me to have this operation to take out the bullets from the war I only received \$500. I protested about this: I pointed this out at the Plenary but I was criticised by members of my own party [CNRT]. But I am trying to continue because these are my personal efforts to get recognition as a resistance member. I made a strong protest to other parliamentary members and pointed out that others had received [more than the

full allowance]. When I presented my case to [Parliamentary] Vice-President Vicente Guterres for consideration they only provided the \$500 and advanced my salary for 4 months. When I returned 5-6 months later I wondered why it happened, as there should not be difference between the rights of the parliamentary members. (Bisoi Interview 2010)

Bisoi is also indignant at the lack of due recognition of the contribution of female veterans in the demobilisation of Falintil fighters and spoke about her group's futile struggle to fight for just treatment. UNTAET, the UN transitional administration of East Timor, oversaw the establishment of the Defence Force of East Timor, ultimately to be called the *Falintil-Forças Armadas de Defesa de Timor-Leste* (F-FDTL) in February 2001. Male Falintil fighters were offered the option of joining the new Timor-Leste Defence Force or received the equivalent of USD\$100 along with language and computer training. Nothing comparable was offered to women (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002:116). Bisoi speaks of this new army today in reference to the plight of her female comrade,

Inequality exists in F-FDTL as an institution. Our resistance *colleaga* is Biralin. Today she is attempting to be recognised by the state. She was also a Captain in FDTL [around 2004]. However they offered positions to younger women and discontinued her duties in the military because she was too old. She was replaced with younger women who had more capacity [education and skills]. When they terminated her duties they didn't provide any support or demobilisation for her. This happened at the Metinaro military base in a phase when FDTL were trying to recruit younger soldiers to replace the older ones.

Our women's group has sent a protest letter to F-FDTL Colonel Lere in Metinaro and then also to Brigadier-General Tau Matan Ruak in Tasi Tolu because Biralin was a Falintil member. We received an answer from Taur that the war has finished now and we should go and work on our farms. He said we don't have rights any more because the army only needs women who are aged 25-35. We don't have any good advisor or capacity to organise a protest any further and so this continues until today...

...We understand that now that we are independent, we must give the opportunities to the most highly skilled, those with the skills to take on responsibilities for the whole society. I can accept that to enter to the military today that you must be young and skilled. But we, who fought for the resistance shouldn't be discriminated against. We recognise that we have very low formal education and we feel hopeless because nobody listens to us.

What is very upsetting is that the discrimination is from our own partners in the struggle... (Bisoi Interview 2010)

Men are culturally, socially and politically dominant in Timor-Leste. The experience of the male Falintil fighters is pre-eminent. Women are startlingly absent from the displays in the Timorese Resistance Archive and Museum, which focused instead on the senior male leadership of the resistance, particularly those currently in

power. Women important to the early struggle seem like ghosts: they appear occasionally in photos and in documents but mostly they are invisible in the telling of East Timorese history. There seems little capacity to imagine women in the roles of soldiers or leaders; stereotypically these heroic roles are assigned or imagined as only male.

Post-independence politics

Biso continued to be a member of Fretilin during the initial period of UN Administration after 1999. She believes there was very little women's representation within the central Fretilin hierarchy and lobbied for more recognition and specific responsibilities at senior levels. 'All of us who came from the hills [during resistance times] were illiterate and were not allowed to enter the main structure of the party...' (Biso 2010 Interview).

On the 30 August 2001 elections were held for a Constitutional Assembly . Fretilin won 57.4 percent of the mandate and set about drafting a new constitution for the country. Biso related that some of the Fretilin women lobbied to become part of the government as it was envisaged that the Constitutional Assembly would convert into the first parliament. Duly, Fretilin transformed into the first constitutional government of the new nation of Timor-Leste. Disappointed she was given no place in the new politics Biso resigned from the Fretilin party and withdrew from political life, starting a small business in Maubisse. She had been completely marginalized by her protests.

Because we participated in the resistance movement we are disadvantaged now and support from the government is minimal. Yet everything today is a result of the resistance movement efforts: no-one can deny it. My main problem now is my capacity as I wasn't educated and I have very limited conditions. What I feel is that it is a little bit unfair for us women who were in the resistance in comparison to those who got themselves educated during that time. We only concentrated on the resistance and now in the independence period we don't feel we have as much opportunity as those who got themselves a good education. They have more knowledge than us. We feel left behind.

Discrimination still exists because the state doesn't recognise or value the women's role in the resistance and because of their lack of background and education, they don't even have enough capacity to say that they are resistance members. They are suffering, they don't have enough knowledge, they don't have enough capacity to represent themselves. (Biso Interview 2010)

However in 2004 at the invitation of the new President, Xanana Gusmao, Biso soon became involved in the Commission for Veterans, collecting and assessing

data on women veterans for their inclusion on commemorative lists and for veteran payments and access to resources. Then in 2006 she was invited by Xanana Gusmao to join his new CNRT political party which would compete in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Bisoi believes Xanana asked her to join CNRT because he supports the political participation of women but also because she was a well-known resistance and community activist who would attract supporters. Also there is a quota for women representatives and every fourth name on party lists should be a woman.

The gendered recognition of veterans

Involvement in the official veterans recognition process was an emotionally disconcerting experience for Bisoi. Bisoi just as other female combatants was not initially recognised as such even though she had clearly engaged in combat. Additionally, women did not serve the armed struggle in ways recognised by male guerrilla leaders so they were initially invisible in the demobilisation process. Bisoi and a small group of other women were only recognised 'post-hoc' and in this way women were treated as something of an afterthought in the process of veteran recognition and again only as 'second-class' soldiers.

The first round of the official veterans recognition process was restricted to those who had been formally part of the armed structure, and women, it was argued, had only been part of the civilian structures. Only thirteen women registered for the combatant list and their names were not included in the final list of names (Kent 2006:9). Other women said they wanted to register but were advised by the President of the Republic, at that time Xanana Gusmao, to wait for the second-round, the clandestine civilian process (Ospina 2006). Several senior resistance women were appointed as Commissioners in these processes and one observer noted that while the women were often critical of the criteria devised for combatants they finally agreed to them. The observer felt that these women had to 'tread a fine line between protecting the interests of women and not marginalizing themselves in the veteran community' (Off-record Interview 2010). The small, yet significant numbers of women like Bisoi who had served together with Falintil for all or most of the resistance period have found this situation difficult to accept. After protests, Bisoi and some of these women who had registered as civilian clandestine veterans received the added designation: 'located with the armed forces'. Later, during the process of recognition and payment of pensions, these women successfully argued that they be recognised in the same category as men who had served in the armed front (World Bank 2008:15). Bisoi too has received some of these benefits. However, there is a feeling that this recognition was forced and grudgingly given. In addition, they have never been recognised for the unique roles they played in Falintil, their sacrifice in giving away their babies, their military logistical support roles and their care and nurturing of male soldiers.

In what can be described as a campaign for recognition of women's actions during the struggle for independence a series of documents has been published by Timorese women and their international supporters: Winters (1999); Alves et al (2003); Cristalis and Scott (2005); Rede Feto (2007); APSC-TL (2008); and the latest, Conway (2010) with more forthcoming. This work is being continued today by women concerned that their experiences and service to the nation are unrecognized, crimes against them are unpunished and their current needs and rights go unmet. The Timorese leadership has not pursued Indonesian military leaders for war crimes for pragmatic political considerations and no international authority has the jurisdiction to pursue them.

The predominantly male leadership of East Timor's armed struggle were engaged in a brutal and bloody war for most of their adult life and suffered a variety of ill-effects including, displacement, imprisonment, torture, and loss of family and fellow soldiers, close friends and colleagues. Generally they have made dreadful sacrifices for independence. It is these male elites who now head the government, military and police, and the society they have shaped is heavily influenced by their experiences and prejudices. These influential men have asserted their political dominance in Timor-Leste today which has precluded the full recognition of women's roles during the war and in turn excludes 'women from full and assertive participation in post-war public life' (Enloe 2004: 217-8).

Gender disparity in Timor-Leste today

While most Timorese women and men today still live in the rural poverty of a life devoted to subsistence farming, indicators for the health and well-being of women and children are often worse. There is substantial gender inequity as illustrated by the 2004 Human Development Index (HDI) (0.426) and Gender Development Index (GDI) (0.369) meaning women had a 13 percent lower standard of living than men. Women overall have less participation in the work force at around 36 percent of the non-agricultural sector and are usually in lower-level positions, meaning lower salaries, fewer benefits and less possibility of advancement (Costa et al 2009:5). In 2005, women represented around 25 percent of the civil service, but held only 2 percent of the highest positions (Ospina 2006). The gender wage gap is huge with women earning one eighth the income of men (ADB 2005:23). Disparity between men and women exists across the domains of land ownership, political participation, access to education and economic activities and domestic issues such as reproductive decision making.

Bisoi feels strongly that women, and particularly women veterans like herself, have a long way to go before they are equal partners with men in East Timorese society today.

Today my family or husband does not intervene in my political activities but when I return home again I submit myself to the family structure. I have to listen to my husband. I recognise that in Timor-Leste it is like this, some people do intervene in others' lives, especially in women's lives and say she can't do this or that. But in my experience it didn't happen, from when I was young to when I was a married woman. Yet this conservatism still exists in East Timor. During the guerrilla war we never knew for sure if we were going to live or die but during independence women are going to have their rights. (Bisoi interview 2010)

The beliefs Bisoi expresses here about women still 'submitting' to the family structure where men are dominant are common amongst women in Timor, especially older women. It is still socially unacceptable for women to privately or publicly contest men's power. Invisible social control is exerted using customary practices and by powerful people or institutions who define socially restricted roles for women. It also works to limit participation psychologically through an internalised feeling of subordination, social exclusion and inequality and devalues the concerns of the excluded group, in this case Timorese women. Women have to be more muted and skilful in getting around these cultural norms and the situation of the war offered many women like Bisoi a way to do this and the post-independence politics too offers this hope. In the home, however, older women still maintain their traditional roles.

Conclusion

The unfinished life story of Bisoi is one of lifelong struggle of a feminist nationalist. Her life journey was intertwined intimately with the fateful vicissitudes of her homeland and the nationalist movement fighting for its independence. Her relentless dedication to the cause, together with the sacrifice and commitment of thousands of her comrades, had contributed to the liberation of her country from foreign occupation. Women veterans in Timor are well-known and generally highly regarded in their communities. Yet the enjoyment of the fruit of nationalist struggle was not shared equitably. Victory over foreign domination was overshadowed by the continuation of feminine subordination and discrimination, not just in the domestic sphere but even in the veterans recognition exercise. We have discussed how women combatants such as Bisoi who served the nationalist movement for independence (1974-1999) have been treated with discrimination historically and were only recognised partially as war veterans following contestations by women activists. The prospect for female combatants like Bisoi to be extended the same recognition and privileges as their male counterparts seems a long way off.

In the contested world of modern Timorese history the crucial and unique role of women in the resistance has not yet been fully acknowledged and this affects women's full and active participation in the post-conflict society. This is significant because how a post-war society treats its female veterans is a powerful indicator of the current and future status of women in that society (cf Enloe 2004).

It is understood that the struggle for women's rights was not possible during the difficult times of the war and was subsumed by the nationalist struggle, and women like Bisoi accept this. However this nationalist struggle created a pool of highly skilled and motivated women who no longer accept the status quo and today work toward equity for women. Only now can women create and develop a separate identity alongside other international women's movements. Yet this process is fraught. Separating the recently concluded struggle for independence and the modern women's movement fighting for women's rights is still difficult today. Such a separation would necessitate a cleaving and the voicing of opposition to the men, the fathers, uncles, brothers and husbands alongside whom women fought the war, and with whom they formed families and communities during these hard times. Such a separation and shift in thinking, for both men and women, may well be impossible for the generation who suffered together during such a long and troubled war.

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Brief Chronology of the East Timorese nationalist movement

1512 Portuguese explorers arrive in Timor **1912** Armed rebellion led by Dom Boaventura against Portuguese colonial control

27 August 1975 Portuguese Governor withdraws from territory amidst a civil war

7 December 1975 Indonesia invades East Timor **22 November 1978** fall of last resistance base at Mt Matebian

March 1981 First National Conference on the Reorganisation of Country, CRRN formed and Xanana appointed leader

March 1983 Regional ceasefire is agreed upon by Xanana and Indonesian military

August 1983 Uprising in Vikeke and Kraras massacre signals end of ceasefire

September 1983 State of emergency declared. New Indonesian offensive launched

12 November 1991 Santa Cruz massacre of hundreds of East Timorese bringing enormous international condemnation of the Indonesian occupation

November 1992 Resistance leader Xanana Gusmao captured in Dili amidst international protests

30 August 1999 UN sponsored referendum votes in favour of independence. After announcement pro-Indonesian militias begin a massive campaign of murder and destruction

19–20 May 2002 The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste established.

¹ I conducted an interview with Rosa da Camara (Bisoi) in the Gender Resource Unit of the Parliament of Timor-Leste in July 2010 and the substantial quotes here are from that interview. Also included in this article is information from prior interviews conducted with Bisoi in, Ospina (2006), Cristalis and Scott (2005) and Cristalis (2009).

³ These population figures are from the Timor-Leste Government Website [<http://www.easttimorgovernment.com/demographics.htm> accessed November 2010] however considering the total population is now over one million these figures cannot be accurate today, most figures must be at least double these numbers. The full range of languages spoken in Timor-Leste are shown on maps in Frederic Durand 2006: 46-48; 95.

⁴ OPMT is the *Organização Popular Mulher Timorese* (Popular Organisation of Timorese Women) founded in 1974 as the women's wing of the nationalist political movement, Fretilin. OMT is the *Organização Mulher Timorese* (the Organisation of Timorese Women), founded in 1998 as part of the renewed National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT).

⁵ CRRN: *Conselho da Resistência Revolucionário Nacional* (National Council for Revolutionary Resistance) (1981-1987); CNRM: *Conselho Nacional da Resistência Maubere* (National Council of Maubere Resistance) (1988-1998); CNRT: *Conselho Nacional da Resistência Timorese* (National Council of Timorese Resistance) (1998-2001) not to be confused with the current political party CNRT: *Conselho Nacional da Reconstrução Timorese* (National Council of Timorese Reconstruction) (2007 current), also lead by Xanana Gusmao.