



Fundasaun Mahein

Press Release

Research Report on *Women's Role in Community Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste*

This research finds that women in Timor-Leste play a central but largely informal – and, thus, unrecognised – role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, operating primarily through family structures and social networks. Their contributions are both preventive and responsive, combining mediation in moments of conflict with sustained efforts to address underlying drivers such as financial stress and economic dependency.

A key insight is that women's influence is often relational, indirect and deliberately discreet. Rather than relying on formal mechanisms such as local authorities and police, women mediators emphasise interpersonal dialogue while prioritising approaches that preserve social harmony and avoid escalation. These practices are highly effective within local contexts, particularly in managing sensitive disputes where public exposure could lead to further harm.

At the same time, women's roles are shaped by structural constraints. Patriarchal norms continue to limit participation in formal decision-making spaces, resulting in a pattern where women's authority is exercised informally and often remains unrecognised. This produces a form of "hidden power" that is central to community stability but largely absent from policy and institutional frameworks.

The findings also suggest that these informal practices reflect broader historical and social dynamics. Fundasaun Mahein finds that the emphasis on trust, discretion and decentralised conflict management is consistent with legacies of resistance-era practices, while contemporary gender norms shape how these practices are expressed and who is able to exercise authority.

Importantly, women in Timor-Leste are not a homogenous group. Their ability to contribute to peacebuilding varies depending on knowledge, economic capacity and social influence. This highlights the importance of strengthening the conditions under which women can act effectively, rather than assuming that their roles or capacities are similar.

Overall, the report demonstrates that peacebuilding in Timor-Leste is not confined to formal institutions, but is deeply embedded in everyday social and economic life, with women playing a critical but under-recognised role in sustaining peace and stability at the community level.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Research and Recognition of Informal Peacebuilding

There is a clear need to address the gap between formal policy frameworks and the reality of how conflict is managed in communities. Further research should be supported to deepen understanding of informal peacebuilding practices, including their gendered dimensions.

This includes:

- documenting women's roles in different regions and contexts, including their successes and limitations
- analysing how informal mechanisms interact with formal systems
- identifying ways in which informal practices can inform policies and programs

Greater recognition of these roles within national and local policy discussions would help ensure that peacebuilding strategies are grounded in the lived realities of communities.

2. Strengthen and Adapt Existing Community-Based Mechanisms to Reflect Women's Informal Roles

While there may be value in institutionalising aspects of informal peacebuilding, this should not necessarily involve creating new structures. FM's analysis suggests that efforts should prioritise strengthening and adapting existing mechanisms, rather than establishing parallel systems that risk duplication or limited sustainability.

Existing women's community-based organisations and networks should be strengthened and supported, as many already contribute to conflict prevention and social cohesion and collaborate effectively with informal peacebuilders.

Mechanisms such as Community Policing Councils (KPK) already provide a platform for community-level conflict management but face significant limitations, including:

- lack of dedicated budgets, resulting in irregular or unsustainable activities
- reliance on voluntary participation
- limited integration of gender perspectives

Addressing these constraints requires both resourcing and adaptation, including more consistent operational support and stronger integration with community-level actors.

At the same time, KPK and similar structures should move beyond treating gender as a token or procedural requirement and instead meaningfully integrate women's existing informal roles, particularly in relation to prevention, mediation and social cohesion. This includes creating space for women's participation in ways that align with local norms and recognising the value of relational, family-level approaches to conflict management.

Practical steps could include:

- strengthening linkages between KPK and women's networks such as cooperatives
- state recognition of family-level conflict management as a legitimate component of community peacebuilding
- local authorities engaging women with demonstrated experience and social influence in mediation processes

These approaches should avoid imposing external models of participation and instead build on the context-specific forms of influence already present in communities.

Overall, the objective should be to bridge formal and informal systems, enhancing effectiveness while preserving the flexibility, trust and contextual sensitivity that characterise women's informal peacebuilding roles.

3. Expand and Support Women's Economic Empowerment as a Peacebuilding Strategy

The findings highlight economic empowerment as a critical mechanism through which women prevent conflict and strengthen family stability. Programs that support women's access to credit, financial literacy and income-generating activities should therefore be understood not only as development interventions but as investments in peacebuilding and long-term security.

Support should focus on:

- scaling community-based models such as cooperatives
- strengthening financial management and business skills
- linking economic empowerment initiatives to broader social outcomes, including conflict prevention

These programs should also be designed to reinforce women's decision-making power within households and communities.

4. Enhance Public Awareness and Engagement on Gender Equality Through Contextualised Approaches

While gender equality is widely promoted and recognised as relevant to women's everyday experiences, the research findings indicate that it is often perceived as an elite-driven concept associated with tokenistic or superficial programs.

To address this, gender interventions should:

- focus on practical, relatable examples of gender equality in action
- highlight shared benefits for families and communities
- engage men as active participants in change

As noted by one respondent, sustained exposure to gender equality concepts through campaigns and media can lead to shifts in understanding, particularly among men. Building on existing efforts by civil society and government institutions such as SEII, including community outreach and media programming, can help translate abstract concepts into impactful practices within communities.

5. Promote Preventive and Restorative Approaches to Conflict Resolution

The preference among respondents for prevention, de-escalation and restorative solutions suggests the need to reinforce these approaches within both informal and formal systems.

This includes:

- supporting mediation practices that prioritise repairing relationships
- encouraging graduated responses to conflict, beginning at the family and community level
- ensuring that formal interventions do not unintentionally escalate disputes

Integrating these principles into community policing and local governance frameworks would align institutional approaches more closely with existing practices.