



Women's Role in Community Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste

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Photo: Fundasaun Mahein - Women working in the fields in Maliana Municipality (07 February 2026)

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Executive Summary

This report examines the role of women in community-level conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Timor-Leste, drawing on qualitative interviews with women actively engaged in managing disputes and maintaining social cohesion in Dili and Bobonaro municipalities. It focuses on the informal and often under-recognised practices through which women contribute to peace and stability at the household and community levels.

The findings show that women play a significant and multifaceted role in peacebuilding and resolution of family and community conflicts. They are frequently called upon to mediate disputes, particularly within families, while also working to prevent conflict by addressing its underlying causes. Their contributions are closely linked to everyday responsibilities, including managing household finances, supporting livelihoods and maintaining harmonious social relationships.

A central finding is that women's influence on community peace and stability is largely informal, relational and often deliberately discreet. Conflict resolution is typically pursued through private dialogue, negotiation and the preservation of relationships, rather than through formal or public mechanisms. Women often prioritise de-escalation and long-term harmony, particularly in sensitive cases where public exposure could lead to shame or further conflict.

The research identifies economic empowerment as a key avenue through which women contribute to peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Access to economic goods such as credit, financial knowledge and small-scale business activities are essential for strengthening family resilience, reducing dependency and enabling women to participate more actively in decision-making.

At the same time, patriarchal norms continue to limit women's participation in formal decision-making spaces, resulting in a pattern where women exercise influence primarily through informal channels. Moreover, despite the existence of legal frameworks and programs on gender equality, these are often perceived as externally driven or disconnected from local realities, leading in some cases to tokenistic implementation.

The report argues that this pattern reflects the interaction of two broader dynamics rooted in Timor-Leste's history and socio-cultural context. First, contemporary practices of conflict management are influenced by the legacy of clandestine resistance, which emphasised informal, decentralised and trust-based practices. Second, patriarchal norms shape how these practices are expressed, whereby formal authority is concentrated among men, while women's contributions remain embedded in family and community structures. The result is a form of "hidden power", where women play a central role in sustaining social stability without corresponding recognition in formal systems.

The report concludes that peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Timor-Leste cannot be fully understood or realised through an exclusive focus on formal institutions, legal frameworks or programmatic interventions. Fundasaun Mahein maintains that women's informal roles represent a critical but underutilised resource for conflict prevention and social cohesion.

Key recommendations emerging from this research include:

- Strengthening research and policy recognition of informal peacebuilding practices
- Improving and resourcing existing community-based mechanisms, with greater integration of gender perspectives
- Supporting women's economic empowerment as a core component of peacebuilding
- Enhancing public awareness of gender equality and women's roles through locally grounded and practical approaches
- Promoting preventive and restorative approaches to conflict resolution that reflect existing community practices

Overall, the report highlights the need to bridge the gap between formal frameworks and lived realities, recognising and supporting the ways in which women already contribute to peacebuilding in Timor-Leste.

Introduction

This study examines the role of women in community-level conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Timor-Leste, with a particular focus on informal practices that are often overlooked in policy and research. While women are frequently framed as underrepresented in formal decision-making processes, this study seeks to understand how they are already actively engaged in managing conflict and sustaining social cohesion at the household and community levels.

The research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of peacebuilding in Timor-Leste by documenting the experiences and perspectives of women practitioners. It also seeks to identify how these roles are shaped by broader social, cultural and historical dynamics, and to explore their implications for policy and programming.

Analytical Approach

The analysis is grounded in an understanding of peacebuilding as a set of practices that extend beyond formal institutions. Rather than focusing on state-led mechanisms or official mediation structures, this study adopts a bottom-up perspective, examining how conflict is managed in everyday life through social relationships and community networks.

The study adopts a gendered analytical lens, recognising that men and women may engage in conflict resolution in different ways and through different forms of authority. This approach moves beyond binary assumptions about women as inherently peaceful or marginalised, and instead examines how gender shapes both opportunities and constraints in practice.

Finally, the analysis is grounded in an understanding of Timor-Leste's historical context, particularly the legacy of clandestine resistance and its influence on contemporary social and political dynamics. This provides a framework for understanding how informal approaches to conflict management have persisted and evolved over time.

Context and Rationale

Despite substantive criticisms of donor-driven gender interventions (Johnston 2023), Timor-Leste has made some progress in building formal institutions and legal frameworks for addressing the drivers of communal conflict gender-based violence (Guterres and Maschietto 2025; Niner and Loney 2020). However, much of the day-to-day management of conflict continues to occur outside these formal structures, particularly within families and local communities.

At the same time, research and policy discussions on gender equality in Timor-Leste have often focused on women's underrepresentation in formal leadership and decision-making roles (e.g. Niner et al. 2022). In addition, research on women's roles in conflict dynamics in Timor-Leste has tended to focus on transitional justice or participation in the pro-independence resistance (e.g. Cristalis et al. 2005). While these are important issues, these narratives risk obscuring the substantial contributions to conflict resolution that women already make through informal channels.

This study responds to this gap by documenting and analysing women's roles in the less visible spaces of post-independence community-based informal peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It also builds on previous work by Fundasaun Mahein, which has highlighted the importance of informal networks and resistance history in shaping socio-political dynamics in post-independence Timor-Leste (Fundasaun Mahein 2025a). By introducing a gendered perspective, the study extends this analysis to examine how these dynamics operate differently for women.

In addition, the study is situated within ongoing concerns about social cohesion, youth conflict and the erosion of traditional values in some communities (Fundasaun Mahein 2025b). Understanding how women contribute to maintaining stability at the household and community levels is therefore of both analytical and practical importance.

Structure of the Report

The report is structured as follows. The next section outlines the methodology, including research design, participant selection, data collection methods and limitations. This is

followed by a presentation of key findings, organised thematically and illustrated with examples from the interviews. Two case studies are then presented to provide more detailed insight into women's roles in practice. The subsequent analytical section examines how these findings can be understood in relation to two broader structural dynamics: resistance-era legacies and patriarchal norms.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at strengthening recognition and support for women's roles in peacebuilding, while ensuring that interventions remain grounded in local realities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at exploring women's experiences, perspectives and practices in community-level conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Timor-Leste. Given the focus on informal processes and lived realities, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate to capture the complexity, nuance and context-specific nature of women's roles.

The research is exploratory and as such does not seek to produce statistically representative findings, but rather to generate qualitative insights into how women engage in conflict management and how these practices are shaped by broader social and cultural dynamics.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in community-level peacebuilding activities. The sample includes women with diverse roles and experiences, including:

- leaders of community-based organisations
- members of women's economic networks
- individuals recognised within their communities for mediating disputes
- practitioners with experience in government and civil society institutions

This approach allowed the study to capture a range of perspectives, from institutional to informal, experience-based practices. While the number of interviews was limited, participants were chosen for their depth of experience and relevance to the research focus.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted between February-March 2026. Interviews were carried out in Tetun, allowing participants to express their views in their preferred language and ensuring greater depth and authenticity in responses.

An interview guide was developed in advance, covering key themes including:

- women's roles in conflict resolution
- types of conflict they engage with
- experiences of mediation and prevention
- relationships with formal institutions
- perceptions of cultural norms and gender equality

The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to introduce additional topics and examples based on their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with attention to ethical principles, particularly given the sensitivity of some of the topics discussed.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. Care was taken to avoid harm or discomfort, particularly when discussing personal or family-related conflicts. In cases where sensitive examples were shared, identifying details have been anonymised in this report.

The research also recognises the importance of respecting local norms, particularly when engaging with community-level actors and discussing culturally embedded practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through a process of thematic grouping and contextual interpretation. Interview notes were reviewed and organised into key themes, which were then refined through iterative comparison across interviews.

The analysis focused on identifying:

- recurring patterns and common themes
- variations in experiences and perspectives
- underlying mechanisms shaping women's roles
- links between empirical findings and broader social and historical dynamics

Illustrative quotations were selected to support key findings and to retain the voice of participants within the analysis.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

First, the sample size is small and not representative of all women in Timor-Leste. The findings are therefore indicative rather than generalisable. Second, the study focuses on women who are already engaged in peacebuilding activities. This may underrepresent the experiences of women who are less active or who face greater barriers to participation. Third, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of bias, including selective recall or socially desirable responses. However, the use of concrete examples and cross-interview comparison helps to mitigate this to some extent. Finally, translation from Tetun to English may result in the loss of some nuance, although efforts were made to preserve meaning as accurately as possible.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into an underexplored area and offers a strong foundation for further research and policy engagement on this important topic.

Key Findings

This section presents the main findings from interviews with women engaged in community-level peacebuilding in Timor-Leste. The findings are organised thematically and highlight both common patterns and important variations across respondents. Overall, the interviews reveal that women play a significant but largely informal role in conflict prevention and resolution, shaped by a combination of socio-cultural constraints, historical legacies and experiential knowledge.

Women as Both Mediators and Preventers of Conflict

Women are frequently sought by family and community members to mediate disputes once conflict has emerged, particularly in cases involving domestic issues, financial disputes and interpersonal conflict. At the same time, respondents consistently emphasised that women's role extends beyond mediation to include preventing conflict before it escalates.

This dual role reflects a distinction between visible and less visible forms of peacebuilding. While women are called upon to intervene in disputes, their deeper contribution lies in addressing underlying causes within the household and community. As one respondent explained:

“Women have hidden power... not to resolve conflict after it happens, but to prevent conflict before it emerges.”

Men, by contrast, were described as more likely to engage once conflict becomes public or escalates. Women's involvement is therefore both reactive and proactive, but their preventive role is less recognised because it is embedded in everyday practices. As another respondent noted:

“Women win because the conflict does not arise in the first place.”

Economic Empowerment as a Core Mechanism of Peacebuilding

Across all interviews, economic empowerment emerged as a key mechanism through which women contribute to conflict prevention and resolution. Women described how financial knowledge, access to credit and participation in small-scale economic activities strengthen family stability and reduce sources of tension, particularly those linked to debt, dependency and financial stress. Moreover, one respondent explicitly connected economic empowerment of the family with prevention of conflict across the wider community, saying that:

“The clever woman (feto matenek) teaches her family to be engaged in developing the family rather than creating conflict... When the whole family is matenek, they can contribute to [helping] other families. When a whole family is matenek, they can support families in the whole village, then in the suku, then the [administrative] post, then the municipality...”

In this sense, economic empowerment functions as a practical strategy for building resilience within the family and across the community, linking household livelihood security directly to broader social cohesion.

Informal, Relational and Invisible Forms of Influence

Women’s roles in peacebuilding, while significant, are predominantly informal and relational, operating through trust-based interactions rather than formal institutions. Respondents described a range of practices including mediating family disputes, advising spouses, influencing children’s behaviour and mobilising peer networks. These roles are often exercised indirectly and tend not to be publicly recognised as forms of conflict resolution.

A strong preference for private and negotiated solutions emerged across interviews, particularly in situations where public exposure could lead to shame, retaliation or escalation. In one case, a theft involving a young woman was deliberately handled privately to avoid severe consequences:

“She was afraid that if the thief was condemned publicly, she might commit suicide... the problem was resolved privately.”

Similarly, cases involving infidelity or minor disputes between neighbours were resolved through direct dialogue, apology and agreement within a limited circle, prioritising the preservation of relationships and social harmony over legalistic outcomes.

The Centrality of the Family as a Site of Peacebuilding

The family emerges as the primary arena in which women exercise authority and manage conflict. Respondents consistently described the household as the foundation of broader social stability, with one noting that the family is “the smallest unit of the state” and must be strengthened to ensure peace and stability.

Within this space, women play multiple roles as caregivers, economic actors and moral authorities. They shape children’s attitudes towards conflict, influence marital dynamics and manage financial decisions that can either generate or mitigate tension. In some cases, women exercise significant authority within the household, even when formal cultural norms privilege male decision-making.

This influence can extend into the wider community as strengthened families contribute to more stable communities, while women’s networks such as cooperatives enable the scaling of these effects across villages and municipalities. In this way, peacebuilding is rooted in everyday social reproduction, with women acting as key agents in maintaining cohesion at the micro level.

Patriarchal Norms and Selective Participation in Formal Structures

Despite their significant informal roles, women’s participation in formal conflict resolution mechanisms remains limited. Respondents highlighted that men continue to dominate public decision-making spaces and that cultural norms often restrict women’s ability to speak or act openly.

Many women choose to remain silent, particularly when engaging in conflict could lead to further complications or social repercussions. As one respondent explained:

“Many women prefer to stay silent... because bringing a problem can create [even] more problems.”

Even where legal frameworks and awareness campaigns exist, including laws on gender-based violence, engagement with formal initiatives such as government or NGO programs tends to be concentrated among women with higher levels of education, knowledge or social standing. Quasi-formalised traditional practices such as *tara bandu* and *nahe bitu bo'ot*, while generally male-dominated, can provide avenues for women's influence, particularly for women who are recognised as knowledgeable or come from respected families.

Gender Equality: Between Elite Discourse and Everyday Practice

Perceptions of gender equality also reflect a tension between formal structures and public discourse, on one hand, and lived realities, on the other. While many respondents recognised the value of gender equality as a concept, it was often described as elite-focused and disconnected from everyday experience, as expressed by one respondent:

“Leaders in parliament or government promote [an idea of] gender equality taken from foreigners, but in the Timorese context [its relevance is] ‘zero’.”

This perception contributes to a degree of scepticism, with gender equality sometimes reduced to slogans, elitist campaigns or donor-driven initiatives that do not translate into meaningful change at the community level.

At the same time, respondents described forms of gender equality emerging through practice rather than discourse. These include shared economic responsibilities, joint decision-making within households and mutual respect between spouses. As one respondent noted, equality is not achieved through rhetoric but through tangible change in family life and economic relations.

“When a woman is no longer dependent on her husband, she has the power to discuss decisions in the family.”

There was also evidence that sustained awareness efforts can shift attitudes over time, including among men, particularly when concepts are communicated in accessible and contextually relevant ways.

Engagement with Formal Actors: A Preference for Graduated and Restorative Approaches

Women peacebuilders do engage with formal actors such as police, but typically only after other avenues have been exhausted. The preferred approach follows a gradual progression from family-level resolution to community mediation and finally to formal intervention if necessary.

Even when engaging formal institutions, women often prioritise restorative outcomes over punitive measures. In one case, a cooperative worked with police to recover stolen property by a former staff member but explicitly opposed detention of the suspect in order to deescalate the situation and avoid further conflict:

“We did not accept that the police detain him... we wanted to prevent conflict.”

This reflects a broader orientation towards maintaining social relationships and preventing escalation, even in cases where formal legal action would be justified.

Summary of Key Findings

Taken together, the findings indicate that women’s contributions to peacebuilding in Timor-Leste are substantial but largely informal, embedded in family life, economic activity and social relationships. Their roles combine mediation and prevention, with a strong emphasis on managing the underlying causes of conflict. At the same time, patriarchal norms and structural constraints limit their participation in formal systems, shaping a form of influence that is often indirect, relational and not publicly recognised.

These dynamics provide the empirical foundation for the analytical section later in the report, which examines how women’s informal roles are shaped by the interaction between historical legacies and deep-rooted socio-cultural norms.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Domingas Dos Santos and the Lanamona Cooperative

Domingas Dos Santos, President of the *Lakon Nakukun, Mosu Naroman*¹ Credit Union Cooperative (Lanamona), represents a model of peacebuilding rooted in economic empowerment and collective organisation. Through Lanamona, she has developed an approach that links financial inclusion, capacity building and social cohesion as mutually reinforcing processes.

At the core of this model is the belief that conflict is often driven by economic insecurity, dependency and limited opportunities within households. Lanamona addresses these drivers by providing women with training in financial management and small business development, alongside access to credit.

As Mana Domingas explained, strengthening women's economic capacity enables families to become more stable and self-sufficient, reducing the likelihood of disputes. When women are able to manage resources effectively and contribute to household income, they are better positioned to support their families and prevent tensions from escalating. In her words, when women are *matenek* and invest in developing the family, they effectively remove the conditions in which conflict emerges.

This approach reflects an understanding of the family as the foundational unit of social stability. By strengthening individual households, Lanamona seeks to generate wider impacts at the community level. The cooperative has expanded across multiple municipalities, including Dili, Aileu, Ermera, Bobonaro and Covalima, with ongoing efforts to extend its reach further.

Lanamona's work also illustrates how women's peacebuilding roles are often preventive and indirect, as the cooperative focuses on addressing underlying vulnerabilities rather than responding to conflicts as they arise. Economic empowerment is viewed as a

¹ Translated as "Eliminate Darkness, Bring Light".

mechanism through which women reduce stress within households and create conditions for long-term harmony and thriving.

At the same time, Mana Domingas highlighted the gap between Lanamona's practical approach and political discourse in Timor-Leste. While gender equality is frequently discussed at national level, she argued that these discussions often fail to translate into meaningful change for women. In contrast, Lanamona's model demonstrates a form of gender equality in practice, where tangible improvements to women's economic and social position are achieved through collective action.

This case underscores how women's organisations can function as a platform for informal peacebuilding, operating outside formal structures while addressing key drivers of conflict and instability.

Case Study 2: Maria Esperança Martins – Mediation Through Experience and Social Authority

Maria Esperança Martins' experience as a renowned community practitioner in Fatuhada, Dili, illustrates a more interpersonal and situational form of conflict resolution, grounded in judgement, discretion and an acute awareness of social dynamics. Her approach reflects a preference for de-escalation, privacy and relational repair, particularly in cases where public exposure could lead to harm.

One example in which she successfully mediated conflict involved a case of infidelity. A woman gathered evidence that her husband had engaged in an extramarital relationship and approached Mana Esperança to seek her advice. Rather than escalating the issue to extended family or authorities, Mana Esperança advised that the matter be addressed directly between the couple. She encouraged the woman to ask the man whether he wished to continue the marriage or pursue separation, thereby placing responsibility for resolution within the immediate family.

The couple ultimately chose to resolve the issue privately. The man acknowledged his wrongdoing and committed to changing his behaviour. By containing the conflict within

the nuclear family, the process avoided broader social tensions and preserved family stability.

A second example concerns a land-related dispute involving neighbours. A visiting relative had picked mangoes from a neighbouring property, which was interpreted as a provocation. Recognising the potential for escalation, Maria Esperança intervened directly by approaching the neighbour to apologise and explain the situation. She emphasised the importance of maintaining long-term harmony between households and discouraged further escalation.

This intervention resolved the issue quickly and prevented it from developing into a larger conflict. It demonstrates how timely, direct communication and acknowledgment of fault play a critical role in deescalating tensions and maintaining social cohesion.

Across these cases, several key features of Maria Esperança's approach are evident. First, there is a strong emphasis on preventing escalation, even after conflict has already emerged. Second, resolution processes are deliberately kept private and proportionate, minimising the risk of shame, retaliation or long-term division. Third, authority is exercised not through formal position alone but through experience, credibility and social trust.

Her approach also reflects a broader understanding that conflict resolution is not only about addressing immediate disputes but about preserving relationships and preventing future instability. In this sense, her work exemplifies a form of informal, experience-based peacebuilding, deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community.

Women's Hidden Power in Peacebuilding: Resistance Legacies and Structural Constraints

The findings presented in this report point to a distinctive pattern in women's roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Timor-Leste. Women are deeply engaged in managing conflict and sustaining social cohesion, but their contributions are overwhelmingly informal, often invisible and rarely recognised within public discourse or formal governance structures. This section argues that this pattern can be understood through the interaction of two structural forces: the enduring influence of resistance-era practices and the persistence of patriarchal norms that constrain women's participation in formal arenas.

Continuities with Resistance-Era Practices

Although rarely articulated explicitly by respondents, many of the practices described in the interviews reflect logics that are consistent with Timor-Leste's experience of clandestine resistance. During the Indonesian occupation, communication and organisational systems were necessarily decentralised, informal and highly dependent on trust-based relationships. Authority was often exercised through personal networks, family structures and respected intermediaries rather than formal institutions.

Elements of these practices are evident in contemporary approaches to conflict resolution described by respondents interviewed during this research. These include a strong preference for resolving disputes within the family or through trusted community figures before engaging with formal systems and entities, as well as an emphasis on discretion, de-escalation and the avoidance of unnecessary exposure. The prioritisation of private resolution in sensitive cases, such as family disputes or incidents that could lead to social shame, reflects a broader logic of risk management that was also critical during the resistance period.

One respondent explicitly drew on historical experience to justify this approach, recalling how public handling of sensitive issues during the resistance could lead to extreme consequences, including self-harm. This reinforces the idea that current practices are not

simply ad hoc or culturally static but are shaped by accumulated experience in managing conflict under conditions of uncertainty and life-or-death stakes.

At the same time, the central role of family and community networks in conflict management mirrors the organisational structures that underpinned the resistance. Just as clandestine networks relied on embedded social relationships, contemporary conflict resolution practices rely on relational authority, trust and local knowledge. In this sense, women's roles in peacebuilding can be understood as part of a broader continuity in modes of social organisation that privilege informal, decentralised and solidaristic approaches.

Gendered Dimensions of Informal Governance

While both men and women participated in and were shaped by resistance-era dynamics, the findings suggest that these legacies have evolved in gendered ways. In contemporary Timor-Leste, formal political authority and public decision-making remain largely dominated by men who derive legitimacy from their roles in the resistance. Political discourse continues to centre on male leaders and their experiences of struggle, reinforcing a visible and formalised version of resistance legacy within state institutions.

In contrast, women's contributions – both during the resistance and in the present – are less publicly recognised and more likely to be expressed through informal channels. The interviews suggest that women exercise influence primarily within the family and community, drawing on social reputation rather than formal positions. Their roles are often preventive, focused on managing everyday tensions and maintaining social cohesion.

This divergence reflects differences in how authority is recognised and institutionalised. While men's resistance credentials have been translated into formal political power, women's contributions have remained largely embedded in social and domestic spheres. As a result, women's influence is substantial but less visible, operating through what one respondent described as “hidden power.”

Patriarchal Constraints and Selective Participation

The persistence of patriarchal norms plays a central role in shaping this dynamic. Across the interviews, respondents described how cultural expectations limit women's ability to participate openly in decision-making processes, particularly in public or formal settings. Men continue to dominate formal conflict resolution mechanisms and leadership structures, while women's participation is often conditional on factors such as education, social status or family influence.

In this context, women frequently adopt strategies that allow them to exert influence without directly challenging established hierarchies. These include mediating disputes within the household, advising family members, mobilising peer networks and selectively engaging with formal actors when necessary. Silence can also function as a strategic choice, particularly in situations where open engagement could lead to further conflict or social repercussions.

Importantly, these constraints do not eliminate women's agency but rather shape the forms it takes. Women's roles are therefore not simply a reflection of exclusion or marginalisation, but of adaptation to a social environment in which formal participation is significantly constrained. This results in a pattern of selective participation, where women engage in formal processes in specific circumstances but rely primarily on informal mechanisms to exert influence.

Informality as a Mode of Peacebuilding

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that informality should be understood as a distinct mode of peacebuilding rather than as a "lack" or absence. Women's practices are characterised by prevention rather than reaction, engagement through relational networks rather than through formal adjudication mechanisms, and discretion rather than public intervention. These approaches are often highly effective in maintaining social cohesion, particularly in contexts where formal systems are limited or their intervention may exacerbate tensions.

At the same time, the informal nature of these roles contributes to their marginalisation in policy and institutional frameworks. As women's contributions are less visible and less easily quantified, they are often overlooked in discussions of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This reinforces a cycle in which formal systems remain male-dominated, while women continue to operate – often effectively – in parallel informal spaces.

The findings therefore point to a need to reconsider how peacebuilding is conceptualised and recognised in Timor-Leste. While formal participation and institutional inclusion remain significant, there is a need to acknowledge and engage with the existing practices through which women already contribute to stability and conflict prevention.

Conclusion: Women's Hidden Power in a Dual System of Governance

This research finds that the interaction between resistance-era legacies and patriarchal norms has produced a dual system of governance in which formal authority is concentrated in male-dominated institutions, while significant forms of influence are exercised informally within families and communities. Women's roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding are central to this informal system of power, even as they remain under-recognised.

This suggests that women's "hidden power" is structurally produced, reflecting both historical continuities in how conflict is managed and ongoing constraints on women's formal participation. Understanding this dynamic is essential for developing more effective and contextually grounded approaches to peacebuilding in Timor-Leste, as well as for recognising the full scope of women's contributions to social stability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This report 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.

Final Reflection

The findings of this report suggest that strengthening peacebuilding in Timor-Leste does not require starting from scratch. Instead, it requires recognising, supporting and, where appropriate, adapting the systems that already exist.

Women's informal roles represent a critical but underutilised resource in this regard. By bridging the gap between informal practice and formal policy, there is an opportunity to develop more effective, inclusive and sustainable approaches to conflict resolution and social stability in Timor-Leste.

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