

Timor-Leste gender assessment: some good news, some bad

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A recent [country gender assessment](#) [pdf] by the ADB and UN Women shows that there has been some sound progress made on gender equality issues in Timor-Leste since independence, but there is still much to do on eliminating gender-based violence, improving women's participation in the formal labour market, reducing maternal mortality and improving female representation in local-level governments.

Some of the good news includes the rapid increase in school enrolments (93% net enrolments for primary school as of 2010), with the girls' enrolment rate now exceeding that for boys at primary and secondary school levels.

Yet Timor-Leste's maternal mortality rate of 557 per 100,000 live births (2009-10) is still among the world's highest, despite having shown some improvement. Hunger and poor nutrition persist, with 27% of women aged 15–49 being malnourished (which can increase risk of obstructed labour, postpartum haemorrhage and illness).

And while Timor-Leste has one of the highest rates of female representation in national parliament in the region at 38% (due in part to a quota system), at the local level there is still a long way to go. 98% of *suco* and *aldeia* chiefs are male. While women have legislated representation levels on *suco* councils, there is a need to move beyond this to achieve influence for women at all levels.

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive problem. More than a third (38%) of Timorese women report experiencing violence in their adult lives. Of married women experiencing violence, 74% reported that it was at the hands of their partner. Only one in five women who had experienced violence sought help, predominantly from family members. Only 4% went to the police. 86% of women said that they believed a husband could be justified in beating his wife for reasons such as neglecting children, arguing, going out without telling him, burning food or denying intercourse.

The report presents comprehensive snapshot of the status of women in Timor-Leste. It also inadvertently highlights data collection problems—much of the analysis in the assessment is based on a 2009-10 Demographic and Health Survey, now more than four years old.

Given the rapid rate of change in Timor-Leste, and particularly given the significant injection from the country's oil and gas revenue into the state budget in the last few years, it would be enlightening to know whether this income has been invested in a way that reaps dividends for gender equality.