Gender equality and its feminist rationale are based on individual human rights while in customary or communal societies, status and rights are relational to others in their community. Communities are made up of ‘paribale’ persons or ‘dualibale’ without individual interests or rights. Women or men cannot have equal rights and their privileges depend on their society. The idea of the parible person in customary societies has been challenged by the long-term influences of colonialism. Christianity and capitalism, it does go some way to explaining the lack of traction for gender equality in customary societies.

The island of Timor is a bridge between the mainland Malay and Melanesian worlds, mixing the original languages and cultures in Timor reflect both forms of society. This diversity, and the mixing of matrilineal and patrilineal ethnolinguistic groups makes understanding gender relations in Timor-Leste more complex. External influences make this more so. Centuries of Portuguese colonialism and Catholic proselitising was abruptly replaced by a brutal 24-year military occupation by neighbouring Indonesia (1975-1999), which was immediately followed by the interventions of UN peacekeepers and the international aid sector. Each regime imposed gender values and relations with little recognition of what previously existed because of an assumption of cultural superiority. In my research, I have sought to discover how gender relations of the indigenous societies of Timor shifted and adapted to forced transitions, and the ways they resist or absorb the more recently introduced imperative of gender equality. Traditionally, Timorese marital relationships were perceived as incompatible with introduced, modern ideas of citizenship, democracy and equality, yet, “the complex entanglement of survival and resistance, international attention and the lack of traction for gender equality in customary societies”.

Within this changing political climate, several women’s organisations were established in East Timor. Drawing upon the opportunities provided by political developments in Indonesia and the associated capitalist market action, these organisations facilitated a number of public forums for East Timorese women to come together to share their experiences of violence and suffering. As my interviewees described, these gatherings were a source of inspiration for many of the participants, and proved critical in both affirming and deepening their commitment to independence. They were also processes through which local, national and international attention to the brutality of Indonesian rule after the Santa Cruz massacre and the challenging political climate in Indonesia, paved the way for East Timor’s transition to independence. My examination of women’s experiences of the changing, and increasingly international, dimensions of the East Timor resistance sheds new light upon the interactions between the local and the global in East Timor’s independence struggle, as well as the gendered dynamics of agency, violence and resistance.


Notes
7. Sara Niner is an interdisciplinary researcher and lecturer in Anthropology, with the School of Social Sciences at Monash University. She is the course Director of the Masters of International Development practice.