IMPROVING THE LIVES OF WOMEN SURVIVORS IN TIMOR-LESTE

ACbit Asosiasaun Chega! Ba Ita

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF WOMEN SURVIVORS IN TIMOR-LESTE

77 Women's Struggle for Peace and Justice

Asosiasaun Chega ba ita (ACbit)

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77 Women's Struggle for Peace and Justice

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Summary

Female survivors' economic vulnerability

Survivors attending the Participatory Action Research (Memory Box) in Baucau (2018)

Some female survivors are living in very **vulnerable economic conditions**: poverty; poor housing, without water, sanitation or electricity; not the owner of one's home or land, and conflict over the land they live or farm on; difficulties generating income; and not accessing the government's social assistance programs or economic aid from other groups.

Although under national law East Timorese women have an equal right to what men do, **men are more often the owners of land and recipients of inheritances**, which reduces women's economic freedom.

In **isolated areas there is limited public infrastructure**: poor condition roads, difficulties accessing markets, clean water sources are far from homes, some places still lack connection to the electricity supply, limited health facilities, etc.

The situation in isolated areas makes it more **difficult for victims to access the services and information** that they need (including health services and information about social assistance from the government).

Many older survivors are **illiterate**, and in general female survivors have a **low level of formal education**.

This makes it difficult for female survivors to access information and **reduces their opportunities to gain employment that is well renumerated.**

Some survivors have a reduced capacity to support themselves and undertake work because of the physical and mental effects of the violations they experienced in the past.

Responsibilities and economic pressures are heightened for female survivors who are taking **care of family members with disabilities**.

The **Aged Pension (Terseira Idade) is not yet reaching all female survivors** over the age of eligibility (60 years of age), and the money it provides is not enough for some survivors' necessities.

Survivors who are mothers face **difficulties covering the costs of their children's schooling**, particularly if they have four or more children at school, or their children are at university.

Although faith, culture, and family are very important for female survivors, if they need to frequently contribute money or animals for **cultural exchanges (*halo lia*) it adds economic pressure**.

Making a living is more **difficult for female survivors who do not have a husband** (widows, those who never married, women separated from or abandoned by their partner), because they alone need to meet the needs of the household, try to make an income, and take care of the children (if they have them).

Survivors who have separated from their male partner or were victims of sexual violation often face

poor treatment, stigma and discrimination from their families or communities.

Some female survivors are generating an income through their activities or have access social assistance programs from the government and yet continue to have poor health and living conditions, because their **families do not prioritise the needs of the survivor** and instead use the money for other ends.

1. Introduction

Asosiasaun Chega ba ita (ACbit) is an East Timorese NGO established to promote the findings and recommendations of the *Chega!* report of Timor-Leste's truth and reconciliation commission (CAVR), particularly relating to victims of gender-based violence.

In 2018 and 2019, with funds from UN Women and the Embassy of Japan in Timor-Leste, ACbit conducted a participatory action research (PAR) project with a total of 77 female survivors from three municipalities, Baucau, Covalima, and Oecusse. The research brought together victims of human rights violations from during Timor-Leste's past conflict (1975-1999) and women who have since faced violations of their rights at the hands of their male partners. ACbit sought to better understand survivors' experiences, and work with them to find solutions for the difficulties that they face. Throughout and since the research, ACbit and its partners have helped to build survivors' awareness of their rights as East Timorese citizens, and where possible have linked them with the services and care that they need.

In this short report we share key results regarding the types of violations that survivors had faced, and the continuing impacts of these experiences. Although the women have their own sources of strength, the various social disadvantages and vulnerabilities that female survivors live with threaten their capacity to move beyond their problems and have healthy and dignified lives.

The East Timorese government has implemented protections for vulnerable citizens, with social assistance programs (welfare), laws, and services. Civil society, the church, and international agencies have various activities to promote human development and the rights of East Timorese women. While these steps are positive, social assistance programs and other forms of supports are not yet reaching or adequate to the needs of the female survivors who are most vulnerable.

This report is directed at government, civil society and other groups that have an interest and obligation to contribute to female survivors' recovery and provide reparation for past suffering, so that survivors can go forward with dignity.

- **Victim or survivor?**

Survivors attending the Participatory Action Research (Stone & Flower) in Baucau (2018)

In this report, and in ACbit's everyday work, we interchangeably use two terms: victim and survivor. We use the word victim because people have committed crimes or human rights violations against the participants, and/or their families. They are victims of the perpetrators' actions. We also use the word survivor because the women have their own strengths and abilities to recover, even though they have lived through difficult experiences. Within the PAR workshops, participants commonly referred to themselves as 'victims', not survivors, perhaps because they are still suffering, living in vulnerability, and not yet feeling free from the violence and rights violations that they have faced.

2. Research method

ACbit and its partner organisation Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) have developed and used a

participatory action research (PAR) process to understand the past and present situation of survivors, to challenge injustice, and to help recovery from trauma and pain. The approach has three important aspects: involving participants as researchers (participatory), working for practical outcomes (action), and creating new knowledge (research).

In the first session, ACbit staff and workshop facilitators introduce themselves and the research objectives and process, and run a warm-up activity to help participants get to know one another and feel comfortable. Before starting the research process, ACbit seeks and records informed consent from each participant and obtains their permission to publish their stories.

- **Research instruments**

Survivors attending the Participatory Action Research (Timeline) in Covalima (2018).

The research instruments used by ACbit give participants the opportunity to tell their stories in an active and creative way. The instruments used for this PAR project were:

Flower and Stone: Participants consider four aspects of their lives: (truth, justice, freedom from violence, and healing), and at three dimensions (self, their family, and their community).

They tell their stories and use a flower to signify they feel positively about this aspect/dimension of their life (e.g. they have truth/feel relief), or a stone to signify a negative response and still feeling burdened.

Timeline: Participants develop a timeline of important events in their community, from a past date they chose to the present day.

Community mapping: Survivors create a community map of important places and sites where key events took place, including where human rights violations occurred.

Survivors attending the Participatory Action Research (resources of life) in Covalima (2018).

Livelihood mapping: Survivors discuss the resources that they have and those that provide income for them. They look at their past and present situations, and their hopes for the future.

Body mapping: Survivors draw around their bodies on a large sheet of paper, then colour blue the parts of their bodies where they have pain or associations with feelings of sadness, and colour yellow the areas that they associate with their strengths and feelings of happiness.

Postcards: Survivors write their life experiences on postcards that they dedicate to important people in their lives.

Memory boxes: Each survivor brings to the workshop personal items that symbolise their happy or sad memories, presenting these to the group and then storing them in a special box with their postcards.

Photo History: Photos are taken of each survivor and their home, family, and other resources.

Detailed explanation of these instruments can be found in AJAR's *Stone and Flower: A Guide to Understanding and Action for Women Survivors* (2017), also in Tetun: *Fatuk ho Ai-Funan: Manual Ida Hodi Kompriende no halo Asaun ba Feto Sobrevivente Sira* (2015).

ACbit used the same PAR approach in 13 municipalities from 2015 to 2016, the results of

which can be found in the report *Our Path is Upwards; Becoming Strong Together: Strengthening Women Survivors of Violence in Timor-Leste through Participatory Action Research* (2017).

- **Reflection on the research process**

Survivors reflection after participatory action research in Covalima (2018)

Throughout and after the PAR activities, we analysed the results and reflected on the obstacles and challenges faced in conducting this research. One challenge was that not all participants were able to attend all of the PAR workshops in their area (because of illness or other commitments), or because of time and resource constraints were unable to complete all the research instruments during the workshops. The annex of this report shares lessons learned about the PAR process, and several of these lessons would also be of relevance when carrying out other activities with women survivors. In this report we include what data we were able to collect (even though for some participants this was quite limited), to recognise the survivors' participation and their desire to share their experiences.

Survivors' feedback about participating in the research was predominantly positive. They said they appreciated the opportunity to recall and share their past experiences and current situation. The research recognises the value of survivors' experiences, their voices, their participation, and their contributions. One survivor said "This process helps us to lighten the load of our problems, and I can share my experiences with other women".

From the point of view of the facilitators, the women survivors also appreciated the informal aspects of the workshops: coming together, chatting, listening to music, eating and drinking, dancing, and laughing. When the women come together to participate in activities, they feel less alone in their experiences and can have hope that going forward they'll be able to find relief from the pressures that cause them stress and suffering.

> '… my eyes see what's near and what's far, and they see people who are rich, educated people who can submit documents and receive all sorts of money, while we're still here in poverty. This makes tears fall from our eyes, but there's nothing we can say, because who's going to listen to us? Until finally, today, you *ACbit+ have come to speak with us, that's making us feel better' (Victim of torture and sexual violence, Baucau).

Survivor photo after attending the Participatory Action Research in Covalima (2018).

• Research participants

The participants in this research were female survivors who had experienced human rights violations during Timor-Leste's armed conflict (1975-1999), and female survivors who had faced violations of their rights in the context of their relationships with their male partners, including partners who committed domestic violence, or abandoned the women and their children. Some participants had experienced both these forms of violation, and some victims of violence during the conflict continued to face various other rights violations following the nation's independence.

• *Table: Number of participants and villages (suku) where the research took place*

Baucau (total 47)	
Suku Laisorulai de Baixo	36
Suku Abo	11
Covalima	
Suku Maudemo	18
Oecusse	
Suku Lalisuc	12
Total participants	**77**

Survivor Romana de Jesus making Tais in Covalima (2018).

• *Table: Ages of participants*

	Baucau	Covalima	Oecusse	Total
18-29	-	1	2	3
30-39	-	2	4	6
40-49	4	9	2	15
50-59	16	4	2	22
60-69	17	1	1	19
70-79	10	-	-	10
80+	-	-	1	1
Total	*47*	*18*	*12*	*77*

• Communities where the research took place

Survivor Cecilia Nau presenting a Map of the Community during a PAR workshop (2018).

The three regions where this research was carried out have particular historical experiences that contributed to the types of human rights violations that communities had faced during the Indonesian military occupation, as well as their current situations today.

Suku Laisorulai de Baixo and suku Abo, Quelicai, Baucau

The villages (suku) of Laisorulai de Baixo and Abo in the administrative post of Quelicai, Baucau municipality endured heavy campaigns of air assaults and other oppression by the Indonesian forces during the first phase of the military occupation. Many women who participated in this research had been detained, tortured, and experienced other forms of violence between 1975 and 1979, and/or in the early 1980s were exiled to Atauro Island or Mehara in Lautem. Residents became targets of the Indonesian military's violence because of their own, or more often their male family members', involvement in the East Timorese resistance.

Most participants made their way on foot to the relevant village office in Laisorlai de Baixo or Abo where the PAR workshops were held, some walking for up to two hours, as they lack transportation or live in isolated areas without roads. For these survivors, it is difficult to access services and information. Levels of literacy and formal education were low among participants from these two villages, and most engage in subsistence farming, some growing a surplus for sale.

Suku Maudemo, Tilomar, Covalima

Some of the participants in the village of Maudemo, administrative post Tilomar, Covalima municipality shared stories of bombings, fleeing to the jungle, threats, and involvement in the clandestine resistance. Of the 18 participants, 11 had been present during the event known as the Suai Church Massacre, when (following the referendum ballot that brought independence) the Ave Maria Church they had been seeking refuge in was attacked by the Laksaur militia on the 6th of September 1999. Some of the survivors who participated in this research had themselves been injured or had family members killed in this massacre. This historical event is well known within Timor-Leste and abroad, and some of the victims had received attention and support from the CAVR, NGOs, or other groups.

Today the village of Maudemo has good condition roads, electricity and a health post. Just a few of the survivors who participated in the research live far from the village office where the PAR workshops were held. Three of the women survivors have formal employment (two teachers and a cleaner), and seven more conduct their own small business activities to generate income.

Suku Lalisuc, Pante Macassar, Oecusse

In the PAR workshops held in the village of Lalisuc, administrative post Macassar, Oecusse municipality, three participants had a member of their family killed in an area called Sikone on the 27th of September 1999, and another participant was herself wounded when shot in the same area.

There are good condition roads, a health post, electricity and a market in the village of Lalisuc today. Some of the participants in the PAR workshops at the village office in Lalisuc had come from other nearby hamlets or villages to take part. Many of the women lacked awareness of national laws, justice processes and social assistance programs, as theiraccess to civic education or participation in public meetings had been limited.

Survivor Natalia Colo and her house in Oé-cusse (2018).

• Types of violence and violation reported by female victims

Survivors after attending the Timeline activity as part of the PAR in Baucau (2018).

When the women spoke about their lives during this research, even if they had faced multiple forms of violence, their stories nearly always focused more on the violations that had occurred in one context or another. For 66 women the main source of their victimisation was the independence struggle in Timor-Leste from 1975 to 1999, and for 13 of these women the most intense pressure occurred after the 1999 Popular Consultation. Problems with their male partners were the primary concern of 11 of the participants, having been victims of domestic violence and/or having been abandoned by the father of their children.

- *Table: Primary source of participant's victimisation*

	Baucau	Covalima	Oecusse	Total
Violence during the war	47	5	1	53
Violence in 1999	-	7	6	13
Problem with male partner	-	6	5	11
Total	*47*	*18*	*12*	*77*

Some participants fit in all three categories; the table indicates just the main context of the violations the participant experienced.

Among the research participants there were women who had experienced problems with their male partners during the period of Timor-Leste's armed conflict, and women who had been victims of violence during the conflict and continued to face various violations of their rights in the years since national independence. For some, violations had occurred repeatedly over a long time period, and/or the violations they had suffered in the past became a factor contributing to them being targeted for further abuses.

- *Table: Violations experienced by female victims*

Type of violation	Baucau (47 participants)	Covalima (18 participants)	Oecusse (12 participants)	Total (77 participants)
Torture	21	7	-	28
Sexual violence	14	5	1	20
Detention (held captive, imprisoned)	32	6	-	38
Forced migration/exile	39	5	3	47
Other violence	37	12	5	54
Husband killed	11	1	2	14
Other family member killed	23	4	8	35
Family (including husband) died due to hunger	22	2	-	24
Domestic violence	-	5	1	6
Abandoned by male partner and left with children	-	6	5	11

It is likely that the number of women who had experienced some of these forms of violation is higher than the numbers presented here, based as they are on participants' responses during the PAR workshops. These are sensitive matters to discuss, and sometimes victims feel afraid, ashamed, or not ready to speak out, particularly in a group context as in this research. ACbit does not force participants to speak out and provides other opportunities for women to speak individually with someone they feel comfortable with, if they should choose to do so.

• Violence and violations in the context of the armed conflict

Just 6 of the 77 women who participated in this research did not report any human rights violations during the armed conflict in Timor- Leste (1975-1999). In addition to general threats that occurred in the context of the war, 43 women were specific targets of human rights violations from the Indonesian armed forces because their brothers, fathers, husbands and/or other male family members were part of the East Timorese resistance.

Female survivors spoke of experiences of physical violence, exile, losing family members who were killed or died of starvation, and being tortured. Forms of torture included being interrogated with threats and violence (being hit, kicked, slapped, pounded with the butt of a riffle), burnt with cigarettes and matches, shocked with electricity, forced into a 44-gallon drum, and having their hair pulled out. For female victims, torture often included abuses of a sexual nature.

<u>Women victims of detention, torture, and sexual violence</u>
Of the 77 women who participated in the research:

- 38 had been detained, imprisoned or held captive by Indonesian forces and/or East Timorese militia
- 28 had been tortured by Indonesian forces and/or East Timorese militia
- 20 had been victims of sexual violence committed by Indonesian forces and/or East Timorese militia and/or male civilians, including:
    - 13 cases of sexual violation (rape), from which:
        - 3 female victims had children born of rape.
        - 1 case of sexual violence which occurred after the armed conflict ended, committed by a community member against a woman who had been widowed in 1999.

• Violence and violations occurring in the context of relationships with male partners

A total of 13 women said that they had experienced violations of their rights within the context of a relationship with a male partner. There were 6 participants who described violence within their relationship (including physical and verbal abuse, controlling behaviours). Of these, 4 women consequently separated from or were abandoned by their partner, leaving the women with the sole care responsibilities for their children. An additional 7 women also reported being abandoned. ACbit suspects that other participants had likely experienced violence in their relationships, but not voiced it during the research. It is possible that in the Baucau workshops, participants' collective experiences during the armed conflict led them to focus on war-related violence, and not on violence they might have individually experienced within their homes.

Violations in the context of relationships with male partners

- Victims of domestic violence: 2
- Victims of domestic violence and abandonment: 4
- Victims of abandonment: 7

Women who had separated from or been abandoned by their partners spoke about then facing

financial difficulties and social marginalisation, including poor treatment by later male partners.

Consequences on the lives of survivors of violence and rights violations

• Economic vulnerability

The Resource of Life activity as part of the PAR (2018).

Often women's past experiences of violence and rights violations had multiple, enduring negative consequences and forced them into even more vulnerable living conditions.

Most participants spoke of having lost everything during the armed conflict in Timor- Leste and particularly the violence in 1999: their houses were burnt down and they lost their animals and other belongings. In this research we identified survivors who are still living with extreme economic vulnerability, for example in poor condition housing with no water, sanitation or electricity, not the owner of their own house or land, and difficulties making a living.

> ‘The government doesn’t take care of us; we’re in God’s hands. People from the government are always coming here, but it’s all talk. They say they’re going to come and connect the water supply to each house, build houses, bathrooms, make roads, connect the electricity, but they haven’t done any of the things that they promised’ (Victim of torture, Baucau).

Many of the women living in poverty had limited ability to generate more income, constrained by various factors that are outside of their control.

Examples of constraints on female survivors’ ability to generate income:

- Poor infrastructure (roads, public transport, markets) in the area where they live.
- Health conditions and disability, including consequences of past violence.
- Care responsibilities for children, grandchildren, or family members with disabilities.
- Low levels of education and illiteracy.
- Possessing few assets, savings or skills required for business activities.

• Limited opportunities for education

Survivors spoke about limits to their (and sometimes their children’s) opportunity to gain an education, because schools had not been accessible, the war interrupted their education, or their family prioritised the education of sons and not daughters.

> ‘After my father died it was really difficult for me. I had to work hard so that I could take care of my mother and my younger siblings. One of my younger brothers is still studying at university’ (Victim of violence in 1999, Oecusse).

The economic disadvantage of mothers is sometimes inherited by their children, and several survivors spoke of financial difficulty putting their children through school.

Many women said they face difficulties trying to get ahead financially because demands are constantly placed on them to contribute their scarce resources for cultural exchanges (*halo lia, fetosaan-umane*), meaning for instance that they’re unable to sell animals they’d been raising to make money for paying for other needs, including their children’s schooling.

> ‘I farm, raise animals, like pigs and chickens. But they’re always coming and telling us to kill them [for cultural events+ so the animals don’t last for long’ (Victim of torture, Baucau).

Survivors often expressed concern about their children’s futures and work hard to meet their needs. Sometimes though, children can add to their mother’s suffering. A widow in Oecusse spoke of the lengths she’d gone to in order to cover the costs of her son’s university education in Dili, borrowing money from someone in her community when she lacked other options. Her son had since finished university and wasn’t working, but the person she’d borrowed from was demanding she repay the loan. Stressed and looking for help, the survivor turned to her son:

'… my son's reply was "I finished uni and there's no work, but what matters is that I'll still be able to afford the eight planks of wood for your coffin". Hearing those wordfrom him broke my heart' (Victim widowed by the war, Oecusse.

• Difficulties faced by widowed/separated women

Survivor Angelina Ximenes Soares doing cooking in Baucau (2018).

The difficulties of supporting oneself and one's family are amplified for female survivors who don't have a male partner: widows, those who never married, and those whose partner had left them. Women in these positions spoke of worrying about money, aches and pains from hard labour, and feeling their dignity is degraded.

'For us as women, of course it's humiliating doing the heavy work in front of people, because women have their role and men have theirs. But women's work and men's work: I do it all' (Victim of domestic violence and abandonment, Covalima).

• Conflict over land

Family or community level conflict over the land they lived or farmed on was reported by 6 of the survivors. Conflict related to land can create instability and make the victims feel that they are still not free from violence.

6 participants reported conflict over land within family or community.
Of these 6 women, 3 were victims of sexual violence.

Women survivors described various health problems and pains in their bodies, some of which were linked to the laborious tasks they carried out at home, in gardens and carrying heavy loads to markets, as well as their advancing age.

> '… in the future I want to be able to just sit and rest, because I'm old already' (Victim of the war, Baucau).

The consequences of violence and rights violations had also left a mark on women's bodies and health status.

Examples of the ongoing physical impacts of violence during the armed conflict:

- Female survivor in Baucau with hearing problems and paralysis in her arm/hand.

-Two female survivors in Covalima with pain/scars/limited movement due to being shot/attacked by machete during the Suai Church Massacre.

-Lower abdomen pain experienced by a female survivor in Bacuau who had been a victim of detention, torture and sexual violence, and who in a separate incident (when pregnant) was beaten until she fell into a gutter, injuring her abdomen and causing her to have a miscarriage.

The survivor with abdominal pain did not know why this was still ongoing, because (like numerous other survivors) she had not yet been to a formal health service for a medical consult about her condition.

Four women participating in the research mentioned taking care of a family member with a disability, which added to the pressures they are facing.

- **Women survivors describe various health problem**

Impacts on emotions, memories and thoughts (mental health and psychological

The survivors described various ways the abuses and violations that they had experienced had impacted their emotions and thoughts, and left them with painful memories (mental/psychological impacts).

Impacts of violations on survivors' feelings, memories and thoughts included reports of:

- Frequently crying or constantly feeling sad.

- When remembering what had happened, feeling distress, sadness and grief.

- Thinking too much about the past or worrying about the present/future.

- Headaches.

- When remembering violence, feeling pain in the parts of the body that were affected (for example breasts, having had them shocked with live electrical wires as a form of torture).

- Trying to avoid triggers that remind them of their past experiences.

- A woman in Baucau said she feels sometimes it would have been better to have died than to have lived.

- A victim of rape and who had violence committed against her while pregnant reported that after she gave birth she 'went mad' ('*sai bulak*'), because she was thinking of what the militia had done to her.

These problems can sometimes exclude survivors from living a normal life.

In the body mapping exercise, women marked as sites of pain and suffering their chests (*laran moras*) and hearts (*fuan moras*/*fuan kanek*), and heads (*ulun moras*). These idioms express sadness, grief, distress and agony, feelings of being overwhelmed, which the survivors said they felt when they remember the bad things that had happened to them in the past.

Such pain was described by:

- 57 out of 73 participants in total who completed the Body Mapping exercise.
- 29 out of 31 participants who were survivors of torture or sexual violence.

• Victims are vulnerable to being re-victimised

Having already been victims of violations or violence, some women then became vulnerable to being re-victimised by their families or communities. A participant in Oecusse who'd been widowed in 1999 was later targeted by a man in her community, who, knowing there was no man living there to protect her, entered her house at night and committed sexual violence against her. Other victims of sexual violence reported later experiences including being denied economic assets, not permitted to return to their homes, and being physically and verbally abused by their male partner and/or his family.

In Covalima, a survivor of sexual violence and torture in 1999 faces ongoing pressure on daily basis from within her own home. The man who perpetrated sexual violence against her has not been punished and is living freely within her community. His presence provokes the victim's husband, who takes it out on the victim, bringing up the past, blaming, insulting and abusing her.

Victims of sexual violence, and also women who had been abandoned by their partners, spoke of being on the receiving end of victim-blaming and stigmatisation in their communities. Insults and rumours made them feel ashamed, sad, and not yet free from violence.

- **Feeling alone, diminished dignity, and low feelings of self-worth**

Survivor Joana Cabral and her house in Baucau (2018).

Survivors sometimes blamed themselves for what had happened to them, even though they were the victims of other people's actions.

> '… since then I've worried a lot because I've faced some problems. Like, I've heard what people have been saying and that's made me worry, thinking am I a bad person? Or what am I missing that made him do this to me?' (Victim of abandonment, Oecusse).

Most participants in the research said that they normally don't talk to people about the violations that they had faced. Some survivors had been keeping their suffering inside them for a very long time. The pain of telling their stories might be what stops women from speaking, or they may feel ashamed or be afraid they might be treated badly in response (as has indeed happened to some victims).

But sometimes the reason why survivors are silent about what happened to them and the suffering that they are going through is because they feel there is no-one to listen to them. Many victims from the armed conflict said that over all these years nobody had asked their stories, or had gone to their homes to speak with them and listen to their suffering.

> 'I've never told my story to anyone, because who am I going to tell?' (Victim of the war, Baucau).

The lack of attention and acknowledgement was associated with feelings of having not been recognised and feeling diminished dignity.

Survivors access to services and social assistance

• Limited access to health services

While carrying out this research, ACbit found survivors with debilitating health conditions including tuberculosis, a neck lesion, a tumour in the stomach, and difficulties walking. Women used both traditional and modern medicines, but faced many barriers to accessing formal health services.

Table: Barriers survivors face to receiving healthcare from the formal health sector

Survivors live far from Health Posts, don't have their own means of transport or money for public transport, and/or would need to walk because roads don't exist or are in such poor condition. This was particularly a problem for survivors in the areas of Laisorulai de Baixo and Abo, Baucau.
For specialist diagnosis and treatment, survivors would need to travel to Dili.
Health conditions prevent the survivor from leaving the home.
Health workers don't attend the Health Post every day (Suku Abo).
Some survivors are not comfortable to speak about sensitive women's health problems or their past experiences, especially if the person attending to them is a man.
Injuries occurred, or illnesses began, a long time ago and have gone untreated.

Of all the survivors who participated in this research, two mentioned accessing any services to lighten the mental and emotional burdens of the violations they had suffered. One had received counselling through FOKUPERS and ACbit, and the other had been provided support by a priest.

• Limited access to justice

Only 16 of the 77 participants in this research mentioned accessing in any way a justice mechanism for the violations and violence they'd experienced.

- *Table: Justice mechanisms accessed by victims*

	Participants
Gave evidence to CAVR	4
Tried to resolve the problem just through the families of the victim and the perpetrator	1
Cultural methods of conflict resolution and justice (*adat*, *kultura*, *lisan*) between families of the victim and the perpetrator	4
Made a formal complaint about the male partner to the Public Prosecutor's Office (process ongoing)	4
Court resolution achieved for problem with male partner	3
Did not mention accessing any mechanism of justice for the violations experienced	61
Total	*77*

Access to justice was extremely limited for victims of the armed conflict; just 4 women in total had participated in any of the transitional justice mechanisms implemented after the Indonesian occupation ended. These 4 women had provided their testimony to truth seeking processes. Not a single participant in this research attained criminal justice for the crimes against humanity (including torture and sexual violence) that they had been victims of between 1975 to 1999. None of the women reported participating in CAVR's reception and reconciliation programs with perpetrators of less serious crimes committed in 1999.

> It still hurts me because I was raped, and the information all went to the tribunal, but the man who did it is still free to this day. It's been 18 years but he hasn't been delivered a suspended sentence from the court or sent to prison, so when I think back to what happened back then, it's agony [*fuan kanek*]' (Victim of sexual violence, Covalima).

Some victims of crime against humanity said that they want the perpetrators to face justice, and more commonly this desire was expressed by women discussing cases with East Timorese perpetrators of violence, particularly if they still lived in or had returned to the victim's community.

Usually, however, when survivors spoke about justice (or injustice), what their attention was focused on now was the lack of recognition from the government for the violations that they had faced, and the lack of reparation for the suffering that these violations hadcaused them.

With regards to participants who'd experienced violations in the context of their relationships with a male partner, 7 had made formal legal complaints, but at the time of the research only 2 had received outcomes that they were satisfied with. An additional 3 women had used just customary conflict resolution and justice processes (*kultura*/*adat*/*lisan*), and they too expressed dissatisfaction. Many women had limited awareness of national laws and the formal justice process.

> 'His family wanted to [meet with my family to resolve the problem culturally], but he's the one who didn't want to. He just wanted sex but he doesn't want to take responsibility for the child' (Victim of abandonment, Oecusse).

Whether the pathway to justice they used was customary or formal, women faced challenges including:

- People listening to and believing the male partner more than the female victim;
- The male partner didn't obey the orders received from the justice process;
- Economic burdens:
  - Repeated travel to and from court;
  - Long waits for court outcomes without financial assistance to take care of their children;
  - Compensation paid by men through customary processes going to the victim's family, and not directly to her.

• Limited access to social assistance

Some participants in the research were beneficiaries of the government's social assistance programs, and/or have received assistance from NGOs or other groups. However other female survivors had little awareness of and/or limited access to social assistance, particularly women living in isolated areas and/or who were not literate.

- *Table: Social welfare and support accessed by survivors*

	Number of survivors
Parenting payment (Bolsa da Mãe/Bolsa da Família)	14
Aged pension (Terseira Idade/Idozus)	12
Emergency aid from Ministry of Social Solidarity (after a natural disaster destroyed their housing)	1
Adult child with disability received assistance from Ministry of Social Solidarity	1
Support from ACbit	5
Support from another non-government organisation (NGO)	7
Combatant's pension (4a7) – one-off payment	10
Combatant's pension (8a14) – monthly pension	3

Combatant's pension (type not stated)	2
Decorated with a medal for contribution to the national resistance	2
Husband received Combatant's pension	8
Combatant's pension – Martyred husband	5
Combatant's pension – Martyred family member (father/brother)	5
Submitted application documents for a Combatant's pension (for self or deceased family member) to MSS/Komisaun Omenajen, but still awaiting a result	16
Received money from CAVR after giving testimony	2
Received one-off assistance to respond to emergency needs of the family in 1999	5
Have not yet accessed any social welfare program or assistance	20

NB: Some participants have accessed multiple forms of assistance.

One quarter of all participants (n: 25/77) had not yet accessed any social support from the government or civil society in the years since Timor-Leste's independence. This is despite some of the women fitting the eligibility criteria for welfare payments from the state.

Female survivors don't know about and/or aren't accessing social welfare programs. For example, the Aged Pension (Terseira Idade) is available to people above 60 years of age:
- Survivors participating who were aged above 60: 30
- Survivors participating who were receiving the Aged Pension: 12

While grateful for the social assistance they receive from the government, some beneficiaries reported that it did not provide them with enough support, especially if they had many children and/or were single.

> 'Three of my *six+ children receive Bolsa da Família, so I receive US$180 a year. I'm supporting my six children on my own, so I feel weighed down' (Victim of domestic violence and abandonment, Oecusse).

Many of the survivors who were victims during the armed conflict had formed families before or during the Indonesian military occupation, and so today their children are adults and no longer meet the criteria for Bolsa da Família. Nevertheless, some survivors use their welfare payments (Terseira Idade, Kombatente) or other income to support their adult children and contribute to their families.

Government and civil society support and services are still not reaching the most isolated areas.

Participants who mentioned receiving support from an NGO: 9

Of those, 6 were from Suai, 1 was from Oecusse, and 2 were from Baucau (where a total of 47 women participated in the research).

Women survivors' access to the Kombatente de Libertasaun Nasionál (Combatants of National Liberation)

Women's resistace and recognition as Combatants of National Liberation

Survivors spoke of making varied contributions and sacrifices during Timor-Leste's independence struggle, but most felt these were yet to have been dignified.

48 survivors reported making some contribution (carrying messages; in cooperatives; as OPMT; weaving tais and baskets for the troops; cooking and giving food and other items to members of family in the jungle, etc.) to the resistance struggle against Indonesian occupation.

- Of these women, just 15 survivors have received recognition as Combatants of the National Liberation.

--Of these beneficiaries:

---10 survivors received a one-off payment (4a7)

--- 3 survivors receive a monthly pension (8a14)

--- (2 survivors didn't say which category of payment they had received)

The criteria of the Kombatente de Libertasaun Nasionál (Combatants of National Liberation) program insufficiently accounts for how women participated in the national resistance, in that women's participation was generally familial and secret (just their husband or other family members would know). As such it is difficult for women to provide the evidence that the Commission requires for proof of contribution and years of service.

Women's contributions and sacrifices sometimes occurred within a short period of time, but with long-lasting consequences on their lives, for example women who were captured and made victims of torture and sexual violence.

To the Ministry responsible:

Take care of my health, and for my children to receive scholarships, like veterans' children can. Because in the past both women and men fought for this country.

Victim of the war, Baucau.

Some survivors who have received payments through the Combatants scheme expressed dissatisfaction, particularly those women who had been granted a one-off payment (4a7 *prestasaun únika*), which can be quickly spent on family necessities. The lack of ongoing support makes women feel that the truth of their stories, sacrifices and suffering are not yet being recognised and valued.

> '… I often feel unbelievable heartache, because I was tortured so much, but I'm still not recognised by the state today. I haven't received a pension yet from the government' (Victim of torture and sexual violence, Baucau; beneficiary of 4a7 one-off payment for Combatants of National Liberation).

• Recognition for martyred husbands and family members

Families have denied some female survivors their right to be the recipient of martyr's payments for their deceased husband, father or brother, even though the survivor themselves may have been victimised during the war because of this same deceased husband, father or brother.

14 survivors' husbands* were killed during the war
- 5 survivors have received a Martyrs payment for their husband's death

35 survivors had a member of their family* killed during the war
- 5 survivors have received a Martyr's payment for a family member's death

*The deceased husbands and family members include armed combatants, other members of the resistance, and civilians.

Overall 7 women mentioned that someone else in their family is the recipient of the martyr's payment for their deceased husband/father/brother; in all 7 cases the person to receive the martyr's payment was a male relative.

3 participants reported that their family is fighting over the martyr's payment for a deceased husband/family member.

Of these 3 survivors, 2 had been victims of sexual violence.

In Oecusse 4 women had been lied to and exploited by veterans, who came to their community in 2003 and made the women pay to submit the documents to register each of their deceased family members as martyrs. These men took advantage of the women's limited understanding of the registration process. The women should not have needed to pay, and at the time of this research the women had still not received any martyr's payment.

• Survivors are waiting for recognition of their sacrifices and suffering during the war

In addition to East Timorese women's own decisions to take part in the resistance to the Indonesian military occupation, whether they wanted to or not women were made a part of the war for independence. Women victims were targets of the wills and violence of soldiers and militia. Enemy forces assaulted East Timorese women's bodies and their dignity, seeking to demoralise the national resistance and intimidate the population.

> 'In 75 *… an Indonesian soldier+ said to me "Your husband is in the jungle. I'll kick you until you piss yourself. That's what we can do to you, you'll completely wet yourself". Then they sent me to the Koramil *military command+ and detained me there for 6 days and 6 nights' (Victim of torture, Baucau).

Women took part in the national liberation as subjects of various violations that the armed forces inflicted on them, and through the sacrifices that people forced them to make.

'That night I was raped *…+ If we didn't submit to them, then they'd take us to Lacudala and kill us (Victim of sexual violence, Baucau).

'… my mother had to have sex with an Indonesian soldier because they were going to kill our family' (Victim of violence in 1999, Covalima).

In the national story and in government policy, everyday civilian sacrifices have not received the same attention as what has been given to those who took up weapons to fight, or fought on the international diplomatic front. Some participants in this research complained of the injustice of there not yet being a government program to dignify the civilians who through no fault or desire of their own became victims of the war.

To President Lu Olo and Prime Minister Tau Matan Ruak:

I'm getting older by the day, and some of my children didn't get a chance to study because I couldn't support them. I ask the Government, or an NGO, to look out for me and my children (who didn't continue their schooling), and to look after my health. I ask the Government to not forget to take care of us victims, who suffered so much for this country.

Victim of the war, Baucau.

• Women survivors' own strengths

Notwithstanding the various challenges they face along the way, women survivors draw on their own sources of strength to move forward from their painful experiences. They make every effort they can to take care of their families, and some survivors have managed to rebuild their economic resources.

The importance of family to survivors was a theme that repeated again and again in the research, testament to how families give value to and can enhance the quality of female survivors' lives. Women spoke of the strength and protection that their faith in maromak (god), their ancestors (matebian), and the natural world (natureza) had bestowed upon them during the war. They attributed their survival and ability to withstand intense pressures to these sources, and their faith is of great importance to them to this day.

Some of the participants in the research were members of victims' or survivors' groups, or were involved in activities to accompany and support other victims. Group activities like ACbit's help provide women survivors with some relief, reduce their feelings of isolation, and give value their experiences, voices, and contributions.

• Women survivors' vulnerability

Today, women survivors are carrying the burden of multiple vulnerabilities, products of inequalities within society and results of the violations that the women faced during and/or after the armed conflict. Some of the vulnerability factors that women live with are shared more widely within the East Timorese population, while others are not and might demand specific attention.

Vulnerability factors:

- Widowed or single (separated, abandoned, never married)	- Old age
	- Illiteracy
- No source of income	- Limited family support
- Not the owner of your house/land	- Unwell/have health problems
- Don't have children	- Live in a remote location
- Have many children	- Have a disability
- Have a child born of rape	- Victim of sexual violence
- Not receiving social welfare	- Low level of education
- Discriminated against or stigmatised	- Limited access to information about human rights, formal law, and social assistance programs (welfare payments)
- Emotional problems or stress (mental health problems)	

Perhaps if you carried the weight of just one or two of these vulnerabilities, you might more easily live well, feel content, and be able to enjoy Timor-Leste's independence and development. But ACbit frequently encounters female victims who are living with multiple vulnerabilities, which makes it difficult for them to move forward from suffering and injustice.

The violence and violations that female victims face give rise to a combination of challenges in their lives and increases their vulnerability. To understand and address women survivors' vulnerability, it is important to consider multiple factors, their interactions, and how an individual survivor's vulnerability is affected by her family and her community.

• Profile of a vulnerable survivor : Baucau

While carrying out the research in 2018 in the village of Laisorlai de Baixo, two participants spoke of their eldest sister, who had also been a victim during the armed conflict but was unable to come attend the PAR because she was severely ill and could not move from the house. The eldest sister was born with a disability, and she and the youngest sister lived together, as neither had married or had children (the middle sister had formed a family). The youngest sister explained "We were going to adopt someone's child, but how would we be able to feed them?" The pair find it difficult to make an income as it requires the younger sister to walk a long distance to the weekly market carrying the produce from her small garden plot.

During the war, the sisters had been sent to Atauro Island by the Indonesian forces, exiled because their brothers were part of the resistance and fighting in the jungle. Today, their brothers receive veteran's pensions and have their own families. They provide little support to the sisters who had in the past suffered on their behalf. The house the two sisters live in is made of grass, bamboo and palm stalks, with no electricity, no water, and no sanitation.

Neither sister had received any form of social assistance from the government, though the elder sister may have met the criteria for a disability or aged pension. The younger sister is not yet old enough for the aged pension, has no children so won't receive Bolsa da Familia, and her only work is occasionally selling the vegetables she grows or *tais* she weaves, so she does not have a right to the social security scheme for employees in the formal sector.

Earlier this year (2019), the eldest sister died, having never recovered from her illness. The younger sister is now living alone.

• Profile of a vulnerable survivor: Covalima

Thinking back on her childhood, a survivor in Covalima said that though she remembers it being a happy time, she was sad that her parents hadn't given her the opportunity to go to school. In 1975 when the Indonesian military invaded Timor-Leste, she and her husband joined the resistance. When her husband was shot by an Indonesian soldier, she saved his life and nursed him back to health. They spent more than three years in the jungle before being captured by the Indonesian forces while on their way to meet with a commander of the resistance. While detained the woman was tortured and raped.

For a period afterwards, things were okay with her husband. But after she gave birth, he began treating her badly, committing violence against her, and then leaving her. She married a second time and had more children with her second husband before they too separated, having argued over resources, leaving her alone to raise her children.

At the time of the research this survivor was not herself receiving any social assistance from the government, despite being over 60 years of age and having contributed to the national resistance. By growing vegetables and selling them in the market, she was able to make a small income. She was fortunate as her brother had given her land to live and farm on, which she registered in her son's name. But she also spoke of there being tension and conflict about the land. She and her now adult daughter live in a house that is of poor condition (with no sanitation, a thatched roof, palm stalk walls, and offering little security). The daughter has mental health problems and has received some financial support from MSSI.

After finding out about this survivor and her daughter's situation, ACbit tried to link the survivor with the mental health system, so that the daughter might access treatment. Dili-based staff from the public mental health program let ACbit know that the daughter may be able to go to the São João de Deus inpatient facility in Laclubar, Manatutu for three months to commence psychopharmacological treatment.

But the survivor was reluctant about the idea of sending her daughter so far away, as she has no transport of her own or money for public transport to make visits, and it would mean she'd be left alone at home. An additional challenge for the daughter to access care for her mental health problems is that she becomes angry and crazed when men come near to her. Perhaps her mother's experiences as a victim, or maybe experiences of her own, have left her distrustful of men.

- **Discussion: Women's position and participation in society in times of conflict and peace**

Survivors presenting Body Mapping as part of the PAR in Baucau (2018).

This research provides insight into how gender inequality contributed to women's experiences during and following the national struggle for independence. For instance:

- Soldiers and militia targeted East Timorese women during the war, to send messages to members of the armed resistance, intimidate the population, and satisfy the perpetrators' own desires (to feel powerful, sexual satisfaction, etc.).
- Some husbands, families and communities blame female victims who had been sexually assaulted by the armed forces, socially excluding them adding to the women's suffering.
- East Timorese armed combatants were mostly men and many lost their lives, leaving behind widows who had to support themselves without the help and protection of their husbands.
- Husbands' families sometimes denied the widowed woman's right to live on her deceased husband's land or inherit what was his, and some have since prevented women from being the ones to receive martyr's pensions for their deceased husbands.
- The criteria of the Combatants of the National Liberation program excludes widows from applying for martyr's pensions for their deceased husband if they have since remarried, even though their first husband may have died some 40 years ago, and even if the widow raised the deceased's children.
- Families have sometimes used survivors' money (from Combatants' pensions, other welfare payments, or other forms of income) for the purposes of the family or an individual in the family who is not the survivor, with the result that the survivor's health and living conditions continue to be poor, despite having money coming in.

- Timor-Leste's national story focuses on the story of men in the armed resistance. Women in the resistance and the civilian population receive less recognition, for example at national commemorative events or in the social assistance program for Combatants. This gives the

  message that women's experiences—their contributions, their sacrifices, and their suffering—is of less value than men's.

Many women have still not felt improvements in their living conditions, and await reparation for their sacrifices and suffering during the national independence struggle. East Timorese women's position and participation in society is still limited, reducing their opportunities and increasing their vulnerability.

In a workshop analysing the results of this research, one of the survivors condemned the current situation:

> 'Today women have even fewer rights; a woman's only right is to be in the kitchen. But in the past in the jungle the leaders informed us that women and men together would hold hands to fight for independence. But until today us women don't have rights. Why has this happened in Timor?' (Victim of sexual violence and torture, Baucau).

The fight for Timor-Leste's independence has been won. The fight for East Timorese women's independence is far from over. Together we can look for ways to listen to women survivors' voices, value their experiences, and dignify their lives.

• Recommendations

East Timorese government to facilitate women survivors' access to social assistance programs

- Revise existing social assistance programs, and where necessary adapt criteria, increase the value of payments, or create new programs to guarantee that vulnerable female survivors can receive sufficient assistance to live with dignity and social inclusion.
- Revise the criteria of the Combatants of the National Liberation program to recognise that women in the resistance made contributions and sacrifices for national liberation in ways that may have been different to those who carried arms but are of an equal worth.
- Continue discussions about how vulnerability is defined, to recognise that assessing someone's vulnerability cannot stop at the individual, but should also take into account how their family and community situations affect their vulnerability (for instance if family members take advantage of the survivor, or if the survivor lives in a very isolated area).
- Provide resources for increasing awareness and registrations for social assistance

programs, using approaches that are appropriate for reaching vulnerable members of the community who do not have literacy, live in rural areas, or have limited participation in public meetings.

Recommendations to the government, institutions, international agencies, local leaders, and civil society:

Respond to female survivors' economic vulnerability

- Improve infrastructure (particularly roads, public transport, access to markets, and health facilities) in rural areas, giving specific attention to regions that were heavily affected by the past conflict, and so have high number of people with vulnerabilities and needs relating to violations experienced during the war.
- Provide training, materials, funds, and ongoing mentoring for women survivors who would like to improve their capacity for income generation.
- Provide survivors with material and financial assistance (including access to social assistance from the government and for income generation activities), to alleviate the economic pressures that add to their stress and burden their mental health.
- Create scholarships specifically for the children of female survivors, to help them to overcome the economic disadvantage and other factors of vulnerability that their mothers have faced.

Strengthen services providing for female survivors' physical and mental health

- Facilitate health workers to make home visits to survivors who are unable to attend health services, including people who are severely ill or of old age, so that they too can receive health care.
- Prioritise the diagnosis and treatment of health problems arising from past violence or torture, to reduce survivors' suffering and strengthen their ability to support themselves.
- Assist survivors with chronic health conditions and disabilities to be assessed for and access disability assistance from MSSI.
- Continue providing support and financing to organisations that deliver social services (e.g. ACbit, Fokupers) and psychosocial support (e.g. PRADET) for female victims, to listen to and accompany them, and build the women's capacity to trust themselves and others.
- Allocate appropriate funding to community-based mental health care, as recommended in the National Mental Health Strategy (2018-2022). Provide training for staff, transportation, and other resources needed so that treatment, counselling and rehabilitation for female survivors with mental health problems can be delivered in their homes or local community health facility.
- Facilitate provision of services from female health care workers for female survivors, to reduce patients' feelings of embarrassment discussing female health issues, and in

recognition that the vast majority of female victims suffered violations at the hands of men, and so may be distrustful or fearful if services are delivered by male staff.

- Provide training to health care workers about the types of violations experienced by East Timorese women during the past armed conflict, to improve their understanding of female victims' potential needs. This could be incorporated into training about other vulnerable populations, such as gender-based violence or mental health (while recognising the needs of all patients will not be the same).
- Recognise that recovery can be a slow process, particularly for women who endured grave violations and/or have suffered for a long time already. Allocate sufficient resources for women survivors to be accompanied long-term, should they need to be.

Facilitate justice for female survivors

- Implement public awareness raising campaigns about domestic violence laws and parental obligations in the case of separation, as well as processes for making formal complaints if domestic violence or abandonment occurs.
- Increase access to legal and social support services (such as ALFELA, FOKUPERS) for female victims of contemporary violence and rights violations, to support them to access and attain justice.
- Find ways of reducing the burden experienced by female survivors during the slow formal justice process. This could include a database and phone service for informing people who have entered formal proceedings about the progress of their case (so that they do not need to go to the tribunal repeatedly for updates), and financial support for the victims' transportation costs.
- Provide acknowledgement to victims of the past conflict that their cases are recognised as serious crimes.
- Where no formal legal pathway currently exists to pursue criminal justice for abuses committed during Timor-Leste's armed conflict, to avoid total impunity and the unease and anger this can provoke, support processes of reintegration and reconciliation at a local level (*nahe biti boot*) when East Timorese perpetrators live in/return to the communities where their victims live.
- Contribute to economic and social justice by dedicating resources to a program of social assistance (reparation, rehabilitation) for vulnerable survivors of past conflict, to valorise their sacrifices and suffering and improve their quality of life.

Promote the dignity of female survivors and guarantee their rights

- Socialise national laws about women's rights to be landowners and receive inheritances, (including martyrs' pensions), and to live free from discrimination and exploitation.
- Facilitate repeated discussions with families and local leaders to guarantee that female survivors receive the benefits of social assistance programs (including aged pensions, martyrs' pensions) that they are the beneficiaries of.
- Increase the opportunities available for female victims to participate in group social and/or economic activities, to help reduce their feelings of being alone, and raise their hope and happiness.
- Conduct public education about women's experiences during the armed conflict, to combat misperceptions that lead to victim-blaming and marginalisation of female victims of sexual violence.
- Commemorate dates and sites associated with women's experiences during the past conflict, and invite women survivors to participate in national level commemorative events for historical days. At such events, share both women's and men's stories, so that it is not forgotten that war and violence impact everyone.

• Annex: Actions carried out based on the research findings

Based on the findings of this research, ACbit and the female survivors discussed strategies to meet their needs, including advocacy and linking them with relevant social assistance programs.

Actions that have been carried out so far include:

- Informing participants during the PAR workshops of their rights to access government programs (including Bolsa de Mãe and Terseira Idade) and health treatment.
- Provided basic necessities (soap, laundry powder, rice, oil, etc.) to the most vulnerable victims.
- Accompanied or referred to Health Posts or hospital survivors with illnesses.
- Advised local authorities in Quelicai of the presence of female survivors in their area who were over the age of 60 and not yet accessing their right to the Terseira Idade pension, to encourage them to help these women to register.
- Explained to victims the legal processes for cases of abandonment and domestic violence.
- Helped link survivors with social support from the government and other NGO services (for example legal case support from Alfela).
- Provided survivors with information about the process of registering with the Komisaun Homenajen for combatants' pensions. We recommended to the survivors

in Oecusse to go through the Komisaun Homenajen directly to register, and not wait for people to come to them or go through third parties. We also spoke with members of GMP-TL and Komisaun F- of the National Parliament about this issue.

- To shift community views and combat stigma, women survivors shared their stories in public settings, including at the Suai Church and Otel Flamboyan (now Pousada) in Baucau. As a means of advocacy, we invited representatives of Parliament, the Ministry of Social Solidarity, and the Ministry of Health to attend these activities.
- Discussed with the DNPKK within the Ministry of Interior how to go forwards and reduce the tension arising in one particular case, where a victim is facing ongoing problems with her husband, triggered by fact the man who committed sexual violence against her during the armed conflict is today still free and in their community.
- ACbit advocated about survivors past experiences and current needs to local authorities and the national government.
- Facilitated a trip to Ataúro Island for survivors who had been exiled there during the Indonesian military occupation, so that they could revisit and see the changes at sites of historical significance to them and visit the graves of family members buried on the island that they had not yet been able to return to.
- Provided information about the mental health system and how to access treatment to a survivor in Covalima, who is caring for an adult daughter affected by mental health problems.

• Lessons learnt about the participatory action research (PAR) process

When carrying out PAR activities in an area where community members speak little Tetun, it is important to **have interpreters and use the local mother tongue**. Working through interpreters will require additional time, and sometimes the interpreter does not translate everything, which might create confusion and pose limits to the data you collect.

Often people living in isolated areas have less access to information and opportunities to participate in activities, so it's important to **take information and activities to communities**. Travel in isolated areas can be time consuming and difficult, because of the conditions of the road and weather. Sufficient resources and time need to be allocated.

Particularly in these isolated areas, but also elsewhere, community members don't get many opportunities to participate in activities and access services, so sometimes more participants than planned for come and want to take part. However, it is **better not to do PAR activities with very large groups**, because it doesn't allow each participant a chance to share their stories in detail, and it makes it difficult for facilitators and participants to get to know each other well.

Village offices are well-known locations and are available for the use of community activities

like PAR, but it might be better to look for a more **appropriate location** when carrying out these activities with survivors. The meeting space at village offices are open to the elements, so rain and wind can enter, and participants might worry that they will be seen or heard by people outside. Some village offices no not have toilet facilities, or have them but with no water.

Participants aren't always accustomed to taking part in activities like PAR, and the first time a group discussion is held some don't want to speak. **Go slowly** so that people can get to know and trust each other. We've seen that the second time we return to a community for a PAR workshop, participants who the first time around were silent suddenly start all talking over one another.

Facilitators need to **explain clearly the purposes and processes** of activities, using terms that are easy for participants to understand. If this doesn't happen, participants sometimes misunderstand, have doubts, or don't see the point to the activities. This can make them angry at the facilitators and lose interest in participating in the PAR.

Sometimes participants don't want to speak about certain topics in a group, because they'll get upset, they're ashamed, or they're scared of what the consequences might be. Members of their family (or the perpetrator's family) might also be participating, or live nearby to where the PAR is taking place. Facilitators need to **take care and not force anyone to talk**. They can perhaps try to speak with participants individually in a private space, to check that they're not facing any dangers or threats and make sure they have access to the information and services they need.

Often when survivors think about the past and speak about painful experiences, it brings up unpleasant feelings. Facilitators need to try to **protect survivors' safety**. Establish rules that what's spoken in the workshops can't be passed on to other people. During workshops, include light and enjoyable activities and give free time, so survivors can take a break and think about something else.

All the **instruments can be adapted** to make them more appropriate for the participants. For example, if participants can read and write, it makes it easier to do some of the activities (e.g. Postcards, Livelihood Mapping). If not, it will take more time as the facilitators have to work one-on- one with participants. Some survivors don't like being asked to draw around each other's bodies lying on the ground for the Body Mapping activity, because they're embarrassed or feel it's childish.

Participants reflections about the PAR activities are generally positive: they like and enjoy taking part and are grateful for the opportunity. But they say: 'You can't stop halfway'. It's not enough to just listen. **Survivors need action** to reduce their suffering and improve their living conditions.

WOMEN SURVIVORS' VULNERABILITY

Today, women survivors are carrying the burden of multiple vulnerabilities, products of inequalities within society and results of the violations that the women faced during and/or after the armed conflict. To understand and address women survivors' vulnerability, it is important to consider multiple factors, their interactions, and how an individual survivor's vulnerability is affected by her family and her community.

Perhaps if you carried the weight of just one or two of these vulnerabilities, you might live well, feel content, and enjoy this era of Timor-Leste's independence and development. But ACbit frequently encounters female victims who are living with multiple vulnerabilities, which makes it difficult for them to move forward from their suffering and injustice.

ACbit hopes that with the key recommendations from the PAR (2019) government and civil society will start a discussion to think of ways to improve the systems in place, or to create new ones, to better support the women survivors and victims of the past and present.

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