

Her Excellency

Kirsty Sword Gusmão

First Lady of Timor Leste

Speech

**UNIFEM INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S DAY (IWD)
ADELAIDE-BREAKFAST EVENT**

8th March 2006

Happy International Women's Day to all you wonderful women and men, who have come out so early to join us at this UNIFEM International Women's Day (IWD) breakfast event, to celebrate women's achievements, and to reflect on the challenges that are yet before us.

Her Excellency, The Governor of South Australia,
Majorie Jackson-Nelson
Premier Mike Rann, Premier of South Australia
Honourable the Senator Penny Wong, today's host
Honourable Michelle Lensink MLC, Shadow Minister Status of Women, representing the Honourable Rob Kerin, Opposition Leader
Honourable Stephanie Key, Minister for the Status of Women
Sandra Kanck, Leader of the Australian Democrats
Lord Mayor Michael Harbison, Adelaide City Council
Professor Denise Bradley, Vice Chancellor, University of South Australia
Professor Ann Edwards, Flinders University
Honourable Dr. Rosemary Crowley, Chair UNIFEM Adelaide Breakfast Committee
Presenter, Deb Tribe, and
Aunty Josie Agius for your welcome to country

I want to thank the Adelaide UNIFEM Committee, and the University of South Australia, who are responsible for affording me the privilege to represent my country of Timor-Leste at this auspicious event, the largest in Australia, I am told with some well deserved pride.

Thank you Rosemary, for caring and for maintaining your long commitment to UNIFEM. The effort you put into UNIFEM, does make a difference to the lives of women in our region.

The tales of ordinary women doing extraordinary work continues to inspire me. That is how I see my role as First Lady in Timor-Leste. An ordinary woman catapulted into an extraordinary role.

My life is one very much determined by my experience of being a woman, a mother, and of being looked to as the mother of a nation. My role is very much defined by my relationships, as are other women's, but it is slowly being redefined by my actions, our collective actions.

UNIFEM in Timor-Leste is bringing concrete benefits to women, through its work in Parliament, in local government and in the handicraft industry.

It is no coincidence that the key concerns of UNIFEM Timor-Leste, those of women's education, participation and economic empowerment, are the same issues being addressed by my organization, the Alola Foundation.

We are proud to have as an Alola Board member, UNIFEM Country Director Ms. Milena Pires.

Becoming the first First Lady of the world's newest nation has necessitated dramatic learning curves for me personally, the rapid acquisition of skills I never imagined I would require – included amongst them public speaking – and a great deal of humility.

For example, I am very humbled by the fact that a world organization such as UNIFEM would even consider me as a worthy person to make this presentation to you on behalf of the nation of Timor-Leste and its women. But because I

have embraced this country I now call home and feel passionately about the needs of the women I share my daily life with, I feel able to rise to the challenge, and I hope that in speaking to you today I may be able to convey a little of what my life is and what it means to be considered the mother of a small but extremely needy infant nation.

The focus of this year's International Women's Day is women in decision making. I have to ask isn't that what all women do every day? But if honing in on the question this year means that those with most power are going to work to ensure women's equity in decision making at public level, then I am all for it.

I have a very public position as First Lady, but no public power, no public recognition, no public budget, no public office. I am put under pressure to make decisions but in the absence of authority or power.

Every day I have to make decisions, some of them weighty, some more mundane. I decide, what my kids (three boys 5, 3 and 16 months) will eat, wear, the logistics of preschool, school, medical appointments, vaccinations, repeated applications of mosquito repellent to keep malaria and dengue fever at bay, decisions as Chairwoman of ALOLA, about staff, human resources, programmes, fund raising, how to respond to hungry women and their children, how to entertain visiting heads of state and their spouses, what issues to speak out on and what to stay silent on.

Most of you also make these sorts of decisions in your daily lives. We women are eminently qualified to be decision-makers, we just need more opportunities to do so in the public arena.

I want to pause here to pay tribute to Ms. Ethel Sigimanu Permanent Secretary of the Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace, Solomon Islands, an Australian UNIFEM International Women's Day (IWD) 2005 guest speaker, who made the point so clearly regarding women as decision makers, receiving no recognition. She said that women in her country succeeded where peace conference after peace conference failed and that their contribution to peace clearly demonstrates that they do not have a subservient role, that they have a key role in public decision making.

I wish I could have heard her.

I will now share some of our political, social and economic achievements in Timor-Leste, as it is after all a day of celebration, a day to show off, and before I do, I would like to recognise Mr. Premier, some facts about your achievements, that I find impressive.

I read that your Government has 41.4% female representation, the highest of all the States and Territories and that you have passed legislation that mandates that women and men have to be considered for all Government Boards and Committees and that you have achieved 40% female representation. This is impressive, but in keeping with the South Australian tradition of being progressive regarding women and their rights, having the right to vote and stand for public office, before Federation.

We in Timor-Leste, acceded to CEDAW & its Optional Protocol in Dec 2002, seven months after formally gaining

our independence and only two months after becoming the newest member of the United Nations.

In 2001 in our first ever Constituent Assembly election, 22 of the 88 members elected were women (the highest female representation in the Asia-Pacific region). 25% of our civil servants are women. We have a quota set for women in our local government (suco) elections guaranteeing at least 3 seats for women. I pay tribute to the Senior Minister for State Administration, Ms. Ana Pessoa for her role in this. We have a specific domestic violence bill soon to become law - it has been the subject of widespread consultation. We have public peace, not to be taken lightly after decades of political violence. We have a National Women's Day, celebrated in November each year. We also celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) in Timor-Leste. We have schools open across the country, and health services being rolled out. All this since May 20, 2002. It is a great effort and we should pat ourselves on the back. We not only had to rebuild a nation from scratch, with the majority of infrastructure destroyed both physically and institutionally, but remarkably we have been able to make these advances for women.

These are the achievements we like to hold up and they are indeed significant, and worthy of praise. However they must be set against the reality of women's lives in Timor-Leste.

Here are some of the rather stark and disturbing statistics. 28% of women suffer from malnutrition, with 7% of these requiring medical treatment. According to a 2003 International Rescue Committee survey, 51% of women feel unsafe in their relationships. 25% had experienced violence from their male partner. We have one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world and the highest

fertility rate in the world - women have an average of eight children. Only 7% of women in marriages or permanent relationships use contraception. 53% of women are illiterate. 1 in 12 children do not reach their fifth birthday. Our nation is one of the world's poorest; 40% of people live on 0.55 cents per day. 1% of Timorese men do some housework.

Despite the high percentage of women in national parliament, our women parliamentarians have expressed their discomfort in that they feel unable to make good and informed decisions, due to a lack of public resources and public experience. Their ability to be effective is at times impeded by the lack of family support and the cultural attitudes that prevail against women.

I am talking about the harsh reality of women's lives and I will now give a recent and alarming example of how women had their rights bartered in exchange for public peace.

You might recall that in early 2005, a series of demonstrations on the issue of religious education in schools were instigated by the Church in Timor-Leste. After weeks of public protests, the government came under intense pressure to end the demonstrations and to meet the demands of the protestors who were insisting upon religious education being made compulsory in the national curriculum. As a result, the government signed a "Joint Declaration" with church leaders in which it was agreed that religious education would become "a regular discipline in the curriculum". In addition, it agreed to outlawing the practice of voluntary abortion and prostitution in the nation's penal code. The issues of prostitution and abortion had at no time featured as an issue in the course of the Church protests.

The most shocking part of this tale is that it didn't occur to many women that they had the right to challenge such action on the part of our male leaders. In response, the Alola Foundation facilitated a series of three public fora on the issues of abortion and prostitution, involving representatives of civil society organizations, women's groups, international agencies, the Church and government. Our objective was to promote dialogue on these sensitive issues and to encourage women to form an opinion on what legislation best served their interests.

Just as I and other women in Timor-Leste brought the matter of abortion and prostitution onto the public agenda, I note with satisfaction that the women MPs in the Australian Federal Parliament, joined forces across party lines, to advance the rights of women on the RU486 debate.

Well done.

I want to share another experience with you; one which demonstrates just how hard women's lives are in Timor-Leste.

Last year I together with the Australian, British, Filipino and Irish Ambassadors (all women) organised an IWD event in Dili. We decided to pay tribute to an "ordinary" East Timorese woman who, in her struggle to survive and her vital role in sustaining the life of her family and community, represents the vast majority of East Timorese women. We chose a member of one of our National Breastfeeding Association's Mother Support Groups who resides in Bebonuk, West Dili. Her name is Helena Pereira Maia – a woman whose infectious smile belies the unimaginable hardship of her daily life. She is a widow and mother of five

children. She earns between \$US 1.50 and 2.00 per day from her sewing. When we interviewed Helena about her life with a view to preparing an audio-visual presentation, I had in mind that Helena might make some insightful comments on the status of women in Timor-Leste society. Instead, what Helena had to say was that she didn't dare to dream or hope for too much and that she only wished to be able to feed, clothe and educate her children.

One of the things that I learned about Helena was that she gave birth to all her babies, five of them, at home. She lives in Dili and she told me that she did not have transport to get to the Hospital and could not afford a taxi. At around the same time the Director of Dili National Hospital came to see me, seeking help. His voice was filled with sadness as he told me that an increasingly large number of rural women are being admitted into the hospital to give birth with, not only not a single item of clothing for their newborns, but without cloth to wrap their babies, nor a chance of clothes for themselves. He explained that the hospital was running out of sheets for the beds since, desperate to help these new mums, the staff of the hospital were ripping up the hospital bed linen to make simple wraps for the new bubs. When he told me, too, that many new mothers, for lack of sanitary napkins and even underwear in some cases, often leave the hospital dripping blood, I made my mind up there and then that the Aloia Foundation would start raising money to put together maternity packs to distribute through the Dili and Baucau hospitals. Since only 10% of East Timorese women give birth in a health facility, in addition to allowing mothers to give birth safely and with dignity, the packs were intended to encourage more women to give birth at hospital.

Thus the Alola Foundation's Maternity Packs Project was born. Between November 2005 and February 2006, the Alola Foundation raised over \$80,000 in support of this project. We formally launched the project on Monday last week at Dili National Hospital. The first woman to receive the maternity pack was Filomena da Costa, and she proudly showed me her newborn baby girl, yet to be named. Babies in many developing countries are often unnamed until 1 or even 6 weeks after birth, reflecting a sense of fatalism and cultural acceptance of high mortality.

So these are our achievements and realities that very much mark out for the women of Timor-Leste our key challenges, and those facing women in developing countries everywhere. They are education and economic empowerment. These alone will transform women's lives. As the education and economic status of women increase so to do health outcomes, life expectancy, and much, much more.

I note that the Rann Government in its list of achievements on women, recognises the fundamental importance of facilitating access to education and the economic empowerment of women.

UNIFEM is at the forefront in taking up this struggle and in modern media language, it is not a sexy struggle. This is about to change, with UNIFEM scoring Nicole Kidman as an Ambassador. In Nicole's words it was her Mum that told her of UNIFEM's great work that inspired her to join them. It is my Mum who also inspires and supports me. Last Wednesday, she flew from her home in Melbourne to Dili, to look after my boys, so that I could undertake this visit. Thanks, Mum.

I also encourage you to read this month's Women's Weekly, that carries a nice piece about my life in Timor-Leste, promoting Timor-Leste at the same time. The article carries a photo of Nicole as well and it is not the first time that we have featured in the Women's Weekly together. I have written to invite her to Timor-Leste, and see that she plans to visit South East Asia, in her UNIFEM Ambassadorial role. Perhaps you can help me to get her to come to Timor-Leste.

Before I conclude, I want to share with you the words of Ms. Ita Fatia, a long standing Indonesian human rights activist, who stood in solidarity with Timorese women, long before it was fashionable and politically acceptable to do so. They were said in testimony she gave before a CAVR hearing on the issues of women, justice and reconciliation.

It is her poem that I want to leave you with. It is simple, yet poignant and it expresses the solidarity of women, across national boundaries, and in Timor-Leste and Indonesia's case, is made even more poignant and powerful, given our history.

Your tears are my tears, Your cries are my cries, Your suffering is my suffering, and Your struggle is my struggle, We are together as one because we are women

Thank you.

Present tais (Rosemary Crowley, Penny Wong, Mayor and Governor).