



Kirsty's journey from middle-class Melbourne to a palace of ashes

The Canberra Times
November 10, 2002

From Rachel Boddy in East Timor

WHEN you're First Lady of the poorest country in Asia, there's no room for pearl necklaces or champagne suppers. So says Kirsty Sword-Gusmao, the Australian-born wife of East Timor's new president Xanana Gusmao, pictured left with her family. Despite the entourage of security staff that accompany her to our meeting in a small cafe in Dili, the country's capital, the former underground resistance worker is much more like the girl next door. The pretty 36-year-old blushes when asked what she would like to drink: 'I'm so sorry, I've left my wallet at home.' After some placating, she allows me to pay for a can of coke and then proceeds to sit down and breastfeed 10-week-old son, Kay Olok.

It is this sort of unaffected charm that made her the perfect undercover agent for Gusmao in the guerrilla fight for Timor's independence. Code-named Ruby Blade, the Indonesian studies graduate translated papers for Gusmao and smuggled information for the resistance movement.

The role blossomed into a letter-writing romance with Gusmao when he was jailed for life in Jakarta in 1993. The pair married in Dili in 2000, a year after Gusmao was freed after the fall of Indonesia's Suharto government. Five months on from East Timor's independence celebrations, Sword-Gusmao is still coming to terms with the amazing turn of events that have transformed her from a middle-class Melburnian to the First Lady of a fledgling third world nation.

'I went from being the partner of someone who was serving a 20-year sentence and wondering if we were ever going to be able to spend any time together in freedom, to being in a situation where I am today,' she says. 'Suddenly I am surrounded by bodyguards and my whole life is pretty much consumed by my public role.' The sudden transition is not without a twinge of regret. 'It's not something I particularly like or would aspire to.

'But it comes with opportunities too, to make use of the authority and the connections you have to be able to do something for the country.' Despite not

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having any official funding for the office of First Lady, Sword-Gusmao is patron of a host of community groups and president of anti gender-based violence group, Alola Foundation. She is planning a fundraising trip to Australia next month, a visit that will also give her a chance to escape the notoriety of being a president's wife for a while. 'I'll be able to jump into my mum's car and go down to Woolies to do some shopping without anyone recognising me,' she says with a smile. Sword-Gusmao is the President's second wife and 20 years his junior. The pair have two sons, Kay and his two-year-old brother Alexandre.

The President still likes to take time out for normal tasks like bathing the baby at night and often rises early in the morning to take the children for a walk while Sword-Gusmao catches a bit more sleep. They have a good relationship with Gusmao's two adult children from his previous marriage. His son Nito, 30, lives with them in their Dili hillside property, while daughter Zeni, 27, is a regular visitor. Not surprisingly, Sword-Gusmao side-steps any questions about Gusmao's former wife, Emilia, who now lives in Australia. The couple married young - Emilia was 21, Gusmao, 23 - but their marital bliss was short-lived. They were separated in November 1975, a week before the Indonesians overran East Timor and Gusmao went into hiding in the mountains. As the wife of the most wanted man in South-East Asia, Emilia endured years of interrogation and virtual house arrest. She was shunned by countrymen and women too terrified to be seen even smiling at her.

She was forced to live with her inquisitors, and gave birth to one of their children.

Sword-Gusmao was a nine-year-old schoolgirl at the time of the Indonesian invasion. She first went to East Timor in 1991 as a researcher and translator for the English documentary Cold Blood, covering Portuguese parliamentary delegation that was preparing an independence referendum in 1991. The documentary team would leave a hair over the door handle of their hotel room to check whether Indonesian spies had entered while they were away. 'You really had no choice.

'They were part of the furniture.' Despite her activist background, Sword-Gusmao sympathises with the Indonesian perspective. She majored in Indonesian studies at university and became enchanted by Bali on her first visit in the 1980s. 'The knowledge I have of Indonesia as a country and as a people has helped me understand the complexity of some of the problems East Timor is facing today, the legacies of the Indonesian occupation like corruption, collusion, autocratic teaching styles,' Sword-Gusmao says. 'When I first travelled to Indonesia as a starry-eyed student back in the 1980s, I used to aspire to being able to integrate completely into Indonesian culture. 'After some years I saw that that really was impossible and possibly undesirable.' As she has matured, the daughter of two school teachers says she developed a healthy respect for her egalitarian roots. She says, 'Indonesia is a fairly hierarchical society and a lot of that has rubbed off on East Timor. 'They'd be served well by aspiring to be a bit more egalitarian.' This is certainly achievable if Gusmao's example is anything to go by. He recently unveiled the burnt-out building of the former Motor Registration Office of the Indonesian provincial government in central Dili as his new office.

He has dubbed it the 'Palace of Ashes'.

The President told assembled diplomats and officials that he had chosen it, 'to curb public expenditure. . . otherwise we won't achieve much in this independence process'.

Rachel Boddy travelled to East Timor on an Asia 2000 scholarship