

**VOICES FOR CHANGE: WOMEN'S VOICES IN POLITICS AND DECISION-MAKING
IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES**

***“THE VOICES AND EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS’ CAUCUS IN
PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT IN THE
NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF TIMOR LESTE”***

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(GMPTL)**

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It is a great pleasure for me to be here to address the 2nd International Women for Peace Conference. I am particularly pleased to see all of us--women and men from our country and other parts of the world—gathering today to discuss and share our experiences on this important issue.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude for the invitation today and also extend a warm welcome to all of you and extend my congratulations to the organizer of the conference for successfully organizing this important event.

This conference is particularly important because it acknowledges and highlights the global issue on the importance of women’s voices in peace, politics and decision making in post-conflict countries that to some extent remains a missing part in the peace process. Through this conference, we will have the opportunity to share and exchange our views, best practices, and lessons learned. We will be able to identify issues and explore ways to build and strengthen our partnerships in addressing the issues that matter to all of us.

I am here today with all of you, to share with you the voices, experiences, and the changes that Timorese women, especially the ***Grupo das Mulheres Parlamentares de Timor-Leste (GMPTL)***-Women Parliamentarians’ Caucus of the National Parliament have made towards the promotion of women’s equal participation in politics, decision making, gender equality , and sustainable peace and development in this country.

As many of you already know, Timorese women have played a very important role and have made significant contributions during our struggle for independence and now in the reconstruction and development of democratic governance after a long period of war and conflict.

In the past, women together with their male counterparts were right in the frontline fighting for independence. During the resistance time, women took up many different roles in the armed fighting, clandestine civilian and diplomatic positions. As armed fighters, some women acted as commanders, deputies, assistants and coordinators. Women also contributed in intelligence roles, provided food, medicine and ammunition as well as took care of the sick and injured.

Women also played an active role in the referendum and election processes. Women constituted 50 per cent of the voters during this process which resulted in the selection for independence. In 2000, women organized the First National Congress of Timorese Women, which resulted in the adoption of a 30% quota for women in the civil service and decision making bodies, including in the National Parliament.

During the 2006 conflict, women parliamentarians organized peace campaigns across Dili and other districts to convey peace messages to youth. They advocated parents to ensure that our children and youth were not involved in perpetuating violent conflict.

Currently, women's representation in the National Parliament has increased from 26% in the previous legislative body to 29.2 % in the current National Parliament of Timor-Leste body (65 members). This represents the highest women's representation in any parliament within Southeast Asia and the second highest in Asia. Furthermore, it ranks very favorably; 26 out of over 137 countries in the world (IPU, November, 2008).

As a post-conflict country and a young nation, Timor-Leste indeed has a strong commitment and has made considerable progress in promoting women's rights and participation in politics and decision making in all aspect of our lives. All the achievements and progress have come about as a result of the remarkable roles and

contributions that women have made in the past and are currently making, and will make in the future of our great country.

The Constitution of Timor-Leste strongly recognizes the principles of gender equality between women and men as a matter of our fundamental rights and citizenship (Article 17). Article 62 of the Constitution states that equal participation of women and men in political life is fundamental to democracy. The country also has declared 3 November as National Women's Day and will recognize and celebrate it every year to acknowledge and recognize women's rights and the important roles and contributions that women have made in the past, today, and in the future.

Timor-Leste has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol on 16 April 2003 as well as other international commitments and legal instruments related to human rights, child rights and labor issues.¹

In July 2007, a specialized Committee on **Poverty Reduction, Rural and Regional Development and Gender Equality** and the Sub-Committee on Gender Equality was created. Through Resolution No.16/2007 in 16 October, 2007 a **Grupo das Mulheres Parlamentares (GMPTL)-Women Parliamentarians' Caucus** was created in the National Parliament. On March 2006, a similar women's parliamentary caucus was set up in the previous parliament. But, it was more on the need to respond to the invitation to become a member of the network of women parliamentarians of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP).

Currently, the GMPTL has a larger mandate. It has been created in response to the needs to ensure that women's voices and needs are heard and put in the main agenda of the work of the National Parliament. Its objective is also to promote and ensure that women's equal representation and participation in the National Parliament can be

¹ These include United Nations (UN) conventions and treaties related to human rights, child rights and labor issues (i.e. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (1965); Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984); Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

achieved. This is particularly important given the fact that the National Parliament is still a male-dominated legislative body.

I am one of among 19 women in the current National Parliament and the GMPTL. The leadership of the GMPTL comprises the President, Vice President and Secretary. The members come from nine (9) political parties and represent eight (8) committees within the National Parliament. The members of GMPTL also hold some key leadership positions as Vice President, Secretary and Vice Secretary of the National Parliament, and President, Vice President and Secretary of Specialized Committees, and sub-committees.

As members of the GMPTL, we have committed ourselves so that gender equality will be systematically addressed and integrated into the analysis and creation of legislative and political decisions as well as overseeing the government's programmes and state budgets. We also have committed ourselves to unite regardless of our political backgrounds and affiliations to promote women's rights and ensure that laws, policies and programmes will benefit women and men, girls and boys so that gender equality can be achieved.

Since its inception in October 2007, the current GMPTL has made significant changes, progress and notable achievements in the promotion of women's voices in politics, decision making, and gender equality within the national parliament and in the country. We have developed a Gender Strategic and Action Plan for the next 5 years to guide us to make concrete actions for the improvement of women's equal political participation and gender equality.

We examined and analyzed the State Budget Proposal from a gender perspective and produced concluding comments, questions and recommendations to ensure the integration of a gender perspective into the State Budget. Together with other members of the National Parliament, as women parliamentarians we approved the government's gender budget statement during the 2008 and the 2009 State Budget Debate.

The GMPTL successfully lobbied for **the establishment and the integration of the Centro de Estudos de Genero (CEG)-Gender Resource Center (GRC) within the National Parliament**. In partnership with the UNDP and UNIFEM, the CEG was successfully launched on 7 October 2008. It was attended by approximately 200 participants from the National Parliament, government institutions, multilateral and bilateral donors, women's groups and organizations, religious and community leaders and others. Through the new Administration Parliamentary Law No.15/2008 on 24 December 2008, the CEG has been fully adopted by the National Parliament as an integral part of the organizational structure of the National Parliament.

The CEG's activities are focused on awareness raising, capacity development, training and research, networking and partnership as well as knowledge and information sharing. The CEG is an important means to support our efforts in pursuing the enhancement of gender equality as well as ensuring a women's voice and participation in politics, decision making and in all aspects of life.

The GMPTL has established a systematic coordination mechanism and conducted regular meetings and joint initiatives with the Specialized Committee on Gender Equality, State Secretary for the Promotion of Gender Equality (SEPI), UNDP and UNIFEM, women's groups and organizations and others. We also work in partnership with men MPs and staff in promoting women's political rights and gender equality. Together with all of them, through the CEG, the GMPTL we have participated, initiated and organized a number of awareness-raising and capacity development activities. This has included public dialogues and advocacy, conferences, training and workshops on gender mainstreaming, CEDAW, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sexual and Gender-based Violence/SGBV, UN Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security and Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB).

The four GRB trainings we organized for women and men parliamentarians and staff for the Secretariat of the National Parliament in 2008 were particularly successful. The women and men parliamentarians and staff have expressed enormous interest in receiving similar training on a regular basis and to conduct a gender budget analysis to increase the capacity and accountability of the National Parliament to gender equality.

Equally important, the GMPTL has also successfully lobbied the National Parliament for the allocation and approval of the gender budget to support the implementation of activities of the GMPTL in 2009. This is the first ever gender budget allocated by the National Parliament in the history of political decision making and democratic governance process in Timor-Leste.

While there have been significant changes, progress, achievements as well as growing recognitions of the work of the GMPTL, unfortunately we still face a number of challenges that potentially affect our long terms goals in achieving gender equality.

Patriarchal system and male-biased traditional power structures within our society that impede women's leadership and equal participation in decision making still exist. Women's representation and participation in legislative, executive, and judicial bodies is still lower than men's. Unfortunately, we still face high levels of women's illiteracy, low health status and conditions, poverty, and sexual/gender-based violence; especially domestic violence against women and girls.

As a relatively new organization, the GMPTL also has faced some internal challenges. The awareness and capacity of women and men parliamentarians and staff on the importance of women's leadership for the development of democratic governance, sustainable peace and development still needs to be increased. The commitment, consolidation and internal communication among members of the GMPTL still need to be strengthened in order for us to be able to play a more active role in increasing women's voices in politics and decision-making in the National Parliament and in all aspect of development at all levels in the country.

We all must remember that women's voices and leadership in peace processes, politics and decision making is not only about women's issues and/or for women only. These issues are human rights and development issues which are fundamental for all - women and men and for the development of our country. Thus, there is an urgent need for us to overcome all these challenges.

The patriarchal system and male bias in our traditional power structures must be eliminated. We need to break the stereotypes and need to de-bunk the myth that women are inherently less able to take on political and leadership roles.

Women are half of the population, thus their voice must be heard and their representation and participation in decision making at all stages and at levels must go beyond the current quota of 30%. We must remember that increasing the number of women's representation in politics and decision making bodies is imperative, but is not enough. This must be accompanied by progress in the quality of women's lives to allow women to participate in politics and decision making on an equal basis as men.

Thus, political commitment and accountability of government, national parliament, and political parties to gender equality and the MDGs must be increased. We need to address women's poverty, illiteracy, women's low health status and all forms of violence against women must be eliminated. All of us need to put more effort to lobby and persuade government, parliament, and political parties to promote more women in decision making positions and focus their work more on the issues that concern women and gender equality.

Women's self-confidence needs to be built and strengthened. Women must be encouraged to believe in themselves and that they are capable of playing an active role in politics and taking leadership positions in the decision making process. In addition, a full recognition from and partnership with male counterparts in this country in pursuing our agenda for gender equality is imperative

Lastly, I truly believe that democratic governance, sustainable peace and development cannot be achieved if gender inequality in politics and decision making in all aspects of life are not addressed. Women, as much as men, have equal rights to engage and steer the political decision-making process and in shaping policies which affect us all. Thus, **women's voices must be heard, gender equality and equal participation of women in politics and decision making in all stages and at all levels is a must.**

Thank you.