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## **Opinion: We know East Timor is poor. But this poor?**

*May 13, 2016 10:00am KATHLEEN NOONAN*

IN a waterfront restaurant on a still-warm autumn night near the Brisbane River, it seems almost ridiculous to be hearing about something as appalling as this.

The woman standing in the middle of the room has been asked about the education of girls in her beloved country and she says, matter-of-factly, most finish school when they start menstruating.

What? Is it a cultural thing? someone asks. No, she says. In the whole country, there are few schools that have toilets with running water, so it is nearly impossible for girls to manage. You get your period, your education ends.

Are we talking about rural China? Or North Korea? Is this place thousands of kilometres from Australia, some land back in time? No, as the crow flies, it's close, just 500km across the Timor Sea to East Timor, our youngest neighbour.

Kirsty Sword Gusmão is a quiet listener, but when she speaks it is with gentle steel that is hard to ignore. You don't survive years as the first First Lady of East Timor – from 2002 until 2007 – without grit.

Those listening in the room – brought together by Women of the World Festival organiser Cathy Hunt – bristle at this talk of school cut short. They think of their daughters, themselves. Imagine that. And why? Because they are the planet's life-givers. No wonder it is called "the curse". "Very few schools have libraries and those that do have few books," Hunt says.

This strikes at a booklover in me. This sounds criminal. Sure, we know East Timor is poor. But this poor?

Ms Sword now lives in Melbourne with her three sons, since undergoing treatment for breast cancer in 2012 and separation from her husband, the nation's former president and prime minister, Xanana Gusmão.

But ties remain strong. She oversees and supports the Alola Foundation, which runs vital mother and baby-feeding programs, literacy programs, teacher training, mobile libraries and maternal and child health projects in East Timor.

Alola's motto is "Feto Forte, Nasaun Forte" (Strong Women, Strong Nation). It is small yet grassroots and effective and needs support. You'd be stunned to learn how far your donation can be stretched in a country as poor as East Timor.

So, what happens when a country fails to educate its girls? It's pretty startling. Not educating girls is dumb – for a country. World Bank studies show that one extra year of secondary school can increase a girl's future income by 15-25 per cent. When girls are educated they are less likely to contract HIV, more likely to control child-bearing and vaccinate their children and have lower maternal and infant mortality rates. And it shows that sending more girls to school – and keeping them there – can boost an entire country's GDP.

Ms Sword, former aid worker and human rights activist, says maternal and child mortality rates in East Timor are among the highest in the South-East Asia region. Half of children under five

are malnourished. Strangely, it doesn't have to be this way. The tiny island nation sits in the oil-rich Timor Sea, with massive oil and gas reserves off the coast.

**Many Australians might be surprised to learn that we don't have a permanent maritime border with East Timor.** The Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields – managed by Woodside Petroleum yet untapped – are worth \$40 billion-\$50 billion and the treaty would map out how it would be divided. The fields are 150km southeast of Timor and 450km northwest of Darwin. East Timor is one of the poorest nations in the region; Australia is its richest neighbour. Are you seeing how this shapes up?

East Timor has called in the United Nations to help resolve the bitter permanent sea border dispute, under the UN's Convention of the Law of the Sea, where the merits of a new boundary will be considered by a panel of five independent experts.

East Timor believes a permanent boundary would result in the vast bulk of oil and gas reserves falling within its territory. (Also claiming \$6.6 billion in revenue lost due to the current temporary arrangements.) Australia's disputes this, yet won't sit down to settle it. Temporary agreements were forged in 2002 and 2006, but East Timor sees them – unsurprisingly – as unfair because Australia allegedly spied on its negotiators in 2004. Secret agents allegedly pretended to be repairing East Timor's government offices and inserted listening devices into the wall cavity of the Dili cabinet office where its negotiating team met.

Alexander Downer, who on leaving politics became an adviser for Woodside, was the authorising minister for the alleged bugging. Australia's conduct earned it a rare rebuke from the International Court of Justice. So, you see, we haven't exactly covered ourselves in glory on the issue. Back in 2014, *The Australian* covered the story as "How Canberra and Woodside 'bugged' Timor PM to strip fledgling nation of oil billions".

On this night, where we sit riverside – all shiny glass and good wine and premium view – the poverty of East Timor seems a long way away. Yet, if you followed the outgoing tide to Moreton Bay, headed north, turned left at land's tip and kept sailing, you'd be close to the deep turbulent waters that Australia and Timor presently are treading.

It's all about greed and oil and gas. As Timor struggles with deep poverty and its uneducated vulnerable girls – for lack of a toilet with running water – our Australian Government plays hardball. It diminishes us all.

I walk out into the soft night and pause at a spot on the river called Humbug Reach. (Humbug's such a strange little word. Kind of a nice way of saying deceive, trick, mislead, hoodwink, dupe and cheat.) To donate to the Alola Foundation, go to [alolafoundation.org](http://alolafoundation.org)

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