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## **Attitudes and Perceptions of Young Men towards Gender Equality and Violence in Timor-Leste**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines attitudes and perceptions of young men toward gender relations and gender-based violence in post-conflict Timor-Leste. A high level of domestic violence is reported and a law against domestic violence has been passed in recent years. In 2013, a research team surveyed almost 500 young men using the Gender-Equitable Men (GEM) Scale in both rural and urban contexts. It was found that young men become less gender equitable as they get older, and the environment they grow up in influences their gender attitudes. Existing contradictions and tensions between national government policy and local customary practices are well-known, and these are reflected in young men's acceptance of general principles of gender equality, which is unmatched by their willingness to accept more equitable gender relations in their own lives. Of concern was the level of young men's acceptance of sexual harassment and forced sex. Mechanisms are required to influence young men's attitudes to gender equality and intimate partner relations in school programs and other arenas as a priority.

*Key Words:* Gender Equality, Masculinity, Gender-Based Violence, Timor-Leste

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## Introduction

Globally around a third of all women have experienced either physical or sexual violence overwhelmingly perpetrated by their husbands, boyfriends or intimate partners (WHO 2013). Research into gender-based violence (GBV) globally has concluded that violence in intimate relationships is closely linked to more general societal conflict, violence and injustice (Merry 2009:2). The varied rates around the world demonstrate that such violence is not inevitable and that improvements are possible to the many economic and socio-cultural environments that foster a culture of violence against women. Challenging and changing these cultural and social norms is one of the many ways these situations can be changed. In 2012 the Government of Timor-Leste adopted the Timor-Leste National Action Plan (NAP) on Gender-based Violence (2012-2014) and supports the fight against this pervasive problem (RDTL 2012). This paper reports on some research undertaken as part of the strategy of this NAP (Niner, Wigglesworth, Boavida dos Santos, Tilman, & Arunachalam 2013).

The research presented in this article focusses on the attitudes and perceptions of young men towards gender roles, relationships and violence in Timor-Leste. It was the first research of its kind to be undertaken in Timor-Leste, using the Gender-Equitable Men (GEM) Scale to survey almost 500 young men between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Survey data was complemented by interviews and focus discussion groups with the wider population. The research was commissioned by international NGO *Paz y Desarrollo* (PyD).<sup>6</sup> The research provides insights into how young East Timorese men think about the roles of men and women in contemporary society, both as an ideal and more pragmatically in their own intimate relationships, and how they think they should manage these relations. The discussion offered here demonstrates that attitudes and perceptions change over time and how this is affected by the environment the young men grow up in. We discuss how the attitudes presented here may be associated with gender-based violence.

The territory of East Timor was affected in particular ways by global influences of modernity as they were refracted through the prism of Portuguese colonialism (c1700-1974), Indonesian military occupation (1975-1999) and UN Administration (1999-2002). Only at independence in 2002 did the Timorese become citizens of their own nation. This history has resulted in a strong sense of identity and expectations around governance, concurrent with rapid social change. Strong attachments to customary practices have found different levels of accommodation with recently introduced international standards of democratic principles, human rights and gender equity.

Timor-Leste is a post-conflict country and the population has faced widespread and long-term trauma and violence primarily during the Indonesian occupation but also in the intervening post-conflict period. The rapidly growing population has a significantly high proportion of youth with 55 per cent of the total population 19 years old or under (NDS 2010:12). Such a 'youth bulge' in a population typically places pressure on society, particularly when educated youth face limited work opportunities (Curtain 2006) and this may be a factor in some of the findings.

## The Post-Conflict Environment of Timor-Leste

While influenced by broader global and national trends gender roles and relations are primarily re-produced and negotiated within families and local communities. Customary

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<sup>6</sup> Research was carried in urban and rural Timor-Leste in 2013 with a joint research team of academics from Monash University and Universidade Nacional Timor-Leste; National University of East Timor (UNTL). The authors would like to thank Paz y Desarrollo (PyD) for their permission to use the research for this article.

practices are significant to varying degrees in determining gendered roles and relationships in the broad domains of private and public life in rural, urban and semi-urban communities in Timor. While women may hold important and powerful roles within families and communities, they are often limited to the private sphere or the domestic realm, which reduces their economic and educational opportunities and political engagement (Niner 2012). This situation can also make women vulnerable to domestic violence (DV), or as expressed in local Tetum language ‘*violencia iha uma laran*’ (violence in the home).

Customarily, village political decision-making structures are made up of senior men at the *suku* and *aldeia* levels (including the *liurai*, the hereditary king and the *lian nain* who holds judicial responsibility). They are responsible for resolving conflict through mediation between families and clans and maintaining balance between people, their land, and their ancestors (Babo-Soares 2004; Trindade 2011). Most Timorese people have a high respect for the law, both local or customary and national or state law as mediated through the *Suco* chief who assumes both national democratic and local customary governance responsibilities (Wigglesworth 2013).

### *General Violence*

In 2006 national level violence between the police, army and leading politicians virtually destroyed the new state of Timor-Leste (Niner 2011: 421). The ‘political crisis’ of 2006 was dominated by armed conflict and expressions of violent masculinity, with women as notably absent from street violence and public displays of anger as they were from subsequent peacebuilding efforts (Niner 2011). At this time, the Deputy Minister of Education and Culture described how people became accustomed to living with violence during the liberation struggle resulting in a ‘culture of violence’ in Timor-Leste (UNICEF 2006)<sup>7</sup>. Outbreaks of male violence in the post-conflict period may be a normative response to the shame and humiliation of poverty, unemployment and associated feelings of hopelessness, such as reported in Indonesia (Clark 2010:107).

Anger and its expression in aggression are viewed as a significant problem affecting individuals, families and communities in Timor-Leste. Findings from a mental health survey in Timor-Leste showed that anger attacks are prevalent in Timor-Leste and lead to violence that can be associated with post-traumatic stress syndrome (Brooks et al. 2011). Two groups of men with high levels of anger are ex-combatants and young, unemployed urban-dwelling adults, groups who have been exposed to human rights violations during the Indonesian occupation (Brooks et al. 2011).

There is a tolerance for certain levels of physical violence in local communities as employed by those in positions of authority to their juniors for ‘educative’ purposes (*baku hanorin*) (Niner 2012:147). Most young people have experienced violence in their families or school. Research found that 67 percent of children in school had experienced the teacher beating them with a stick, while more than half of all children also had experienced being beaten with a stick and shouted at by their parents (UNICEF 2006).

### *Domestic or Gender-Based Violence and Its Rationale*

In Timor-Leste, intimate partner violence, or domestic violence, accounted for 40 per cent of all reported crime in Timor-Leste in 2004, yet formal justice systems dismally failed women attempting to pursue justice for such crimes (JSMP 2004). A concerted national

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<sup>7</sup> Deputy Minister of Education and Culture’s speech at the launch of the Report ‘Speak nicely to me—a study on practices and attitudes about discipline of children in Timor Leste’ by UNICEF, Dili, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2006.

campaign against domestic violence driven by strong pressure from the Timorese women's movement has promoted changing gender attitudes. However what is perceived as changes to women's traditional gender roles can trigger a backlash against women which drives further conflict and violence in households (Enloe 2004; Niner 2011:4).

In 2010 the Timorese government introduced a new national law '*Lei Contra Violencia Domestica*' or Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV). This was a result of continued pressure from the local women's movement working in partnership with international agencies (Hall 2009). Domestic violence is defined broadly in Article 2 of the 2010 LADV as:

...any act or sequence of acts committed within a family context, with or without cohabitation, by a family member against any other member of that family, where there is a situation of ascendancy, notably physical or economic, in the family relationship, or by a person with regard to another person with whom the former has had an intimate relationship which resulted, or may result, in physical, sexual or psychological injuries or suffering, economic abuse, including threats such as intimidating acts, bodily harm, aggression, coercion, harassment, or deprivation of freedom. (LADV 2010)

Local understandings of this definition and the Law in general are superficial and most GBV cases continue to be dealt with by local customary processes. In these systems, women are not usually permitted to participate and compensation for offences is usually made to the family of the victim through male representatives (Wigglesworth 2013). However, this is part of a larger issue of how domestic violence is conceptualised in customary justice systems:

...as a problem between two extended families rather than the individuals directly involved, prioritizing the protection of the collective relationships in tight-knit communities, or 'peace', over 'justice'...As a result, customary justice systems do not always respect the victim's interests or rights, frequently blame female victims for violence committed against them, and impose social pressure to accept a solution which provides no redress for the violence. (Kovar & Harrington 2013)

*Barlake* is the customary practice of mutual exchange between the bride and groom's families on marriage. A dominant cultural perspective in Timor-Leste is that *barlake* is a cornerstone of East Timorese indigenous culture integral to a wider, complex system of social action and ritual exchange. Although customary marriage practices have been found to increase the risk of violence against women, it is not perceived directly as a trigger (Khan & Hyati 2012:56). Timorese customs have sustained life in the challenging environment of the long and recently concluded war with neighbouring Indonesia. *Barlake* is traditionally an exchange of goods (especially livestock, grain and woven cloth) representing 'value' and enhancing the bride's dignity and status. However, the commodification of *barlake* in post-independence Timor-Leste has resulted in accusations that it represents a sale of a woman to her husband's family and the subsequent sense of ownership can lead to violence against her if she fails to live up to expectations (Niner 2012). *Barlake* binds the families together such that wives might be compelled by their family to tolerate DV because such commitments cannot be reversed or broken (Silva 2011). Women's economic dependence on men is often explained to be why it is

not in the interests of women to refer DV to the police and risk imprisonment of the perpetrator, separation or divorce (Swain 2003; Alves 2009; Kovar & Harrington 2013).

The most comprehensive data on violence against women in Timor-Leste is found in the 2010 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), which included a domestic and interpersonal violence survey module sampling 2,951 women. Of these women 38% reported to have experienced physical violence since age fifteen, with 80% of these cases involving a current or former husband or partner. Overall, 6% of ever-married women reported that they had initiated physical violence against their current or former husbands (NDS 2010:243). The main form of GBV in Timor-Leste then is physical abuse perpetrated by a husband or partner toward his wife or partner.

Of particular relevance to our research is the NDHS finding that married women in the youngest age groups (15-19 and 20-24) have the highest levels of controlling behaviour exhibited by husbands (NDS 2010:248). Younger women were also more likely to report that they had been physically violent towards their husband or partner. They also disagreed most strongly with the statement that that 'a man cannot control his sexual behaviour' (33% for women aged 15-19 compared to 47% for the age group 20-24) and that marital rape is allowable (NDS 2010:248). This may indicate that attitudes amongst women are changing.

No dedicated studies of attitudes of men and their motivations for perpetrating domestic violence has been carried out previously in Timor, with the most relevant data on DV to date to be found in the NDHS. Overall, 80 per cent of Timorese men agree with at least one reason for a man being justified in beating his wife. Of the reasons offered in the survey, the highest level of agreement (71%) was with 'if a wife neglected the children.' About 44 per cent of men felt that 'arguing with a husband' justified physical abuse. Women held remarkably similar views and like men were least likely to say that 'burning food' (38%) or 'refusing to have sex' (27%) were grounds for physical abuse (NDS 2010:213).

The level of acceptance of physical abuse of wives by husbands and the level of male control over female behaviour are predictive of a society's overall level of DV. Risk factors include controlling behaviours as risk factors for violence:

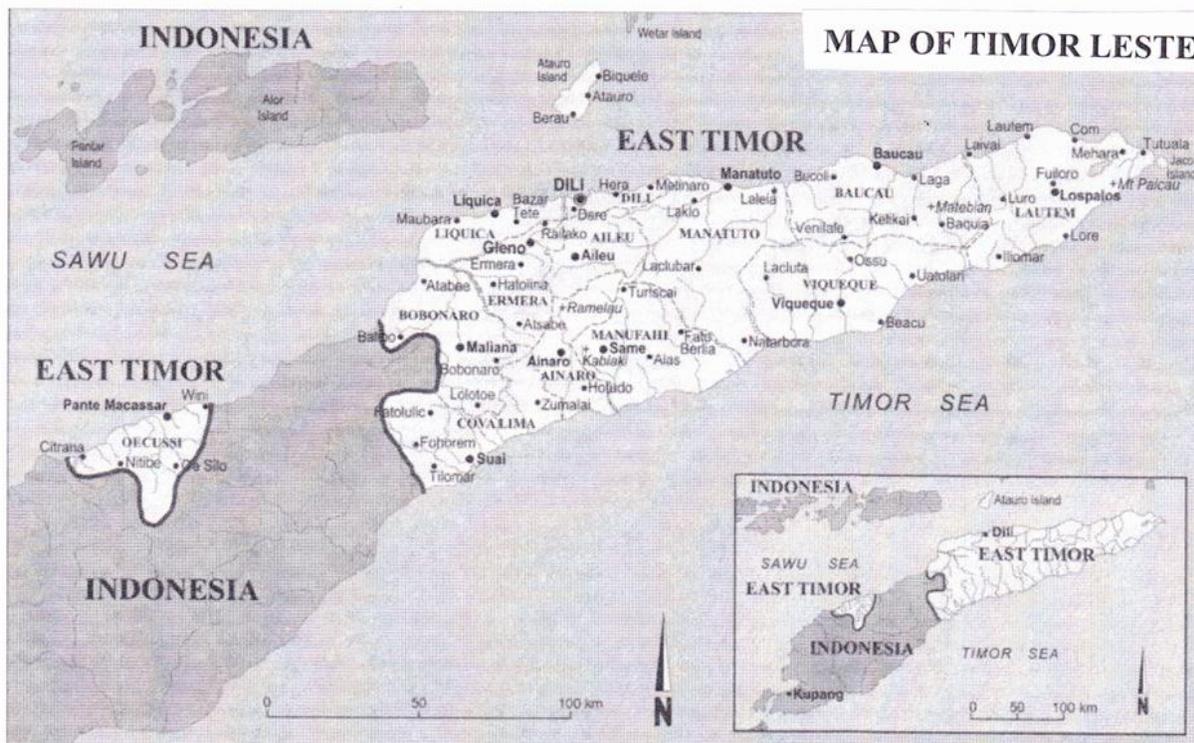
The greater number of controlling behaviours a woman experienced from her husband the higher likelihood that she will experience violence. Each additional controlling behaviour confers a 20% increased risk of physical and 72% increased risk of combined violence; Women who consider a beating justifiable if they neglect the children or burn the food are more likely to experience physical violence, whereas if they consider beating justifiable if they argue with their husband or if they refuse sex, are more likely to experience combined forms of violence. (Taft & Watson 2013:4)

Married women in the youngest age groups (15-19 and 20-24) have the highest levels of controlling behaviour exhibited by husbands (NDS 2010:248) and women who have grown up with a father beating a mother are almost six times more likely to experience physical violence (Taft & Watson 2013:4). As well, recent research has found that experiences of violence have affected the one in twelve women in Timor-Leste who suffer from Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED) behaviours that compound interpersonal problems (Rees et al. 2013:5).

## Research Methodology

This research study was designed to provide baseline knowledge to inform and enhance a communication campaign targeted at the prevention of GBV as part of a national prevention strategy. The research took place in the capital, Dili, and in three locations in each of two rural districts, Baucau and Viqueque, both at the eastern end of the island. The district town of each area was one research site and two villages were purposely chosen (one where PyD was already working and one other). The mix of areas was selected based on language, geography and population density.

**Figure 1: Map of Timor-Leste Showing Districts**



In addition to the GEM Survey, separate focus group discussions were held with young men and with young women at each research site, and individual in-depth interviews were also held with leaders and others thought to be influential in the communities surveyed. In the district towns, interviews were also held with government appointed Gender Working Group members, and youth organisations and media such as radio stations.

Attitudes of young men were captured in the survey using the Gender-Equitable Men (GEM) Scale methodology developed in other international contexts by the Brazilian NGO Promundo (Pulerwitz & Barker 2008; Verma et al. 2006) and adapted for use in Timor-Leste by the research team. The GEM scale was designed to provide information about the prevailing gender norms in a community and measure the effectiveness of programs that seek to influence them (Barker, 2000; Instituto Promundo & Instituto Noos 2003). This methodology is based on the understanding that social norms that promote gender inequality, such as men's controlling the

behaviour of female partners, increase the risk of DV. Therefore measuring inequitable gender norms and transforming them is recognized as an important strategy to counter these problems.

GEM statements measure the gender norms associated with sexuality, violence, domestic work, and other gendered behaviour. Respondents who show greater support for inequitable gender norms by agreeing with statements of gender inequality are significantly more likely to use physical and sexual violence against their partners than more gender equitable respondents (Pulerwitz & Barker 2008). This study used GEM statements which were modified and developed further in Dili after discussion with partners and NGO experts in the field. The survey was carried out by a team of Timorese researchers, both staff and students, from the Department of Community Development of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL).

Research instruments, including the survey (GEM statements), as well as individual in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussion (FGD) questions were translated into Tetun, the most commonly used language in Timor-Leste. A two-day training on gender equality and the research methodology was held for all researchers and some stakeholders. GEM statements were workshopped with the research team to ensure correct use of local idiom for young people was used to describe gendered behaviours, relationships, sex and violence. Pilot studies were carried out first at the University, then in a suburb of Dili surveying young men, and holding IDIs with community leaders and FGDs with separate groups of young men and young women. The pilots resulted in a number of adjustments to the survey instruments to improve understanding.

## **Findings**

### *General Findings from the Study*

Data gathered in this Study from focus groups and interviews demonstrate that East Timorese people commonly present an underlying culture of gender roles and relationships which remain very hierarchical and patriarchal. Men are typically described as *Chefe Familia*, as stronger than women, and should be wise and loving to their families. Women are expected to be good, responsible wives and mothers and serve their families.

During interviews in the course of this research it became clear that many people see rapid changes in society that have taken place in the past dozen years as major challenges. These are seen to reflect international rather than Timorese values and therefore often described as 'globalisation'. There are two important aspects to this: firstly, a contradiction between customary governance and justice frameworks, which normally deal with family violence and conflict in the community, and national policies, in particular the LADV. The challenge, presented by the district and community leaders, is that LADV does not define a mechanism for local governance structures to address DV at the community level, but requires all cases of DV to be referred to the police. The second aspect of 'globalisation' presented as a concern is increasing access to the media and internet which is enabling young people to access pornography and other material which influences their behaviour negatively. Such commentaries were presented by all groups interviewed including district and village leaders, young men and young women. These findings will be further analysed and elaborated in a separate paper, but they provide important context to the data presented here on young men's attitudes to gender and violence.

### GEM Survey Results

A total of 482 surveys were carried out with young men aged 15 to 24 years, of whom 94% or more were single and Catholic and 85% still in education (secondary to university). Of the total respondents, 32.5% had completed pre-secondary education (Year 7 to 9), 43.5% had reached secondary (Year 10-12) and 24% studied some form of post-secondary or tertiary study.

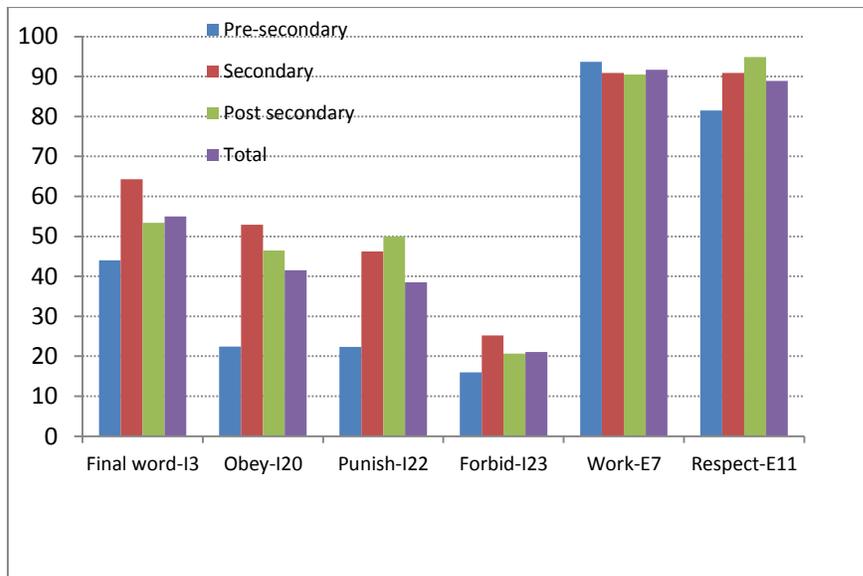
Of the 42 statements that appeared on the survey form, we have analysed the following thematic groups of statement here: attitudes to gender equality; perceptions of violence, attitudes to gender based violence and concepts of masculinity.

#### Attitudes toward Gender Equality

Statements pertaining to gender equality (as per key below) were analysed across several variables including age, education, district location (Dili, Baucau, Viqueque) and location type (urban, peri-urban and rural) to establish general trends. Graphs show agree responses only to the GEM statements (coded 'I' for statements of inequality and 'E' for statements of equality). Overall there was broad agreement with positive statements of gender equality, such as 'Men and women have an equal right to respect' and more varied responses to statements of inequality. As education has been found to be an important factor which influences the attitudes toward gender based violence internationally, it is considered first here.

In Figure 2, two equitable statements about women having equal rights to study and work (E7) and being equally respected (E11) show a high level of acceptance by all groups.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with Gender Equality Statements by Completed Education, 2013**



**Key**  
 I-3 A man must have the final word about decisions in the household  
 I-20 Women should always obey their husbands  
 I-22 If a wife makes a mistake her husband has the right to punish her  
 I-23 A husband has the right to forbid his wife meet her family or friends  
 E-7 Women have equal rights with men to study or work outside the home  
 E-11 Men and women have an equal right to respect

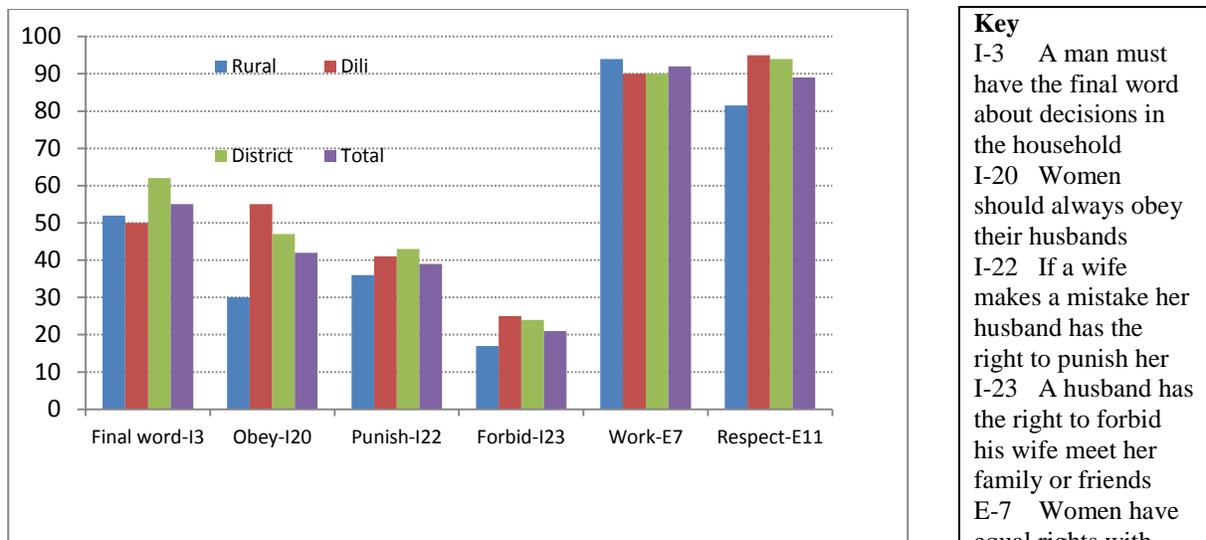
The weakest levels of agreement to the inequitable statements within this theme are to I-23 'A husband has the right to forbid his wife meet her family or friends' with just 21% agreeing, followed by (I-22) 'If a wife makes a mistake her husband has the right to punish her' at 39% and (I-20) 'Women should always obey their husbands' at 42%.

Support for gender equity was strongest amongst the pre-secondary educated youth at only 22% in agreement for these latter statements and 16% for I-23. The highest agreement (gender inequity) overall is 55% for (I-3) ‘A man must have the final word about decisions in the household’, to which 44% of pre-secondary youth and 64% with secondary education agree.

Within the age group surveyed (15-24 years) there are considerable correlations between age of respondent and level of education and many are current students in pre-secondary, secondary or post-secondary courses at college or university. For instance similar responses can be seen between the ‘pre-secondary’ level of education and the 15-17 year old age group. This younger cohort also had high ‘no response’ rates to certain questions related to sex throughout the survey. While the correlation between the older age groups and education was slightly less consistent than the younger age group, the analysis by age showed the same pattern of responses as that by education. Overall gender equitable attitudes are more prevalent amongst the less educated or younger cohort of respondents. However, major acceptance of gender inequality can be found in statements directly related to gendered decision making and issues of power and control within marital relationships which favour men (Statements 1-3, 1-20, 1-22). Older, more educated respondents have stronger agreement with these inequitable statements than younger and less educated.

With respect to location type, three categories of location were surveyed—rural communities (rural), district towns (district) and the capital Dili (urban). The two equitable statements (E-7 and E-11) are agreed to by over 89% of all respondents.

**Figure 3: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with the Gender Equality Statements by Location Type, 2013.**



**Key**  
 I-3 A man must have the final word about decisions in the household  
 I-20 Women should always obey their husbands  
 I-22 If a wife makes a mistake her husband has the right to punish her  
 I-23 A husband has the right to forbid his wife meet her family or friends  
 E-7 Women have equal rights with men to study or work outside the home  
 E-11 Men and women have an equal right to respect

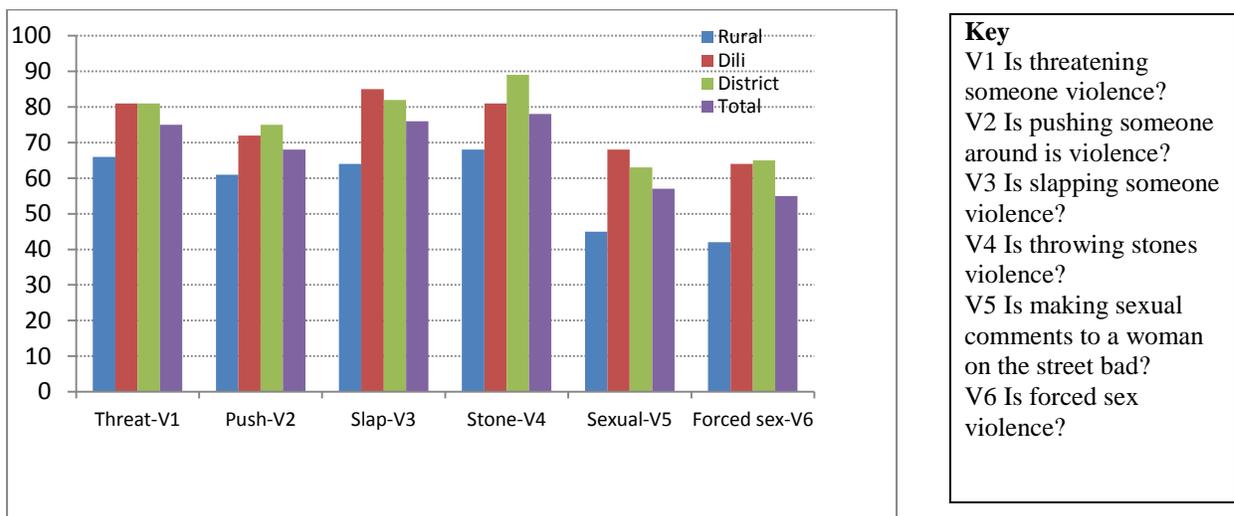
Across inequitable statements, (I-23) ‘A husband has the right to forbid his wife meet her family or friends’ meets most consistent disagreement by over 72% across all groups and categories. Analysis by location type shows that rural respondents were more gender equitable overall. Also, as the NDHS also showed, there is significant variation between districts. In this survey Baucau district residents were significantly less gender equitable than Viqueque district residents.

*Perceptions of Violence*

As certain levels of physical abuse are tolerated in Timor-Leste, it was important to examine how common forms of physical abuse are classified by young men, thus statements on types of violence were included in addition to GEM statements.

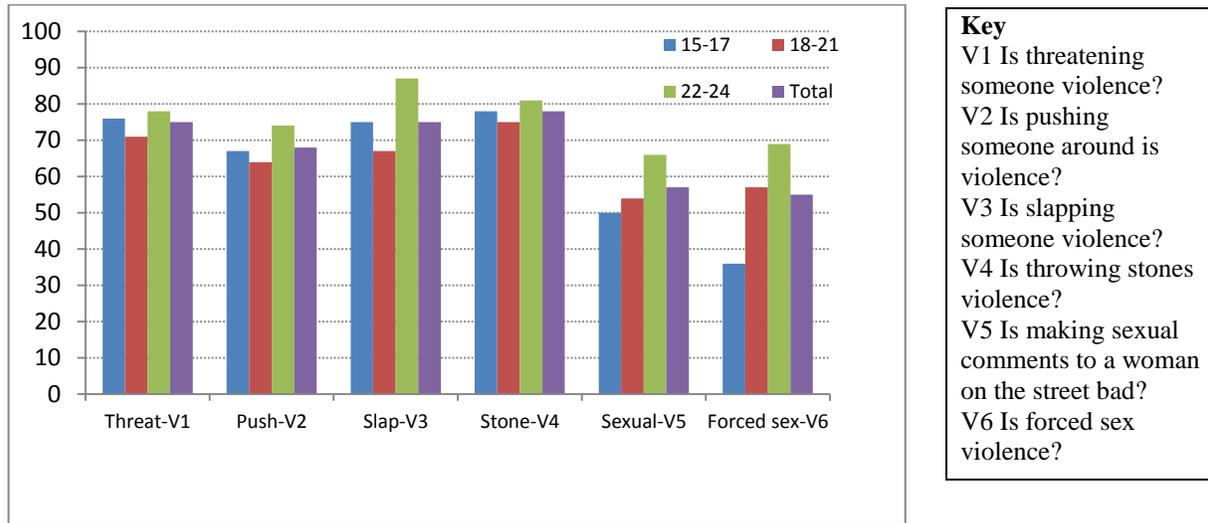
In Figure 4 we can see that three quarters of the young men surveyed believe threatening, pushing, slapping, throwing stones are violence. However, this leaves a substantial minority ranging from 21%-31% who do not agree that these acts are violent. This minority rises to 30-36% in the rural areas.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with the ‘What is Violence’ Statements by Location Type, 2013**



Included in this section were some statements addressing sexual harassment and rape as this too has been identified as a problem without any real data on attitudes. Responses to these statements show there are significant numbers of young men who do not think ‘making sexual comments to a woman on the street is bad’ or that forced sex is violent, although as has been the trend in this survey, explicit statements about sex had a high ‘no response’ rate (26% among rural men to the forced sex statement). However this leaves a large proportion of young men (40%) overall who do not think it bad to make sexual comments to women on the street—of those in rural areas this rises to 52%. Most disturbingly, overall 31% of young men surveyed do not think forced sex is violence. Slightly more young men in Dili (35%) and more 18-21 year olds (36%) think so, while the younger age group recorded a high ‘no response rate’ as noted.

**Figure 5: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with the ‘What is Violence’ Statements by Age, 2013**

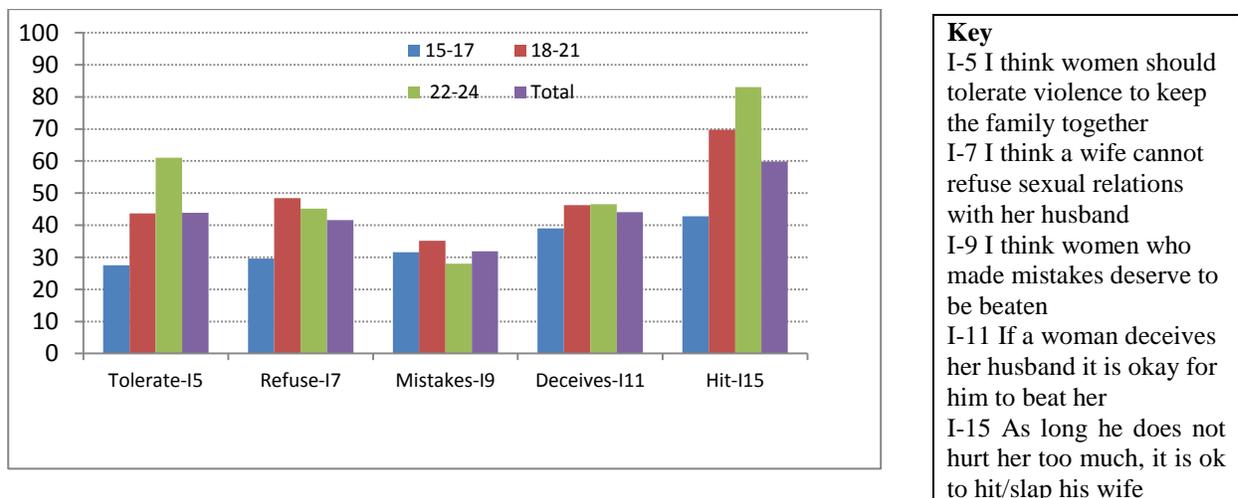


The variation in ‘What is violence?’ is greater across location than age group. Figure 5 shows there is slightly more agreement among the oldest group that threatening, pushing, slapping and throwing stones acts constitute violence. The lowest levels of agreement that these are violent acts are among those in the age group 18-21. Again we see those older agreeing that sexual comments are bad and forced sex is violence but this is skewed by younger men not commenting on the statements related to sex.

*Attitudes toward Gender Based Violence*

This theme measures attitudes toward gender based violence in different contexts and the perceived ‘acceptability’ of violent behaviour by men towards women. Figure 6 demonstrates that in general, the acceptance of or tolerance for GBV increases with age.

**Figure 6: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with Gender Based Violence Inequality Statements by Age, 2013**



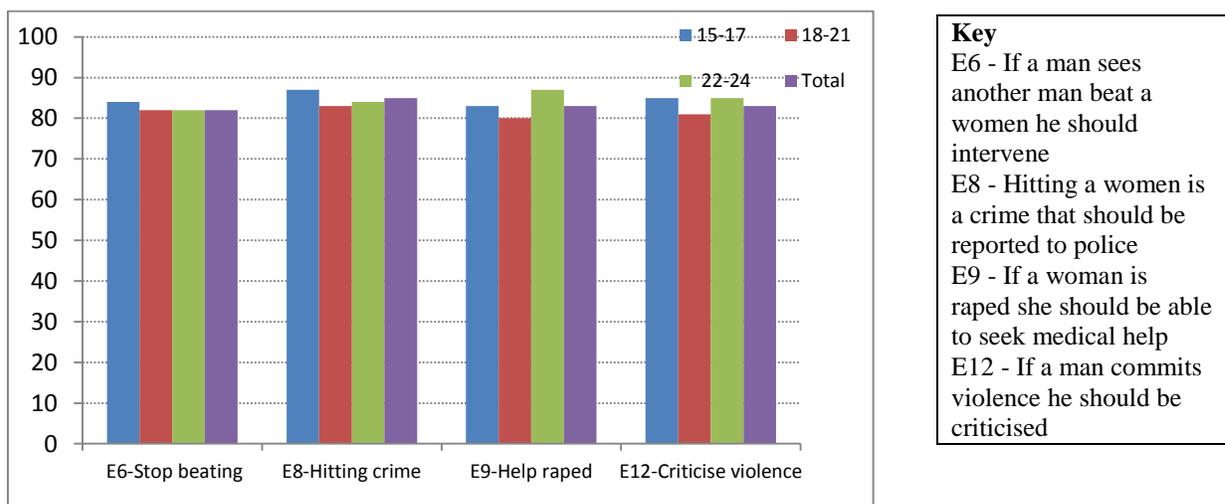
For example in Statement 1-5 ‘women should tolerate violence to keep the family together’ only 28% of the youngest cohort agree, while agreement rises to 44% of 18-21 year olds and 61% of 22-24 year olds. This clearly indicates that the majority of the older group of men in our study condone violence in this context.

In Statement I-9, if a wife makes a mistake, a third of all respondents think she deserves to be beaten (*baku*) (32%). However in question I-15 double that number (60%) believe that if a husband does not hurt her too much it is okay to slap (*basa*) or push (*dudu*) her, with increasing numbers in agreement with age: 43% of 15-17 year olds; 70% of 18-21 year olds; nearly doubling to 83% of 22-24 year olds. This suggests that physical abuse becomes more acceptable as young men get older and most likely more engaged in intimate relationships. A similar pattern can be seen in responses to the GEM statement (I-11) about a husband’s right to physically punish a wife he believes has deceived him: 39% of the younger group agree, while this figure increases significantly in the older age groups.

Statement I-7, whether a woman can refuse sexual relations with her husband, received slightly more agreement than disagreement from the 18-24s. However, there was no response from 46% of the 15-17 age group suggesting this group is not comfortable or familiar with discussing sex (a high no response rate was found amongst all sexuality related questions).

Over 80% of young men in all categories agreed with the gender equitable statements in Figure 7. The statements related to hypothetical members of society committing violence (E6 ‘another man’, E12 ‘a man’) or to the rights of a hypothetical woman to seek medical assistance in the case of rape (E9) most youth across all age cohorts agreed with the equitable position. These levels are almost double the levels of support for the equitable position (i.e. disagreement) in responses to inequitable statements directly related to specific situations in intimate or marital relationships. For instance, almost half (44%) of all the young men we surveyed felt that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together (1-5) and 60% felt that it is okay for a husband to slap (*basa*) or push (*dudu*) his wife as long as he does not hurt her too much (I-15).

**Figure 7: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with Gender Based Violence Equality Statements by Age, 2013**



## Masculinity

A theme of masculinity was analysed in relation to six statements describing how a man should behave: be tough (I-19); be aggressive if insulted (I-1); be heterosexual (I-13) and sexually virile (I-12). They also include attitudes to homosexual men (I-8) and feminine men (I-10). Most agree that men should be tough, although a large minority (36%) do not agree.

**Figure 8: Percentage of Young Men Agreeing with Masculinity Statements by Location Type, 2013**

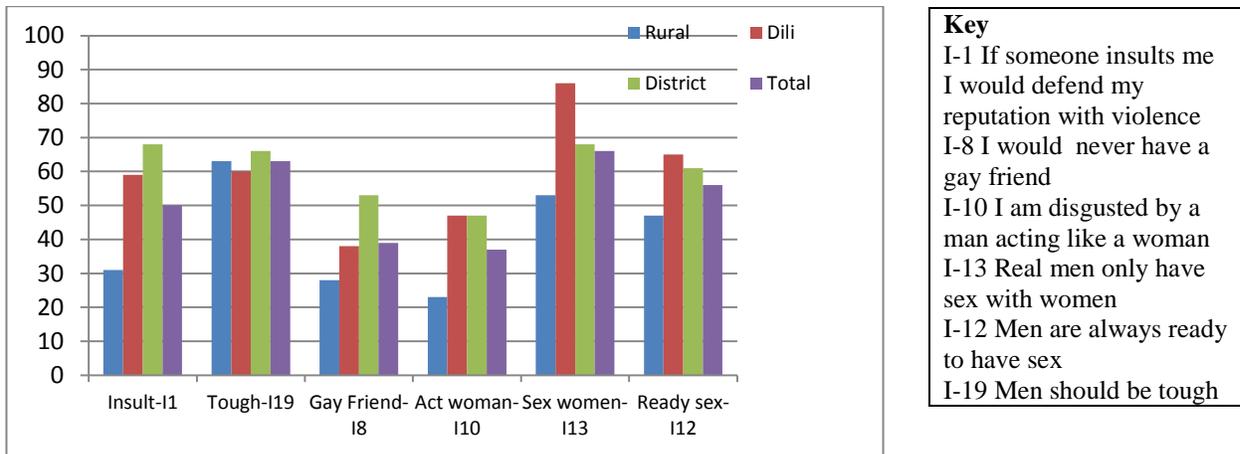


Figure 8 shows that young rural men have much less aggressive attitudes if insulted (31%) than those in district towns (68%) who are the most aggressive by far. Overwhelmingly most young Timorese men think ‘real’ men only have sex with women (66%) (rising to 86% in Dili). A belief that men are always sexually ready, a sign of male virility, is also agreed to by most young men (56%). Rural areas do not hold to such strong stereotypes about tough and virile masculinity as more urbanised young men do, although this may be because they are too reticent to talk about sex altogether and just did not respond.

Overall homophobic attitudes are only just in the minority, with particularly low levels in the rural areas. There is an overall perception that homosexuals are not ‘real’ men because real men only have sex with women. However, many more men (60%) would have a gay friend than not (39%). The rural men were much more accepting (70%) of this and also disagreed overwhelmingly (76%) that they would be disgusted by a man acting like a woman, while Dili and town respondents agreed and disagreed equality (50/50).

Heterosexuality is the fundamental criteria for masculinity in Timor, followed by toughness, although there are large minorities that do not support this view. It is clear that stronger attitudes endorsing a tough, virile masculinity increases and become more entrenched as this cohort of young men age, and as they move into urban areas. These views are stronger in the district centres than in Dili. Education does not appear to temper inequitable attitudes with agreement to an aggressive reaction to insults (I-1) rising sharply from less-educated to more-educated men.

## **Discussion: Young Men's Attitudes toward Gender Equality and GBV**

'Traditional' gender norms, reflecting conservative patriarchal values, remain strong in Timorese culture and society. The youngest men surveyed hold more gender-equitable attitudes than others only a few years older, highlighting that around the age of 18 these attitudes change and harden significantly into more inequitable attitudes. Young men in district towns are significantly more aggressive and less gender equitable than both their rural counterparts and marginally more than those in the capital, perhaps not only reflecting a more competitive socio-economic environment, but also increasing 'rights' to masculine power associated with age and the status ascribed to education and urbanity over rural life.

Although there was overwhelming agreement to general statements of equality between men and women, gender equality was less apparent in the GEM statements involving specific situations of intimate or marital relationships. Their agreement to gender equitable perspectives is often to ideals rather than to specific domestic situations. For instance, 80% young men agree that intervention should occur in abstract cases of gender-based violence but when situations refer to relations between husband and wife support for the gender equitable position decreases markedly. While there appears to be broad support for gender equality these are not fully realised in attitudes to intimate relationships between young men and women. The young men in this survey still largely believe that men should be able to maintain power and control within marital relationships, behaviours that are strongly linked to levels of gender-based violence. While new education and economic opportunities for young women has meant increases in their personal freedoms, their male peers have not shifted their perceptions of gender roles within relationships that would fully support these opportunities.

A tolerance for physical abuse such as threatening, pushing, slapping and throwing stones is high amongst young men surveyed with a substantial minority (31% to 21%) believing that these are not violent acts (in rural areas this increases to 30-36%). These figures sharpen the understanding that particular forms of physical abuse are tolerated in East Timorese society and not necessarily viewed as violent behaviour that needs to be changed. Even higher levels (40%) of young men surveyed do not think verbal sexual harassment of women in public is wrong or inappropriate and in rural areas this rises to a majority at 52%.

There were also high levels of tolerance for physical abuse in the family which is supported by other data such as that in the 2010 NDHS. Although over 70% of younger men surveyed did not agree that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together, this decreased significantly with age. We found that the majority of the older youth in our study condoned violence in this context. A third of survey respondents thought that if a wife makes a mistake she could be beaten, and 60% felt it was acceptable for husbands to perpetrate lower levels of physical abuse (slapping and pushing) toward wives even though most defined this as violence.

Physical abuse of wives becomes more acceptable as young men grow up and are more likely to be involved in intimate relationships with women. Very disturbingly, 31% of young men surveyed overall do not think forced sex is violence and even more, 42%, believe that a woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband. These are higher figures than the 2010 NDHS which found that 13% of 15-19 year olds and 15.5% of 20-24 year olds think when a wife refuses to have sex with her husband he has the right to force her—an attitude that continues to slightly, although continually, increase with age. This issue of women's consent to sex requires urgent definition and attention in Timor-Leste.

Overall, there is great variation and confusion about what is a tolerable level of conflict, physical abuse and what can be classified as ‘domestic violence’. Most accept a husband’s right to physically punish his wife if she contravenes certain gender roles and expectations, as was also found in the 2010 NHDS. Tolerance of physical abuse of wives becomes more acceptable as men get older. Younger men agree that intervention should generally occur in incidents of GBV, indicating that there is an opportunity to target education campaigns at young men to be able to resist the trend towards declining gender equitable attitudes with age. It is recommended that local conceptualisations and vernacular associated with relationships and emotions that cause or prevent violence should be used in planned programs. Issues that require urgent attention are clear guidelines in local vernacular about what physical abuse constitutes DV according to the law and what constitutes sexual violence and rape, particularly within marriage.

## **Conclusion**

This research finds that gender-inequitable attitudes increase with age, and that greater education does not have any discernible impact on this. This research has also shown that abrupt changes since national independence in 2002 have created many challenges for Timorese communities and customary practices. While gender equality and equity has been broadly accepted, understandings are often superficial and families find it difficult to implement these new concepts at the household level and in intimate family relations. A contradiction exists between national and local policy and practice which is reflected in young men’s in principle acceptance of gender equality but a lack of acceptance of change in gender relations in their own lives. There is a preference for the maintenance of traditional values which confer on them power and status attributed to masculinity and age.

Evidence from this research suggests that male teenagers are generally more open to equal status for their female peers than older youth, and there is no evidence that increased years of education promotes a greater understanding of gender equality and rights. However, patriarchal and hierarchical social structures which determine gendered roles and relationships in the broad domains of private and public lives are changing. Further, as national policy concerning gender equality and rights is slowly disseminated and socialised within the population these structures are under pressure to change further.

Gender-inequitable attitudes can be anticipated to be significantly associated with gender-based violence prevalence. Influencing young men’s attitudes to gender equity and intimate partner relationships through programs in schools and other arenas is a priority. While young men state that they accept the rights of young women to equal educational and work opportunities, this is *not* supported by reduced expectations that women must provide domestic services and care within the household, or defer in decision making to the male head of the family. Gender equality appears to be supported as an ideal compatible with current domestic power hierarchies and men’s control in intimate-partner relationships. Greater aspirations of young women in Timor-Leste for more dynamic public roles and for more equity in their families and intimate relations will create conflict if young men and others’ attitudes are not influenced by the new national aspirations for gender equality.

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