MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Violence Against Women in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste: Historical Legacies and Prevention Strategies

verfasst von | submitted by

Linda Marie Lukaschek

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Table of Contents

Abstract (English)

This master thesis offers a systematic, theory-guided analysis of intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention efforts in Timor-Leste, a post-conflict nation marked by high rates of gender-based violence. Grounded in the social-ecological model and situated within public health, the study explores how historical legacies, cultural norms, and structural conditions interact to sustain intimate partner violence, and how these dynamics are addressed – or overlooked – by community-based interventions such as the Nabilan Program, which adapts the Uganda-originated SASA! methodology. By conducting an interpretative qualitative literature review and targeted document analysis, the research identifies key risk factors across individual, relational, community, and societal levels, while critically assessing the contextual fit and theoretical assumptions underlying global prevention models. The findings suggest that while community mobilization initiatives like Nabilan hold potential, their positive impact depends on their ability to engage with Timor-Leste's colonial past, militarized conflict, cultural narratives, and fragile legal infrastructure. The thesis contributes to the scholarly understanding of intimate partner violence in post-conflict contexts by extending the social-ecological model to account for historically, culturally and structurally shaped dimensions of power, and it offers practical ideas for designing culturally sensitive interventions.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit bietet eine systematische, theoriegeleitete Analyse der Präventionsbemühungen gegen Partnerschaftsgewalt in Timor-Leste, einem Post-Konflikt-Land mit hohen Raten an geschlechtsspezifischer Gewalt. Auf der Grundlage des sozial-ökologischen Modells und im Rahmen öffentlicher Gesundheit („public health") untersucht die Studie, wie historische Hinterlassenschaften, kulturelle Normen und strukturelle Bedingungen zusammenwirken, um Partnerschaftsgewalt aufrechtzuerhalten, und wie diese Dynamiken durch gemeinschaftsbasierte Interventionen wie das Nabilan-Programm, das die aus Uganda stammende SASA!-Methodik adaptiert, angegangen – oder übersehen -werden. Durch eine interpretative qualitative Literaturanalyse und eine gezielte Dokumentenanalyse werden die wichtigsten Risikofaktoren auf individueller, relationaler, gemeinschaftlicher und gesellschaftlicher Ebene identifiziert und gleichzeitig die kontextuelle Passung und die theoretischen Annahmen, die globalen Präventionsmodellen zugrunde liegen, kritisch bewertet. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Initiativen zur Gemeinschaftsmobilisierung wie Nabilan zwar Potenzial haben, ihre positive Wirkung jedoch von ihrer Fähigkeit abhängt,

sich mit der kolonialen Vergangenheit Timor-Lestes, dem militarisierten Konflikt, den kulturellen Normen und der fragilen rechtlichen Infrastruktur auseinanderzusetzen. Die Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zum wissenschaftlichen Verständnis von Partnerschaftsgewalt in Post-Konflikt-Kontexten, indem sie das sozial-ökologische Modell um historisch, kulturell und strukturell geprägte Dimensionen der Macht erweitert und praktische Ideen für die Gestaltung kultursensibler Interventionen liefert.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACBIT	Asosiasaun Chega Ba Ita
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AJAR	Asia Justice and Rights
APODETI	Associação Popular Democrática Timorense
APSC-TL	Asia Pacific Support Collective for Timor-Leste
CAVR	Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation *(Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste)*
CBA	Community-Based Approaches
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEDOVIP	Center for Domestic Violence Prevention
CMs	Community Mobilizers
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
FOKUPERS	Women's Communication Forum *(Forum Komunikasi Petempuan)*
FRETILIN	Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor *(Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente)*
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GMPTL	Women's Parliamentary Group of Timor-Leste
HANSIP	Civil Defense Force *(Organisasi Pertahanan Sipil)*
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IMAGE	Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
KB Programme	Program Keluarga Berencana

KKN	Corruption, Collusion and Nepotism
KOKOSA!	Komesa, Konxiénsia, Suporta, Asaun
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Inter, Queer
LMICs	Low-and Middle Income Countries
MSSI	Ministry for Social Solidarity and Inclusion
MVP	Mentors in Violence Prevention
NAP-GBV	National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence
NeNaMu	Ne'on Nain ba Mudansa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPMT	Popular Organization of East Timorese Women *(Organização Popular de Mulheres Timor)*
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
SASA!	Start, Awareness, Support, Action
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEII	Secretary of State for Equality and Inclusion
SEPI	Office of the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality
TAF	The Asia Foundation
UDT	União Democrática Timorense
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNMISET	United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor
UNMIT	United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor
UNTAET	United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

WHO   World Health Organization

1. Introduction

According to the WHO (2018), almost one in three women – about 736 million women - have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner, or sexual violence from someone else, during their lifetime (WHO ix). Defined as physical, sexual, psychological or emotional harm enacted by a current or former partner, intimate partner violence (IPV) is now recognized as both a pervasive human rights violation and a preventable public health crisis: it increases illness and early death and swells legal and medical costs (OECD 14; Cardenas 1; Wagman et al. 1391). Once dismissed as a private or family matter, intimate partner violence has now been re-cast as a preventable public health priority, which introduces a "broader, population-oriented view, focusing on the community as a whole", thereby improving an understanding of violence in all its forms through connecting the dots (Howe and Alpert 276-278). Despite four decades of research, current research on how large-scale social factors, like poverty, gender inequality, and conflict, translate into everyday patterns of abuse – especially in settings where the population faces significant health challenges and regions facing limited financial, human, and physical resources to address these challenges – is still inconclusive since context-specific approaches to analysing these factors are rarely made. This thesis responds to this gap by offering a systematic, theory-guided analysis aiming to clarify these multilevel factors (historical, cultural, and structural) and their implications for prevention programs.

Understanding how such violence persists demands a wide analytic lens – one that embeds individual acts of abuse within the social environments that enable them. The social-ecological[1] model, originally developed by Russian-born US psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 and later-on adapted by various scholars like social epidemiologist Lori Heise in 1999, can provide such a lens: the model locates intimate partner violence within four mutually reinforcing layers – individual, relationship, community and society – each encompassing interacting risk and protective factors (Wagman et al. 1392-1393). Research supports this layered causality: prior trauma, substance abuse, and economic stress heighten personal vulnerability; unequal power and conflict dynamics within couples transmit risk interpersonally; community norms that valorise male dominance legitimize violence; and macro-structures such as gender inequality, weak legal regimes and conflict legacies entrench

---

[1] As Stokols explains, the "term ecology refers to the study of the relationships between organisms and their environments" (285). Further, early studies on how plants and animals interact with their natural habitats were later expanded to include research on human communities and environments in sociology, psychology, and public health (Stokols 285).

those norms in everyday life (Blanchfield et al. 5; Whitzman 53-58; 62; 93). This multi-layered perspective not only deepens our understanding of the issue but also supports the development of comprehensive interventions that target risk and protective factors at various social levels (Stokols 283; Casey et al. 231). However, to understand how these layered forces interact in practice, and to identify levers for disrupting them, we must ground social-ecological theories in settings where historical, cultural, and structural drivers (e.g. insufficient legal reforms and health services) are amplified. Such contexts not only expose the model's explanatory limits but also test its utility for designing context-sensitive prevention strategies where they are needed most.

One such context is Timor-Leste, a post-conflict[2] nation of 1.3 million in Southeast Asia. Due to conflict legacies, entrenched gender[3] hierarchies and constrained state capacity, the country faces challenges seen across other low- and middle-income countries (LMCs) which positions the country as a highly relevant case for understanding and preventing intimate partner violence (Da Dalt 301). The *Nabilan Baseline Study* (2015), conducted by The Asia Foundation, reported that 59% of ever-partnered women aged 15-49 reported having experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence, 55% emotional abuse and 43% economic abuse[4] (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 1). Another study, namely the 'Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey' from 2009-2010, places lifetime intimate partner violence at 38% - well above the 30% global mean (Costa and Sharp 115-116). Translated to a population of just over 1.3 million, these percentages mean that tens of thousands of women are subjected to violence, severe enough to jeopardize household stability, public health and national development goals. The combination of exceptionally high rates of violence, limited response capacity by different stakeholders, e.g. government bodies, community members and judiciary, and an under-examined social context, therefore, makes Timor-Leste an important case for understanding what scholars have framed as 'global intimate partner violence epidemic'.

---

[2] Nations or societies emerging from recent armed conflict encounter a range of complex challenges. How they address these issues plays a crucial role in determining both the overall well-being of the country after the conflict and the likelihood of it descending back into warfare.

[3] The term 'gender' denotes the roles assigned to males and females based on social constructs. Every society establishes distinct behavioural expectations for men and women, though these norms vary greatly between cultures (Cristalis and Scott 176).

[4] Economic abuse refers to "[m]aintaining total control over financial resources, withholding access to money, and/or forbidding attendance at school or employment, among others" (UN Women "Types of Violence Against Women and Girls").

The extreme levels of partner violence documented above are partially rooted in Timor-Leste's long experience of foreign rule and conflict (Meiksin et al. 1339). Under Portuguese colonial rule (1515-1975) - which changed over time considering the long period of 400 years, thus the implications for Timorese women's realities also changed - forced labour, mission schools, and a strict Catholic code placed Timorese women under formal male guardianship (Cristalis and Scott 101; Niner 230-232; Niner and Loney 879). The Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) then normalized armed control: soldiers and local militias used sexual violence both as punishment and reward (Meiksin et al. 1339; Rimmer 841). These diverse historical implications sit at the societal layer of the social-ecological model, as they, each in their certain ways, strengthened ideas of male dominance and force that continue to shape everyday relationships.

Beyond the conflict-shaped past, everyday cultural narratives and weak enforcement regimes still make partner violence appear ordinary. Common sayings, like the Portuguese-era warning "never stick your oar into a fight between husband and wife" or "it's bad with him, but it's worse without him", still reflect the normalization and trivialization of intimate partner violence in everyday discourse, discouraging outside intervention (Nogueira et al. 40). The 'barlake' bride wealth exchange, for instance, reinforces this logic: livestock and cash move from the groom's family to the bride's, casting the wife as a debt to be 'repaid' through obedience and nudging disputes toward informal settlement rather than formal justice (Niner 228; Cristalis and Scott 20). On paper, while Timor-Leste's Constitution formally supports gender equality, and the country has ratified international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and passed a national Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV), actual enforcement and social acceptance of these protections remain limited (Cowan 24; TAF "Community-Based Approaches: Ending Violence Against Women Through Community Action).

Women's material dependence weakens this impunity: many Timorese women, particularly in rural areas, have no independent cash income or land rights, which decreases their ability to leave violent relationships or sustain a case in court (Kovar 243). Situated in the community and societal tiers of the social-ecological model, these intertwined cultural norms and institutional gaps lock the cycle of violence in place when legal reforms like the Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV) and the 2017 land and property law say otherwise (GoTL 77).

Building on these socio-ecological insights, Timor-Leste has experienced the implementation of several community-driven intimate partner violence prevention efforts. The flagship effort

is the Nabilan Program, a partnership between the Australian and Timorese governments implemented by The Asia Foundation (TAF)[5] that has operated since 2014 across both rural 'sucos' and urban neighbourhoods (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). Nabilan fuses school talks, faith-leader dialogues and survivor services with a grassroots mobilization cycle adapted from SASA! – the four-phase 'Start-Awareness-Support-Action' model developed by the NGO Raising Voices in Uganda to spark reflection on power dynamics in intimate relationships (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 9; TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). Community Mobilizers (CMs) and Nabilan team members convene engaging dialogue-based activities to openly discuss issues, strengthen local engagement, work with local churches and create safe spaces for open discussion and reflection to question gender hierarchies and model non-violent alternatives (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14; TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). By engaging diverse stakeholders from families, police, healthcare services, local authorities and NGOs, these programs operationalize the social-ecological model in practice; their actual reach and staying power, however, depends on aspects like the strength of the evidence base, funding and efficient response from government bodies and other stakeholders.

Yet, the knowledge base, apart from the theoretical underpinnings, supporting these prevention efforts is surprisingly shallow. Most published studies (e.g. *The Nabilan Baseline Study* (2015), *The SASA! Study* (2015)) on Nabilan or its SASA! roots examine short-run attitude shifts among members of Timorese and Ugandan communities, especially men, in a handful of pilot communities; few track lasting behavioural outcomes. Where overall data do exist, findings are mixed: some surveys link lowered acceptance of wife-beating to program exposure, but rigorous designs that isolate causality are rare and sample sizes remain small (Whitaker et al. 295-296). Some critiques emphasize this evidence base. Warrier (2009) argues that many evaluations simply graft 'one-size-fits-all' indicators from global toolkits onto single countries, overlooking how historical, structural, and cultural factors mediate change, which makes the evaluation of their effectiveness even more important (Warrier 81-82; Cardenas 1; OECD 14). Furthermore, current evaluations often neglect how Timor-Leste's colonial legacies – from Portuguese-era patriarchal norms to Indonesia's militarized governance – and post-conflict masculinities shape intervention outcomes, risking misalignment with local realities (Warrier 82). As a result, core claims about shifting power risk to go untested from program manuals

---

[5] The Asia Foundation is a non-profit international development organization with the aim of improving lives across Asia focusing on women's empowerment, economic development, and regional cooperation.

into policy briefs, while questions about long-term durability, intergenerational impact and equity across rural-urban or linguistic lines remain unanswered (Kovar 209; 243; Swaine 780-781; Warrier 79). In short, the intervention landscape has outpaced the scholarship tasked with validating it, leaving practitioners and donors to act largely on conviction rather than cumulative evidence. These layered gaps, rooted in historical legacies, cultural norms and a sparse empirical record, highlight the need for a systematic socio-ecological synthesis that can illuminate how prevention models function within Timor-Leste's unique context and guide more effective, context-sensitive strategies.

Taken together, the fragmentary evaluations just outlined expose a scholarly deficit. At the conceptual level, many programs still graft one-size-fits-all indicators onto diverse settings, flattening colonial legacies and local gender economies into universal checkboxes (Warrier 81-85). Empirically, the record is thin: most studies sample only a handful of communities and report mixed or inconclusive effects on behaviour change (Heise vii; Brush and Miller 1641-1642; Flood 209-218). Analytically, few accounts integrate insights from all four layers of the social-ecological model, even though effective prevention must engage communities as active agents across multiple social tiers (Casey et al. 231; Stokols 283). As a result, we still lack a coherent picture of how Timor-Leste's post-conflict history, cultural logics and Catholic-inflected gender norms shape the mechanics and limits of contemporary intimate partner violence prevention interventions. To date, no study has systematically synthesized this scattered evidence through a combined socio-ecological and public health lens, leaving a significant gap in research surrounding evidence-based violence prevention.

Responding to this unmet need for a systematic, socio-ecological and post-colonial synthesis, I conduct a review of community-based intimate partner violence prevention initiatives in Timor-Leste – primarily the Nabilan Program and its SASA!-derived approach – to map how well they engage the historical legacies, structural and cultural underpinnings that sustain violence. The guiding research question reads as follows:

What historical, cultural, and structural factors contribute to intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste, and how are these addressed through community-based prevention efforts like the Nabilan program?

To support this inquiry, several sub-questions have been developed to explore specific dimensions of the problem: *How do historical legacies shape post-conflict gender norms and patterns of intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste? In what ways does a public health lens*

and the social-ecological approach help in identifying and analysing the layered risk factors for intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste? What challenges arise in translating global prevention models like SASA! to the specific socio-cultural context of Timor-Leste, and how has the Nabilan program addressed these challenges? What are the documented outcomes and limitations of the Nabilan program in contributing to primary prevention and long-term change? Together, these questions direct the review's search strategy and analytical framework, serving as an initial step toward addressing the thesis questions. A more comprehensive understanding will require further research, in particular with regard to how intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste has evolved over time in response to changes in history and other factors.

This study uses an interpretative, qualitative literature-review methodology to map the landscape of community-based intimate partner violence prevention in Timor-Leste, as well as to understand the historical, structural, and cultural dynamics shaping both violence and its prevention. One the one hand, a literature review synthesizes peer-reviewed articles, edited volumes, review articles and grey literature (research and information produced by organizations outside of academic publishing channels, e.g. reports, evaluations) published from 2002 (marking the restoration of independence in Timor-Leste) through 2024, in English and German. Sources were identified in multiple academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, the National Library of Medicine, u:search and ResearchGate. Primary sources (program reports, evaluations, policy briefs, etc.) were accessed via official UN websites, the Government of Timor-Leste and leading organizations like Raising Voices (SASA!) and The Asia Foundation (Nabilan). A snowball sampling method was also used to trace citations and expand the body of relevant literature.

The study's theoretical framework is guided by scholars like Heidi Stöckl and Susan Sorenson, who are professors in the field of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, focusing their research on intimate partner violence as a public health and social policy issue. Meghan Howe and Elaine Alpert from the School of Public Health focus, similarly, on public health strategies to address intimate partner violence. Lori Heise, professor of gender, violence and health at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health focuses on gender equity and the prevention of violence against women and children. Further, Jackson Katz, educator and co-founder of 'Mentors in Violence Prevention', puts his focus on the bystander intervention approach, while Michael Flood, professor at Queensland University of Technology, does

research on men, masculinities, and violence prevention. Lori Michau is the co-founder of Raising Voices and developed the SASA! community mobilization methodology.

Moreover, other literature guiding this thesis, in particular Chapter 4, includes the work of Sara Niner, who is an interdisciplinary researcher and lecturer at the Monash University, and who focuses her research on gender and international development, particularly in post-conflict settings. Susan Harris Rimmer is a professor of law at the Griffith University, primarily doing research on gender equality and transitional justice. Last but not least, Rebecca Meiksin, who is a public health researcher at the University of Washington, is an expert in reproductive health and gender-based violence.

On the other hand, a targeted document analysis was conducted on Nabilan Program files such as baseline and mid-term evaluations, annual progress reports, training manuals, and on key legal-policy instruments (the 2010 Law Against Domestic Violence, National Action Plans on Gender-Based Violence 2017-2021 and 2022-2027, Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030) to anchor theory in practice. These texts were interrogated for (i) how SASA!'s four-phase model was translated to the local Timorese context, (ii) the institutional enablers and constraints of the program encountered, and (iii) any quantitative and qualitative outcome evidence. Findings from the literature review were cross-referenced with insights drawn from program and policy documents to look for convergence or contradiction, and both were interpreted through a public health lens attentive to how structure, culture and intervention interact across the social-ecological model.

The resulting synthesis, organized with a social-ecological framework, makes it possible to identify which risk factors, namely historical, structural and cultural, contribute to the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste, and further, identify where more research is needed. Conceptually, the thesis applies the well-established social-ecological model to post-colonial and intersectional issues, showing how colonial rule, militarization and cultural norms operate as macro-level 'risk structures' that filter down through community and relational layers. In doing so, it offers a modest extension of the model, one that foregrounds historical power relations when assessing norm-change programs such as SASA! and Nabilan. This integrated lens also helps to clarify what 'power' means in settings where religious authority, customary law and donor agendas coexist, which enriches the global literature on gender-transformative prevention.

For practitioners and policymakers, particularly The Asia Foundation's Nabilan team, governmental sectors of Timor-Leste and international donors, the review provides context-specific insights for understanding violence against women and adapting global prevention frameworks. It highlights the importance of embedding concrete cultural values in curriculum design, and it emphasizes the need for multi-year monitoring that can detect whether early attitude shifts translate into lasting behavioural change. More broadly, the study underlines the importance of grounding primary prevention in survivors' lived realities and in the structural conditions that shape those realities.

By also questioning development practice with a gender-sensitive, power-aware analysis, the thesis speaks directly to my master program's stated aim of interrogating global inequalities and fostering context sensitive interventions. Thus, this research aligns closely with the interdisciplinary objectives of the master's program in International Development at the University of Vienna. The program fosters critical engagement with global inequalities, post-colonial power structures, and the intersections of development, gender, and social justice. By addressing intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste, this study contributes to debates central to development studies. Lastly, by advancing understanding of violence prevention in post-conflict societies such as Timor-Leste, the study exemplifies the practical application of the program's principles and methodologies to contextually responsive research.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 ("Theoretical Framework") establishes the conceptual foundation by framing violence against women (VAW) as a multidimensional public health issue. It introduces the social-ecological model to explain how violence operates across individual, relational, community, and societal levels, outlines various prevention strategies, and highlights in particular the role of community mobilization within the prevention field. Chapter 3 ("From Theory to Practice") applies this framework by analysing two real-world case studies: the SASA! model in Uganda and the Nabilan Program in Timor-Leste. These illustrate how theoretical models translate into practice and the importance of culturally grounded, community-led interventions. Chapter 4 ("Understanding Violence Against Women in Timor-Leste") provides a contextual analysis of Timor-Leste, examining historical legacies, gender relations, cultural narratives, and structural factors influencing the prevalence of intimate partner violence. Chapter 5 ("Discussion") synthesizes these findings by exploring how historical, cultural, and structural factors shape violence against women in the Timorese context and critically evaluates the adaptation and limitations of community-based prevention models like Nabilan. It also reflects on the broader theoretical and practical challenges of

preventing violence against women in diverse contexts. Finally, Chapter 6 ("Conclusion") summarizes the key insights, assesses the impact of current interventions, and proposes recommendations for future research and policy development.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter lays the groundwork for understanding violence against women (VAW) as a multidimensional public health issue, presenting theoretical insights that will inform this master thesis and its study of prevention strategies. The framework will synthesize perspectives from public health and social ecology, offering a lens for examining the root causes and structural drivers of violence against women. By integrating multidisciplinary approaches, the framework illustrates the systematic nature of violence against women and explores how intersecting societal, cultural, and economic factors perpetuate this violence and create barriers to achieving gender equity. The chapter is structured into three sections: The first section will explore the recognition of violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence (IPV), as a public health challenge, while examining historical shifts in public health priorities and the emergence of violence prevention as a central focus within this field. Building on this, the next section introduces the social-ecological model as a framework for understanding the various drivers of violence against women. Lastly, the third and fourth sections outline key approaches to violence against women prevention, with a focus on community-based mobilization efforts in preventing this violence.

Together, these sections provide a theoretical foundation for analysing violence against women prevention efforts, emphasizing the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration and cultural sensitivity in addressing this complex issue.

2.1. Violence Against Women as a Public Health Issue

Violence has increasingly been recognized as a critical public health issue, though this acknowledgment is relatively recent. As Dahlberg and Mercy (2009) note, "[v]iolence is now clearly recognized as a public health problem," but just a few decades ago, the association between violence and health was rarely made (Dahlberg and Mercy 1). Several developments have contributed to this paradigm shift, including changing mortality trends, rising behavioural health challenges, and growing international advocacy for addressing violence as a public health matter (Dahlberg and Mercy 1; 2).

In the early 20th century, public health initiatives were predominantly centred on addressing infectious diseases, during which illnesses like tuberculosis and pneumonia accounted for the highest mortality rates (Dahlberg and Mercy 1). By the mid-century, advancements in vaccination programs, improvements in sanitation, and the development of medical treatments had dramatically curtailed the prevalence of these diseases which prompted a realignment of public health priorities (Dahlberg and Mercy 1). During this period, homicide and suicide emerged as prominent causes of death, particularly among specific demographic groups, such as young people and minority communities in the United States (Dahlberg and Mercy 1). By 1965, these issues had consistently ranked among the top 15 causes of mortality, with suicide rates among adolescents and young adults tripling between 1950 and 1990 (Dahlberg and Mercy 1). These patterns generated widespread alarm and emphasized the need for innovative approaches that moved beyond conventional criminal justice strategies.

The recognition of intimate partner violence (IPV) and child maltreatment as social and health concerns highlighted the importance of adopting a public health perspective (Dahlberg and Mercy 2). During the 1960s and 1970s, these types of violence came to be understood not merely as criminal offenses but as behaviours influenced by societal, cultural, and psychological factors, which resulted in an understanding that collaborative, multi-sectoral solutions are necessary (Dahlberg and Mercy 2). The demonstrated success of public health strategies in addressing behavioural issues such as smoking and alcohol abuse encouraged the application of similar approaches to violence prevention (Dahlberg and Mercy 2). These efforts were solidified in 1979 with the Surgeon General's report, *Healthy People*, which identified violence prevention as a key public health concern, later incorporating it into measurable objectives within the *Promoting Health/Preventing Disease* framework (Dahlberg and Mercy 2).

Globally, the late 20th century marked an important shift in recognizing violence as a critical public health concern. In 1996, the World Health Assembly adopted Resolution WHA49.25 that identified violence as "a leading worldwide public health problem" (Dahlberg and Mercy 6). This resolution directed the World Health Organization (WHO) to analyse and document the global impact of violence, evaluate prevention strategies, and encourage intervention efforts at both international and national scales (Dahlberg and Mercy 6). Building on this momentum, the WHO established the 'Department of Injuries and Violence Prevention' in 2000 and

released the influential *World Report on Violence and Health* in 2002, which continues to serve as a foundational resource for global public health initiatives (Dahlberg and Mercy 6).

Violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence, constitutes a critical aspect of the broader public health crisis. The WHO defines intimate partner violence as "any behaviour by a current or former male intimate partner, [...] that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm" (Stöckl and Sorenson 278). This issue is alarmingly pervasive: by 2018, global data indicated that one in four women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives, with rates considerably higher in low- and middle-income countries (LMCs) (Stöckl and Sorenson 279). The WHO's "Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence" (2005) offered essential insights into the prevalence of such violence across diverse regions, revealing that 15% to 71% of women in surveyed countries, including Ethiopia, Brazil, and Japan, had endured physical or sexual violence by a partner during their lifetime (Stöckl and Sorenson 279). Moreover, intimate partner violence has far-reaching consequences for women's physical, mental, and reproductive well-being (Stöckl and Sorenson 280). Research dating back to 2001 has consistently shown that women subjected to such violence face heightened risks of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance dependency, unintended pregnancies, miscarriages, low birth weight in infants, and sexually transmitted infections (Stöckl and Sorenson 280). These findings illustrate the need for public health systems to approach intimate partner violence not only as a social and legal problem but also as a factor influencing overall health outcomes.

In this context, efforts by global women's movements and feminist organizations have played an important role in bringing attention to intimate partner violence as both a public health and human rights issue (Stöckl and Sorenson 282; 284). Landmark events such as the 'International Conference on Population and Development' held in Cairo in 1994 and the Beijing Declaration in 1995 highlighted the eradication of violence against women as fundamental to achieving gender equality and sustainable development (Stöckl and Sorenson 281). This advocacy laid the groundwork for the inclusion of eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls as a key target in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 (Stöckl and Sorenson 281). The WHO reinforced this agenda in 2016 by adopting a global plan of action in order to highlight the essential role of public health systems in preventing violence against women and providing support to survivors (Stöckl and Sorenson 281).

However, achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals target of eradicating violence against women remains an ongoing challenge (Stöckl and Sorenson 278). Obstacles such as insufficient funding, social norms that reinforce violence, and weak enforcement of existing laws and policies continue to impede progress. Nevertheless, recognizing violence against women as a public health concern has led to advancements, including the collection of globally comparable data and the implementation of evidence-based prevention initiatives (Stöckl and Sorenson 278; 279). Furthermore, adopting a public health framework to address violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence, puts increased focus on prevention, intervention, and the enhancement of overall population well-being (Howe and Alpert 277). This approach integrates multiple disciplines, fosters collaboration, and prioritizes prevention to improve physical, mental, and social health outcomes through systematic and enduring measures. As Howe and Alpert (2009) explain, public health is intrinsically interdisciplinary, grounded in both advocacy and evidence-based practices, and committed to promoting population health by addressing the conditions essential for individuals to live healthy lives (Howe and Alpert 276).

Overall, the public health framework consists of four key steps: surveillance, identifying risk factors, developing interventions, and disseminating successful strategies (Howe and Alpert 275). These components are vital in addressing intimate partner violence, which affects not only the immediate victims but also those indirectly involved, such as children, family members, and broader communities (Wagman et al. 1391). As discussed earlier, the repercussions of intimate partner violence include severe health and social consequences, such as mental health struggles, diminished productivity, and substantial economic burdens on society (Wagman et al. 1391). These effects highlight the need for a population-focused strategy that extends beyond individual care to address the systemic issues that perpetuate violence.

Next, preventing the effects of intimate partner violence is central to the public health approach, which emphasizes prevention across three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention focuses on stopping intimate partner violence before it begins by addressing underlying causes, such as harmful gender norms and inequality, while teaching skills for fostering healthy relationships (Howe and Alpert 281). Strategies like school-based violence prevention programs and initiatives that promote male allyship are, for instance, key in challenging societal attitudes and driving long-term cultural change within primary prevention

efforts (Howe and Alpert 281). Approaching the root causes of intimate partner violence is widely regarded as the most sustainable way to reduce its prevalence, particularly in contexts where such violence is culturally normalized or accepted. Thus, transforming harmful social norms is crucial to these efforts. Heise et al. (2005) point out the prevalence of beliefs condoning intimate partner violence, and note that in some regions, up to 90% of women accept that a husband is justified in beating his wife under certain conditions (Heise et al. 1283). These statistics highlight the urgency of programs aimed at reshaping gender norms and empowering women in societies where such views are deeply ingrained (Heise et al. 1283).

While primary prevention efforts focus on understanding violence and its causes, secondary prevention services are provided "as a means of detecting an otherwise unapparent problem early in its course, so as to prevent later or more severe complications" (Howe and Alpert 280). Secondary prevention strategies can also be "provided to individuals who previously faced a crisis situation and are now trying to manage its chronic manifestations, thus avoiding more serious complications in the future" (Howe and Alpert 280). However, secondary prevention efforts "do not prevent a given problem from occurring in the first place" (Howe and Alpert 281). Lastly, the tertiary response is an "immediate response to crisis, designed to prevent a severe outcome" (Howe and Alpert 280). Tertiary intervention strategies for intimate partner violence, for example, include emergency shelter admissions, law enforcement responses, and crisis hotline services (Howe and Alpert 280).

While progress has been made in acknowledging and addressing intimate partner violence as a public health concern, challenges persist. Primary prevention initiatives often encounter obstacles such as limited funding and the difficulty of evaluating long-term outcomes (Howe and Alpert 281). Additionally, ingrained social norms, economic disparities, and restricted access to support services continue to impede advancements (Heise et al. 1283). To foster change, greater emphasis must be placed on public awareness campaigns, gender-inclusive policies, and comprehensive prevention strategies (Mitchell and James 13). These efforts should also incorporate culturally sensitive methods that align with the needs of the diverse populations affected by intimate partner violence in order to ensure interventions are both accessible and inclusive (Howe and Alpert 277).

At large, the public health framework is particularly effective in tackling intimate partner violence because it facilitates collaboration across various disciplines and sectors and hence, encourages cooperation among practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and communities

(Howe and Alpert 276). In this context, Howe and Alpert (2009) highlight that public health brings together a wide range of stakeholders, including governmental bodies, private organizations, and civil society groups, to design culturally appropriate and evidence-based strategies for addressing intimate partner violence (Howe and Alpert 276). This collective approach is essential for addressing the complex interplay of factors contributing to intimate partner violence, such as economic disparities and gender norms. By integrating evidence-based strategies with community[6] involvement and advocacy efforts, public health professionals can craft solutions to decrease violence against women and build healthier, safer communities (Howe and Alpert 277). As Heise et al. (2005) stress, "there is nothing 'natural' or inevitable about men's violence toward women," and further, challenging societal norms and empowering women are fundamental to the prevention of intimate partner violence (Heise et al. 1283).

2.2. The Social-Ecological Model in Violence Prevention

The social-ecological model is a widely recognized framework for understanding and addressing violence prevention in public health. Initially developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, and later-on described and adapted by scholars like McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, and Glanz in 1988 and Heise in 1998, the model was introduced to illustrate the various levels of influence on individual behaviour (Howe and Alpert 284). Over time, it has been adapted for public health use to categorize and address the complex and interconnected factors that drive violence (Howe and Alpert 284). The model emphasizes that violence rarely stems from a single cause but rather arises from the interplay of influences at multiple levels (Howe and Alpert 284). This multi-layered approach makes it particularly effective for creating comprehensive, prevention-oriented strategies to address violence as a public health concern (Howe and Alpert 285). More importantly, the social-ecological model encompasses multiple interconnected levels of influence: individual (or intrapersonal), relational (or interpersonal), community, institutional, and societal (Howe and Alpert 284). Each level reflects distinct factors that interact to shape behaviours and risks (Howe and Alpert 284).

---

[6] A community consists of individuals with diverse characteristics who are connected through social relationships, share similar viewpoints, and participate together in activities within specific geographic areas or settings (TAF "Nabilan Prevention Toolkit – Fact Sheet 3" 1).

At the individual level, personal characteristics such as knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and biological traits—including factors like age, income, education, and a history of violence—play a role in influencing behaviour and determining an individual's likelihood of becoming either a perpetrator or a victim of violence (Krug et al. 1085). For instance, studies have consistently identified a connection between substance abuse and personality disorders with a higher propensity for engaging in intimate partner violence (Krug et al. 1085). Furthermore, certain attributes, such as aggression or low self-esteem, can elevate the risk of violent behaviour (Krug et al. 1085). Krug et al. (2002) also highlight that interventions targeting individuals often promote positive attitudes and behaviours among children and adolescents while offering pathways to modify the actions of individuals already exhibiting violent tendencies (Krug et al. 1085).

At the interpersonal level, the model explores how close relationships, such as those with family members, friends, or peers, shape behaviours and influence the risk of violence (Howe and Alpert 285). These social interactions can either reduce or increase the likelihood of violence occurring. In the context of intimate partner violence, factors such as marital conflict, coercion, and manipulative behaviours within relationships play an important role in escalating risks (Howe and Alpert 285). Moreover, relationships provide a critical lens for understanding violent behaviours, as elements like power imbalances, substance misuse, and unresolved trauma often fuel abusive dynamics (Ranganathan et al. 2). According to Ranganathan et al. (2021), individuals bring their unique genetic predispositions, temperament, and prior experiences of abuse or trauma into relationships (Ranganathan et al. 2). Together, partners create a dynamic shaped by communication styles, conflict resolution strategies, perceptions of gender roles, and power inequalities (Ranganathan et al. 2). As a result, interventions focused on relationships aim to improve family interactions, address unhealthy peer influences, and promote positive communication patterns (Krug et al. 1085).

Expanding to the community level, this dimension considers the impact of wider social networks, educational institutions, workplaces, and neighbourhoods (Krug et al. 1085). Key factors such as poverty, the prevalence of illicit drug activities, and fragile social connections have been identified as central drivers of violence within communities (Krug et al. 1085). Additionally, cultural norms and societal expectations, particularly those tied to gender roles, play a vital role in shaping perceptions of violence and responses to it (Krug et al. 1085). For example, well-established community attitudes toward marriage and divorce can heavily

influence a survivor's decision to remain in or leave an abusive relationship (Howe and Alpert 285). Here, community-based initiatives have the potential to mobilize collective action or prioritize support and care for survivors (Krug et al. 1086). Furthermore, programs aimed at raising awareness and providing education within communities can drive cultural change, reducing the acceptance of violence and encouraging individuals to seek assistance (Krug et al. 1087). Increasingly, community-driven approaches are recognized as a component of comprehensive efforts to address violence against women (Krug et al. 1086).

At the institutional level, the focus shifts to the role of organizations, policies, and procedures in shaping behaviour (Howe and Alpert 284). Examples include workplace policies aimed at preventing harassment, school-based programs designed to address violence, and the provision of health services for survivors (Krug et al. 1085). These institutional interventions are typically intended to establish structural support for individuals who are at risk of or have experienced violence (Howe and Alpert 284). Additionally, institutional strategies can encompass legal reforms, public health initiatives, and educational campaigns that influence broader societal attitudes and behaviours.

Lastly, the societal level examines the overarching cultural and structural factors that either promote or deter violence (Krug et al. 1085). These include societal and cultural norms surrounding gender roles, the efficiency and responsiveness of the criminal justice system, the adequacy of the social welfare infrastructure, and broader economic and political conditions such as income inequality and political instability (Krug et al. 1085). Societal perceptions, for example, that frame intimate partner violence as a private issue rather than a criminal act reinforce cycles of abuse and discourage victims from seeking assistance (Heise et al. 1283). Further, systemic issues such as patriarchy[7], poverty, and insufficient access to mental health care contribute to the enduring prevalence of intimate partner violence (Krug et al. 1085).

Moving forward, the social-ecological model builds on ecological theories that explore the dynamic relationship between individuals and their environments. Stokols (1996) emphasizes that human health is influenced not only by individual behaviours and genetic factors but also

---

[7] Patriarchy refers to a social system characterized by male dominance and the subordination of women within the broader society (Cristalis and Scott 176).

by broader environmental elements, such as social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Stokols 285). Stokols (1996) further characterizes social ecology as a broad framework for examining the links between personal and environmental influences and therefore provides a holistic approach to health promotion and violence prevention (Stokols 285). The model recognizes that external conditions like income inequality, community instability, and inadequate access to social services can profoundly impact individual behaviours and overall health (Stokols 285). This systematic approach enables practitioners to identify both risk and protective factors at various levels which can then facilitate the development of targeted interventions that address these factors simultaneously (Stokols 287).

According to Stokols (1996), an advantage of the social-ecological model is its ability to merge strategies aimed at changing individual behaviour with initiatives to enhance physical and social environments (Stokols 287). For instance, efforts to address intimate partner violence could include programs designed to shift personal attitudes about violence, community-driven campaigns to challenge harmful gender norms, and policy measures to reinforce legal protections for survivors (Whitaker et al. 300). By targeting both individual actions and systemic factors, this model ensures that prevention strategies are both holistic and enduring (Stokols 287). Moreover, Stokols (1996) highlights the value of cross-level analysis in capturing the interactions between individual and environmental influences (Stokols 287). This approach highlights how personal experiences with violence are shaped by broader community and societal contexts, such as the availability of support systems or the persistence of patriarchal norms (Stokols 285; 286). More importantly, another key strength of the social-ecological model lies in its interdisciplinary nature. As Stokols (1996) explains, this framework connects diverse fields such as psychology, sociology, and public health which offers a comprehensive perspective on understanding and preventing violence (Stokols 286). For example, ecological analyses draw on systems theory to investigate how various environmental contexts—like households, workplaces, and communities—interact to shape both individual and group health outcomes (Stokols 286). This layered structure enables researchers to explore how immediate factors, such as family dynamics, intersect with broader influences, such as national policies or global economic trends (Stokols 286). By avoiding the limitations of focusing on a single level of analysis, this approach ensures that interventions are informed by a nuanced understanding of the interconnected factors driving violence (Stokols 287).

Finally, the social-ecological model serves as an important tool for fostering equity and addressing disparities in violence prevention initiatives. Stokols (1996) stresses that interventions should be tailored to address the challenges faced by specific population groups, such as low-income families or marginalized communities, who often experience heightened vulnerability to violence due to systemic inequalities (Stokols 289). Moreover, community-based efforts to prevent intimate partner violence in underserved areas must consider the particular barriers faced by women, such as limited access to legal and social support services (Stokols 289). Next, Stokols (1996) highlights the importance of integrating both active (behavioural) and passive (environmental) strategies in prevention programs (Stokols 290). While behavioural interventions aim to reshape individual attitudes and actions, environmental strategies focus on creating enabling conditions that promote healthier choices, for example, by instituting workplace harassment policies or enhancing neighbourhood safety through urban development (Stokols 290).

In sum, this model provides a framework for understanding and preventing violence. By addressing the interplay between individual, relational, community, and societal factors, it offers a multi-level approach that is both systematic and inclusive. The model further emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and its capacity to promote equity in violence prevention efforts. As a tool for public health approaches, the social-ecological model remains essential for creating sustainable solutions to the complex and pervasive problem of violence.

2.3. Types of Prevention Strategies

One strategy within the prevention field of violence against women has been the active involvement of men and boys as allies in addressing gender-based violence (Brush and Miller 1636). Traditionally, the burden of tackling this issue fell largely on women, often emphasizing risk reduction rather than addressing the root causes (Chen et al. 3). However, as Katz (2018) observes, there has been a shift towards primary prevention models that not only involve men but also empower women to take on leadership roles in promoting change (Katz "Bystander Training as Leadership Training" 1757). Initiatives such as 'Mentors in Violence Prevention' (MVP) exemplify this evolution by redefining violence against women as an issue that men must actively challenge which leads to a reassessment of cultural beliefs about masculinity and power (Katz "Bystander Training as Leadership Training" 1760). These programs help men recognize their role as allies rather than perpetrators and counter concerns that interventions

unfairly target them (Chen et al. 4). Research supports this approach, showing that men's willingness to intervene in situations of sexual assault is strongly influenced by their perception of other men's willingness to act, "accounting for 42% of the variance in men's self-reported willingness to do so" (Katz "Bystander Training as Leadership Training" 1762). This insight highlights the importance of creating a collective culture of accountability.

A key component of this strategy is the bystander intervention model, which expands the focus beyond the traditional perpetrator-victim framework by engaging the wider community in prevention efforts (Chen et al. 4). Programs like 'Green Dot' and 'Bringing in the Bystander' equip individuals with the skills to identify and safely intervene in situations where abuse may occur (Chen et al. 4-5). These initiatives seek to cultivate a cultural norm where sexist behaviour is widely condemned (Chen et al. 5). Here, the 'Green Dot' program has demonstrated success in reducing violence rates by empowering communities to be proactive (Chen et al. 4). However, as Katz (2018) points out, the effectiveness of bystander interventions often hinges on their ability to create structured environments where men feel socially supported in standing up against abuse, rather than solely altering their perceptions of gender-based violence (Katz "Bystander Training as Leadership Training" 1762). Furthermore, as Chen et al. (2024) point out,

> [w]hile research has suggested that interventions targeting masculinity may be more effective than those that ignore the roles that systems of gender inequality play in sexual violence (Jewkes et al., 2015), one challenge that GBV prevention programs targeting men face is resistance and backlash from the very people they hope to reach (Chen et al. 4).

Although bystander intervention programs have been extensively researched, certain difficulties persist. Systematic reviews indicate that these initiatives can enhance participants' willingness to take action and foster prosocial attitudes, yet their measurable impact on reducing sexual assault rates remains inconclusive (Chen et al. 5). Additionally, the prevalence of these programs in specific environments, such as universities and the military, points out the need for wider implementation (Chen et al. 6). To effectively challenge the social norms and structural inequalities that sustain violence against women, it is essential to adapt and expand these interventions across diverse communities and cultural contexts.

Another promising approach to preventing violence against women involves the implementation of so-called gender-transformative strategies. These initiatives seek to challenge and reshape harmful gender norms that contribute to violence by encouraging

participants to critically examine the negative consequences of rigid masculinity (Katz "Bystander Training as Leadership Training" 1768). Programs such as 'MenCare' and 'EngenderHealth's Men as Partners' focus on connecting the redefinition of 'traditional' masculinity with broader efforts toward gender justice (Nardini et al. 13; Katz 236). 'MenCare,' for example, advocates for engaged and nurturing fatherhood as a means of reducing intimate partner violence while promoting gender equality (Nardini et al. 13). These programs also recognize the interconnected nature of violence against women with other forms of gendered abuse, such as bullying and homophobic harassment in order to create a more overlapping approach to addressing gender-based violence (Katz "Bystander Training as Leadership Training" 1767).

Community engagement and advocacy are other essential approaches in preventing violence against women. Efforts that equip local communities with the tools to challenge violence-supportive attitudes and strengthen their capacity for effective response are increasingly viewed as key to sustainable prevention strategies (Flood 214). Community participation is a crucial component of violence prevention, as efforts must go beyond individual and interpersonal levels to address the wider societal factors that enable violence (Flood 214). Flood (2015) underlines the importance of community-driven approaches that encourage local ownership of the issue, engage both formal and informal leaders, and address the broader social conditions that sustain violence (Flood 214). This involves confronting systemic inequalities, shifting harmful cultural norms, and considering intersecting influences such as substance abuse, poverty, and institutional discrimination (Flood 214). For instance, initiatives that control alcohol availability or provide support for alcohol dependency have demonstrated promising results in reducing intimate partner violence (Flood 214).

Similarly, educational initiatives continue to be a fundamental aspect of preventing violence against women. These programs, implemented in schools, workplaces, and community settings, equip participants with the skills to identify and confront violence (Flood 212). South Africa's 'Soul City' has proven effective by combining education with multimedia campaigns to challenge harmful norms and raise awareness of intimate partner violence (Flood 213). Likewise, 'Bringing in the Bystander' has undergone extensive evaluation and demonstrate success in reducing acceptance of rape myths and encourage proactive intervention (Chen et al. 5). However, obstacles remain, including the difficulty of sustaining long-term changes in attitudes and behaviours (Flood 211). While well-established programs like 'Mentors in

Violence Prevention' have helped participants recognize sexual aggression and increased their willingness to intervene, achieving widespread and lasting behavioural change continues to be a complex issue (Chen et al. 5).

Media advocacy serves as another vital instrument in preventing violence against women. By presenting intimate partner violence as a societal concern that demands collective responsibility, media campaigns can influence public attitudes and reinforce values of respect and consent (Flood 213). In this context, Men Can Stop Rape's 'My strength is not for hurting' have successfully combined media messaging with educational programs in schools, therefore encouraging young men to adopt non-violent expressions of masculinity (Flood 213). This approach highlights the positive outcomes of strategic communication in fostering social norms that reject violence (Flood 213). The impact of such campaigns is amplified when integrated with broader community engagement and policy reforms (Flood 214). Additionally, media advocacy initiatives play a key role in encouraging journalists and media organizations to frame intimate partner violence as a widespread social issue that requires proactive intervention, ultimately reshaping the cultural discourse surrounding abuse (Flood 214).

On top of that, policy and legal reforms are also of importance in preventing violence against women by establishing a framework for lasting societal change (Flood 216). Well-designed national and state-level action plans can coordinate various prevention initiatives and allocate necessary resources to support their implementation (Flood 216). Moreover, incorporating gender-based violence prevention into broader development objectives, such as economic growth and public health strategies, can enhance the long-term impact and sustainability of these efforts (Flood 215). For instance, programs like the 'Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity' (IMAGE) demonstrate how addressing gender inequality alongside economic empowerment can lead to meaningful reductions in intimate partner violence (Flood 215).

Despite these advancements, the field of violence against women prevention faces some challenges. Katz (2015) highlights that current initiatives are insufficient in scale and reach to effectively address the widespread nature of the issue (Katz 241). Reducing violence meaningfully requires not only expanding existing programs but also developing innovative strategies that confront deeply rooted power imbalances and societal norms (Katz 235). One crucial yet often overlooked approach is actively involving men as allies in prevention efforts, which calls for a cultural shift in how masculinity is understood and its connection to violence

(Katz 234). Katz (2015) further points out that "[t]he logic behind the premise of engaging men is simple" since men do not only "commit the overwhelming majority of VAW; they also continue to hold the majority of economic and political power, and cultural authority worldwide" (Katz 233). Hence, this work must be rooted in a feminist commitment to gender justice to ensure it aligns with broader goals of equality and empowerment (Katz 237). Moreover, ensuring cultural sensitivity is essential when developing and implementing violence prevention initiatives (Katz 238). Strategies must be tailored to reflect the unique historical, social, and political realities of specific communities, particularly those that have endured colonial oppression, racial discrimination, and systemic marginalization (Katz 238).

Moreover, Katz (2015) asserts that

> the "no-one-size-fits-all" ethos is perhaps most relevant in relation to prevention work with men from marginalized and subordinated populations, including those from communities in both the global North and the global South that have been devastated by centuries of racism, colonial violence, and subjugation (Katz 238).

Further, interventions aimed at addressing violence against women in indigenous populations or post-colonial settings must recognize the compounded effects of historical trauma and socio-economic inequities that contribute to violence (Katz 238). In addition, aligning gender-based violence prevention efforts with broader community objectives—such as curbing street violence, reducing substance abuse, and promoting economic stability—can help create a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that benefits society as a whole (Katz 239).

In sum, preventing violence against women necessitates a comprehensive, intersectional approach that addresses its root causes across individual, relational, community, and societal dimensions. Key strategies include engaging men and boys, fostering gender-equitable norms, and empowering communities to challenge and transform harmful social structures. Despite this, as Katz (2015) highlights, these initiatives must be expanded and sustained through systemic institutional and policy reforms to create meaningful and long-lasting reductions in violence (Katz 241). By embedding these interventions within a broader social-ecological framework, societies may move closer to eliminating violence against women.

2.4. The Role of Community-Based Mobilization Efforts in Preventing Violence

Community mobilization has emerged as a recent strategy in preventing violence against women. Rather than focusing solely on individual or relational factors, this method seeks to

challenge the societal and cultural norms that enable violence to persist. As Lowe et al. (2022) note, "community-based interventions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) can effectively address the harmful social norms that promote or sustain gender inequality and drive VAW" (Lowe et al. 1). In this way, community mobilization can be particularly impactful in confronting the structural inequalities and ingrained beliefs that perpetuate violence. Unlike isolated interventions, it provides a cohesive framework that connects individual efforts into a broader movement for social transformation (Michau 97). This participatory strategy actively involves community members in dismantling harmful norms and power imbalances. As Michau (2007) emphasizes, violence against women is rooted in systemic inequality, and meaningful change requires a sustained effort to reshape the societal environment in which it occurs (Michau 99).

Overall, community-driven interventions stand in contrast to conventional strategies that primarily focus on altering individual behaviours, such as perpetrator rehabilitation or self-defence training for women (Lowe et al. 2). While these approaches may mitigate immediate risks, they have been criticised for failing to address the embedded gender norms that sustain violence (Lowe et al. 2). Here, programs aimed at rehabilitating perpetrators often employ cognitive behavioural therapy, which emphasizes personal behaviour modification but overlooks the broader cultural constructs of masculinity (Lowe et al. 2). Likewise, self-defence initiatives for women have faced scrutiny for placing the burden of prevention on victims rather than fostering collective responsibility (Lowe et al. 2). In contrast, community-centred interventions seek to dismantle societal norms that legitimize violence and uphold male dominance, promoting systemic change rather than individual adaptation (Lowe et al. 2).

At its core, community mobilization seeks to prevent violence by influencing the value systems and environments that tolerate and enable it (Michau 99). In this context, Michau (2007) emphasizes the importance of building a critical mass of individuals and groups who actively reject violence against women, stating that "if enough people from different walks of life are actively supportive of women's rights to live free of violence, the climate in the community can shift from tolerating to rejecting VAW" (Michau 101). Therefore, this approach goes beyond addressing individual acts of violence to focus on the broader social dynamics that sustain inequality (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 4). By engaging communities in a process of critical reflection and dialogue, community mobilization can challenge the normalization of violence against women

and promote positive social norms rooted in equality and respect (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 4). This approach is supported by the public health principle that prevention is a systematic process, often guided by frameworks like the previously mentioned social-ecological model, which provides a roadmap for planning and implementing interventions (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 4). However, as Michau (2012) warns, "working to prevent violence against women without a social justice frame quickly devolves into an impersonal, technical quick fix" (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 3). To be truly progressive, community mobilization must integrate the technical rigor of public health with the ethical commitment of social justice (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 3).

Moving forward, community mobilization consists of several interconnected strategies designed to engage diverse stakeholders across all levels of society (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). These strategies include local activism, media campaigns, advocacy, communication materials, and participatory training programs (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). Each strategy plays a role in challenging harmful norms and promoting positive change. Grassroots initiatives such as community conversations, door-to-door discussions, and public events are essential for fostering critical dialogue and raising awareness about violence against women (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). These activities can then empower individuals to question harmful norms and envision alternative ways of relating to one another (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). Moreover, media plays an essential role in shaping public perceptions and challenging societal attitudes (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). Traditional and new media platforms, including soap operas, films, and radio programs, have also been used to promote messages of equality and non-violence (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6).

Further efforts such as advocacy approaches aim to influence policymakers, community leaders, and institutions to prioritize violence prevention (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). Activities such as petitions,

lobbying, and policy analysis ensure that the issue of violence against women remains on the agenda of key decision-makers (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). Moreover, visual tools like posters, murals, and comics translate complex ideas into accessible and relatable content for community members (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). These materials can help demystify the issues surrounding violence against women and inspire community-wide engagement (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). In addition, interactive workshops and mentoring sessions provide community members with the skills and knowledge needed to lead prevention efforts (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). These programs may also foster critical thinking and equip participants to challenge harmful norms within their own networks (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6). Training sessions can be particularly effective when they reach both men and women equally, ensuring that prevention efforts do not reinforce existing gender inequalities (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 5). By combining these strategies into a cohesive framework, community mobilization can ensure that interventions reach all layers of the ecological model. This kind of approach could be vital for creating the critical mass needed to shift societal norms and sustain long-term change (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 5). This inclusivity then can not only reduce resistance but also foster a sense of shared responsibility which enables communities to work collaboratively toward the elimination of violence.

Furthermore, the concept of 'spheres of influence,' drawn from the social-ecological model, provides a framework for ensuring that interventions reach every layer of the community (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 5). This model identifies key individuals, groups, and institutions that influence societal norms, including community leaders, schools, health systems, and the media (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 5). A mapping exercise based on this model can help organizations identify the stakeholders who must be involved to create a positive impact (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 5). As Michau (2012) notes, "by reaching within and stretching throughout these layers, community mobilization engages sufficient numbers of people to

make a significant influence typically referred to as critical mass" (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 5).

As already mentioned, social norms – the unwritten rules that guide behaviour – are a central focus of community mobilization efforts (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 7). As Lowe et al. (2022) explain, "[s]ocial norms refer to collectively held beliefs about what others believe or do," and these shared beliefs vastly influence individual behaviours, including the use of violence (Lowe et al. 2). In many communities, these norms uphold the acceptance of violence and reinforce patriarchal structures (Lowe et al. 2). To achieve a reduction in violence against women, "negative social norms that perpetuate and condone violence must be replaced by positive social norms that support non-violence, dignity and the rights of women" (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 7). For example, the 'SASA!' program in Uganda aims to disrupt harmful social norms by engaging community members in conversations about power and relationships (Lowe et al. 1). Similarly, participatory group-based programs like 'Stepping Stones' in South Africa and 'Yaari Dosti' in India have demonstrated reductions in men's intimate partner violence perpetration by fostering critical reflections on gender norms and power dynamics (Lowe et al. 1-2).

Having said this, changing social norms requires more than raising awareness. As Michau (2012) observes, "[m]ost people know violence happens and that it is harmful", which is why, the "real effort is needed in helping people connect with the core drivers of power, patriarchy and injustice in a personal and impactful way" (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 7). Community mobilization can achieve this, as Michau argues, by creating spaces of dialogue and reflection, allowing individuals to critically examine their beliefs and behaviours (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 8). It also highlights collective action, as community members work together to challenge the symbolic contexts that normalize violence (Lowe et al. 2). For example, Lowe et al. (2022) assert that social psychologists approach social norms from a different perspective highlighting that "a reduction in violence comes about through challenging symbolic contexts in which it is accepted and normalized" (Lowe et al. 2). Ultimately, primary prevention requires addressing the systemic inequalities that confirm violence, including the lower status of women in relationships, families, and communities (Michau 96). Therefore, community mobilization can be particularly important in addressing the social norms that reinforce intimate partner violence. Many communities normalize

violence to such an extent that it is not even recognized as a problem, neither by men nor by women (Michau 99). This approach may not only foster a sense of ownership but also ensures that changes in behaviour are supported and sustained by the broader social environment (Michau 99).

The long-term and holistic nature of community mobilization also sets it apart from other approaches. Michau (2012) notes that "the distinctively long-term, holistic and sustained nature of community mobilization requires such a meaningful roadmap to track its extended and sometimes unpredictable trajectory" (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 4). Further, this iterative process requires ongoing collaboration, monitoring, and adaptation to make sure that interventions remain relevant and impactful over time (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 4; 10). Unlike short-term programs, community mobilization may foster sustained engagement, allowing for deep and lasting changes in social norms and behaviours.

While community mobilization does offer a promising approach to prevent violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence, it is not without challenges. Measuring the impact of community mobilization efforts can be particularly difficult, as social norm changes are inherently broad and diffuse (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 9). Additionally, there is a lack of established methods for tracking progress, and many organizations lack the technical skills needed for effective monitoring and evaluation (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 9-10). Nevertheless, evaluation remains important for understanding the positive outcomes of interventions and identifying areas for improvement (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 10). To address these difficulties, organizations should plan evaluations in advance and use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the impact of their efforts (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 10). Long-term evaluation frameworks are particularly important, as meaningful social change cannot be expected within short time frames (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 10).

Despite these challenges, community mobilization represents a transformative approach to prevent violence, particularly violence against women. By engaging entire communities in a

systematic process of change, it addresses the root causes of violence and creates environments for sustained behavioural shifts. Its multifaceted strategies, ranging from local activism to media campaigns, can secure comprehensive engagement across all levels of society. Rooted in a social justice framework, community mobilization may emphasize the importance of dismantling power imbalances and promoting equality. Although difficult to measure, its long-term impact on social norms and behaviours illustrates its critical role in violence prevention efforts. As Michau (2012) notes, "social change is not a program that can be implemented, it is a process of inspiring and facilitating activism" (Michau "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms" 6).

3. Examples of Prevention Programs in Post-Conflict Societies

The third chapter of this thesis aims to bridge the theoretical framework discussed earlier with its application in real-world scenarios. This chapter examines how two different prevention programs have been implemented in two different post-conflict societies: the SASA! model in Uganda and the Nabilan Program in Timor-Leste. These examples highlight how theory translates into practice, demonstrating the potential of evidence-based strategies to address violence against women within complex social, cultural, and political contexts. Through these examples, the chapter illustrates the importance of adapting theoretical frameworks to specific cultural and social settings. It also emphasizes the role of community mobilization, participatory engagement, and evidence-based interventions in preventing violence against women.

3.1. The Development and Impact of the SASA! Model in Uganda

In the next pages, I will first briefly take a look at Uganda's history in order to roughly understand the country's context and the enabling conditions for the prevalence of intimate partner violence, followed by an assessment of the SASA! model in Uganda.

Uganda's history has been shaped by its colonial past, particularly the British rule that began in 1877 with the arrival of the British Missionary Society in the Buganda Kingdom, which later became the heart of the Protectorate (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). The British officially established the Protectorate in 1894, and their policies significantly influenced Uganda's state formation, creating divisions along ethnic, religious, and regional lines that led to instability and political violence in later years (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). These colonial policies also introduced and reinforced gender norms during the Victorian period, which institutionalized separate roles for men and women and created gender disparities that persist today (Datzberger

and Le Mat 64). Before British colonial rule, Ugandan societies held women in high regard, attributing them with important economic and social responsibilities (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). Women were seen as "sacred custodians next to God regarding life" by many ethnic groups (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). However, colonial rule and the increase in ethnic conflicts severely disrupted these roles. Women were forced to take on additional duties, such as farming and fetching water, 'traditionally' done by men, due to the recruitment of men for forced labour and the impact of ethnic wars (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). The forceful introduction of Christianity further entrenched patriarchy, chaning women's roles and identities across Uganda (Datzberger and Le Mat 64).

Post-independence Uganda faced severe political instability. The country gained internal self-government in 1958 and became independent in 1962 (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). However, Uganda soon plunged into turmoil, marked by a military coup and the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin (1971-1979) (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). This was followed by disputed elections in 1980 and a five-year war that eventually brought Yoweri Museveni to power in 1986 (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). Uganda experienced at least seven civil wars, with broad violence, especially in the nothern regions (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). The civil war with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony, which began in the 1990s, disproportionately affected women, with rape, forced marriages, and abductions becoming common forms of violence (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). Women were also crucial in peacebuilding efforts, although their contributions often went unrecognized (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). From 1987 to 2007, Uganda operated under a "war with peace" model, where the south of the country focused on development and gender equality, while the north remained embroiled in conflict and discrimination (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). Even though southern Uganda made strides in addressing gender inequalities and fostering economic growth, the northern regions faced continued war, and women there were particularly marginalized (Datzberger and Le Mat 64). By 2017, Uganda was ranked 23rd among the world's most fragile states, with ongoing regional instability, economic disparities, and lack of governance contributing to the vulnerability of women, particularly in the north (Datzberger and Le Mat 64).

Overall, the cultural and social systems in Uganda, shaped by British colonial rule, are historically patriarchal, where men have dominated decision-making processes and access to resources (Wagman et al. 1396). Customary laws place women in subordinate positions, and community-based dispute resolution is often dominated by men, making it difficult for women to have a voice in decisions regarding their own lives (Wagman et al. 1396). The legal systems

and cultural attitudes leave women at a disadvantage, increasing their vulnerability to intimate partner violence (Wagman et al. 1396). Women's economic dependence on men, particularly in rural areas, further increases their exposure to violence (Wagman et al. 1396). Moreover, the institution of marriage in Uganda adds to women's vulnerability (Wagman et al. 1396). Upon marriage, many women "lose social and economic support from their natal families," which makes it harder for them to leave abusive relationships, trapping them in cycles of violence (Wagman et al. 1396). The practice of paying bride price is also essential in reinforcing these power imbalances, where the bride is treated as a commodity, and this can perpetuate unequal gender relations in marriages (Wagman et al. 1396). Studies indicate that bride price is a common practice in Uganda, with 68% of marriages involving the payment of bride price, which further limits women's autonomy and reinforces their dependent status in marriages (Wagman et al. 1396).

Hence, the normalization of intimate partner violence in Uganda can be described as rooted in these cultural and societal norms, influenced by British colonial rule and militarized conflict. A study found that a large majority of both men (70%) and women (90%) believed that violence within relationships could be justified under certain circumstances, indicating how widespread the acceptance of intimate partner violence within Ugandan society is (Wagman et al. 1396). This finding illustrates how cultural attitudes shape people's perception of what constitutes acceptable behaviour in intimate relationships, with women often expected to tolerate violence and men expected to wield power (Wagman et al. 1396). Moreover, the response to intimate partner violence in Uganda has faced some challenges. Many authorities hold 'traditional' attitudes that view this kind of violence as a private matter rather than a criminal issue, leading to reluctance from institutions such as the police and social services to engage with cases of partner violence (Wagman et al. 1408). Although general violence is illegal, Uganda has faced delays in enacting legislation specifically addressing domestic violence (Wagman et al. 1408). The Kampala by-law, passed in 2007, was a landmark achievement, but it remains isolated, which reflects the ongoing struggle to establish a comprehensive legal framework that acknowledges violence against women as a human rights and public health issue (Wagman et al. 1408).

An initiative that aims to prevent intimate partner violence is the SASA! model which represents an example for a community mobilization approach in Uganda. Developed in collaboration by the NGO Raising Voices and the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), the SASA! program emerged in response to the need for holistic, evidence-based

strategies to address the root causes of gender-based violence in Uganda (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 10). Grounded in the understanding that power imbalances between women and men reinforce violence, the SASA! model fosters community-wide change through a participatory methodology (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 9). The program operates on the premise that violence against women is not an isolated issue but rather a product of embedded societal norms and structures that reinforce male dominance and inequality (Carlson 8). To challenge this, SASA! draws on the social-ecological model to engage all levels of influence within a community, including individuals, families, institutions, and society at large (Carlson 8). These intersecting levels are then targeted through a phased methodology designed to challenge and transform harmful norms.

Overall, the SASA! model was developed in response to gaps in violence prevention strategies, particularly the lack of integrated approaches that address both HIV and violence against women (Carlson 4). Research has shown a strong link between these twin pandemics, emphasizing the need to address power imbalances as a root cause (Carlson 4). Thus, Raising Voices introduced the "SASA! Activist Kit for Preventing Violence against Women and HIV," a resource designed to bridge this gap by examining how power dynamics contribute to both issues and providing a practical, context-appropriate framework for community activists (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 8). Over time, more health professionals and activists began to acknowledge the importance of incorporating a gendered perspective into HIV prevention efforts, thus, recognizing that addressing violence against women is crucial to reducing HIV (Carlson 4).

The NGO Raising Voices, a Uganda-based feminist organization, has been actively working to prevent violence against women and children since 2000 (Raising Voices "Strategy 2023-2027" 4). One of its key partners, the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), originated from Raising Voices' initial prevention initiatives in Uganda and became an independent entity in 2003 (Raising Voices "Strategy 2012-2016" 15). The SASA! model was developed as a continuation of Raising Voices' earlier efforts, particularly drawing from the resource guide "Mobilizing Communities to Prevent Domestic Violence: A Resource Guide for Organisations in East and Southern Africa" (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 9). The name 'SASA!' derived from Kiswahili and translates to 'now,' symbolizing the urgency to prevent violence against women (Michau and Namy 2). Additionally, it serves as an acronym for the program's four-phase methodology: Start,

Awareness, Support, and Action (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 8). The 'Start' phase encourages communities to recognize the link between violence against women and HIV while the second phase (Awareness) raises awareness about how communities accept men's use of power over women, thereby "fueling the dual pandemics of violence against women and HIV and AIDS" (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 8). During the 'Support' phase, individuals, including women, men, and local activists, are encouraged to collectively challenge harmful norms and foster change (Michau "The SASA" Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 8). Finally, the 'Action' phase mobilizes communities to translate this awareness into efforts to combat gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 9).

These phases build on the so-called 'Stages of Change Model' which recognizes that "individuals typically pass through a process before lasting change is possible" (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 9). Hence, individuals and communities go through a structured process that moves from initial unawareness to reflection, engagement, and ultimately, sustained action (Michau and Namy 2). This phased approach may enable communities to address sensitive topics systematically in order to foster gradual yet lasting change in attitudes, behaviours, and social norms (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 8). However, real-world change does not always follow a linear path. Communities often experiment with new ideas informally, incorporating elements of change into daily life before formally reaching the 'Action' phase (Michau and Namy 6). This organic, sometimes unpredictable process reflects the complexities of social transformation, where shifts in norms and behaviours happen incrementally rather than all at once. Recognizing this, SASA! integrates community-led discussions on power dynamics, exploring both its constructive and harmful uses within relationships and broader society (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 8). By breaking down complex issues into accessible concepts, SASA! aims to foster understanding and action at multiple levels of the social-ecological model, from individuals to societal structures (Michau and Namy 6). This multidimensional approach may then allow communities to challenge entrenched norms and practices that enable violence (Raising Voices Strategy 2012-2016 9).

Furthermore, the SASA! approach is built on four core strategies: "Local Activism, Media & Advocacy, Communication Materials, and Training" (Carlson 8). Each of these elements plays an important role in engaging different community members and ensuring that progress is

sustained across the program's phases (Carlson 8). For instance, local activism focuses on grassroots engagement, including community dialogues, door-to-door conversations, and interactive workshops that encourage reflection on gender norms and power dynamics (Carlson 8). To amplify these efforts, media campaigns spread messages of equality and non-violence through various platforms (Carlson 8). Another essential component is the use of interactive communication materials, which serve as practical tools to spark critical thinking and discussion (Michau and Namy 2). Moreover, the program's activities focus on fostering personal reflection and collective action by encouraging community members to question harmful norms and embrace healthier alternatives (Carlson 8). A central aspect of this work is examining power dynamics, with activists facilitating discussions on different forms of power, namely power within, power over, power with, and power to, to illustrate how shifts in power relations can contribute to more equitable and respectful relationships (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 9). Thus, this approach can enable participants to connect more deeply with the program's themes, moving beyond awareness to behavioural and attitudinal change (Carlson 14).

To evaluate this kind of programming, the SASA! study was conducted from 2007 to 2013 in Kampala, Uganda, which marked a turning point in the field of violence against women prevention (Michau and Namy 2). This randomized controlled trial (RCT), carried out in partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Makerere University, and the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention, provided strong evidence of the program's impact (Michau and Namy 2). Findings from the randomized controlled trial revealed that SASA! reduced women's risk of experiencing physical intimate partner violence by 52% and shifted attitudes, with social acceptance of violence dropping from 26% in control communities to 76% in intervention areas (Michau and Namy 2). In addition to these measurable outcomes, qualitative data highlighted the program's deeper influence on intimate relationships (Michau and Namy 2). Participants reported enhanced trust, communication, and mutual respect which indicates a broader aspiration to strengthen partnerships (Michau and Namy 2). This progress shows SASA!'s ability to foster not only change in individual behaviour but also community-level shifts in norms and practices. Overall, as Michau and Namy (2021) emphasize,

> the study marked an important moment within the broader field of violence against women, as the first rigorous study in an African setting to demonstrate that it is possible to achieve meaningful change and prevent violence at the communtiy level […] (Michau and Namy 2).

Moreover, the progressive impact of SASA! has led to its implementation by more than 65 organizations across 25 countries, expanding its reach far beyond Uganda (Michau and Namy 2). Adoptions of the program have been introduced in regions such as Haiti, West Africa, and Asia, with Raising Voices supporting these efforts (Raising Voices "Strategy 2012-2016" 16). However, Raising Voices acknowledges in its strategy paper that improving communication would enhance program implementation, making it easier to gain direct insights into what is needed to prevent violence against women in different contexts (Raising Voices "Strategy 2012-2016" 16). Further, the program's scalability is largely due to its flexible framework, which enables organizations to modify the approach to fit diverse cultural and socio-economic settings while preserving its core principles (Raising Voices "Strategy 2012-2016" 9; 16). Yet, as SASA! continues to expand, challenges remain in ensuring program fidelity and achieving consistent results across various locations (Michau and Namy 3).

Moving forward, in 2018, Raising Voices launched 'SASA! Together,' an updated version of the original model, designed to incorporate new insights and address emerging needs in the field of violence prevention (Michau and Namy 2; 3). This revision was driven by an ethical commitment to integrate the latest evidence and ensure the program's relevance in diverse contexts (Michau and Namy 2). 'SASA! Together' specifically focuses on intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships as its primary focus since it reflects the prevalence of intimate partner violence globally and its severe impact on women's lives (Michau and Namy 8). This targeted approach stems from programme experiences from Raising Voices suggesting that "content highlighting diverse forms of violence can be confusing or overwhelming, and […] potentially alienate community members" (Michau and Namy 3). Rather, this focus emphasizes the positive use of power, particularly within intimate relationships, encouraging individuals to recognize their role in supporting positive change in their lives and communities (Michau and Namy 3). Key improvements in 'SASA! Together' include a deeper focus on sexual decision-making and relationship values, such as mutual care, respect, and authenticity (Michau and Namy 5). By addressing these aspects, the program aims to foster sustainable changes in couple dynamics and reduce resistance to discussions about gender roles (Michau and Namy 6). This adjustment also helps counter the "tit-for-tat" mentality that sometimes undermined earlier interventions (Michau and Namy 5).

Additionally, new materials for faith leaders have been introduced, including sermon guides and discussion prompts that connect religious teachings to SASA!'s core principles (Michau and Namy 5). This adaptation directly responds to previous challenges where religious

institutions resisted conversations about gender and power, which helps bridge this gap through faith-based dialogue (Michau and Namy 5). Finally, 'SASA! Together' strengthens its intersectional feminist framework, acknowledging that women's experiences of violence are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, such as race, class, ability, HIV status, and sexual orientation (Michau and Namy 7). Recognizing this, the program works in solidarity with marginalized groups, including LGBTIQ+ communities, ensuring that its methodology remains inclusive and adaptable across diverse settings (Michau and Namy 7).

To improve scalability, 'SASA! Together' has introduced additional tools and resources, including a Learning and Assessment (L&A) Guide and a Set-Up Guide ("The Set-Up Guide: The What, Why and How to get started with SASA! Together") (Michau and Namy 6). The Learning and Assessment Guide offers insights on key topics such as ethical feminist research and approaches to data analysis, while the Set-Up Guide provides practical recommendations on staffing, program size, budgeting, and other logistical considerations (Michau and Namy 6). These resources aim to support organizations in implementing 'SASA! Together' by making sure that core principles like feminist analysis, sustainability, and do-no-harm principles are integrated into their work (Michau and Namy 6). Additionally, new monitoring tools, including case vignettes, allow for a more in-depth assessment of changes in social norms, helping to capture the program's long-term impact (Michau and Namy 6). It is also important to emphasize that the program's community mobilization approach "aims to achieve population-level change beyond those directly participating in program activities and therefore can be considered as already "at scale"" (Michau and Namy 7).

While the SASA! program has shown its positive impact in the field of violence prevention, it also highlights the complexities of violence prevention efforts. One of the primary challenges is maintaining long-term momentum and ensuring sustained community involvement. Raising Voices' experiences highlights the difficult balance between depths and scalability, since expanding too quickly can sometimes weaken the program's transformative impact (Michau and Namy 7). Additionally, with so many different organizations implementing SASA!, making sure that its core principles are upheld across diverse cultural and socio-economic settings remains an ongoing task (Michau and Namy 3). Another critical issue is the emotional and physcial toll that violence prevention work can take on activists, which means robust support systems and capacity-building initiatives are essential (Michau and Namy 5). A key takeaway from SASA! is the need for continuous learning and adaptation. The program's ability to integrate real-world experiences and respond to shifting contexts has helped it remain relevant.

This commitment to ongoing refinement and innovation reflects Raising Voices' dedication to creating long-term change in the fight against gender-based violence (Michau and Namy 8). Apart from this commitment, Raising Voices raises some other remaining questions in their strategy paper (2023-2027) regarding impactful prevention:

> How can the field shift from implementing violence prevention programs toward building movements that sustain social change? How can programs at scale remain grounded in feminist values, be technically rigorous and accountable to increased numbers of communities and schools? What will it take to ensure the experiences of activists and communities leading this work are valued, prioritized and shaping global discourse and decisions? What will it take to ensure that funding for VAW and VAC prevention programming goes to the organizations leading this work in their own communities? (Raising Voices Strategy 2023-2027 11).

Even though these questions remain and still challenge violence prevention efforts like SASA!, the model offers a fresh perspective on tackling violence against women by addressing its root causes. Through a blend of theory and hands-on practice, the program demonstrates how community mobilization can drive social change and foster more equitable relationships. Its structured, phase-based approach, emphasis on power dynamics, and participatory nature have set a benchmark for violence prevention initiatives worldwide. As SASA! continues to evolve, its impact serves as a testament to the importance of investing in evidence-based, community-driven approaches. As Raising Voices states, "transformation is possible when those most affected are spearheading the change" (Raising Voices Strategy 2012-2016 14).

3.2. Goals and Implementation of the Nabilan Program in Timor-Leste

In this section, I will outline the emergence of the Nabilan Program in Timor-Leste, including its various strategies, goals and ways of implementation. Since the aim of this thesis also consists of understanding the historical context of Timor-Leste in a detailed version, this section only briefly mentions the historical context and describes it in more detail in the next chapter.

Timor-Leste, a country shaped by a history of Portuguese colonial rule and Indonesian occupation, faces persistently high levels of violence against women, which makes it an interesting case for addressing gender-based violence through innovative and evidence-based approaches. Violence against women in Timor-Leste remains dominant, affecting all areas of society (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 13). A majority of women in the country experience some form of physical, sexual, emotional, or economic violence in their lifetimes, often at the hands of an intimate partner (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-

Leste" 1). Domestic violence and sexual assault are deeply normalized within Timorese society, where violence is often seen as an acceptable means of conflict resolution (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 25). A decade ago, no comprehensive national research existed to assess the prevalence, consequences, or risk factors of violence against women in Timor-Leste (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 13). However, accurate data is crucial in shaping evidence-based prevention strategies and informing policy decisions (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 13).

To address this critical knowledge gap, The Asia Foundation (TAF) conducted *The Nabilan Health and Life Experiences Baseline Study* from July to September 2015 (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14). This study provided data on the prevalence and perpetration of various forms of violence against women, collecting insights from both women and men in Timor-Leste (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14). The findings of this study then formed the "baseline data for the Foundation's *Nabilan* Program, and will further inform programming and advocacy on responses to and prevention of violence against women and children in Timor-Leste" (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14).

The *Nabilan Baseline Study* focused primarily on intimate partner violence (IPV), which is globally recognized as the most widespread form of violence against women (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 17). It examined various types of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence, committed by both current or former intimate partners (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 17). The study also assessed controlling behaviours, such as restricting women's movements, limiting her social interactions, and displaying extreme jealousy (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 17). Key findings revealed that nearly 59% of ever-partnered women aged 15-49 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence by a male intimate partner at some point in their lives (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 49). Moreover, 55% of ever-partnered women reported emotional abuse, and 77% of those subjected to physical violence endured severe acts (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 49). Alarmingly, 81% of women who suffered intimate partner violence reported experiencing it repeatedly, with only 5% reporting isolated incidents (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 49). 55% of survivors of physical violence also noted that their children had witnessed the abuse (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 49). Among men, 36% in Dili (the capital of Timor-Leste) and 41% in Manufahi (one of Timor-Leste's municipalities) admitted to perpetrating physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence against a female partner (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 49). While the 59% intimate partner violence prevalence in Timor-Leste aligns with patterns observed in the Asia-Pacific region,

rates vary significantly across different studies and local contexts (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 58).

The study further revealed that 80% of women and 79% of men in Dili, and 70% in Manufahi, "believed that a husband is justified in hitting his wife under some circumstances" (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 83). Even more concerning, 24% of women felt they could not refuse sex with their husbands, regardless of their health or willingness (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 83). These statistics highlight how male dominance and female submission are reinforced within social structures, which further entrenches the normality of violence in intimate relationships. Although awareness of legal protections against violence is relatively high, with 87% of men in Dili and 75% in Manufahi acknowledging the existence of laws prohibiting such acts, many view these laws as excessively harsh (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 83). This gap between legal knowledge and societal attitudes suggests that legislative frameworks alone are not enough, rather behavioural and normative change is another necessary step to enable meaningful enforcement. In addition, the study highlights the intergenerational cycle of violence, revealing that experiencing abuse during childhood increases the likelihood of perpetrating violence against women and children later in life (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 81). This correlation illustrates the interconnectedness of violence at various stages of life and the need to address violence holistically. Efforts to promote positive parenting, uphold children's rights, and challenge harmful disciplinary practices are essential in breaking this cycle (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 81). By addressing these issues at their root, such programs can help foster a culture of respect, equality, and non-violence from an early age.

The study further shows the public health implications of violence against women by emphasizing that violence impacts women's mental health and general well-being (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 100). Recognizing violence as a public health crisis necessitates the need for preventative interventions that address both the short- and long-term health repercussions (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 100). This perspective reinforces the urgency of integrating violence prevention strategies into national health policies, making sure that adequate resources and support systems are in place for survivors while simultaneously working to reduce violence at a broader level (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 119). Another framework which is used by Nabilan for understanding violence against women in Timor-Leste is the social ecological model, which emphasizes that risk factors do not exist in isolation but rather interact in complex ways to sustain gender inequalities and perpetuate violence (TAF

"Nabilan Baseline Study" 135). As a result, approaching a single contributing factor, such as controlling behaviour within relationships, is insufficient to end violence against women. Instead, coordinated, multisectoral approaches are required to effectively address the issue, while being "incorporated into the larger social development, gender equality, and human rights framework and plans within the country" (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 144; 151).

Given these circumstances, the Nabilan began looking for a new way of programming to change social norms on violence against women. While the program was already working to strengthen institutional responses to violence, it recognized that without shifting societal attitudes and behaviours, the overall impact would remain limited (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2). This realization led to an approach that prioritized flexibility, reflection, and adaptation, allowing strategies to evolve based on ongoing learning and community engagement (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2). One influential model that informed Nabilan's approach was SASA! (Start, Awareness, Support, and Action), which I have described in the previous section, an initiative that had already been implemented in various countries and demonstrated measurable success in reducing violence against women (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2).

The Nabilan Program emerged in 2014 as an eight-year partnership between the governments of Australia and Timor-Leste, implemented by The Asia Foundation[8] (TAF) in collaboration with Timor-Leste's Ministry for Social Solidarity and Inclusion (MSSI) and Secretary of State for Equality and Inclusion (SEII) (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 4). 'Nabilan,' meaning 'bright' in Tetum (one of the official spoken languages in Timor-Leste), symbolizes the program's overarching goal: reducing violence against women and children while enhancing the well-being of survivors (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste" 1). The program is structured around three core pillars: prevention, services and support, and access to justice (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14). These pillars are backed by research, monitoring, and evaluation to ensure that programming is grounded in evidence and 'global best-practice'[9] (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14). Ultimately, these pillars represent a holistic approach to addressing violence against women and the need for

---

[8] The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization who works in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC.

[9] In this context, it should be clarified that The Asia Foundation explains its usage of 'global best-practice methodologies' due to its "high level of data reliability they produce, the ability to make cross-country comparisons, and their internationally recognized ethical and safety standards" (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14).

multifaceted interventions that address both the immediate and underlying causes of violence (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14).

Phase I of the Nabilan Program primarily aimed to reduce the number of women experiencing violence within target communities while also improving the well-being of survivors and their children (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 4). Phase II built upon these foundations, broadening its scope to ensure that women and children can live free from violence and fully exercise their rights (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 4). Additionally, this phase placed greater emphasis on supporting feminist movements and promoting positive social norms (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022 1). Phase II was structured around two main pillars: shifting social norms and strengthening services (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022 1). A key development during this phase was the introduction of KOKOSA! (Komesa, Konxiénsia, Suporta, Asaun), "a Timorese adaptation of SASA!," alongside NeNaMu (Ne'on Nain ba Mudansa), "a gender-transformative curriculum-based violence prevention initiative" (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 1; 8). NeNaMu integrates social and behavioural change strategies with sexual and reproductive health education while enhancing access to services for survivors of violence against women (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 1; 8). Both phases of the Nabilan program were designed in alignment with Timor-Leste's "National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence" (NAP-GBV), which prioritizes prevention, survivor services, access to justice, and program monitoring and evaluation (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 5). Currently, Phase III is in progress and will continue until 2026, with the possibility of a four-year extension that would carry the program forward into Phase IV, ending in June 2030 (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 4).

To operationalize its prevention strategies, the Nabilan Program adopted and localized the community-based SASA! methodology. The adaptation of SASA! into KOKOSA!, mirrors the four phases of the original model (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste" 2). KOKOSA! integrates benefits-based activism and gender-power analysis, encouraging communities to explore how balanced power in relationships leads to positive outcomes for individuals and families (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014–2022" 16). Moreover, it uses interactive and engaging dialogue-based activities to encourage community members to openly discuss issues and work together to find solutions (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste 2). To bring these discussions to life, Nabilan trained and deployed 23 community mobilizers (CMs) in Letofoho, Manufahi,

who lead KOKOSA! sessions within their communities, building support networks and strengthening local engagement (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste" 2). The program's impact in this area has been notable, as confirmed by an independent evaluation in 2021, which found that KOKOSA! had transformed how partner organizations understand violence prevention and its root causes (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 20). This shift in perspective has enhanced their ability to implement KOKOSA! and other prevention initiatives effectively (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 20).

Initially, the rollout of KOKOSA! started in Letefoho, Manufahi, where trained community mobilizers (CMs) worked alongside local residents to identify key challenges and to collaboratively find solutions (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 16). The initiative centered on creating safe spaces for open discussion and reflection, building on existing community networks to inspire collective action against violence (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste" 2). Rather than relying on negative messaging or assigning blame, KOKOSA! takes a constructive approach, opting instead to emphasize the benefits of respectful and equitable relationships (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste" 2). This positive framing has led to enhanced participation and trust, especially in a social context where conversations about violence against women remain highly sensitive (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2). Moreover, the earlier mentioned evaluation conducted in December 2021 confirmed that KOKOSA! had made progress in raising awareness, shifting attitudes, and encouraging help-seeking behaviours (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 20). These positive outcomes paved the way for the next phase of the program's implementation.

Alongside KOKOSA!, Nabilan introduced NeNaMu, which translates to "Seeds of Change" (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 1). This initiative aimed to integrate violence prevention with reproductive health services, using a curriculum-based approach to challenge harmful social norms and strengthen community resilience (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 1). Designed to complement KOKOSA!, NeNaMu aims to reinforce long-term behaviour change efforts by addressing the intersections between gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 8). To develop NeNaMu, the program adopted and translated the 'Stepping Stones' model, a globally recognized, evidence-based framework for violence prevention (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 16). In collaboration with Marie Stopes Timor-

Leste (MSTL)[10] and the Prevention Collaborative, Nabilan refined the 'Stepping Stones' methodology, incorporating additional elements to create a locally relevant curriculum in Tetum (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 16). By linking social and behaviour change efforts with improved access to essential health services, NeNaMu offers a holistic approach to reducing violence and empowering communities to address inequalities.

In addition to these prevention strategies, the Nabilan program has also improved support services for survivors of violence. By providing grants to civil society organizations, the program has helped expand access to critical services, including medical care, legal aid, safe housing, counselling, and life skills training (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 3). To further enhance service quality, Nabilan supported the creation of a nationally accredited vocational education program by ensuring that social service providers receive specialized training in trauma-informed care (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). Between 2014 and 2022, these efforts enabled the program to assist over 10,000 survivors and facilitate more than 64,000 support services (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 13).

Another key focus of Nabilan has been improving access to justice for survivors. The program has worked to strengthen the legal system's response to gender-based violence by training police officers, prosecutors, and judges in gender-sensitive approaches, helping survivors seek legal recourse more easily (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 3). Additionally, Nabilan-backed legal aid services have empowered survivors to navigate the justice system and hold perpetrators accountable (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 3). However, Nabilan also acknowledges that changing societal attitudes toward violence is equally important to ensuring justice. Recognizing this, Nabilan's advocacy efforts have focused on challenging the normalization of violence, a perception ingrained in Timor-Leste's history of conflict and instability (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 25).

Overall, the Nabilan program prioritizes community-based approaches (CBA) as a key strategy for fostering sustainable, long-term change. Inspired by the SASA! model and research from Timor-Leste, the program identifies and supports women and men who can serve as change agents within their communities (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). Unlike short-term initiatives, community-based approaches take a long-term, embedded approach, making sure that interventions are rooted in local contexts rather than temporary, external

---

[10] The NGO Marie Stopes Timor-Leste provides family planning, sexual and reproductive health services.

efforts. A central aspect of this approach is creating safe spaces where community members can openly discuss challenges in their daily lives, including violence and inequality (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2). To facilitate these discussions, the program works closely with Community Mobilizers (CMs) and Nabilan team members, who maintain a consistent presence in local communities (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2). A major focus of community-based approaches research has been understanding the factors that encourage men to shift their attitudes and behaviours around violence against women and children (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 13). This involves exploring who or what influences men, identifying key moments for intervention, and recognizing the social environments that foster positive behaviour change (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 13).

By confronting violence against women as part of a broader gender inequality issue, the program has mobilized both institutions and individuals to drive change (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014–2022" 23). Between 2018 and 2021, prevention initiatives like KOKOSA! and NeNaMu engaged nearly 7,000 participants (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014–2022" 14). At the same time, collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) improved services for survivors, helping over 10,000 individuals access medical care, legal assistance, psychosocial support, and reintegration services (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014–2022" 13). Further, 220 prevention initiatives were carried out, addressing violence at all levels of the ecological model, from individual and relationship dynamics to community, societal, and institutional structures (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 20).

The program's impact has also been formally recognized. In March 2021, Nabilan was awarded the Gender Equality Award by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for its contributions to women's empowerment and gender equality in the region (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 13). Moreover, an independent evaluation in 2021 praised the program's comprehensive approach, which combined service provision and prevention while aligning with development priorities set by both Australia and Timor-Leste (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 13). The evaluation also highlighted Nabilan's role in improving survivor services, noting that service providers gained essential skills and knowledge through capacity-building efforts (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 13). Beyond that, the program was credited with shifting harmful social norms and promoting gender equality at the community level, reinforcing its importance as a model for violence prevention (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 23).

In sum, Timor-Leste's complex social environment (which will be discussed in the following chapter in more detail) has required innovative approaches to tackle violence against women. The 2015 *Nabilan Health and Life Experiences Study* revealed that survivors often struggle to access support services, facing both stigma and resource limitations (TAF "Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in Timor-Leste" 1; 3). To address these gaps, the Nabilan program has worked to improve service delivery by funding local organizations, training frontline workers, and developing accredited vocational education programs (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). Beyond service provision, violence prevention has been a core focus, particularly through education and community engagement. Programs promoting positive discipline in schools and collaborations with religious institutions have encouraged healthier relationships and challenges beliefs that normalize violence (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2). Working with local churches has proven especially impactful, as it has helped shift attitudes in communities where 'traditional'[11] norms often reinforce gender inequality and harmful practices (TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" 2).

Ultimately, the Nabilan program stands as an example of how global research and locally driven solutions can come together to combat gender-based violence. By adapting the SASA! model into the culturally relevant KOKOSA! initiative, the program has shown that community-driven change can reshape social norms and reduce violence in Timor-Leste. However, in the discussion part I will outline the complexities of implementing such programs, particularly the tensions between external frameworks and local perspectives.

4. Understanding Violence Against Women in Timor-Leste

This chapter explores the historical and contemporary factors shaping gender-based violence in the country. It examines how colonialism, conflict, and socio-cultural norms have contributed to the current landscape of gender relations and the challenges faced by women in Timor-Leste today. By analysing both historical and contemporary perspectives, this chapter aims to contextualize violence against women within broader social, political, and economic frameworks.

The first section traces the legacy of gendered oppression in Timor-Leste from its colonial past through the Indonesian occupation and into the struggle for independence. It overall highlights

---

[11] Using the term 'traditional' in the context of intimate partner violence and gender norms in Timor-Leste must not be done lightly regarding a decolonial lens: Scholars like Mohanty and Spivak have long argued that terms like 'traditional' can perpetuate colonial hierarchies and silence diverse local experiences, instead of analysing the complex, historically produced, and constantly evolving context in a respectful and accurate way.

how historical violence and systematic inequalities laid the groundwork for persistent gender-based violence in the post-independence era. The second section explores the current status of women in the country, examining the intersection of Timorese culture, politics, and social norms in shaping gender dynamics. It discusses the persistence of patriarchal structures, and the challenges Timorese women face in achieving political, economic, and social equality. Lastly, the third chapter examines the structural and institutional circumstances hindering but also improving women's rights in Timor-Leste. By connecting past and present, this chapter aims to show the complexities of addressing violence against women in Timor-Leste. It argues that while progress has been made in specific areas, achieving gender equality requires increasing efforts to dismantle the structural inequalities that continue to marginalize Timorese women. Through this exploration, the chapter provides a foundation for understanding the broader implications of violence against women and the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive strategies to combat it.

4.1. Historical Context

Timor-Leste's history is marked by centuries of colonial rule and a prolonged occupation, culminating in its long-fought struggle for independence, which was finally achieved in 2002. This context sheds light on the country's ongoing challenges related to sovereignty, justice, and gender equality. The impact of Portuguese colonial rule, followed by the violent Indonesian occupation, has left lasting imprints on society, shaping both the hardships and resilience of the Timorese people, particularly Timorese women.

For more than four centuries, Timor-Leste remained under Portuguese rule, beginning in the 16th century. Although the Portuguese first arrived in the mid-1500s, it was not until after 1642 that their military efforts intensified, and only in 1769 did they establish Dili as the colonial capital (Engel 50). Portuguese authority remained largely confined to the coastal areas for much of the early colonial period, with limited invasion into the interior (Engel 50). Between the 18th and 20th centuries, the Portuguese gradually expanded control, introducing forced labour systems, particularly in coffee plantations, and attempting to reshape indigenous governance by undermining kinship and ritual structures (Engel 50). Despite these efforts, over 95% of the population remained under the influence of traditional rulers, who were given some autonomy even as they were subordinated to colonial authorities (Engel 51). Further, the colonial administration employed a divide-and-rule strategy, selectively empowering certain local elites who benefited materially from their cooperation with the Portuguese, while others resisted or

were marginalized (Engel 51). These colonial dynamics produced both strategic alliances and internal tensions which reshaped but not eradicated indigenous systems of power (Engel 51).

Moreover, colonial authorities largely neglected the territory, investing little in economic growth or infrastructure development (Niner and Loney 879). As a result, Timor-Leste remained one of the most impoverished regions within the Portuguese empire (Niner and Loney 879). One of the few social initiatives introduced by the Portuguese was Catholic education, yet access was largely limited to young men, leaving women with minimal opportunities for education or social mobility (Niner and Loney 879). Colonial policies reinforced 'traditional' gender roles, with women expected to focus on domestic responsibilities while men dominated public life (Niner and Loney 879). The oppression experienced by Timorese women was twofold, subjected both to patriarchal norms within their own society and to the control of colonial rule, a reality described by activist Rosa Bonaparte Soares as 'double exploitation' (Niner and Loney 879). Additionally, Portuguese colonial rule was marked by sexual violence against local women, which added another layer of suffering for Timorese women, further deepening their marginalization (Niner and Loney 879).

During World War II, Timor-Leste endured immense suffering, despite Portugal's declared neutrality. Allied forces used the territory as a strategic base, drawing the attention of Japanese troops, who launched an invasion in 1942 (Cristalis and Scott 13). The Japanese occupation resulted in widespread devastation, with an estimated 70,000 Timorese losing their lives due to violence, famine, and disease, as well as attacks from militias recruited from West Timor to assist the occupiers (Cristalis and Scott 13). Thousands of Timorese women were subjected to sexual slavery by Japanese forces, a trauma that continues to affect survivors today (Cristalis and Scott 13-14). Some of these women have since broken their silence, participating in international efforts to seek justice and demand formal recognition of their suffering (Cristalis and Scott 14). In 2001, two Timorese women testified at the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in Tokyo, bringing global attention to their experiences (Cristalis and Scott 14).

Unlike other occupied territories in Asia, Timor-Leste did not see the rise of a nationalist independence movement during the war (Cristalis and Scott 15). This was partly due to Portugal's failure to invest in education, which hindered the development of an intellectual elite capable of mobilizing for self-rule (Cristalis and Scott 15). It was only in the 1970s that university-educated Timorese returning from Portugal began advocating for independence

(Cristalis and Scott 15). Additionally, Portugal faced little international pressure to decolonize, as Western powers, particularly the United States, viewed Salazar's authoritarian regime as a strategic ally and did not push for decolonization as they had with Dutch-controlled Indonesia (Cristalis and Scott 15).

By the early 1970s, political activism in Timor-Leste intensified as Portugal's Salazar regime weakened (Niner and Loney 880). The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) emerged as a dominant force, not only opposing colonial rule but also promoting a revolutionary vision for social and economic reform, including gender equality (Niner and Loney 880). FRETILIN's ideology challenged existing hierarchies and sought to create an inclusive movement that actively involved women in the struggle for independence (Niner and Loney 880-881). In the aftermath of the civil war, on August 28, 1975, FRETILIN's women's wing, the Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense (OPMT – Popular Organisation of East Timorese Women), was founded by Rosa Bonaparte, Marie do Ceu, Maia Reis, Aicha Bassarawan, Dulce Da Cruz, and Isabel Lobato (Cristalis and Scott 28). This was the first indigenous political women's organization in Timor-Leste which marked an important step in women's political participation (Cristalis and Scott 28). Unlike other political factions at the time, FRETILIN was the only party to establish a formal women's wing (Cristalis and Scott 28). Despite this, the creation of the OPMT had broader objectives: "first, to participate directly in the struggle against colonialism; and second, to fight the violent discrimination that Timorese women suffered in colonial society" (Cristalis and Scott 28). However, despite FRETILIN's rhetoric of equality, women remained underrepresented in leadership roles. Of the 50 members in FRETILIN's Central Committee, only three were women: 'Muki' Bonaparte, Maria do Céu Pereira, and Guilhermina Araúo (Niner 230). Rosa 'Muki' Bonaparte, a key figure in the independence movement and leader of the OPMT, consistently called out the dominance of patriarchal norms in Timorese society and stressed the need for continued resistance against them (Niner 230).

The authoritarian rule of Portugal's Salazar regime reinforced existing inequalities in Timor-Leste. However, the Carnation Revolution of 1974 marked a turning point (CEPAD 27). With the collapse of the dictatorship, Portuguese colonial rule began to unravel, providing an opening for political activism in Timor-Leste (Yuniar and Easton 161). At the same time, Timorese students studying in Europe were exposed to revolutionary movements centred on freedom and equality, which challenged the gender norms they had grown up with (Niner and Loney 880). These students returned to Timor-Leste with a new language for articulating their

demands within the colonial context, and many women became prominent figures in the emerging nationalist movement during 1974-1975 (Niner and Loney 880). Notably, the influence of revolutionary ideas meant that male leaders in FRETILIN were comparatively more receptive to gender equality than those in other anti-colonial movements in Portuguese colonies (Niner and Loney 880). This aspect set the Timorese independence struggle apart, as it integrated women's participation more deliberately into the broader fight for liberation (Niner and Loney 880).

After the Carnation Revolution, a power struggle emerged in Timor-Leste, with three main political factions competing for control (Yuniar and Easton 161). The Associação Popular Democrática Timorense (APODETI) advocated for integration with Indonesia, while FRETILIN, a left-wing, anti-colonial movement, pushed for full independence (Yuniar and Easton 161). The União Democrática Timorense (UDT) represented the interests of the traditional Timorese elite (Yuniar and Easton 161). Initially, UDT and FRETILIN formed a coalition, but internal tensions led UDT to stage a coup against FRETILIN in August 1975 (Yuniar and Easton 161). The resulting civil conflict was devastating, with thousands killed in just a month (Yuniar and Easton 162). As FRETILIN established control, Indonesia took advantage of the turmoil by escalating border incursions and arming APODETI and UDT supporters in West Timor, thereby forming paramilitary groups known as the 'partisans' (Yuniar and Easton 162).

The geopolitical climate further fuelled the crisis. Indonesia's President Suharto, deeply hostile to communism, viewed FRETILIN's leftist orientation as a threat (Cristalis and Scott 16). This aligned with Cold War-era fears in the West, particularly the 'domino theory,' which suggested that communist influence in one country could spread across the region (Cristalis and Scott 16). As a result, Indonesian special forces infiltrated Timor-Leste's border areas, engaging in direct combat with FRETILIN's forces (Cristalis and Scott 16). On November 28, 1975, FRETILIN formally declared Timor-Leste's independence. However, this declaration was short-lived. Just nine days later, following a meeting between Indonesian President Suharto, US President Gerald Ford, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Indonesia was given tacit approval to invade (Cristalis and Scott 16). The invasion not only crushed FRETILIN's progressive aspirations but also fundamentally reshaped the independence movement (Niner and Loney 881). With survival and armed resistance becoming the primary focus, broader ambitions like gender equality were sidelined (Niner and Loney 881). As the struggle became increasingly militarized, Timorese women played essential but often overlooked roles,

supporting the resistance in various capacities while navigating the extreme violence of the occupation.

During Indonesia's occupation, Timor-Leste was largely inaccessible to Western researchers, restricting the documentation of its social and anthropological landscape (Cristalis and Scott 17). The most recent anthropological studies were conducted in the early 1970s, and none specifically examined the roles of Timorese women (Cristalis and Scott 17). These studies did, however, suggest that Timorese social structures bore similarities to those found in neighbouring Melanesian and Indonesian societies (Cristalis and Scott 17). As a result, the experiences of Timorese women during the occupation remain insufficiently studied, leaving many of their contributions and struggles overlooked in historical narratives.

Overall, the Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste in December 1975 marked the start of a brutal 24-year occupation defined by widespread violence and repression (Rimmer 838). Framing its actions as a necessary measure to prevent 'communist expansion' in Southeast Asia, Indonesia capitalized on Cold War tensions to gain approval from Western allies (Yuniar and Easton 161). The initial assault was devastating, claiming around 60,000 lives within just a few months as military forces targeted civilian populations (Yuniar and Easton 162). Throughout the occupation, the Indonesian military employed systematic tactics to fight resistance, including forced displacement (Yuniar and Easton 162). Entire communities were relocated to resettlement camps in remote and inhospitable areas, where they endured inadequate shelter, food shortages, and limited medical care (Yuniar and Easton 162). One of the most infamous sites was the Atauro Island detention camp, where detainees faced extreme deprivation as a form of collective punishment (Yuniar and Easton 162). These dire conditions contributed to famine and disease, leading to thousands of deaths throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s (Yuniar and Easton 162).

Yet, the Timorese resistance proved remarkably adaptive, continued its struggle despite Indonesia's harsh crackdown. By the 1980s, resistance efforts had evolved into a highly coordinated movement, operating through a network of clandestine supporters who provided vital supplies, intelligence, and logistical aid (Yuniar and Easton 162). The movement consisted of three key fronts: the Armed Front, which waged guerrilla warfare in the mountains and forests; the Diplomatic Front, which sought to garner international support for independence; and the Clandestine Front, which worked covertly within occupied Timor-Leste (CEPAD 28). This multi-pronged strategy allowed the resistance to remain resilient in the face of intense

oppression. In response, the Indonesian military expanded its counterinsurgency efforts, establishing civil defence units like 'Hansip' (Civil Defense Force) and paramilitary groups such as 'Team Saka' to root out and eliminate opposition (Yuniar and Easton 162). These forces resorted to extreme violence to maintain control over local communities. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the global political landscape had shifted with the end of the Cold War, bringing greater international attention to human rights violations in Timor-Leste (Yuniar and Easton 162). A pivotal moment came on November 12, 1991, with the Santa Cruz massacre, when Indonesian troops fired on peaceful demonstrators, killing approximately 271 people and detaining many others (Yuniar and Easton 162). Footage of the atrocity was smuggled out and broadcast worldwide, triggering international condemnation and amplifying demands for intervention (Yuniar and Easton 162).

Throughout the Indonesian occupation, Timorese women were subjected to severe gender-based violence, including sexual assault, forced sterilization, and coercive birth control measures (Rimmer 841). One such policy was the KB Programme (Program Keluarga Berencana), which mandated the use of family planning methods like Depo Provera contraceptive injections (Rimmer 841). Concerned about overpopulation in Java, Indonesian President Suharto extended his national birth control agenda to Timor-Leste, where it was enforced by military doctors with little to no regard for consent (Cristalis and Scott 38). Many Timorese women suspect they were sterilized against their will in the 1980s, while others were misled into receiving Depo Provera injections under the false pretence that it was a routine vaccine (Cristalis and Scott 38). Evidence suggests that injectable contraceptives accounted for approximately 62% of family planning methods in Timor-Leste, with many administered coercively or without informed consent (Cristalis and Scott 38).

Rape and sexual assault were also systematically used as weapons of war (Da Dalt 301). In this context, sexual violence was employed not only as an interrogation technique but also to 'reward' Indonesian soldiers (Da Dalt 301). Female survivors recounted being told that these assaults were meant to "breed more Indonesians into East Timor" (Da Dalt 301). Similarly, the Indonesian military used women as sex slaves, with women in poorer rural areas particularly vulnerable to enforced slavery and prostitution (Cristalis and Scott 36). Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, documented numerous cases of such abuses, though the true number of victims is believed to be significantly higher due to widespread underreporting (Cristalis and Scott 36). The situation was so dire that Catholic nuns reportedly assisted some women in obtaining abortions (Cristalis and Scott 36). This deliberate use of

sexual violence highlights the gender-specific forms of trauma that women endure in conflict settings (Da Dalt 301).

Moreover, many children born as a result of rape were either abandoned or placed in church-run orphanages (Cristalis and Scott 36). Women who had been sexually assaulted often faced rejection from their families and communities, with some being pushed into prostitution as a consequence (Cristalis and Scott 36). Testimonies given to the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR), which was established in 2002 to investigate human rights violations in Timor-Leste since 1975, revealed that the occupying forces had coerced some women into sex work (Cristalis and Scott 36). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, described the strategic use of sexual violence during the occupation as follows:

> Perhaps more than the honor of the victim, it is the perceived honor of the enemy that is targeted in the perpetration of sexual violence against women; it is seen and often experienced as a means of humiliating the opposition. Sexual violence against women is meant to demonstrate victory of the men of the other group who have failed to protect their women. It is a message of castration and emasculation of the enemy group. It is a battle among men fought over the bodies of women (Cristalis and Scott 37).

Women were also subjected to violence as a means of retaliation against male relatives involved in the resistance movement (Rimmer 841). Despite this, the conflict forced a shift in women's roles, expanding their participation in economic, social, and political spheres, a pattern observed in many war-affected societies (Niner and Loney 884). While most women were not directly involved in combat, many received military training, learned to assemble weapons, and played supporting roles in guerrilla operations (Niner and Loney 882). A small number of women even actively engaged in battle, especially when their male counterparts were injured or killed (Niner and Loney 882). Thus, in addition to their roles as caregivers, educators, and community members, Timorese women took on critical responsibilities within the resistance. They played a vital role in clandestine networks, acting as couriers for classified information and supplying food, medicine, uniforms, and ammunition to the fighters (Niner and Loney 884). Women also risked their lives by sheltering, feeding, and guiding guerrillas, demonstrating courage and resilience (Niner and Loney 884). It is estimated that women made up approximately 60% of those involved in these underground networks (Niner and Loney 884).

Ultimately, the conflict compelled many women to take on roles beyond their 'traditional' domestic responsibilities. With the deaths and disappearances of husbands, fathers, brothers,

and sons, women found themselves as the primary providers for their families, pushing them into economic activities that had previously been dominated by men (Niner and Loney 884). Despite the immense suffering caused by the Indonesian occupation, it also brought about shifts that altered women's positions in Timorese society (Niner and Loney 884). Indonesian-led 'development' and 'modernization' initiatives, though intended to shape the territory according to Jakarta's vision, inadvertently created spaces for women to participate more actively in public life (Niner and Loney 884). These programs, part of the New Order's[12] broader social engineering agenda, sought to instil specific values but also introduced organizational and educational opportunities for women (Niner and Loney 885). The establishment of a national education system, for example, granted greater access to schooling for young women, an opportunity that had been largely limited under Portuguese rule (Niner and Loney 885). While many Timorese resisted the imposition of Indonesian culture, language, and governance, the expansion of education and formalized women's networks laid the foundation for new forms of social organization and activism (Niner and Loney 885).

Starting in the 1990s, as the independence movement gained traction on the global stage, Timorese women leaders began forging alliances with both Indonesian and international women's organizations (Niner and Loney 885). These transactional connections provided a platform for Timorese women to share their experiences and draw attention to the gender-specific challenges they faced within the broader resistance movement (Niner and Loney 885). This period also saw the rise of a new wave of activists, many of whom were young students from Dili, determined to challenge the Indonesian occupation (Niner and Loney 886). Among them were numerous women who played a visible role in voicing oppression to the regime, further emphasizing their indispensable contributions to the fight for national liberation (Niner and Loney 886).

However, the possibility for real change only emerged with the resignation of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998 (Yuniar and Easton 162-163). His successor, President B.J. Habibie, announced in January 1999 that a referendum would be held to determine Timor-Leste's future. The United Nations-organized Popular Consultation took place in August 1999, offering Timorese a choice between remaining an autonomous region within Indonesia or becoming independent (Yuniar and Easton 162-163). Despite severe intimidation tactics by militias supported by the Indonesian military, 78.5% of voters opted for independence (Yuniar and

---

[12] The New Order regime in Indonesia, led by President Suharto from 1966 to 1998, was marked by authoritarianism, military dominance, and a focus on economic modernization.

Easton 163). Nevertheless, the results were met with violent retaliation (Yuniar and Easton 163). Pro-integration militias, which had been armed and financed by Indonesia, launched a wave of destruction, killing approximately 1,500 people, displacing 400,000, and leaving 70% of the country's infrastructure in ruins (CEPAD 31; Rimmer 840). In response, the United Nations intervened by establishing the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) to oversee the country's transition to full independence from 1999 to 2002 (GoTL 35). UNTAET took charge of governance, wielding both legislative and executive authority while helping to build Timor-Leste's institutional capacity for self-rule (GoTL 35). Following its independence in 2002, Timor-Leste became a member of the United Nations and a follow-up mission, the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET), was deployed from 2002 to 2005 to assist in stabilizing the country and strengthening its key administrative institutions (GoTL 35).

Following the political crisis in 2006, the United Nations established a new peacekeeping mission, namely the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT), which remained in place until 2012 (GoTL 35). As security conditions gradually improved, the government prioritized rebuilding infrastructure, expanding access to healthcare and education, and strengthening institutions to support long-term stability (GoTL 35). However, these efforts were hindered by the absence of well-developed governance systems, outdated institutional frameworks, and linguistic challenges stemming from Timor-Leste's colonial history and the influence of Portuguese, Indonesian, and UN administration (GoTL 35). The 2006 crisis further highlighted the need for proactive conflict prevention strategies. In response, the government established the National Directorate for Community Conflict Prevention under the Secretariat of State for Security (GoTL 39). Working in collaboration with the NGO Belun[13], government ministries, local authorities, and civil society organizations, the Conflict Prevention and Response Network was formed to detect early warning signs of conflict and mitigate tensions before they escalated (GoTL 39). Furthermore, in 2010, the Ministry of Social Solidarity created the Department of Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion, which partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to integrate structured conflict resolution mechanisms into national policy frameworks (GoTL 39).

Further, Timor-Leste, under the direction of the United Nations, implemented several transitional justice measures to address past atrocities and lay the foundation for a more just

---

[13] The NGO Belun is one of the largest national NGOs in Timor-Leste, aiming to strengthen peace and prevent conflict.

future (Yuniar and Easton 163). Within a year of UN administration, a Serious Crimes Court was established with the authority to prosecute genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, as well as murder, sexual violence, and torture specifically committed in 1999 (Yuniar and Easton 163). The court notably recognized sexual violence as a serious crime and incorporated gender-sensitive rules of evidence, drawing on legal precedents set by the international tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (Yuniar and Easton 163). UN-led investigations resulted in 95 indictments involving more than 360 individuals, the majority of whom had fled to Indonesia and were charged in absentia (Yuniar and Easton 163-164). These indictments targeted both Timorese militia members and high-ranking Indonesian military officers (Yuniar and Easton 163-164). However, only eight of the 95 cases addressed gender-based crimes, with six involving charges of rape as a crime against humanity (Yuniar and Easton 163-164). Out of these cases, just one led to a conviction (Yuniar and Easton 163-164). Notably, sexual slavery and other forms of gender-based violence were never prosecuted, nor were any crimes of this nature committed before 1999 brought to trial (Yuniar and Easton 163-164). The lack of emphasis on gender-based crimes stemmed from several factors, including limited initial prioritization in investigations, inadequate engagement with local women's organizations that supported survivors, and deeply rooted cultural and social stigmas that discouraged women from speaking out about their experiences (Yuniar and Easton 163-164).

For 24 years, the people of Timor-Leste remained steadfast in their pursuit of independence, a goal that finally became reality on May 20, 2002 (CEPAD 35). However, the newly independent nation was immediately confronted with numerous challenges as it sought to build democratic institutions, uphold fundamental rights, and foster national unity under a constitutional framework (CEPAD 35). Decades of conflict had left the country with a fragile governance structure and a lack of institutional experience (CEPAD 35). Additionally, leaders had to navigate conflicting expectations, balancing the urgent need for social and moral reconstruction with the long-term task of shaping a democratic future (CEPAD 35). Beyond rebuilding political and legal systems, the transition also required addressing the deep psychological and social wounds inflicted by years of occupation and violence.

The transition also required considering in what ways Timorese society is shaped, namely by a complex web of historical divisions, political allegiances, and social inequalities. Traditionally, it was structured into three main classes: liurai (rulers), dato (nobles), and povu (commoners), with status inherited through lineage (CEPAD 87). However, in 'modern' Timor-Leste, class is increasingly influenced by access to state resources, political connections, and

proficiency in dominant languages such as Portuguese, Indonesian, and English (CEPAD 87). This shift has deepened social stratification and created tensions within communities (CEPAD 87). Many Timorese have voiced concerns over growing disparities, noting that those with ties to political elites often have greater access to employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services, which fuels frustration and resentment (CEPAD 87; 89). Beyond economic inequality, the country also grapples with regional divides, particularly between easterners (lorosa'e) and westerners (loromonu), as well as divisions stemming from wartime experiences, between those who actively resisted the occupation and those who fled or were perceived as collaborators (CEPAD 89-90). Linguistic differences further add to the fragmentation, as Portuguese, Tetum, and Indonesian continue to shape cultural and political identities (CEPAD 89-90). In addition, widespread issues like corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN) exacerbate instability, leaving society vulnerable to recurring conflict and unrest (CEPAD 88). Considering these divisions, civil society organizations and local leaders faced, and still face today, the immense challenge of promoting reconciliation and fostering long-term peace.

Furthermore, the judicial system played a crucial role in Timor-Leste's reconstruction, as it was responsible for upholding democratic principles and fundamental rights outlined in the constitution (CEPAD 50). In its early stages, the country operated under a mix of its emerging legal framework and adapted Indonesian laws (CEPAD 50). Since the newly independent nation lacked its own comprehensive legislative system, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) initially adopted Indonesian law as a temporary measure to ensure the functioning of the justice system (CEPAD 50). Despite these efforts, the judicial system faced hurdles. In response to international pressure, Indonesia set up an ad-hoc human rights tribunal to prosecute those involved in violence during the occupation (CEPAD 62). However, the tribunal was widely criticized for its lack of independence and credibility, with only 18 individuals indicted, none of whom were ultimately convicted (CEPAD 62). Human rights organizations dismissed the tribunal as a symbolic effort to sidestep demands for an UN-backed international court (CEPAD 62). The shortcomings of transitional justice became even more evident following the 2006 crisis, when the country plunged into political instability and humanitarian turmoil (CEPAD 62; 64). In an effort to address the most severe crimes committed during this period, the United Nations established an Investigation Commission at the request of then-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. José Ramos-Horta (CEPAD 62). While the Commission recommended trials for certain cases, only a handful were ever prosecuted (CEPAD 62-63). These persistent legal and institutional weaknesses highlight the

fragility of governance structures in post-conflict Timor-Leste, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, including women and children (Costa and Sharp 113).

Three years after gaining independence, Timor-Leste established the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) to investigate human rights violations committed by all parties between 1974 and 1999 (Yuniar and Easton 164). Designed to complement the work of the Serious Crimes Court, the CAVR placed a strong emphasis on incorporating women's experiences into the reconciliation process, recognizing the specific harms they endured during the conflict (Yuniar and Easton 164). Between 2002 and 2004, the commission gathered around 8,000 statements from victims and witnesses, with women accounting for 21% of the testimonies (Yuniar and Easton 164). Public hearings were held, including a dedicated session on women and conflict (Yuniar and Easton 164). The CAVR concluded that rape constituted a crime against humanity and proposed several measures to combat gender-based violence and support female survivors (Yuniar and Easton 164). In its 2005 final report, *Chega!* (meaning "Enough!" in Portuguese), the commission estimated that as many as 183,000 people lost their lives due to violence and deprivation under Indonesian rule (Rimmer 840). A more conservative figure of 102,800 conflict-related deaths was presented, including killings, enforced disappearances, and deaths resulting from displacement policies, an alarming toll given that Timor-Leste's population at the time was only about 700,000 (Rimmer 840). The report documented severe human rights abuses, including 18,600 cases of extrajudicial executions and disappearances, 84,000 deaths linked to malnutrition and disease, and 60,000 non-fatal violations such as torture, unlawful detention, and sexual violence (Yuniar and Easton 164). Despite these findings, only a limited number of gender-based crimes were prosecuted which illustrates the shortcomings of the transitional justice process in fully addressing the violence experienced by women (Yuniar and Easton 163-164).

All in all, the hardships endured by women during the years of conflict were complex and far-reaching. Testimonies from the CAVR's *Hearing for Women in Conflict*, held in April 2003, highlighted the multiple responsibilities women had to juggle as they served as homemakers, took on the role of heads of households, and operated within clandestine networks, while some also fought alongside men in the resistance (CEPAD 84). Women were especially at risk of violence and interrogation when male relatives were suspected of involvement in resistance activities or had gone into hiding (CEPAD 84). Despite their immense sacrifices and contributions, 'traditional' gender norms continued to dominate, reinforcing societal expectations that often excluded them from leadership and decision-making roles (CEPAD 84).

Moreover, discussions during the CAVR hearings brought attention to domestic violence as an urgent issue that needed greater recognition, particularly at the community and regional levels (CEPAD 84). Cultural norms in Timor-Leste had long positioned men as the undisputed heads of households, with women expected to be obedient and deferential (CEPAD 84-85). However, there were signs of evolving gender roles, as women increasingly took on financial responsibilities within their families which indicated a shift in societal dynamics (CEPAD 85).

However, although Timorese women played a crucial role in the struggle for independence, their push for gender equality was often overshadowed by the broader nationalist movement (Niner and Loney 887). While independence created space for women's activism, the lasting effects of the occupation still posed challenges (Niner and Loney 887). As a result, addressing systematic gender inequalities remains an ongoing effort (Niner and Loney 887). However, the process of rebuilding the nation also presented opportunities for women to engage in politics and advocate for justice (Yuniar and Easton 164). One notable achievement was the 2001 election, in which 23 women (26%) secured seats in the Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting the country's constitution (Yuniar and Easton 164). The constitution formally enshrined gender equality under Article 17, and subsequent legislation introduced quotas to enhance women's representation at the national (Decree Law 6/2006) and local levels (Decree Law 3/2009) (Yuniar and Easton 164). These measures contributed to a large increase in female political participation, with women making up to 38% of the national parliament by 2012, the highest in the Asia-Pacific region at the time (Yuniar and Easton 164; Niner and Loney 891). Despite these gains, women's representation at the local level remains minimal. No women hold the position of district head across the country's 13 districts, and they occupy only a small percentage of village leadership roles (Yuniar and Easton 164). Additionally, the historical contributions of women to the independence movement continue to be overlooked. The Timorese Resistance Archive and Museum primarily highlights male figures, leaving women's involvement largely unrecognized (Niner and Loney 893). The only public monument in Dili that honours women's contributions is a park dedicated to activist Rosa Bonaparte (Niner and Loney 893).

Women's pursuit of equality was further complicated by economic instability. In the wake of independence and years of conflict, Timor-Leste has struggled with a fragile economy heavily dependent on petroleum revenues and a limited institutional framework, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups such as women and children (Costa and Sharp 113). The departure of Indonesian forces, combined with militia-led violence, resulted in the destruction of key

services, economic resources, and governmental institutions (GoTL 35). Basic infrastructure, including water systems, sewage facilities, electricity, and telecommunications, was left in ruins (GoTL 35). Schools and healthcare centres were also devastated, worsening already low literacy rates and limiting access to education and medical care (GoTL 35). In response, the newly established government focused on addressing immediate needs while trying to preserve stability (GoTL 35). However, with minimal resources and institutional capacity, efforts to rebuild the country proved challenging, leading to a renewed outbreak of violence in 2006 (GoTL 35). That year, tensions among the military, police, and disenfranchised youth erupted into a political and humanitarian crisis, exposing the weaknesses of governance structures and the rule of law (GoTL 35; Costa and Sharp 113). In the long run, fragile economies often struggle to develop efficient bureaucracies which leads to inconsistent budget management and inadequate service delivery, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Costa and Sharp 113). These systematic issues disproportionately impact women and children, making them more vulnerable to economic hardship and limited opportunities (Costa and Sharp 113).

Women's ability to influence economic policy remains limited in this context (Costa and Sharp 113). However, since 2008, reforms in budgeting and planning, particularly those incorporating gender considerations, have opened new pathways for advancing women's rights (Costa and Sharp 113). Recently, Timor-Leste has experienced rapid economic expansion, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the Asia-Pacific region, with growth surpassing 12%, largely fuelled by petroleum revenue (Costa and Sharp 113). Furthermore, the government has introduced reforms in policy development, strategic planning, and budgeting, with a particular focus on gender inclusion (Costa and Sharp 113). A special milestone was reached in 2008 when Timor-Leste formally committed to integrating gender perspectives into budgetary policies, signalling a commitment to addressing gender disparities (Costa and Sharp 113). This initiative is a core part of the broader gender mainstreaming agenda, overseen by the Secretaria de Estado da Promoção da Igualdade (SEPI or Office of the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality) (Costa and Sharp 113-114). To support this work, gender working groups were established within all government ministries through legislation passed in 2011 (Costa and Sharp 113-114). Additional institutions like the Grupo das Mulheres Parlamentares de Timor-Leste (GMPTL, or Women's Parliamentary Group of Timor-Leste), along with civil society organizations such as Fokupers, the Alola Foundation, Rede Feto, and the Asia Pacific Support Collective for Timor-Leste (APSC-TL), have also played vital roles in advocating for gender equality (Costa and Sharp 113-114). These organizations, in collaboration with civil society

actors like Luta Hamutuk and the NGO Forum, have reinforced efforts to integrate gender considerations across policy and economic sectors (Costa and Sharp 113-114).

Despite these advancements, systematic barriers remain. As of May 2019, Timor-Leste's political landscape continued to be dominated by a select group of male leaders from the '1975 generation,' including prominent figures such as FRETILIN's Francisco Guterres (Lú-Olo), José Ramos-Horta, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, and Mari Alkatiri (Rimmer 841). These leaders, who rely heavily on consensus-driven decision-making, still wield considerable influence over the country's governance. Meanwhile, Timorese women remain actively engaged in advocating for their rights and increasing their presence in public and political spheres (Rimmer 841). The National Congress of Women, held every four years since 2000, has served as a vital platform for shaping gender-focused policies and strategies for advocacy (Niner and Loney 889). This congress has played a key role in amplifying women's voices, ensuring that gender equality remains a central issue in national discourse and policymaking.

Despite progress, the pursuit of gender equality in Timor-Leste remains a formidable challenge, shaped by the enduring legacy of colonial rule, decades of occupation, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. The absence of justice for crimes during the Indonesian occupation continues to influence the country's social and political landscape. In Indonesia, key figures accused of serious human rights violations, including military generals Prabowo Subianto and Wiranto, have largely escaped legal consequences (Rimmer 842). Both individuals have been named in credible reports and United Nations investigations as being responsible for war crimes in Timor-Leste and Indonesia (Rimmer 842). Yet, instead of being held accountable, they have maintained influential political roles, with Prabowo running for president in 2019 and ultimately winning the Indonesian presidency in 2024 (Rimmer 842). This ongoing lack of accountability illustrates the broader difficulties Timor-Leste faces in reckoning with its history while striving for justice, reconciliation, and gender equality.

4.2. Gender Inequality and Gender Relations in Contemporary Timor-Leste

> Not only is "post-conflict" a misnomer for women, so too may be reconstruction, reintegration and rehabilitation. These concepts all assume an element of going back, restoring people to a position or capacity that previously existed. But this is not necessarily what women seek. The goal is rather societal transformation, that is, not restored dependence and subordination but rather an enhanced social position that accords full citizenship, social justice and empowerment based upon respect for standards of women's human dignity and human rights that may never have previously existed (Rimmer 840).

In the post-conflict period, gender relations and the struggle for equality in Timor-Leste reflect the enduring effects of its colonial past, militarization, and social 'traditions'. Women continue to face cultural and political pressures to conform to patriarchal norms rooted in customary practices, the colonial legacy, and the nationalist struggle led by a militarized male elite (Niner and Loney 874). While there have been notable advancements in some areas, men continue to dominate politics and public life which makes the fight for gender equality a persistent and multifaceted challenge (Niner and Loney 875). Many of the leaders who emerged from the resistance movement now hold influential roles in government, security forces, and other state institutions (Niner and Loney 875). Hence, "the post-conflict society they have shaped is heavily influenced by the thinking and behaviours derived from their wartime experiences" (Niner and Loney 875).

One of the challenges in this context has been the lack of effective demobilization efforts to address the embedded militarized masculinity of former combatants and the broader societal effects of prolonged conflict (Niner 233). As Connell (2002) points out, post-conflict societies often see a resurgence of male patriarchal dominance, frequently accompanied by the establishment of new military structures (qtd. in Niner 233). This reinforces hyper-masculine ideals and militarized behaviours, further reinforcing gender inequalities within the post-war social order (Niner 233). Moreover, ongoing conflicts among the militarized male elite reflect a troubling trend. As Cynthia Enloe (2004) has argued, this persistent militarization serves to "re-entrench the privileging of masculinity – in both private and public life" (qtd. in Niner and Loney 875). Overall, a deeply rooted culture of hegemonic militarized masculinity persists in Timor-Leste, perpetuated by the influence of veteran leaders who remain powerful figures despite their advancing age (Niner 236). This has, in turn, contributed to an aggressive model of masculinity that is increasingly evident among younger generations of men in Timor-Leste today (Niner 236). The effects of this masculinity are wide-ranging, not only impacting men's health and well-being but also shaping family dynamics and broader societal interactions (Niner 236).

These lasting effects of trauma and repeated violence have profoundly shaped the experiences of the Timorese people. Research has shown that the internal conflict of 2006-2007 led to a seven-fold increase in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder and a nearly three-fold rise in cases of severe psychological distress (Meiksin et al. 1339). Another analysis found that 38% of a sample of 1,544 adults in Timor-Leste exhibited signs of explosive anger, with exposure to trauma identified as a key contributing factor (Meiksin et al. 1339). Scholars widely agree

that Timor-Leste's violent past has fuelled cycles of aggression, particularly in the form of domestic violence, which remains a major concern (Meiksin et al. 1339). Many men who suffered imprisonment and torture during the Indonesian occupation later exhibited violent behaviours, further perpetuating this pattern (Meiksin et al. 1339). Hence, the link between masculinity and violence in Timor-Leste illustrates how personal trauma and broader social dynamics intersect. For many men, violence becomes a way to reassert a sense of control and identities in the wake of threatened masculinities which reinforces patterns of dominance and aggression that stem from past suffering (Niner 234; 235). This phenomenon, often described as "violence as a reassertion of masculinity," demonstrates how historical and personal trauma shape societal behaviours (Niner 235). Alarmingly, 68% of men who admitted to committing rape cited reasons such as sexual entitlement, amusement, or boredom (Niner 235; TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 22). Furthermore, 42% of surveyed men reported experiencing sexual abuse before the age of 18, nearly double the rate reported by women in the same study, suggesting a troubling cycle where victimization and perpetration are closely linked (Niner 235; TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 23).

In this context, it is widely recognized that domestic violence tends to rise in post-conflict societies, even after hostilities have ended (Cristalis and Scott 94). War often disrupts 'traditional' gender dynamics, pushing women into roles that were previously dominated by men (Cristalis and Scott 94). This shift can create frustration and a sense of displacement among men, especially when coupled with high levels of unemployment (Cristalis and Scott 94). In many cases, these pressures lead to destructive coping mechanisms such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Cristalis and Scott 94). In Timor-Leste, where generations have endured both physical and psychological violence, these experiences continue to shape how individuals and communities navigate peacetime, process their traumas, and rebuild their lives (Cristalis and Scott 94).

Furthermore, rather than solely attributing violence against women to external forces such as the Indonesian occupation, Timorese society has increasingly recognized that much of this violence is inflicted by men within their own families and communities (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 7). However, fully acknowledging and addressing this issue remains an ongoing challenge. Although domestic violence legislation was enacted in 2010 following advocacy from organizations like Fokupers, widespread recognition of domestic violence as a crime is still lacking (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 7). Further, reports of

domestic violence vary widely across Timor-Leste's 13 districts, indicating that some regions experience higher prevalence rates than others (Meiksin et al. 1339). Studies focusing on gender inequality and violence in areas such as Covalima, Oecusse and Bobonaro stress the need for localized interventions to address these ingrained issues (Meiksin et al. 1339). For girls and women who experience sexual violence, the repercussions can be especially devastating. Survivors often encounter immense stigma and shame, making it difficult for them to seek justice (Cowan 25). Many families, rather than supporting victims, prioritize protecting their reputation, opting for silence or sending daughters away rather than reporting the crime (Cowan 25). This isolation, coupled with the trauma and social rejection they experience, puts many survivors at heightened risk of exploitation. Lacking adequate support and economic opportunities, some are forced into sex work, where they are further exposed to violence and abuse (Cowan 25).

Beyond the domestic challenges they face, Timorese women are also at risk of both internal and international trafficking due to their marginalized status in society (UNDAF 4). Limited job opportunities, persistent economic struggles, and a lack of awareness about safe migration routes often leave women and girls vulnerable to deceptive employment offers, both in urban centres and abroad, without adequate legal or social protections (UNDAF 4). Many women who find themselves in the sex industry have already endured severe trauma, including rape, incest, or social exclusion due to cultural stigma surrounding premarital sex (UNDAF 4). In addition to existing patterns of trafficking within the country, where women and girls are moved from rural to urban areas or between districts, Timor-Leste is increasingly at risk of becoming a source country for international trafficking, compounding the vulnerabilities women already face (UNDAF 4).

In remote and rural communities, these issues are often even more pronounced. Women in these areas encounter gender-related obstacles, including restricted freedom of movement, limited access to crucial information and services, fewer economic opportunities, and higher illiteracy rates compared to men (Cowan 26). Additionally, rural women in Timor-Leste tend to have more children and often give birth at a younger age, frequently without adequate maternal healthcare, increasing risks to both their health and survival (Cowan 26). Research also shows that rural women are nearly twice as likely as urban women to lack formal education and feel less empowered to refuse sexual relations with their husbands (Cowan 26). Gender-based violence remains a major concern, with 35% of women in rural areas experiencing abuse,

yet they are less likely to seek justice for such violence (Cowan 26). These statistics show the urgent need for targeted policies and interventions to combat gender-based violence and enhance the overall well-being and economic prospects of women in rural regions.

Another pressing issue is the strict regulation of girls' and women's mobility and opportunities, which stems from societal anxieties about female sexuality (Cowan 25). Timorese cultural norms place heavy importance on girls maintaining their virginity until marriage, with any deviation, whether consensual or as a result of sexual violence, being perceived as a stain on the family's honour (Cowan 25). As a result, families often impose restrictions on their daughters' movements and deny them opportunities such as further education, particularly if it requires them to live away from home (Cowan 25). These limitations not only curtail young women's autonomy but also unfairly hold them responsible for actions perpetrated by men (Cowan 25). Of additional concern is the widespread lack of access to information about sexual health and healthy relationships for young people in Timor-Leste (Cowan 27). This gap in knowledge perpetuates cycles of gender-based violence, high fertility rates, and maternal mortality, which then pose risks for future generations (Cowan 27). Thus, addressing these issues through comprehensive sexual education and broader social reforms is important in preventing current inequalities from being passed down to the next generation.

Moreover, women in Timor-Leste face disparities in health and economic well-being compared to men. Studies indicate that malnutrition rates are higher among women, and their earnings amount to only one-eighth of what men earn (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 1). In addition, while the fertility rate in Timor-Leste remains one of the highest in Asia, it has steadily declined in recent years (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 1). Between 2000 and 2005, the fertility rate stood at 7.0, one of the highest in the world (GoTL 55). By 2015, this figure had decreased to 4.5, meaning that, on average, a woman of reproductive age (15-49 years) could expect to have 4.5 children (GoTL 55). However, disparities persist, with rural women averaging 5.1 children compared to 3.2 among their urban counterparts (GoTL 55). Despite this decline, only 47% of women of reproductive age have access to modern contraceptive methods to meet their family planning needs (GoTL 55). These persistently high fertility rates, alongside elevated maternal and infant mortality rates, highlight broader systematic challenges that continue to affect women in Timor-Leste. Furthermore, although paid parental leave policies have been introduced, social expectations and the absence of adequate childcare services make it difficult for women to return to the workforce (Costa and

Sharp 115). These structural barriers are further exacerbated by the widespread issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence, locally known as "violencia iha uma laran" ("violence in the home"), remains the most reported crime in Timor-Leste, accounting for 77% of all cases reported in 2009 (Costa and Sharp 115-116; Niner 232).

Another factor contributing to the persistence of violence is the customary practice of 'barlake', a system of mutual exchange between the families of the bride and groom, which often creates a dynamic in which women feel obligated to endure domestic violence (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10). This custom can reinforce a transactional view of marriage, where the material goods exchanged are perceived as justification for treating wives as property (Cristalis and Scott 20). In some instances, this mindset leads to acts of violence against women who fail to meet the expectations of their husband's family (Cristalis and Scott 20). Further, these marital commitments are often seen as unbreakable, discouraging women from reporting abuse to authorities out of fear of their husband's imprisonment, forced separation, or divorce (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10). Economic dependence further deepens these issues, as many women lack the financial resources to leave abusive relationships (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10).

The dominance of male-centred narratives can be considered as another obstacle to achieving gender equality and reinforcing gender-based violence. In both historical and contemporary Timorese society these narratives have reinforced militarized conceptions of masculinity across public and private spheres, upholding male privilege and marginalizing women's contributions to the independence movement and post-conflict rebuilding (Niner 231). Despite playing a critical role in the resistance against the Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999, comprising an estimated 60% of the resistance network, Timorese women remain largely excluded from political recognition and public discourse (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 6). These gendered exclusions have shaped policymaking and restricted women's access to education, employment, and political leadership (Niner 231; Niner and Loney 875). Ultimately, the prioritization of male figures in independence narratives and post-conflict nation-building efforts perpetuates systematic inequalities and undermines efforts toward gender equality (Niner and Loney 887). Furthermore, the absence of active conflict has not guaranteed social peace or equity; economic progress has benefited only a minority, and gender norms persist (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 5). These rigid expectations have effects on both sexes: women face structural discrimination, while men endure psychological stress linked to societal pressures to dominate and lead which contributes to harmful behaviours

and increased vulnerability to health risks, including preventable deaths (Niner 231; 236). Globally, 'traditional' masculinities exacerbate male exposure to violence and suicide, with men six times more likely to die in combat and twice as likely to die by suicide, according to the WHO (2014) (Niner 232).

Ultimately, Timorese women's historical contributions have often been overshadowed by narratives emphasizing male-dominated accounts of the resistance and its aftermath (Da Dalt 308). This reinforces what Cynthia Enloe (2004) describes as the "gendered presumption that what men did must have been more important than what women did in determining how the war was fought, how it ended, and what its impact is on post-war society" (qtd. in Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste 5). Consequently, women are often depicted primarily as victims or martyrs, rather than as key agents of change (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 6). This perception continues to obscure their contributions, discouraging many survivors from sharing their experiences due to societal stigma (UN Women 6). A notable example in this context is Beatriz Miranda, a survivor from Kraras – known as the 'widow village' after the 1983 massacre in which most of the men were killed – who faced backlash due to stigma regarding sexual violence when she spoke about her experience to the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) in 2003 (UN Women 6).

Even today, many survivors struggle for recognition as veterans and face barriers in accessing essential services (UN Women 6). According to the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, only 5,000 of the 53,098 individuals receiving veterans' pensions are women (UN Women 6). Consequently, it is necessary to challenge these dominant narratives by incorporating alternative perspectives (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 6). Revisiting women's involvement in the resistance could help reshape Timor-Leste's national identity and collective memory (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 6). Further, patriarchal narratives continue to restrict a more inclusive understanding of post-colonial identities and limits democratic development and social transformation (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 6). This is why, by adopting a subaltern perspective to reconstruct 'her-story,' it becomes possible to highlight the indispensable roles that women played in Timor-Leste's resistance and foster a more nuanced conversation about gender equality (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 6).

In addition to these obstacles, many survivors, especially widows or those separated from their partners, shoulder the full burden of providing for their families while raising children and

managing financial responsibilities (Toome et al. 2). Those who care for relatives with disabilities face even greater economic strain, as the Aged Pension ('Terseira Idade') does not always reach all eligible women and often fails to meet basic needs (Toome et al. 2). Mothers, in particular, struggle to afford their children's educational costs, especially when they have multiple children in school or university (Toome et al. 2). On top of these financial issues, cultural obligations such as contributing funds or livestock for 'traditional' ceremonies ("halo lia") add further economic pressure (Toome et al. 2). In addition, women who have endured sexual violence or separation often face stigma, discrimination, and mistreatment from both their families and communities, making it even harder for them to rebuild their lives (Toome et al. 2).

On another note, local patriarchal 'traditions' are often identified as barriers to achieving gender equality in Timor-Leste (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 3). Culture[14] is frequently linked to 'tradition' or 'customary' practices, which are perceived as static and unchanging (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 3). Nevertheless, scholars in gender studies emphasize that gender roles and relations are socially constructed elements of cultures that evolve over time, influenced by historical and political factors, including both colonial and post-colonial developments (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 3). This perspective aligns with Macintyre's (2017) argument that social structures in societies like Timor-Leste are deeply interconnected which makes it difficult to distinguish between intrinsic and introduced cultural practices, particularly those shaped by colonial rule, Western education, and Christianity (qtd. in Niner 229). Furthermore, cultures are dynamic, constantly evolving and merging in ways that blur simplistic distinctions between what is considered 'traditional' and what is seen as 'modern' (Niner 229).

Historically, women have not always been excluded from 'traditional' leadership structures and, in some cases, have held prominent roles (Cristalis and Scott 19). For example, female leaders known as 'feto ferik' were more prevalent in the western part of Timor-Leste, particularly among the 'Bunaq,' a matrilineal society (Cristalis and Scott 19). In certain areas,

---

[14] In academic contexts, culture is broadly understood as a dynamic set of beliefs, customs, practices, and social behaviours of a people, subject to change over time (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 3). This understanding emphasizes the fluidity of cultural practices and the interplay of historical and social transformations in shaping societal norms. It is important to acknowledge that there is no singular East Timorese culture; rather, a variety of regional traditions, practices, and customs have evolved over centuries (Cristalis and Scott 101).

women could assume high-ranking positions, especially when there was no adult male heir (Cristalis and Scott 19). On top of that, women played essential roles in religious and spiritual practices, acting as intermediaries between the spiritual and secular realms, a vital function in 'Tetum Terik traditions,' which emphasized maintaining harmony between humans and spirits (Cristalis and Scott 21). Despite these roles, customary law ('adat'), which evolved under the influence of Chinese and Muslim traditions, often placed women at a disadvantage (Cristalis and Scott 22). Under 'adat,' women were prohibited from inheriting land, and widows were required to relinquish property to male heirs (Cristalis and Scott 22). Polygamy was also permitted which left many women in precarious economic positions if their husbands could not provide adequately for multiple wives (Cristalis and Scott 22). Even senior women ('feto ferik') who held respectable social positions were still expected to fulfil demanding domestic, reproductive, and caregiving responsibilities, which limits their capacity to engage in public leadership (Niner and Loney 878). While cultural norms may have granted Timorese women a degree of status within private spheres, true gender equality remains elusive. Women's unpaid labour in domestic and caregiving roles continues to be undervalued, despite their economic contributions often surpassing those of men (Costa and Sharp 114). For instance, according to a 2007 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, women dedicated 50% of their time to household labour, compared to just 36% of men (Costa and Sharp 114).

More importantly, the Timorese expression "mane ho feto kompleta malu," which translates to "men and women complete each other," captures a deeply held cultural view that men's and women's roles are interconnected and form a balanced whole within Timorese society (Niner 226). In this context, anthropologists studying the region often point out that while patriarchal norms are prominent, women in Timor-Leste still hold considerable respect and authority, especially within the home and spiritual life, where many families are described as 'matrifocal,' or centred around the mother (Niner 226). These gender roles and relationships vary by region and clan, with some communities organized along 'patrilineal,' 'matrilineal,' or 'matrilocal' lines (Niner 227). Still, many of them share core cosmological beliefs that emphasize the value of women's roles (Niner 227).

Ultimately, in the broader indigenous Timorese belief system, women are often seen as sacred and vital to the balance of life, working in tandem with men (Niner and Loney 878). Female symbolism features strongly in Timorese cosmology, while fertility and feminine force, known as 'Rai Inan,' are especially worshipped (Niner and Loney 878). These ideas are also reflected in 'traditional' dualities such as 'feto-mane' (female-male), 'tasi feto-tasi mane' (female sea-

male sea), and 'rai ulun-rai ikun' (head of the land-tail of the land), which express the structure of social order and meaning (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 4). Furthermore, Timorese society today is still shaped by the ancient animist belief system known as 'lulik,' which includes a strong sense of spiritual and social hierarchy (Niner 227). This view continues to influence many aspects of daily life, including leadership and community organisation (Niner 227). The revival of customary authority after the conflict reflects just how deeply rooted and enduring these traditions are (Niner 227). Within these systems, women are respected and acknowledged, particularly in spiritual contexts (Niner 228). Even so, the path to achieving gender equality remains difficult. Indigenous values that honour women symbolically often coexist with colonial legacies and modern political structures that perpetuate gender-based inequality (Niner 228). Women are still largely expected to remain in domestic roles, and their societal value is often linked to their duties as wives and mothers, rather than being recognized as leaders, professionals, or political figures (Niner 236).

Against this backdrop, Portuguese colonialism left a lasting mark on gender dynamics in Timor-Leste, an area that still has not received the attention it deserves (Niner 229). The Portuguese ruled indirectly, working through local 'liurai' (chiefs), which gave rise to a highly gendered form of colonial intimacy (Niner 230). Portuguese men, often soldiers, engaged in relationships with Timorese women, while the reverse was not true (Niner 229). These unequal and exploitative relationships were a contributing factor to the 1912 'Great Rebellion,' sparked in part by the widespread sexual abuse of local women by colonial forces (Niner 229). This period also played a role in shaping a new form of masculinity in Timor-Leste, one that mirrored colonial ideals of authoritarianism, nationalism, and militarism (Niner 229). As Connell (2002) points out, colonial regimes exported their own gender norms, leaving behind layered and often conflicting systems of gender relations, a pattern clearly reflected in Timor-Leste's history (qtd. in Niner 230).

Further reinforcing these dynamics, the Portuguese colonial administration, in close partnership with the Catholic Church, played a major role in entrenching patriarchal systems in Timor-Leste (Niner 230). Power was concentrated in the hands of male elites, while women were systematically excluded from public life (Niner 230). Colonial policies reinforced male authority by officially recognizing men as heads of households, primarily for taxation purposes while discouraging women's economic participation (Niner 230). In addition, education opportunities heavily favoured boys which limited women's chances of mobility and influence in society (Niner 230). These colonial legacies are still felt today, reflected in persistent bias

toward male leadership and education (Niner 230). Compounding this, the Catholic Church, having played a central role during the independence movement from 1976 to 1999, remains a powerful social and political institution (Niner 232). Its reach extends from policy-making circles to daily community life, shaping how gender roles, sexuality, reproduction, and homosexuality are perceived (Niner 232). Often adopting conservative positions, the Church reinforces 'traditional' gender norms through portrayals of men as protectors and women as passive figures (Niner 232). This narrative upholds male dominance and makes it harder for women to question or push back against established roles (Niner 232). In this way, the enduring influence of both colonial and religious institutions continues to shape Timor-Leste's gender dynamics today.

Accompanying this, conservative views are still present in Timor-Leste, with many pushing back against feminist ideals and choosing to downplay or hide issues like domestic violence (Cristalis and Scott 101). This pushback is often reinforced by the Catholic Church, which frames feminism as a threat to family cohesion, 'traditional' marriage, and cultural values (Cristalis and Scott 101). Nevertheless, Timorese women have begun carving out a space for their voices. During the Indonesian occupation, access to education and training programs enabled many women to organize and mobilize together. As activist Olandina Caeiro put it, "I like my culture, but some things have to change" (Cristalis and Scott 5). While the past continues to shape men's attitudes and behaviours, many women have come to realize they cannot afford to wait for others to change, instead they must take initiative themselves (Cristalis and Scott 171). For some, the war altered their roles entirely. Widows and women whose partners were lost or absent had no choice but to take on leadership in their households or even joined the armed resistance (Cristalis and Scott 2). For others, the hardships of the conflict gave rise to independence, confidence, and the drive to pursue rights and freedoms that had long been denied (Cristalis and Scott 2). These shifts often result in the formation of women-led organizations advocating for equality and challenging long-standing patriarchal systems (Cristalis and Scott 2).

In this context, long-held expectations of masculinity are being tested. With unemployment having been high (which has changed over the last years) and few economic prospects, many Timorese men are finding it difficult to meet the 'traditional' role of family provider (Cowan 24). At the same time, more and more women are stepping into paid work, with some even becoming the main earners in their households (Cowan 24). These shifts challenge conventional ideas of what it means to be a man, and for some, the loss of this role leads to

frustration and the use of violence, whether through gang activity in public or abuse within the home (Cowan 24). This behaviour reinforces existing gender inequalities and make it harder for women to claim space and power in society (Cowan 24). Still, there are signs that change is underway. Cultural norms around gender roles show some flexibility. When women take up jobs outside the home, they show that financial responsibility can be shared (Cowan 25). Likewise, in times of family hardship, men often take on tasks 'traditionally' seen as women's work (Cowan 25). These small but important shifts show that rethinking gender roles is not just theoretical, it is already occurring in daily life in Timor-Leste.

In sum, Timorese culture has been shaped not only by local customs but also by outside forces like Portuguese colonial rule, the Indonesian occupation, and the rise of Roman Catholicism (Cristalis and Scott 101). These influences have played a big part in reinforcing male-dominated systems, just as much as 'traditional' beliefs have (Cristalis and Scott 101). At the same time, research on gender in Timor-Leste often focuses mostly on adults in childbearing age and tends to treat men and women as a single, unified group (Cowan 7). As a result, differences between communities, like ethnicity, religion, or age, are often overlooked (Cowan 7). This makes it difficult to identify the specific groups that face distinct disadvantages (Cowan 7). Still, it is clear that women living in rural and remote areas face some of the harshest challenges (Cowan 7). They often deal with multiple layers of disadvantages made worse by physical distance from basic services and limited opportunities (Cowan 7).

Ultimately, to really grasp gender dynamics in Timor-Leste, it is important to look at how history, culture, and politics have shaped the roles of men and women over time (Niner 226). The way gender roles are understood and lived today is the result of a long process shaped by colonial rule, local customs, resistance struggles, and global influences (Niner 226). These roles do not exist in a vacuum, they are tied to how power is structured in society, often giving advantages to some while holding others back (Niner 226). Patriarchy plays a role everywhere, but it looks different depending on the context. This is why it is crucial to pay attention to how people organize their lives, how traditions are passed down, and how values are reinforced from one generation to the next (Niner 226). Describing these patterns clearly, while also pointing to ways how things could be different, is a necessary step toward change (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). Both researchers and those working on the ground in gender-focused fields have a part to play in making sure these issues are better understood and more meaningfully addressed in the context of Timor-Leste's experience (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11).

Another layer of difficulty in pushing for gender equality in Timor-Leste lies in how people understand gender roles in everyday life. The term 'gender' is still fairly new in the country and is often seen as something introduced by foreign aid and development projects after 1999 (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 1). As a result, some locals, especially men in positions of power, feel that these initiatives give women special treatment, creating pushback against programs seen as upsetting 'traditional' norms (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 2). On top of that, there is no shared understanding across the country of what 'gender' actually means, which has made it harder to build a united movement for gender justice (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 2). Further, Niner (2017) observes that this lack of local engagement has left little room for deeper conversations about the power dynamics behind gender roles and inequality in Timor-Leste (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 2). Even international researchers have sometimes missed the mark, with some studies criticized for overlooking gender entirely in their research in Timor-Leste (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 2).

In addition, there is a need to take a step back and question one's own beliefs about gender, especially when trying to understand how gender and cultural norms operate in local Timorese communities (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). As Niner (2017) asserts, failing to do this has slowed real progress toward achieving gender equality in the country (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). Many gender-focused programs are built on assumptions about what inequality and gender-based violence look like, but these do not always match how local communities experience or understand them, particularly in places where 'traditional' customs or different worldviews still shape daily life (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). This is why clarification is needed regarding how locals understand new or foreign values (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). Scholars like Da Silva and Simião (2017) have pushed back on these programs, arguing they can reflect neo-colonial or neoliberal thinking, and they raise concerns about how local gender dynamics are often oversimplified or misrepresented in development reports (qtd. in Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). Their critiques do not just challenge Western feminist frameworks, they also remind one to think carefully and respectfully about the different cultural contexts one works in (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11). Moreover, taking a more thoughtful and open-minded approach to gender and development work helps create solutions that are better grounded in the lived realities of Timorese communities (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 11).

The push to challenge patriarchal structures and norms and promote gender equality is ongoing. Activists in this space often face backlash, but their work remains essential in confronting the power imbalances embedded in 'traditional' gender roles (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 3). These efforts must navigate a complicated mix of cultural traditions and colonial legacies which demonstrates how history, belief systems, and politics all shape the way gender plays out in present-day Timor-Leste (Niner 229; Niner and Loney 874). Nevertheless, women leaders and grassroots advocates have become central to the contemporary gender justice movement (Niner 874). This includes female members of parliament, local NGOs, and international allies who are pushing back against cultural constraints and political resistance (Niner and Loney 876). While formal gender equality is legally recognized in Timor-Leste, translating this into real live equality remains difficult (Niner and Loney 874; 875). The broader societal shift needed to give men and women equal footing is still a work in progress (Niner and Loney 876). Some encouraging signs have emerged, though, for example, the creation of the "Men's Association Against Violence" (Asosiasaun Mane Kontra Violensia) in 2002 by a group of 20 men committed to breaking the cycle of male dominance and violence (Niner 235). Initiatives like this show potential, but they often lack the funding and support needed to expand their reach, which illustrates the urgent need for broader investment in changing harmful norms and addressing gender-based violence (Niner 235).

In addition, real empowerment for women in Timor-Leste requires more than just opportunity, it demands deeper changes across society and its institutions. As Cowan (2013) puts it, women, first and foremost, need access to knowledge, leadership development, real opportunities, and the time to engage with them (Cowan 26). But these cannot happen without addressing the unequal division of labour that places the bulk of reproductive work, caregiving, and income-earning on women's shoulders (Cowan 26). Thus, it is not about men "helping out" with women's duties, rather it is about redefining these roles as shared responsibilities for both men and women (Cowan 26). Changing this mindset is key to building gender equality. Cowan (2013) also stresses the importance of improving access to essential services, particularly in areas like maternal health, reproductive care, education, business, and protection from violence (Cowan 26). Women cannot thrive if they are illiterate, stuck in an abusive relationship, lack control over reproductive choices, or face life-threatening risks when giving birth (Cowan 26). As women gain more confidence and time to participate outside the home, spaces where decisions are made, especially those 'traditionally' dominated by men, must open to include

them (Cowan 26). True inclusion means not just having a seat at the table but knowing your voice will be heard and respected, whether at home, in the village, or at the national level (Cowan 26).

4.3. Structural Constraints and Opportunities

Timor-Leste has undertaken important steps toward addressing intimate partner violence (IPV), particularly through legislative reforms and institutional efforts aimed at protecting women's rights. A major achievement was the enactment of the Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV) in 2010, which officially recognized domestic violence as a public crime (UNDP "Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste" 1). This legal shift transferred the responsibility for reporting abuse from solely the victims to any witnesses, enhancing accountability and support for victims (Kovar 211). The government also introduced specialized police training, established shelters for women, and offered counseling services in partnership with civil society organizations to improve responses to intimate partner violence cases (Wild et al. 2).

The Government of Timor-Leste (GoTL) has also embraced wider gender equality frameworks, such as the Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030, the 2018-2023 Declaration of Maubisse on Rural Women's Development, and three National Action Plans (NAPs) addressing gender-based violence (GBV), women's engagement in the private sector, and their involvement in peace and security efforts (TAF "Nabilan Completion Report Phase 2014-2022" 8; GoTL 52). Additionally, the government's dedication to international agreements, including the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), strengthens its efforts to address gender inequalities in Timor-Leste (Niner 235).

However, these institutional frameworks must also take into account the complexities of Timor-Leste's dual justice system, as many rural communities continue to rely heavily on customary justice practices, the previously mentioned 'adat'[15], to address domestic violence

---

[15] For clarification, local justice in Timor-Leste operates primarily through so-called 'sukus' and 'aldeias', the smallest administrative units in the country (Hirst and Almeida 6). These structures existed before independence and are now regulated by national legislation (Hirst and Almeida 6). Each suku comprises a Suku Chief and a council, including 'traditional' authority ('lia-na'in'), youth representatives, and representatives from aldeias

cases (Cristalis and Scott 97-98). These 'traditional' mechanisms typically involve compensating the female victim's male relatives with goods or livestock, rather than offering direct compensation to the victims themselves (Cristalis and Scott 97-98). As a result, some women turn to the formal legal system, believing that customary resolutions do not adequately acknowledge their suffering or the humiliation they have endured (Cristalis and Scott 97-98).

Yet, in the absence of adequate protection and support services, women who experience violence encounter obstacles when seeking formal justice. These challenges often stem from fears of social exclusion, losing family support, and facing financial hardship (UNDP "Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste" vii; Kovar 230). While 'traditional' justice systems are generally more accessible, faster, and less expensive, they frequently fall short of addressing the specific needs of female victims (UNDP "Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste" vii). Moreover, these customary practices often silence women's voices and restrict their access to meaningful restitution (UNDP "Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste" vii). The shortage of confidential and safe shelters, especially in rural regions, further narrows the options for women seeking to escape abusive situations (Kovar 230). Next, many victims lack awareness of formal legal procedures or how to navigate these systems, a problem that is particularly pronounced in rural areas where legal knowledge is scarce (Kovar 208).

Geographical challenges and inadequate infrastructure further limit women's access to formal justice (Kovar 236). Poor transportation, insufficient communication systems, and long distances to police stations and courts create barriers for victims seeking help or pursuing legal action (Kovar 236; GoTL 43). As a result, the justice system still struggles to effectively serve remote communities (GoTL 43). The introduction of mobile courts has improved access in municipalities lacking permanent courts and helped decrease criminal case backlogs (GoTL 43). Nonetheless, their reach remains constrained – they operate in only nine out of thirteen municipalities and handle only criminal, not civil, cases (GoTL 43). Consequently, many women continue to depend on customary justice systems, and the government recognizes that expanding judicial infrastructure further will require additional resources (GoTL 43). Still, efforts to modernize service delivery are underway (GoTL 77). Mobile applications like

(Hirst and Almeida 6). Although elected and subsidized by the state, officials in these local structures are not legally recognized as state officials but rather as representatives of public associations (Hirst and Almeida 6).

'Hamahon' assist survivors of gender-based violence by connecting them to legal, health, and social services, while 'ChatBot Rosa' allows individuals to report sexual harassment occurring in public places or workplaces (GoTL 77). Supported by development partners, these digital innovations aim to lower barriers to justice and enhance public service quality (GoTL 77).

Language and literacy barriers also hinder women's engagement with the formal justice system, as legal proceedings are generally conducted in Portuguese, a language many rural Timorese women do not speak (GoTL 43; Hirst and Almeida 8). This language barrier further distances women from legal processes and reinforces their dependence on customary justice systems (Kovar 236). Additionally, gaps remain between the creation of laws and their practical enforcement. A lack of enforcement capacity continues to be an obstacle, as both law enforcement agencies and the judiciary struggle with limited resources and staffing (IAN "Menschenrechte 2024" 30; Wild et al. 2). For instance, specialized domestic violence units within the Polícia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL) are understaffed, leading to delays in processing cases and weak enforcement of protective measures (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26). Furthermore, lenient sentencing practices, often involving probation rather than serious penalties, foster a sense of impunity and erode public confidence in the justice system (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26; IAN "Menschenrechte 2024" 30).

In light of these challenges, government initiatives must strengthen the capacity and responsiveness of health, legal, and justice services to more effectively assist women experiencing violence. Greater focus on enforcing and upholding existing laws within the judicial system is important to ensure that intimate partner violence cases receive appropriate sentencing (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 119). However, improving institutional capacity must be accompanied by targeted efforts to shift attitudes and behaviours at the institutional, community, and individual levels, addressing barriers like social stigma that prevent women from seeking assistance and justice (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 119). While the Constitution of Timor-Leste guarantees gender equality, in practice, customary norms take precedence over formal legislation (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27). Timorese women continue to face unequal access to land, and lower levels of education often result in fewer job opportunities and poorer working conditions (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27; Toome et al. 1). The 2017 land and property law marked progress toward securing women's ownership rights, yet obstacles persist, particularly for young mothers, single women, and widows (GoTL 77). Many women lack ownership of the land they farm, and insecure land tenure prevents them

from making long-term investments in agriculture or business ventures (GoTL 77). Additionally, around 20% of households in Timor-Leste are headed by women, who often face multiple disadvantages (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27). These women are more likely to experience poverty and have limited access to government services, especially in rural communities (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27). The National Action Plan acknowledges that post-conflict economic recovery has been particularly difficult for women and calls for targeted support, though progress in implementation has been slow (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27).

Economic dependency further exacerbates these institutional challenges. Many Timorese women rely financially on their partners which creates obstacles for those considering legal action against their abusers (Kovar 229). This financial vulnerability often forces women to weigh the risk of continued abuse against the threat of economic hardship (Kovar 229). Employment inequalities further highlight these challenges, with women being only half as likely as men to obtain paid work (UNDP "National Human Development Report" 5). Responsibilities related to household duties and unpaid care, though critical to the broader economy, restrict women's participation in the formal workforce. Moreover, the scarcity of formal job opportunities, especially in the already saturated public sector, continues to pose difficulties for Timorese youth (UNDP "National Human Development Report" 5). Nearly half of young people report unequal access to public sector jobs, with 10 percent citing discrimination based on age, language skills, religion, or gender (UNDP "National Human Development Report" 5). These findings highlight the need to address such barriers to create more equitable opportunities, especially for young women (UNDP "National Human Development Report" 5).

In response, the Government of Timor-Leste (GoTL) has strengthened its commitment to advancing women's economic empowerment, notably through the adoption of the National Employment Strategy 2017-2030 (UN Women "Annual Report 2016-2017" 12). This strategy aims to eliminate gender-based discrimination in hiring and promotion practices and has been supported by UN Women through the use of sex-disaggregrated data analysis (UN Women "Annual Report 2016-2017" 12). In addition, a 2017 government resolution reinforced the principle of equal pay for men and women performing the same work, emphasizing the importance of consistent enforcement and oversight in both public and private sectors (UN Women "Annual Report 2016-2017" 12). UN Women has also partnered with the World Bank and Timor-Leste's Ministry of Finance to examine economic disparities in agriculture, finding

that male farmers produce, on average, 31 percent more per hectare than their female counterparts (UN Women "Annual Report 2016-2017" 13). This disparity illustrates the need for comprehensive investment in women's economic empowerment, including improvements in literacy, access to labour markets, professional networks, and participation in cash crop production (UN Women "Annual Report 2016-2017" 13). Addressing these inequalities requires targeted policy measures to expand employment opportunities and provide young people with the skills necessary to achieve their goals. Despite these ongoing challenges, Timor-Leste's rapid economic growth, largely fuelled by petroleum revenues, along with government reforms in planning, budgeting, and policymaking, has opened new opportunities for women to advocate for gender equality (Costa and Sharp 113). Notably, initiatives such as gender-responsive budgeting have allowed Timorese women to influence fiscal policy and incorporate gender perspectives into national budgeting processes (Costa and Sharp 116).

Although Timor-Leste has introduced a range of legislative and policy measures to address intimate partner violence and advance gender equality, institutional and structural challenges remain. Progress has been made, particularly in achieving gender parity in primary and pre-school education across the country, with girls slightly outperforming boys at the pre-secondary and secondary levels (GoTL 64). Women's political participation is also noteworthy, with 38% of parliamentary seats held by women, the highest proportion in the Asia-Pacific region, largely due to quota systems championed by the national Women's Network (Rede Feto) and other gender advocacy organizations (GoTL 74). Programs like '100 percent Hau Prontu,' which supports women's readiness for leadership roles, have led to an increase in the number of female Village Chiefs, rising from 2.5% in 2009 to 5% in 2016 (GoTL 74-75). However, women's representation at the local level continues to lag behind that of men (GoTL 74-75). Additionally, while women's participation in the civil service (35%), police force (15%), and military (10%) is gradually rising, these numbers remain relatively low (GoTL 75).

Nevertheless, the introduction of gender-responsive budgeting and the creation of multi-level gender coordination frameworks reflect Timor-Leste's strong commitment to integrating gender equality into governance and policymaking processes (GoTL 76). Additional progress includes the development of essential support services of violence, such as the police's Vulnerable Persons' Unit, safe houses (uma mahon) in selected municipalities, and economic assistance programs designed to support vulnerable women and children (Wild et al. 2). Moreover, the Timorese NGO 'PRADET' (Psychosocial Recovery and Development in East

Timor), in partnership with the Ministry of Health, has established calm spaces ('fatin hakmatek') in five municipal hospitals (Wild et al. 2). These facilities offer a range of critical services to victims of violence, including forensic injury documentation, emergency counseling, medical treatment, temporary shelter, and access to basic needs such as food, clothing, and transportation (Wild et al. 2). The creation of a national 'Medical Forensic Protocol' and the training of more than 50 medical forensic professionals, including midwives and doctors, also mark improvements in the healthcare system's ability to address violence against women (Wild et al. 2).

Nonetheless, cultural traditions, economic dependence, infrastructural challenges, and weak law enforcement continue to hinder the full effectiveness of these initiatives. Feedback from community consultations has emphasized the need for widespread public education and improved communication about existing laws and individual rights (Wild et al. 6). Educational campaigns are seen as vital for challenging patriarchal norms and empowering women to speak openly about their experiences with violence (Wild et al. 6). Discussions on addressing intimate partner violence often reveal a tension between customary family-based systems and formal judicial procedures. While some experts contend that women seldomly achieve substantial justice through either approach, others believe that local cultural practices could play a constructive role in increasing women's protection and expanding their options (Wild et al. 7).

Finally, the persistent discrimination faced by female survivors of human rights abuses committed during the Indonesian occupation – many of whom have yet to receive appropriate reparations – remains a pressing issue (Ian "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 31). Families continue to bear the burden alone as they search for the graves of relatives who forcibly disappeared (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 31). While the national truth commission (CAVR) provided a platform for women's testimonies through public hearings and helped raise awareness of gender-based violence, meaningful legal accountability has remained largely absent (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26-27). Survivors still endure social stigma and marginalization and have extremely limited access to medical, psychological, reproductive, and mental health services, a deficiency also noted by the CEDAW Committee (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26-27). In the area of peacebuilding, the National Action Plan has reaffirmed CAVR's recommendations, advocating for initiatives aimed at eliminating discrimination against survivors of sexual violence and promoting women-led efforts in conflict prevention and resolution (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27). This plan emphasizes the need to recognize and secure justice for female survivors

and women veterans as part of fostering a responsible state and a dynamic civil society (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27). However, the actual implementation of these recommendations remains limited (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 27).

As Cristalis and Scott (2005) have highlighted, ending intimate partner violence requires more than just passing laws or enforcing regulations; it demands challenging and reshaping the societal attitudes that tolerate violence against women (Cristalis and Scott 101). Although rights-based strategies are important, they are often criticized for focusing too narrowly on legal reforms. Experiences from transitional societies show that without cultural acceptance and effective implementation, legal changes alone have limited impact (Cristalis and Scott 162). Still, establishing legal frameworks provides an essential tool for holding governments accountable and offers a foundation for women's rights advocates to push for broader systematic reforms (Cristalis and Scott 162). Still, these legal advancements must be paired with long-term efforts to foster cultural and societal change (Cristalis and Scott 162). A comprehensive approach is necessary, one that combines legal action with economic empowerment and ongoing, culturally appropriate community education. Promoting women's financial independence, improving rural infrastructure, and supporting grassroots initiatives to raise awareness of women's rights can help address structural challenges. At the same time, continuous training for law enforcement and judicial personnel is vital to ensure the effective application of laws and to strengthen institutional responses to intimate partner violence (Cristalis and Scott 98).

5. Discussion

This chapter critically explores the structural, cultural, and historical foundations of violence against women (VAW) in Timor-Leste, with a specific focus on intimate partner violence (IPV). Drawing on a public health framework and the social-ecological model, it examines the multi-layered factors that contribute to the persistence and normalization of intimate partner violence. Central to this discussion are the following questions: *Where does this kind of violence originate? What structural, historical, and cultural conditions enable and sustain it? How do these conditions complicate prevention efforts? And to what extent are they accounted for in current interventions?*

From a public health perspective, intimate partner violence is not only a private or legal issue but a widespread social problem with profound implications for individual and community

well-being. The social-ecological model, which emphasizes the interaction between individual, relational, community, and societal factors, provides a useful analytical tool to understand how violence is produced and reproduced across different levels of Timorese society. This chapter focuses on each of the layers of this model, particularly the societal and community levels, where structural inequalities, gendered cultural norms, and historical legacies converge to shape the conditions under which intimate partner violence occurs. In the context of Timor-Leste, these outer layers are heavily influenced by the enduring impacts of Portuguese colonization, Indonesian occupation, and post-conflict militarization. As outlined in Chapter 4, these historical experiences have institutionalized patriarchal hierarchies and reinforced militarized masculinities, contributing to the normalization of violence in domestic spaces. This chapter interrogates how these legacies shape current attitudes toward intimate partner violence, how they continue to influence gendered power relations, and how they hinder efforts toward violence prevention. Cultural norms and practices further embed intimate partner violence within everyday life, often framing it as a familial or communal concern rather than a public health or human rights issue. Key questions guiding this section, 5.1., include: *Which cultural norms and practices enable or sustain intimate partner violence? How do these interact with historical and structural conditions to complicate violence prevention strategies?*

These inquiries also lay the groundwork for Section 5.2, which analyzes the Nabilan Program with regard to, firstly, the consideration of the historical, cultural, and structural context of Timor-Leste, and secondly, the adaptation of the SASA! model. This case study raises important questions about the translatability of community-based prevention frameworks across distinct socio-historical contexts. Specifically, it asks: *How has Nabilan accounted for the specific historical and cultural context that shapes IPV in Timor-Leste? What challenges and limitations have emerged in adapting SASA!, a model developed in Uganda, to a post-conflict Southeast Asian setting?* By examining these questions through a public health lens and within the structure of the social-ecological model, this chapter aims to contribute to a more contextually grounded understanding of violence against women prevention and its theoretical and practical limits.

5.1. Historical Legacies and the Structural-Cultural Foundations of Gendered Violence

To effectively understand violence against women, it is crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach that situates the issue within its broader public health and socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, employing a public health lens allows for a thorough understanding of violence as

not merely an individual or isolated issue, but as one embedded in historical, cultural, and structural dynamics that vary across different contexts. Since, overall, the public health approach illustrates the importance of identifying and addressing both individual and systemic risk factors, such as inequitable gender norms, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, societal stigma, and discriminatory policies, it is a useful tool to analyse the risk factors in Timor-Leste which collectively contribute to the prevalence and persistence of violence against Timorese women. Hence, violence directed against women cannot be fully understood or addressed without acknowledging the historical legacies and cultural narratives that reinforce gender inequality and legitimize male dominance and aggression. Research consistently demonstrates that violence emerges within specific historical contexts and cultural frameworks, shaping the frequency, severity, and social acceptance of violence against women (Meiksin et al. 1339; Nogueira et al. 36-40).

This section of the discussion, therefore, explores the various determinants that contribute to ongoing patterns of violence and gender inequality. The case of Timor-Leste will provide an illustrative example of how historical experiences of conflict and militarization, alongside ingrained gender norms, have shaped patterns of violence against women and gender inequity, thereby highlighting the importance of context-specific analyses. Through a public health lens, the discussion aims to disclose the complex web of determinants at the individual, relational, institutional, and community levels which affirms the necessity of context-sensitive public health interventions in addressing and preventing gendered violence.

Historical factors contributing to violence against women (VAW) in Timor-Leste can be traced through the complex interplay of colonialism, militarized conflict, and cultural and gendered transformations. Portuguese colonization, lasting from the 16th century until 1975, introduced social and cultural shifts, notably through the establishment and spread of Catholicism. This religious imposition was not merely spiritual; it institutionalized patriarchal norms by embedding hierarchical gender relations within the societal structure. Catholic teachings reinforced strict gender roles, casting men as household heads and moral authorities, which normalized male dominance and institutionalized the subordination of women (Nogueira et al. 40). One clear example of this influence was the enforcement of conservative marriage practices and the regulation of women's sexuality. Women were expected to embody chastity and obedience, which severely limited their autonomy and decision-making power (Da Dalt 300). Missionary schools further reinforced these gender roles by prioritizing domestic skills

over intellectual development for girls, further reducing women's roles within the home (Da Dalt 300). Although less thoroughly documented than in later periods, sexual violence was a persistent feature of the colonial era, functioning as a means of oppression and control. This contributed to women's vulnerability and fostered a culture of impunity around gender-based violence (Da Dalt 300). Reports of colonial officers sexually exploiting local women, particularly domestic workers, established patterns of abuse that normalized and perpetuated gender-based violence (Da Dalt 300).

The Indonesian occupation intensified the violence experienced by Timorese women. Sexual violence during this period was not only widespread and systematic but was deliberately used as a weapon of terror, control, and subjugation. Numerous documented incidents include mass rapes, sexual slavery, forced pregnancies, and acts of sexual torture committed by Indonesian military personnel (Cristalis and Scott 91). For instance, during military crackdowns in 1999, the district of Liquiçá witnessed extensive rape and sexual abuse, intentionally carried out to intimidate local communities and suppress resistance through public humiliation and fear (Cristalis and Scott 91). This strategic use of violence left deep psychological scars and fostered a lasting culture of fear, silence, and stigma surrounding sexual assault. During this time, men and boys were conditioned to associate masculinity with aggression, power, and violence. Hence, at the individual level of the social-ecological model, the enduring impact of colonial and military violence has contributed to the normalization of aggression as a way for men, particularly those who endured torture and violence during the occupation, to assert their masculinity, leading to ongoing cycles of domestic violence even after independence (Meiksin et al. 1339). The broader militarization of society throughout the occupation and the resistance further reinforced harmful models of masculinity, equating male honour and authority with dominance and physical force, a dynamic that largely remained unchallenged in the post-conflict period.

Another important historical dimension is the often-overlooked role of Timorese women during both Portuguese colonization and the resistance against the Indonesian occupation. Despite their active involvement, serving as combatants, caregivers, and leaders who bolstered community resilience, women's contributions have been largely marginalized or ignored in post-independence Timor-Leste. For example, the Organisation Popular de Mulheres Timorense (OPMT) played a crucial role in providing logistical support and mobilizing communities. Nevertheless, post-independence accounts omitted these efforts, effectively

erasing women's narratives from the broader story of national liberation (Cristalis and Scott 28). The re-establishment of patriarchal norms after independence further diminished the visibility of the empowerment women had gained during the conflict. True post-conflict reconstruction would require not just a return to past practices but a transformation of society that fully acknowledges and upholds women's rights and social status (Rimmer 840). The failure to achieve this societal change has contributed to ongoing vulnerabilities and the continued normalization of gender-based violence.

Taking into account the historical factors contributing to the prevalence of intimate partner violence and gender inequality, cultural factors must also be considered. At the interpersonal level, gendered norms rooted in practices like 'barlake' reinforce family expectations that women should tolerate abuse to maintain social bonds and protect family honour (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10). The belief that a woman must stay with her husband, even in abusive circumstances, arises from the perceived permanence of these family agreements. As a result, such customs often leave women with few options to seek assistance or escape harmful relationships (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10).

The community level presents further challenges, as local justice mechanisms, while accessible and cost-effective, often prioritize community cohesion over women's safety and rights. Customary leaders exclude women from participating in dispute resolution and tend to address intimate partner violence through compensatory settlements that benefit the victim's family rather than the woman herself (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10; UNDP "The Path Out of Poverty" 16-17). In rural areas, the lack of police presence and limited healthcare infrastructure further restrict women's access to justice and protective services, especially in urgent situations (Wild et al. 2). Cultural perceptions of gender roles are also shaped by Timorese cosmology, which is based on a dualistic concept of male-female complementarity. This view is captured by the often-cited phrase "mane ho feto kompleta malu" ("men and women complete each other") (Niner 226). While this dualism implies balance, it has operated within a hierarchical framework that assigns public leadership to men and domestic duties to women. Moreover, although women are symbolically valued as sacred custodians of fertility and tradition, this status rarely translates into political or economic power (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 4). Some point to women's ritual importance, particularly in their roles related to fertility and household management, but this recognition remains largely symbolic (Niner 236).

An important, though complex, historical dimension of these cultural dynamics developed during the Indonesian occupation. While this period is remembered for its brutal repression and violence, it also brought state-driven efforts to expand public education. Niner (2012) notes that the Indonesian government's initiatives to increase access to schooling, including for girls, gradually influenced 'traditional' gender roles (Niner and Loney 874). Greater educational opportunities for women during this time opened pathways for their involvement in formal employment and public affairs. Although these advancements took place under an oppressive regime marked by gendered violence, they helped lay the groundwork for the rise of women's rights activism and growing demands for gender equality in the post-conflict period. Although gender roles began to shift during the occupation, current data indicates that 'traditional' views on gender and violence remain largely conservative (Cristalis and Scott 101). As Niner (2019) points out, surveys show that intimate partner violence is still widely considered acceptable in certain situations, especially when women are perceived to have violated established gender expectations (Niner 234). This tolerance for violence reflects a broader cultural framework, shaped by historical factors, that upholds male authority and normalized violence behaviour.

The persistence of intimate partner violence and gender inequality in Timor-Leste is not only the result, as I argue, of historical and cultural legacies but is also shaped by structural factors. At the institutional level, while the country's legal framework, including the 2002 Constitution and the 2010 Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV), formally upholds gender equality, there remains a gap between policy commitments and their practical application. Limited institutional capacity, insufficient training for law enforcement, and poor coordination between government agencies and civil society organizations impede effective implementation (IAN "Menschenrechte 2024" 30). Courts often issue light sentences, such as probation, even in serious cases, which weakens the law's deterrent impact and fails to emphasize the severity of intimate partner violence as both a public health and human rights concern (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26). Additionally, victim support services, including shelters and psychosocial assistance, remain underfunded, insufficient, and largely inaccessible to many women, especially those living in rural and remote areas (Toome et al. 3).

Moreover, a 2015 report submitted under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) highlighted the ongoing challenges posed by cultural norms, gender stereotypes, and limited access to justice (Niner and Loney 895). Many women who experience violence choose not to report it, often due to fears of stigma, retaliation,

or being dismissed (IAN "Menschenrechte 2024" 30). The Ministry for Social Solidarity and Inclusion, which is responsible for supporting victims of domestic violence, operates with limited resources and depends heavily on underfunded civil society organizations (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26). Health services, particularly reproductive care provided by midwives, could serve as important contact points for survivors (Wild et al. 2). However, few abused women disclose their situations to healthcare providers, and most reside in remote areas where access to medical care is extremely limited (Wild et al. 2).

Structural inequalities can also be found in the economic circumstances faced by women in Timor-Leste. Limited access to land ownership and formal employment opportunities leaves many women economically dependent, increasing their vulnerability to intimate partner violence. Female-headed households are particularly affected by poverty, a condition that often leads to lower educational attainment for children and diminishes overall family well-being (UNDAF 4). The challenges are even more severe for widows, abandoned women, and survivors of sexual violence, who endure not only social stigma but also financial hardship and exclusion from government support systems (Toome et al. 1-2). Although gender equality in property rights is legally recognized, 'traditional' customs continue to limit women's land access, especially in patrilineal communities where inheritance and land ownership typically follow the male lineage (Cristalis and Scott 22). As a result, women's full economic independence remains constrained, making it especially difficult for those in abusive relationships to achieve the financial autonomy needed to leave their partners.

Political participation also partly reveals structural inequalities. While gender quotas have successfully increased women's representation in the national parliament, reaching 38% in 2012, women continue to be underrepresented at the local level (Yuniar and Easton 164). Cultural and practical obstacles, including illiteracy, geographic remoteness, and male-dominated leadership structures, hinder women's involvement in village councils (suku) and district governance (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 8). Even when women secure reserved seats, they often lack the necessary resources and institutional support to meaningfully influence decision-making which limits the broader impact of the quotas (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 8). The women's movement has sought to drive structural change through both advocacy and grassroots initiatives. Campaigns for legal reform, including the development of the Women's Charter of Rights, have contributed to shaping the constitution and increasing public awareness of gender issues (Niner and Loney 888).

However, the challenge remains in reconciling formal legal norms with local cultural understandings. International gender discourse often appears foreign to many Timorese which prompts resistance unless it is reframed in culturally resonant ways (Niner and Loney 895).

When viewed through a public health lens, the historical, cultural, and structural factors contributing to intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste represent a complex interplay of risk conditions that affect the health and well-being of Timorese women and their communities. Hence, intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste can be understood through the social-ecological model's four levels which highlight how historical, cultural, and structural factors intersect. At the individual level, colonial violence, low education, economic dependency, and childhood abuse increase the risk of intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste (Meiksin et al. 1339; Krug et al. 1085). Relationally, cultural practices such as 'barlake' create power imbalances and economic dependencies that trap women in abusive relationship (Niner "Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste" 10; Niner 228). Community-level risks include customary justice systems that favour reconciliation over accountability, limited services, and norms that justify violence (Wild et al. 2; UNDP "The Path Out of Poverty" 16). Societal factors – weak institutions, patriarchal ideologies, and economic deprivation – further entrench intimate partner violence (Niner and Loney 895; Krug et al. 1086). Public health, with its emphasis on addressing root causes, promoting resilience, and understanding the social determinants of health, offers a framework for holistic intervention. As Howe and Alpert (2009) suggest, effective prevention of intimate partner violence requires an integrated strategy that identifies underlying social and institutional patterns, evaluates their impact, and implements culturally sensitive, community-based programs to disrupt these cycles and promote long-term change (Howe and Alpert 276-278).

5.2. The Adaptation and Limitations of Community-Based Models in Timor-Leste

Previously, I have explored what historical, cultural, and structural factors in Timor-Leste contribute to the prevalence of intimate partner violence and gender inequality. This is why I will explore in the following section how the Nabilan program takes these factors into account while taking a look at the adaptation process of the SASA! model from Uganda. The following questions will guide this section: *Was the specific historical, cultural and structural context that shapes violence against women in Timor-Leste considered as this program was being implemented? In what ways do insights from such a case study reveal limitations and blind spots of violence against women prevention efforts? How has the Nabilan initiative tried to*

adapt global strategies like SASA! to the Timorese context? Does the Nabilan Program align with its theoretical framework, namely the social-ecological model? What specific challenges emerged when adapting the SASA! approach in Timor-Leste, given its distinct cultural and historical context compared to Uganda?

In my view, the implementation of the Nabilan Program demonstrated a thoughtful consideration of the historical, cultural, and structural factors influencing violence against women in Timor-Leste. This contextual approach was particularly grounded in the *Nabilan Health and Life Experiences Study*, conducted between July and September 2015. As discussed in a previous chapter, this study collected data on both the prevalence and perpetration of different forms of violence, providing a solid evidence base to inform programming and advocacy efforts (TAF "Intimate Partner Violence Against Women" 1). The findings highlighted that violence against women in Timor-Leste cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the country's long history of conflict, patriarchal social structures, and persistent gender inequalities. The study further identified violence against Timorese women as a consequence of historically unequal power dynamics between men and women, reinforced by cultural, social, and institutional norms (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 13). Reports of violence were widespread across all sectors of society, with domestic violence emerging as the most prevalent form (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 13). Notably, the Nabilan Program acknowledged that the trauma resulting from past conflicts, especially the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) and the internal unrest of 2006-2008, had normalized violence as an accepted method of resolving disputes, including intimate partner relationships (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 24; 131).

The socio-economic conditions in Timor-Leste also played a crucial role in shaping the Nabilan Program's strategy. Most of the population lives in rural areas and relies in low-yield agricultural activities, with women predominantly engaged in unpaid labour (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 22). This economic dependence diminishes women's bargaining power within households, making it harder for them to leave abusive situations (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 23). Economic challenges are further compounded by social stigmas attached to family separation and by gender norms that view domestic violence as either a private matter or an acceptable form of discipline (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 25). Expressions such as "bikan ho kanuru baku malu" ("a plate and a spoon will hit each other") capture how normalized intimate partner violence is within Timorese society (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 25). Practices such as polygamy and customary exchanges like 'barlake' were also found to

reinforce women's marginalization and social isolation (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 24). These insights indicate that addressing violence against women in Timor-Leste requires more than just delivering services, it demands long-term strategies aimed at transforming gender norms.

The Nabilan Program demonstrates sensitivity to these realities by adopting a holistic and multi-sectoral approach to both prevention and response. The *Nabilan Baseline Study* explored not only women's experiences of violence but also the factors contributing to men's perpetration (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 14). Identified risk factors included childhood exposure to violence, personal experiences of abuse, acceptance of wife-beating as justified, and, for men, trauma symptoms linked to past conflict and occupation, involvement in physical fights, and controlling behaviours (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 134). These findings informed the design for interventions that sought to break cycles of intergenerational violence (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 81). The program also acknowledged that societal acceptance of violence is deeply ingrained and thus, requires sustained, community-driven prevention initiatives. The high prevalence of attitudes accepting wife-beating, reported up to 86% of women under certain conditions, demonstrated the need for behaviour-change programs that engaged both men and women (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 90). Recognizing the need to involve men and boys alongside women and girls in violence prevention was integral to the program's holistic strategy (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 61).

Furthermore, the findings of the *Nabilan Baseline Study* emphasized the importance of prioritizing primary violence prevention alongside ensuring access to justice throughout all sectors of society. Given the pervasive nature of intimate partner violence, a population-wide strategy was deemed essential. Global research also indicates that the most effective way to reduce violence against women involves interventions that address gender inequality across multiple levels, namely individual, relational, community, and societal. In line with this, the Nabilan Program adopted the social-ecological model as the theoretical foundation for its prevention efforts (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 60; 135). This adoption reflects the growing recognition that violence against women cannot be addressed in isolation but requires coordinated, multi-level strategies (Krug et al. 1085; Howe and Alpert 285).

Acknowledging that gender norms are among the strongest predictors of violence in Timor-Leste, the Nabilan Program places transforming gender relations at the heart of its prevention strategy (Heise et al. 1283). Social norms and cultural values contribute to justifying and

sustaining the victimization of women and children, making it essential to address the influences across different levels (Krug et al. 1086). The program demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of violence by working to change these attitudes and behaviours at the individual level, fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, strengthening community support systems, and promoting broader legal and cultural reforms. This multi-faceted approach reflects a public health perspective, which emphasizes understanding the patterns of violence, identifying both risk and protective factors, and prioritizing primary prevention strategies to achieve lasting change (Howe and Alpert 277-278).

Aligned with this approach, the Nabilan Program prioritized gaining a deeper understanding of local contexts by actively engaging with community leaders. For example, interviews were held with ritual elders ('lia-na'in') to collect insights on the influence of customary practices, marriage traditions, and community-based methods for addressing domestic violence (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 4). These discussions aimed not only to provide a clearer picture of the community's social dynamics but also to evaluate how legislative reforms, particularly the introduction of the Law Against Domestic Violence, had affected local attitudes and responses to violence against women (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 4). Conversations also examined the roles played by various stakeholders, including families, police, and healthcare services, in responding to domestic violence and implementing 'traditional' sanctions (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 4). Another key component of Nabilan's strategy was collaborating with village chiefs and council members who demonstrated a willingness to address violence-related challenges (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 27-28). In Letofoho, for instance, village chiefs welcomed community-based initiatives, partly because they were overwhelmed by the large numbers of domestic violence cases they were expected to mediate (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 27-28). Early engagement with local authorities was seen as critical, not only for effective program delivery but also for securing the legitimacy of Nabilan's efforts within the community (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 27-28).

Building on this foundation, the Nabilan Program has implemented a multi-sectoral approach that targets individual beliefs and behaviours while also targeting wider structural inequalities that sustain violence. The program recognizes that government, legal, and economic policies are integral to violence prevention and must be included in strategies aimed at achieving lasting change (Krug et al. 1086). Research consistently shows that disadvantaged populations bear a

disproportionate share of the burden of violence, facing obstacles in accessing protection, services, and pathways to recovery (Krug et al. 1086). Additionally, interpersonal violence and extended periods of conflict hinder economic progress by increasing healthcare and security expenses, lowering productivity and property values, and weakening public institutions and community wellbeing, factors especially relevant in Timor-Leste's post-conflict context (Krug et al. 1086).

At the same time, the Nabilan Program demonstrates an understanding of the importance of local contexts in shaping both the experience of violence and the process of change. A key principle of its community-based approach has been acknowledging how everyday social relationships, including political, family, resistance, educational, and workplace networks, shape how violence is understood, justified, and challenged (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 25). Staff were encouraged to engage in informal conversations to build trust and foster deeper discussions on sensitive issues like violence (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 25). Moreover, the program recognized that community-based research and interventions should avoid creating general, 'one-size-fits-all' solutions. Instead, the knowledge and strategies developed were rooted in the specific realities of each community, designed to be relevant and responsive to local needs. These approaches were intended as adaptable starting points that could inspire solutions in other settings, rather than rigid models to be applied universally (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 23).

In line with this emphasis on local relevance, one of the first programmatic questions asked was: *"How is violence understood within a community context in Timor-Leste?"* (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 6). This exploration was divided into several key areas: how violence against women and children is defined, the reasons given to justify such violence, the social norms that sustain it, variations in perception depending on the perpetrator, and the differences between community understandings and formal legal definitions (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 6). Employing these grounded, participatory methods was essential to ensuring that prevention strategies were culturally relevant and resonated with local values.

Guided by this, the program's strategies include promoting positive forms of masculinity, challenging 'traditional' notions of male dominance, and fostering family and community environments grounded in respect and non-violence (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 150). The program also prioritized the health sector's involvement in both responding to and preventing

violence, alongside justice and legal reforms aimed at enhancing women's access to care and protection (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 150). Crucially, the program recognized and supported women's agency, even within the restrictive and historically shaped environment of Timor-Leste. The *Nabilan Baseline Study* revealed that, despite the lack of formal support services, many women employed various coping strategies to navigate their circumstances (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 110). Thus, interventions were designed to reinforce women's resilience while simultaneously dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate cycles of violence (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 150).

In this light, the adaptation of the SASA! model within the Nabilan Program into 'KOKOSA!' in Timor-Leste exemplifies the complex process of integrating a globally recognized strategy into a vastly different cultural and historical context. Originally developed in Uganda, SASA! focuses on mobilizing communities to address power imbalances between men and women. However, implementing the model in Timor-Leste presented challenges that required modifications. One major obstacle was the sensitivity surrounding discussions of domestic violence in rural communities, where such issues are mostly regarded as private matters (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2). Thus, the Nabilan team quickly realized that introducing global concepts too directly could provoke community resistance (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 27). Instead, they concentrated on identifying and supporting local advocates who were willing to initiate conversations about violence, adapting SASA!'s principles to promote organic, community-led engagement rather than imposing structured programming (Raising Voices "Learning from SASA! Adaptations in Diverse Contexts" 4). In addition, understanding how violence was perceived locally posed another challenge. In many communities, violent acts were often framed as 'discipline' or 'teaching', rather than being recognized as abusive (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 6). This required the Nabilan team to carefully design prevention messages that began with addressing everyday concerns before moving into deeper discussions about power dynamics and violence (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 27).

Furthermore, developing violence against women prevention programs in new contexts requires a careful balance between maintaining fidelity to the original model and adapting it to ensure contextual relevance. Maintaining fidelity involves upholding the four key SASA! principles: conducting a gender-power analysis to address the root causes of violence against women, using a phased approach to gradually build community understanding, engaging across multiple spheres of influence to create momentum for change, and promoting activism that is led by the community itself (Raising Voices "Learning from SASA! Adaptations in Diverse

Contexts" 4). Preserving these core elements was a priority for the Nabilan Program. However, adaptation proved challenging, especially in translating core concepts like 'power' into local languages that often lacked direct equivalents (Raising Voices "Learning from SASA! Adaptions in Diverse Contexts" 5). As a result, the team carried out extensive consultations to ensure the program's messages were clear and culturally relevant. While community mobilization had shown promising results in places like Uganda, the absence of a well-established activist network at the community level in Timor-Leste required more intensive groundwork (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 26). Foreign staff often had to take a more active role in identifying and mentoring potential local allies, which highlights that meaningful prevention efforts in Timor-Leste needed long-term, hands-on engagement, drawing on both global experience and ongoing dialogue with local communities (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 26).

Another layer of complexity arose from the program's organizational structure: while the community-based approach's (CBA) activities were carried out locally, the funding, host organization, and overall management were largely led by foreign entities (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 25). This arrangement created tensions both within the team and between the program and the community regarding whose perspectives and experiences should shape the program's direction (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 25-26). In this context, foreign staff, often perceived as less personally affected by potential program failures, tended to be more open to experimenting with new and innovative methods (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 26). In contrast, local staff voiced concerns about the possible negative consequences for their careers and standing within their communities if these approaches did not succeed (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 26). The urgency to implement international models also sometimes led to the adoption of tools without fully assessing their relevance to the Timorese context, contributing to staff feeling overwhelmed and disempowered (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 26-27). Over time, however, the team recognized the importance of adopting a more collaborative and inclusive approach to adaptation. They introduced structured capacity-building initiatives, including SASA!-based workshops, monthly internal discussions on gender and power, and ongoing technical support from Raising Voices, fostering a sense of ownership and shared learning among team members (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 26-27). As one staff member observed, while drawing on international experiences is valuable, meaningful change requires blending these lessons

with local knowledge and acknowledging that communities may not yet be ready to lead these efforts independently (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 27).

In addition, the program faced ethical challenges related to the idea of promoting a social change agenda. Some team members and observers questioned whether it was appropriate for a foreign-led initiative to encourage behavioural change in communities where addressing violence was not considered a pressing concern (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33). This sparked broader discussions about who should lead social transformation, whether it should arise organically from within the community or whether programs like Nabilan should actively promote transformative goals (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33). The Nabilan team ultimately concluded that promoting non-violence was not about imposing external values but about demonstrating the potential and benefits of change, drawing on both research findings, such as those from the *Nabilan Baseline Study* (2015), and respectful dialogue with communities (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33). Staff acknowledged that while advocating for change might appear externally driven, addressing violence against women inevitably requires intentional efforts to shift social norms and behaviours, even when the demand for such change has yet to emerge from within the community itself (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33).

At the same time, ethical and safety concerns also extended to program staff and community mobilizers (CMs) themselves. Given the widespread incidence of violence against women in Timor-Leste, it became clear that many team members had either personally experienced violence or were closely connected to it, increasing their vulnerability to trauma (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33). Those working directly in communities encountered cases of abuse that required interventions and resources beyond what the program could formally provide, sometimes involving family authorities or private solutions (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33). To support staff and community mobilizers in handling these complex situations responsibly and safely, Nabilan's Access to Justice team developed clear guidelines that outlined acceptable actions and established necessary boundaries for community-based work (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 33).

The experience of adapting SASA! within the Nabilan Program highlights the limitations of relying too heavily on 'international best-practices'. Although global models like SASA! offer valuable frameworks, their success depends on local adaptation. The complexity and context-specific nature of violence against women means that 'no one-size-fits-all' solutions exist.

Programming with positive outcomes requires both fidelity to proven principles and sensitivity to local realities. This means that social change must be rooted in the lived experiences and agency of local communities. Programs must allow time and space for adaptation, critical reflection, and collaboration with community members by resisting the urge to impose even well-intentioned external solutions too quickly or rigidly.

In summary, in this discussion I analysed the structural, cultural, and historical drivers of violence against women in Timor-Leste, emphasizing how colonial legacies, militarization, gender norms, and systematic inequalities sustain intimate partner violence. Using a public health lens and the social-ecological model, I explored how these factors intersect at individual, relational, community, and societal levels. Further, I argued that the Nabilan Program's adaptation of Uganda's SASA! model integrated these contextual realities through various locally relevant strategies. Nevertheless, challenges emerged that illustrate broader critiques in the violence prevention field: while curriculum-based interventions addressing known risk factors offer valuable starting points, their application in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Timor-Leste with colonial histories can reproduce power imbalances and limit genuine community participation (Mannell et al. 1-2). As discussed earlier, the social and structural drivers of intimate partner violence, including gender inequality, poverty, and marginalization, are often intensified in post-colonial and post-conflict contexts, where the legacy of violence continues to shape both gender dynamics and research practices (Mannell et al. 2). This dynamic reflects concerns that Western research paradigms and predefined interventions may obscure local knowledge systems and perpetuate new forms of imperialism in both programming and evaluation (Mannell et al. 2-3) Moreover, dominant Northern feminist frameworks that attribute violence solely to patriarchy risk sidelining Indigenous and local explanations that link violence to intersecting forms of structural oppression affecting both women and men (Mannell et al. 3). The Nabilan Program's experience highlights the need for culturally responsive, flexible, and participatory approaches that not only adapt global 'best practices' but also support community co-production of knowledge and participatory dialogue between Southern epistemologies and established violence against women research (Mannell et al. 3). Consequently, I conclude that effective intimate partner violence prevention in Timor-Leste requires interventions that critically engage with power dynamics in both content and process, rejecting extractive tendencies and centring local agency and knowledge in both program design and implementation.

5.3. Limitations

Despite the efforts made to provide a comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis of the structural, cultural, and historical drivers of violence against women in Timor-Leste, the consideration of these factors within the Nabilan Program, and lastly, the adaptation of the SASA! model within the program, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the analysis was necessarily shaped by the availability and scope of existing literature and primary sources. Much of the available data, including evaluations, reports, and academic studies, were produced or funded by international organizations operating within normative frameworks that reflect external agendas. This reliance may have limited access to alternative perspectives, particularly those emerging from grassroots Timorese voices or critical local scholarship. In addition, the limited corpus of scholarly literature specifically addressing violence against women prevention in Timor-Leste resulted in some redundancy across the thesis, with key sources recurring in multiple sections. While this repetition was essential for reinforcing core arguments and themes, it may have constrained the diversity of empirical evidence presented. This overlap also contributed to blurring between chapters 4 and 5, where thematic intersections led to some redundancy in the presentation of findings and discussion.

Second, it must be noted that, despite certain similar historical trajectories of Uganda and Timor-Leste (including colonial legacies and its impact on gender relations, armed conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction), the aim of this thesis was not to compare these two post-conflict societies, especially regarding the divergent socio-political contexts, distinct cultural frameworks and violence prevention strategies.

Furthermore, the nature of the Nabilan Program itself presents inherent complexities. Its foreign support, particularly Australian funding, and reliance on international 'best-practices' raises important questions about the influence of external actors and North-South power dynamics in both intervention design and implementation. As previously mentioned, Mannell et al. (2021) argue that even well-intentioned interventions targeting known risk factors inadvertently reproduce power imbalances when applied in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) with colonial histories (Mannell et al. 1-2). The adaptation process of SASA! into the KOKOSA! model reflects such tensions, especially regarding the extent to which foreign-led frameworks can genuinely accommodate or empower local agency. Moreover, a significant limitation arises from the scarcity of evaluations of the Nabilan Program. To date, only one independent evaluation from 2021 exists. This restricts the informative value available for

robust analysis and critical assessment of the program's long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

The theoretical framing of this research also carries limitations. While the public health approach and the social-ecological model provided useful analytical tools, they are both rooted in Western epistemological traditions. This reliance may have overlooked or insufficiently integrated Timorese indigenous knowledge systems and cultural explanations of violence, gender, and power. As Mannell et al. (2021) note, the dominance of Northern (feminist) theories in violence against women research often sidelines indigenous perspectives and risks obscuring the intersectional structural oppressions that affect both women and men (Mannell et al. 3). While I have tried to critically engage with these structural oppressions, fully overcoming such limitations was beyond the scope of this thesis.

Finally, my own positionality as a white Western woman has inevitably influenced the interpretation and framing of this research. Despite my efforts to critique extractive research tendencies and centre community agency, particularly the agency of Timorese women, and the influences of Timor-Leste's colonial and militarized past, it is important to reflect on my privileged position. This also means that my intention in this thesis was to neither speak for Timorese women nor to generalise all Timorese women's realities as being the same. With this in mind, my positionality must be acknowledged as a lens through which the analysis has been constructed.

In sum, these limitations point to the importance of future research that employs participatory methodologies, fosters the co-production of knowledge with Timorese communities, and facilitates meaningful engagement with Southern epistemologies. Such approaches would not only address some of the limitations identified here but also contribute to more equitable, culturally resonant, and sustainable violence prevention strategies. Recognizing these limitations, the following concluding chapter reflects on the key findings of this thesis, their theoretical and practical implications, and recommendations for future research and intervention strategies.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the historical, cultural, and structural drivers of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Timor-Leste and critically assess how community-based prevention strategies – most notably the Nabilan Program – address these drivers. Intimate partner violence, now recognized as a preventable public health crisis and human rights violation,

affects one in three women globally, with Timor-Leste exhibiting among the highest known prevalence rates. This is due, as argued by scholars like Meiksin et al. (2014) and Da Dalt (2021), to a history of armed conflict and patriarchal norms, and the push into more 'traditional' gender roles post-conflict (OECD 14; TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 1; Wagman et al. 1391). Despite decades of research, knowledge gaps remain, especially concerning how context-specific factors, ranging from historical, cultural, gendered, economic etc., perpetuate intimate partner violence in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This thesis has responded to that gap by applying a social-ecological framework, supplemented by public health, to analyse intimate partner violence causality and the performance of prevention models in Timor-Leste.

First, the research confirms that intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste is not simply the outcome of individual or relational dysfunction, but the product of multi-layered risk factors rooted in history, culture, and structure (Blanchfield et al. 5; Whitzman 53). Colonial governance, Catholic doctrines, and militarized masculinities established during Portuguese colonial rule and the subsequent Indonesian occupation (1515-1999) normalized gendered violence (Meiksin et al. 1339; Rimmer 841; Niner and Loney 875; Swaine 780-781). In addition, several cultural practices assign women to subordinate roles and create economic dependencies that inhibit escape from abusive relationships (Nogueira et al. 36-40). The norms are reinforced by the weak enforcement of laws like the 2010 Law Against Domestic Violence (IAN "Gewalt gegen Frauen" 26). This aligns with global findings that harmful 'traditional' practices, shaped by a history of colonial rule, militarized occupation and constantly evolving contexts and factors, including intimate partner violence, are often socially accepted, even by victims themselves (Blanchfield et al. 10-11). Hence, at every layer of the social-ecological model, risk factors interact to entrench violence (Wagman et al. 1393; Krug et al. 1085-1086).

Second, while the Nabilan Program has achieved specific, evidence-backed gains, its interventions are constrained by these barriers. Since 2014, Nabilan has adapted the SASA! model into the culturally relevant KOKOSA! initiative, combining strategies like school talks, church partnerships, and community mobilization (Michau "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women" 9; TAF "Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste" 2; TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 4-28). Community Mobilizers (CMs) have facilitated dialogues with community residents to challenge gender norms and promote healthier masculinities (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 150; TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 2; 34). However, these strategies have not yet translated into system-wide

behavioural change. Public acceptance of intimate partner violence remains high, legal enforcement is inconsistent, and women's economic dependence persists (TAF "Nabilan Baseline Study" 90; Cristalis and Scott 21-22).

Additionally, challenges arose from translating SASA!'s abstract concepts, especially 'power', into local languages without alienating communities or triggering resistance (Raising Voices Strategy "2012-2016" 5; Blanchfield et al. 11). Staff faced tensions between adhering to international 'best-practice' solutions – which, in this case, were developed in Uganda which is, obviously, a different cultural and socio-political context, where theoretically proven strategies like gender norm change and community mobilization are emphasized - and respective cultural autonomy, which demands sensitivity to local values, practices, and worldviews, a balance also noted in violence prevention literature (Blanchfield et al. 11; Mannell et al. 3; Flood and Pease 137; Warrier 82). For example, tensions emerged around how to frame and discuss sensitive concepts like power, gender equality, and violence in ways that would resonate with local beliefs without reinforcing patriarchal norms or alienating influential community members, such as religious leaders or elders.

This reflects a broader debate over how to reconcile foreign-led prevention programs with the preservation of cultural identity (Blanchfield et al. 11). The Nabilan Program has worked to overcome this imbalance by strongly focusing on local needs through community-based efforts in preventing violence against Timorese women, and additionally, combining these initiatives with strengthening legal, policy, and health sector responses to violence. Yet, these efforts must be situated within a broader critique of how 'best-practice' models are partly applied without sufficient cultural specificity. As Flood and Pease (2009) argue, "violence prevention interventions must be culturally appropriate, such that this includes sensitivity not only to ethnic diversities but also to local gender cultures", and must be accompanied by structural change, not merely attitudinal shifts (Flood and Pease 137). Similarly, Warrier (2009) critiques static understandings of culture that present communities as homogenous and unchanging, warning that such portrayals can produce stereotypes and undermine prevention efforts (Warrier 81). Culture, in this view, must be understood not as a fixed set of traditions but as a dynamic and contested terrain, where internal differences, conflicts, and contradictions shape social practices (Warrier 82). This understanding is essential in contexts like Timor-Leste, where cultural identity has been shaped by colonialism, occupation, and resistance, and where diverse linguistic, ethnic, and gendered experiences intersect.

Third, this study confirms that multi-sectoral, community-empowered strategies offer a promising pathway forward, as emphasized by the WHO and scholars like Krug et al. (2002), Michau (2007), Heise (1999), and Flood (2015). Impactful prevention requires aligning public health, legal, educational, and economic sectors to reduce inequalities and transform gender norms (Krug et al. 1087; Blanchfield et al. 36). Early intervention, especially reducing children's exposure to violence, is critical to breaking intergenerational cycles (Krug et al. 1086; Whitzman 70). Nabilan's efforts to involve schools, healthcare providers, and religious institutions align with this strategy but face resource constraints, limited data collection, and institutional gaps that complicate long-term impact (Krug et al. 1086; Whitaker et al. 295-296).

Fourth, the research illustrates the need for locally driven, historically aware, and evidence-based program design and evaluation. As Warrier (2009) critiques, many programs apply 'one-size-fits-all' indicators without adapting to post-colonial and militarized histories that shape both gender norms and intervention outcomes (Warrier 81-82). The Nabilan Program, while mindful of these dynamics, has lacked longitudinal rigorous evaluation frameworks that can assess behaviour change across diverse rural-urban, ethnic, and linguistic contexts (Whitaker et al. 295-296). Furthermore, structural risk factors like poverty, landlessness, and discrimination remain under-addressed despite their well-documented role in sustaining intimate partner violence (Blanchfield et al. 5; 36; Whitzman 70).

Finally, the thesis advances a conceptual contribution: applying the social-ecological model not merely as a risk factor checklist but as a historically, culturally and structurally aware analytical tool. This approach integrates colonial legacies, post-conflict masculinities, and contemporary institutional weaknesses into the analysis of intimate partner violence causality and prevention (Niner and Loney 875; Casey et al. 231; Mannell et al. 3). It also highlights the importance of local definitions of social norms, violence, and context when adapting international models like SASA!, ensuring cultural resonance and community ownership (TAF "Community-Based Approaches" 6; 13; Krug et al. 1087).

In conclusion, while the Nabilan Program has achieved positive outcomes in raising awareness about the issue of violence, increasing discussions and reflection within communities, and supporting and increasing essential services for survivors of violence, the persistence of structural inequalities, harmful cultural practices, and weak legal enforcement limits its impact. Remaining open questions regarding violence prevention within different historical and cultural contexts read as follows: How can community-led frameworks be developed to reduce

reliance on externally driven, foreign-funded models without compromising resource access? What is the long-term impact of the Nabilan Program across diverse communities in Timor-Leste? How can Timorese indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices be integrated into violence prevention without reinforcing harmful gender norms? What locally defined indicators of success can replace or supplement global 'best-practice' metrics? And lastly, what strategies can mitigate North-South power imbalances in program funding, design, and evaluation?

To address the limitations identified and to deepen a context-sensitive understanding of violence prevention in Timor-Leste, several aspects for future research are necessary. First, I would argue that there is a need for increased participatory action research (PAR) that involves Timorese women, men, and youth not merely as subjects but as co-researchers. This approach may enable the co-production of knowledge which would allow local communities to shape research questions, methodologies, and the interpretation of findings. Second, another research priority involves how Timorese indigenous knowledge, and cultural practices might be integrated into prevention strategies without reinforcing gender stereotypes. This could be done through increased collaborations with cultural experts, elders, and grassroots organizations to document and critically assess local conflict resolution methods and gender roles expectations. This may help inform culturally resonant program designs while avoiding the pitfalls of cultural essentialism. Finally, longitudinal studies employing mixed-methods designs would be important to be prioritized to assess the long-term impacts of the Nabilan Program. These studies could combine quantitative data collection with ethnographic approaches and community storytelling to capture both measurable outcomes and context-specific experiences. Currently, the lack of rigorous, long-term evaluations prevents an understanding of how and whether community mobilization efforts translate into sustained behavioural and attitudinal shifts.

As the WHO asserts, the predictability of violence means it is preventable (Heath 726). And as Raising Voices emphasizes, "transformation is possible when those most affected are spearheading the change" (Raising Voices "Strategy 2012-2016" 14). The future of preventing intimate partner violence in Timor-Leste lies in empowering local communities by focusing on equipping communities themselves to address violence and support survivors sustainably (e.g. raising awareness, strengthening local services, enhanced research and data use), informed by the lived realities shaped by Timor-Leste's historical and cultural context.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Carlson, Cady. *SASA! Mobilizing Communities to Inspire Social Change!* Raising Voices, n.d., pp. 1-20.

Centre of Studies for Peace and Development (CEPAD). *Timor-Leste: Voices and Paths to Peace*. 2009.

Government of Timor-Leste (GoTL). *From Ashes to Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Sustainable Development - Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.* Voluntary National Review of Timor-Leste, Government of Timor-Leste, 2019, pp. 1-196.

Michau, Lori. "Approaching Old Problems in New Ways: Community Mobilisation as a Primary Prevention Strategy to Combat Violence against Women." *Gender and Development*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2007, pp. 95–109, https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070601179144.

Michau, Lori. "Community Mobilization: Preventing Partner Violence by Changing Social Norms." Raising Voices, 2012, pp. 1-15.

Michau, Lori. "The SASA! Way to Preventing Violence Against Women." Raising Voices, n.d., pp. 8-10.

Michau, Lori, and Sophie Namy. "SASA! Together: An Evolution of the SASA! Approach to Prevent Violence against Women." *Evaluation and Program Planning*, vol. 86, 2021, pp. 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2021.101918.

NDS (National Statistics Directorate). *Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey 2009–2010.* NSD, Ministry of Finance Timor-Leste and ICF Macro, Dili.

Raising Voices, et al. *Is Violence Against Women Preventable? Findings from the SASA! Study Summarized for General Audiences.* Raising Voices, et al., 2015, Kampala, Uganda, pp. 1-48.

Raising Voices. *Learning From SASA! Adaptations in Diverse Contexts: A Summary Brief.* Raising Voices, n.d., pp. 1-12.

Raising Voices. *What Will It Take to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children? Raising Voices Strategy 2012-2016.* Raising Voices, 2012, pp. 1-33.

Raising Voices. *Raising Voices Strategy 2023-2024.* Raising Voices, 2023, pp. 1-29.

The Asia Foundation. *The Nabilan Prevention Toolkit: Fact Sheet 3 – Community-Led Approaches to Preventing Violence Against Women.* Raising Voices, 2016, pp. 1-2.

The Asia Foundation. *Understanding Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste: Findings from the Nabilan Baseline Study - Main Report.* The Asia Foundation, 2016., pp. 1-349.

The Asia Foundation. *Ending Violence Against Women and Children in Timor-Leste.* The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 1-2.

The Asia Foundation. *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.* The Asia Foundation, 2018, pp. 1-2.

The Asia Foundation. *Community-Based Approaches: Ending Violence Against Women Through Community Action - A Reflection on Research, Ethics, and Practice.* The Asia Foundation, 2017., pp. 1-37.

The Asia Foundation. *Nabilan Completion Report Phase I and II.* The Asia Foundation, 2014-2022, pp. 1-58.

The Asia Foundation. *Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in Timor-Leste: Understanding the Differences Between the Nabilan Baseline Study and the Demographic and Health Survey.* The Asia Foundation, n.d., pp. 1-6.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *National Human Development Report 2018 – Planning the Opportunities for a Youthful Population.* UNDP Timor-Leste, 2018, pp. 1-137.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence in Timor-Leste: Access to Justice Options, Barriers and Decision Making Processes in the Context of Legal Pluralism.* Justice System Programme, UNDP Timor-Leste, 2013, pp. 1-63.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *The Path out of Poverty: Integrated Rural Development. Human Development Report Timor-Leste.* UNDP, 2006, pp. 1-87.

United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). *Supporting Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Timor-Leste - Revised Standard Joint Programme Document.* UNDAF, 2008, pp. 1-21.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). "MoH and UNFPA, through KOICA-funded 'Together for Equality' project, Launches Safe Space to Support GBV Survivors in Timor-Leste." UNFPA Timor-Leste, 21 November 2024, https://timor-leste.unfpa.org/en/news/moh-and-unfpa-through-koica-funded-together-equality-project-launches-safe-space-support-gbv.

UN Women. *Annual Report 2017-2018 – Timor-Leste Country Office.* UN Women, 2017-2018, pp. 1-25.

UN Women. "FAQs: Types of Violence Against Women and Girls." UN Women, 27 June 2024, http://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/faqs-types-of-violence-against-women-and-girls.

UN Women. *UN Women Timor-Leste: Quarterly Newsletter*. 2019, pp. 1-8.

World Bank. *Policy Note: Gender-Sensitive Poverty Mapping for Timor-Leste*. 2019, pp. 1-12.

World Health Organization. *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence Against Women. Executive Summary.* World Health Organization, 2021.

World Health Organization. *Respect Women: Preventing Violence Against Women.* World Health Organization, 2019, pp. 1-23.

Secondary Sources

Blanchfield, Luisa, et al. *International Violence against Women*. Nova Science Publishers, 2009.

Blanchfield, Luisa, et al. "Chapter 3 – Scope and Context." *International Violence Against Women*, Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2009, pp. 5-7.

Blanchfield, Luisa, et al. "Chapter 9 – Current and Emerging Issues." *International Violence Against Women*, Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2009, pp. 35-36.

Brush, Lisa D., and Elizabeth Miller. "Trouble in Paradigm: 'Gender Transformative' Programming in Violence Prevention." *Violence against Women*, vol. 25, no. 14, 2019, pp. 1635–1656, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219872551.

Cardenas, Iris. "Advancing Intersectionality Approaches in Intimate Partner Violence Research: A Social Justice Approach." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2020.1855494.

Casey, Erin A., et al. "Context, Challenges, and Tensions in Global Efforts to Engage Men in the Prevention of Violence against Women: An Ecological Analysis." *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2013, pp. 228–51, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X12472336.

Chen, Yimin, et al. "Canadian Gender-Based Violence Prevention Programs: Gaps and Opportunities." *Violence against Women*, 2024, pp. 1-23, https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012241259727.

Connell, Raewyn W. "The History of Masculinity." *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, edited by Rachel Adams and David Savran, Blackwell Publishers, 2002, pp. 245–261.

Costa, Monica, and Rhonda Sharp. "Budgetary Policy, Gender Equality and the Politics of Change in Timor-Leste." *Women and the Politics of Gender in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste: Between Heaven and Earth*, 2016, pp. 113–128, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315657387.

Cowan, Elizabeth. *Gender and Power Analysis: Timor-Leste*. CARE International in Timor-Leste, 2013.

Cristalis, Irena, and Catherine Scott. *Independent Women: The Story of Women's Activism in East Timor.* Catholic Institute for International Relations, 2005.

Dahlberg, Linda L., and James A. Mercy. *The History of Violence as a Public Health Issue*. Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, pp.1-8.

Da Dalt, Alexandra Tamiko. "Women's Perceptions of Their Agency and Power in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2021, pp. 299–317.

Datzberger, Simone, and Marielle L. J. Le Mat. "Just Add Women and Stir?: Education, Gender and Peacebuilding in Uganda." *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 59, 2018, pp. 61–69, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.09.006.

Engel, Rebecca Ellen. *The 2006 Crisis in East Timor : Lessons for Contemporary Peacebuilding*. Routledge, 2021.

Engel, Rebecca E. "Political Settlement Interrupted: Part I – Portuguese Colonialism." *The 2006 Crisis in East Timor*, 1st ed., vol. 1, Routledge, 2021, pp. 49–64, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429490903-3.

Enloe, Cynthia. *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*. University of California Press, 2004.

Evans, Richard. *Intimate Partner Violence: Assessment, Treatment and Prevention*. Nova Science Publishers, 2021.

Fisher, Bonnie, et al. *Critical Issues on Violence against Women: International Perspectives and Promising Strategies*. First edition., Routledge, 2015.

Flood, Michael. "Current Practices to Preventing Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence." *Critical Issues on Violence Against Women*, edited by Bonnie Fisher et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 209–220, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203727805-23.

Flood, Michael, and Bob Pease. "Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2009, pp. 125–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838009334131.

Heath, Iona. "Treating Violence As A Public Health Problem: The Approach Has Advantages But Diminishes The Human Rights Perspective." *BMJ*, vol. 325, no. 7367, 2002, pp. 726–27, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.325.7367.726.

Heise, Lori. *What Works to Prevent Partner Violence? An Evidence Overview*. STRIVE Research Consortium, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2011.

Heise, Lori, et al. "Violence against Women." *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)*, vol. 310, no. 5752, 2005, pp. 1282–1283, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1121400.

Hirst, Megan, and Eurosia de Almeida. *Local Justice in Timor-Leste: Barriers to Access at the Community Level.* The Asia Foundation, 2023, pp. 1-28.

Howe, Meghan E., and Elaine J. Alpert. "A Public Health Approach to Intimate Partner Violence." *Intimate Partner Violence*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 275-287 https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195179323.003.0020.

Internationale Advocacy Netzwerke (IAN). *Gewalt gegen Frauen: weltweit bekämpft und doch alltäglich – Politische Handlungsoptionen.* Internationale Advocacy Netzwerke (IAN), 2019, pp. 1-40.

Internationale Advocacy Netzwerke (IAN). *Menschenrechte 2024: Aktuelle Lage in 16 Ländern – Politische Handlungsoptionen.* Internationale Advocacy Netzwerke (IAN), 2024, pp. 1-44.

Katz, Jackson. "Bystander Training as Leadership Training: Notes on the Origins, Philosophy, and Pedagogy of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Model." *Violence against Women*, vol. 24, no. 15, 2018, pp. 1755–1776, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801217753322.

Katz, Jackson, et al. "Engaging Men in Prevention of Violence against Women." *Critical Issues on Violence Against Women*, edited by Bonnie Fisher et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 233–243, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203727805-25.

Kovar, Annika. "Approaches to Domestic Violence against Women in Timor-Leste: A Review and Critique." *Human Rights Education in Asia-Pacific*, vol. 3, Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center, 2012, pp. 207–252.

Krug, Etienne G., et al. "The World Report on Violence and Health." *The Lancet (British Edition)*, vol. 360, no. 9339, 2002, pp. 1083–1088, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)11133-0.

Lowe, Hattie, et al. "Mechanisms for Community Prevention of Violence against Women in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Realist Approach to a Comparative Analysis of Qualitative Data." *Social Science & Medicine (1982)*, vol. 305, 2022, pp. 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115064.

Macintyre, Martha, and Ceridwen Spark, editors. *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*. ANU Press, 2017. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crwn. Accessed 26 Feb. 2025.

Mannell, Jenevieve, et al. "Decolonising Violence against Women Research: A Study Design for Co-Developing Violence Prevention Interventions with Communities in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs)." *BMC Public Health*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-13, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11172-2.

McWilliam, Andrew, and Michael Leach. *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Timor-Leste*. Routledge, 2019.

Meiksin, Rebecca, et al. "Domestic Violence, Marital Control, and Family Planning, Maternal, and Birth Outcomes in Timor-Leste." *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1338–1347, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-014-1638-1.

Mitchell, Connie, and Deirdre Anglin. *Intimate Partner Violence: A Health-Based Perspective*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Mitchell, Connie, and Lisa James. "Evolving Health Policy on Intimate Partner Violence." *Intimate Partner Violence*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195179323.003.0001.

Nardini, Krizia, et al. "Constructing, Deconstructing or Abolishing? Discourses on Masculinities in Violence Against Women Prevention by Stakeholders in Spain." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2024, pp. 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241265437.

Niner, Sara. *Women and the Politics of Gender in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste: Between Heaven and Earth*. Routledge, 2017.

Niner, Sara. "Iha Lalehan Nia Klaran No Rai - Living between Heaven and Earth: Understanding Jender in Timor-Leste." *Women and the Politics of Gender in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315657387-1.

Niner, Sara. "Mane Ho Feto Kompleta Malu: Gender Relations in Contemporary Timor-Leste." *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Timor-Leste*, edited by Andrew McWilliam et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 226–240, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315623177-17.

Niner, Sara Louise, and Hannah Loney. "The Women's Movement in Timor-Leste and Potential for Social Change." *Politics & Gender*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2020, pp. 874–902, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000230.

Nogueira, Elayne Esmeraldo, et al. "Chapter 2 – Fighting Domestic Violence as a Cultural Problem by Means of Institutional Advertising Campaigns." *Intimate Partner Violence*, edited by Richard Evans, Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2021, pp. 33-57.

OECD. "Breaking the Cycle of Gender-Based Violence: Translating Evidence into Action for Victim/Survivor-Centred Governance." OECD Publishing, 2023, pp. 1-152.

Ranganathan, Meghna, et al. "Cross-Disciplinary Intersections between Public Health and Economics in Intimate Partner Violence Research." *SSM - Population Health*, vol. 14, 2021, pp. 1-6, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100822.

Rimmer, Susan Harris. "Viva Timor-Leste: A Feminist Review of 20 Years of Independence." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 21, no. 5, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2019, pp. 838–844, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1669477.

Silva, Kelly, et al. "Negotiating Culture and Gender Expectations in Timor-Leste: Ambiguities in Post-Colonial Governance Strategies." *Women and the Politics of Gender in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 185–206, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315657387-15.

Stokols, Daniel. "Translating Social Ecological Theory into Guidelines for Community Health Promotion." *American Journal of Health Promotion*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1996, pp. 282–298.

Stöckl, Heidi, and Susan B. Sorenson. "Violence Against Women as a Global Public Health Issue." *Annual Review of Public Health*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2024, pp. 277–294, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-060722-025138.

Swaine, Aisling. "Beyond Strategic Rape and Between the Public and Private: Violence Against Women in Armed Conflict." *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2015, pp. 755–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2015.0043.

Tavassoli, Afsaneh, et al. "A Research on Violence Against Women: Are the Trends Growing?" *Iranian Rehabilitation Journal*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2022, pp. 425-439, https://doi.org/10.32598/irj.20.3.1664.1.

Toome, Emily, et al. *Improving the Lives of Women Survivors in Timor-Leste: 77 Women's Struggle for Peace and Justice*. Asosiasaun Chega ba Ita (ACbit), 2019.

Wagman, Jennifer A., et al. "A Public Health Approach to Intimate Partner Violence Prevention in Uganda: The SHARE Project." *Violence against Women*, vol. 18, no. 12, 2012, pp. 1390–1412, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801212474874.

Warrier, Sujata, et al. "Culture and Cultural Competency in Addressing Intimate Partner Violence." *Intimate Partner Violence*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 79-85, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195179323.003.0007.

Whitaker, Daniel J., et al. "Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence: Toward a Developmental, Social-Ecological Model." *Intimate Partner Violence*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 289-305, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195179323.003.0021.

Whitzman, Carolyn. *The Handbook of Community Safety, Gender and Violence Prevention: Practical Planning Tools*. Earthscan, 2008.

Whitzman, Carolyn. "Analysing the Problem: Causes, Consequences and Prevention of Violence*." The Handbook of Community Safety, Gender and Violence Prevention: Practical Planning Tools*, Earthscan, 2008, pp. 53-95.

Wild, Kayli, et al. "Security from above and below: A Critical Ethnography of the Health Response to Violence against Women in Timor-Leste." *Social Science & Medicine (1982)*, vol. 260, 2020, pp 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113191.

Yuniar, Dodi, and Matt Easton, editors. *Enduring Impunity: Women Surviving Atrocities in the Absence of Justice*. Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), 2015, pp. 1-368.