

GENDER ANALYSIS OF OXFAM SAVINGS AND LOANS GROUPS IN TIMOR-LESTE: RESEARCH REPORT

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Research Team with Oxfam Staff, Dili
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell

Cover image: Alysia Vittal, a participant in an Oxfam-supported savings group for women in Timor-Leste
Photo: Timothy Herbert/Oxfam Australia 2011

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ACRONYMS & TERMS

Aldeia	A hamlet – sub-unit of a suco
Adat	Traditional law
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AusAID	Australian Government Aid Program (now defunct) Traditional Indonesian savings groups
<i>Arisan</i>	Traditional Indonesian savings groups
CLRDP	Community Led Rural Livelihoods Program
COPE for LIFE	Covalima- Oecusse People Empowerment for Livelihoods Improvement and Food Security Enhancement Program
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs (Australian Government)
EU	European Union
GNI	Gross National Income
HMVK	Haforsa Vida Moris Kommunidade. Strengthening Healthy Communities
MU	Monash University
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OAU	Oxfam Australia
OGB	Oxfam Great Britain
OHK	Oxfam Hong Kong
OMP	Oxfam Monash Partnership
RDTL	<i>República Democrática de Timor Leste</i> , Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste
ROSCA	Rotating Savings and Credit Associations
SFC	Savings for Change
SHP	Self-Help Groups
SLG	Saving and Loans Groups
SILC	Savings and Internal Lending Cooperatives
Suco	A village locality
UBSP	<i>Usaha Bersama Simpan Pinjam</i> (working together to save and borrow)
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Fund
USAID	United States Aid Agency
Xefe	Leader or Chief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the early 1970s, Oxfam (previously Oxfam-Community Aid Abroad) actively supported calls for independence by the Timorese people, and has maintained an operational in-country presence in Timor-Leste since 2000 with field offices in Dili, Covalima and Oecusse. Over time, the focus of Oxfam's programs in Timor-Leste has transitioned from predominately humanitarian responses, to long term development, advocacy and emergency preparedness programs.

Like many development agencies and practitioners, Oxfam's approach to Savings and Loans groups (SLG) is based on the principle that microcredit (epitomized through group formation, loan distribution and recovery) is necessary to build financial inclusion for the poor who may not be able to access more formal sources of credit. Oxfam believes that increasing access to savings and financial inclusion alongside other mechanisms such as improving food production and diversifying livelihoods as the backbone of integrated poverty reduction systems. In areas of Timor-Leste where food insecurity is a constant challenge, it was anticipated, by Oxfam, that the savings from such groups could also be used during the 'hungry months' to buy food at markets.

Microfinance programs are the 'perfect' grassroots networks in which to introduce new ways of thinking about gender to men and women (Mayoux 2005). And, whilst there is significant support for women-only microfinance programs as a strategy to increase gender equity, there is little evidence of gender analysis of the social dynamics and outcomes resulting from mixed-gender microfinance groups, such as the majority of groups in Timor-Leste.

This research aimed to examine the gendered social dynamics and impact (positive and negative) of Oxfam-partnered diverse SLGs in Timor-Leste. Led by Monash University academics in partnership with a local research team, 17 microfinance groups were consulted about their motivations for establishing their savings groups and the gendered roles and experiences of men and women in the groups. In-depth discussions were also held with key stakeholders to identify the enabling and inhibiting factors that contribute to women's participation and leadership in the group. A key focus of the research was further, to highlight positive (and negative) impacts on women as a result of their engagement to inform and improve Oxfam's program design.

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The formation and sustainable hybrid organisational structures and functionality of the SLGs were based on the engagement of individuals from already existing formed and trusted networks, coupled with, indigenous modes of sociality and acceptance of customary gender norms and relations in the structure and organisation of the group.

Recommendation: balance Timorese traditional and cultural strengths with 'new' national values of social inclusion and gender equity espoused by contemporary government institutions.

2. The groups were identified as a vehicle for building economic and social resilience and protection, including for some, a growing sense of agency or social empowerment. Group members expressed pride in being able to meet their own needs and developing economic livelihoods. A challenge to the reliance and sustainability of the groups is the ongoing partnership and support from mentor NGOs.

Recommendation: Develop a clear policy on exit strategy once S&L Groups are self-reliant, sustainable, and no longer in need of ongoing support from mentor NGOs.

3. SLGs provided economic and social successes for participants. However, it was also clear that the groups demonstrated adherence to established gendered roles and economic strategies, which in many cases did little to challenge gender inequity and associated attitudes.

Recommendation: Establish programs that seek to strengthen social empowerment and gender equity whilst at the same time focusing on a balance between traditional and innovative economic opportunities to enhance equal opportunities for all members.

4. SLGs heavily rely on trust and memory for group management and reporting, similar to arisans (traditional Indonesian savings groups). Low technical management skills and experience, combined with patriarchal discriminatory attitudes may further entrench traditional social (and gender) hierarchies.

Recommendation: Develop innovative adult literacy and numeracy program that do not rely on full literacy and numeracy - and are culturally-appropriate.

5. Women are identified as more trustworthy and transparent and therefore best suited for group administrator roles, with superior skills as 'money-managers'. This meant that women's roles in the groups were treasurers and secretaries, and men were generally noted as better suited to the leadership role of Xefe.

Recommendation: Strengthen support for women's overall participation and leadership to raise the status and empower women and mitigate negative outcomes for women related to conflict between their domestic or reproductive roles with their productive and community roles that group work represented.

6. Mixed gender groups can be networks for building gender awareness and equity, however, mixed groups can also perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.

Recommendation: To strengthen gender equity, different program strategies are required for both mixed- and women-only groups. The roles and relationships between men and women within the group must be discussed in both groups using locally designed culturally appropriate methodologies.

It is a strong recommendation that cultural appropriateness and sensitivity be the basis of designing any gender awareness training.

This report briefly outlines the broader political and socio-economic context of women in Timor-Leste and the evolution of Oxfam's programming in this context. The report further highlights, the research design and methodology, the emerging findings of the research and recommendations emerging from the data analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 affiliate organizations working together with partners and local communities in more than 90 countries around the world. Oxfam programs across different countries have linkages through Oxfam's campaigns and advocacy work; linking grassroots programming to national, regional and global influencing. Since the early 1970s, Oxfam (previously Oxfam-Community Aid Abroad) actively supported calls for independence by the Timorese people, and has maintained an operational program presence in Timor-Leste since 2000, with field offices in Dili, Covalima and Oecusse. Over time, the focus of Oxfam's programs in Timor-Leste has transitioned from predominately humanitarian responses, to long term development, advocacy and emergency preparedness programs. In Timor-Leste, Oxfam does not undertake direct implementation activities with communities instead working through national NGOs and networks.¹

Post Timorese independence, Oxfam's support to SLGs in Timor-Leste began as part of post conflict programming focusing on water and sanitation, poverty reduction and civil society engagement. The initial SLGs were originally supported through local partners via a number of projects with funding from various donors. Oxfam's support to the SLGs was then pulled together under a single umbrella 'food security and livelihoods' program funded by the European Union (EU) called Covalima-Oecusse People Empowerment for Livelihoods Improvement and Food Security Enhancement Program (COPE for LIFE), which ran from 2007 to 2010. Following the completion of this program, SLGs were supported through the predominantly AusAID funded Community Led Rural Livelihoods Program (CLRDP) from 2011 to 2014, and now currently by DFAT and Oxfam Community Support income (that is income raised from the Australian public) through the Haforsa Vida Moris Kommunidade (HMVK) program.

Oxfam's approach to SLGs is based on the principle that microcredit (epitomized through group formation, loan distribution and recovery) is necessary to build financial inclusion for the poor who may not be able to access more formal sources of credit. Oxfam believes that, increasing access to savings and financial inclusion alongside other mechanisms, such as,

improving food production and diversifying livelihoods as the backbone of integrated poverty reduction systems. Oxfam understands access to credit as vital to community empowerment as it creates opportunities for groups to build savings and then make choices to use their money to extend livelihood opportunities (e.g. by purchasing more products/seeds or a piece of equipment) or to pay for other family/household needs (i.e. school fees, customary contributions). In areas of Timor-Leste where food insecurity is a constant challenge, it was anticipated by Oxfam that the savings from such groups could also be used during the 'hungry months' to buy food at markets.

Originally, Oxfam supported SLGs in Timor-Leste using the Indonesian model referred to as UBS (Usaha Bersama Simpan Pinjam) which means 'working together to save and borrow' in Bahasa Indonesian, which local implementing partners had some familiarity with from the years of Indonesian occupation, and had some confidence in applying. While the UBS methodology is not specifically designed as a women's empowerment initiative, Oxfam is committed to furthering gender equality and challenging structures and institutions that entrench inequality and suppress the rights of women and girls. The SLGs supported by Oxfam in Timor-Leste were not originally conceived with an overt transformational approach to gender; rather an assumption that, through participation, role-modelling, and leadership of women in the SLGs, women's economic empowerment would be increased, and that this in turn would lead to shifts in gender inequality within the communities.

The design of Oxfam's programs has changed dramatically over the years: initially focusing on food security and response to humanitarian need, they have since evolved through cycles of review and redesign. The current iteration of livelihoods program takes an integrated approach to resilience (both risk reduction and climate adaptation) as well as a market systems approach to food security and livelihood opportunities. In all these iterations, gender has been mainstreamed rather than included as a specific pillar of the program theory of action. By default, the SLGs supported by Oxfam through the livelihoods programs have therefore also taken this gender mainstreaming approach to implementation.

¹ An exception to this may be made in the case of a humanitarian response if there is a humanitarian mandate that requires Oxfam to directly implement.

TIMOR-LESTE: WOMEN AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Timor-Leste is one of the newest nations in the world and in 2015, was ranked as ‘medium human development’ (.595) at 133/188 in the world on the Human Development Index (UNDP: 2015). This was largely due to recent increases in GNI per capita up to \$5,363. National income had increased due to exploitation of oil and gas deposits. Life expectancy rose slightly to 68.2 years with 4.4 mean years of schooling recorded, but with the mean years of schooling now expected to increase to 11.7 years due to rises in national income. The Government remains hopeful that these positive increases will continue and the economy expand through non-oil activities.

However, more than half of Timor-Leste’s people still live in poverty, and the percentage is rising. Two-thirds of people live in rural areas as subsistence farmers.² Gender indicators record high maternal mortality (270/1000) with chances of having a baby as an adolescent also high at 52.2%. While women hold an impressive 38.5% of seats in the national parliament, but women’s labor force participation is low (24.6%) compared men’s (50.8%) (ADB/UNIFEM 2005).

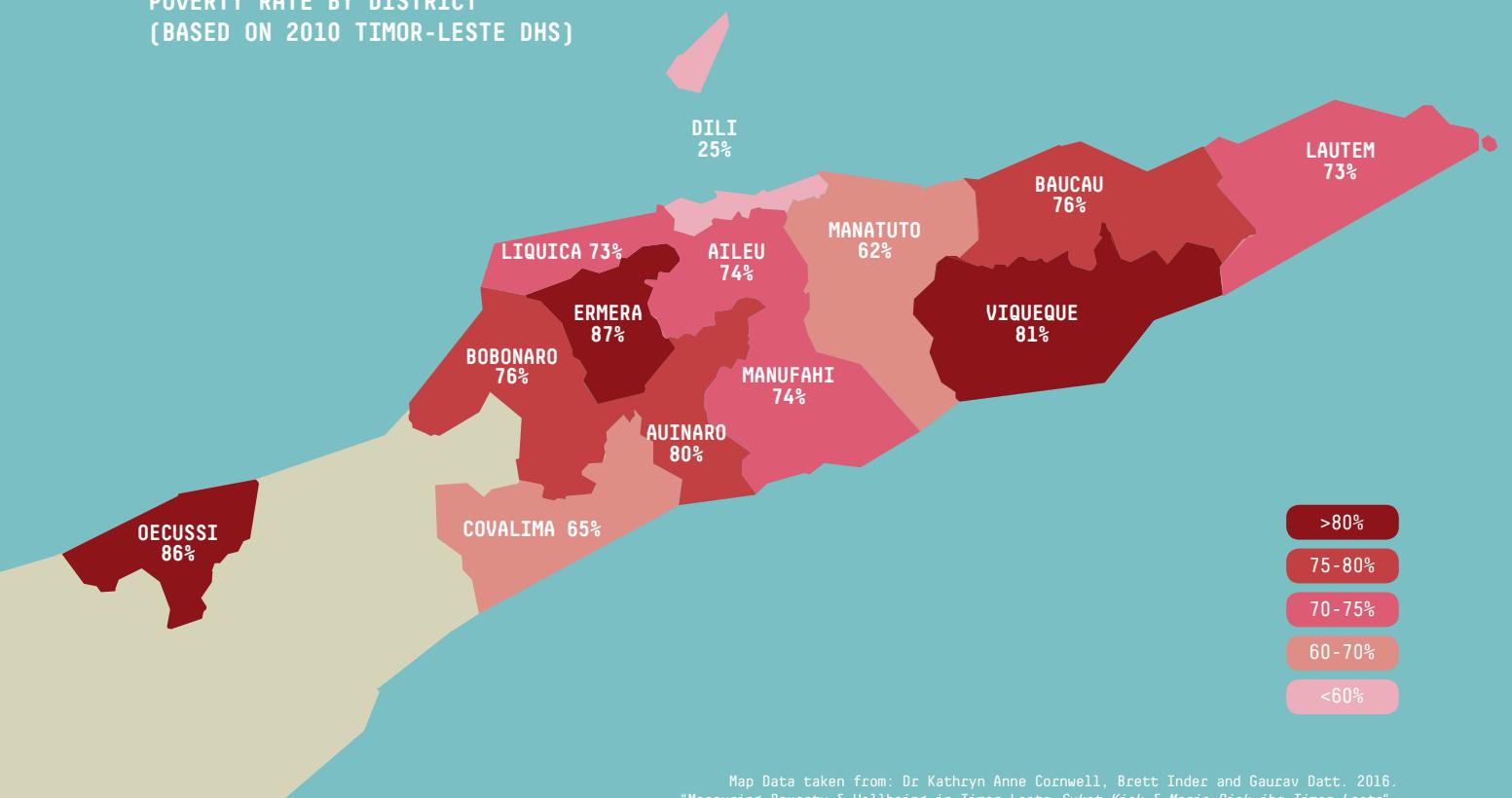
Working and earning money in Timor-Leste is very different for men and women. Women are much more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than men, due to higher rates of illiteracy, lower rates of education and the greater likelihood of undertaking many more hours of domestic, unpaid labour than men. Even when women do earn money for their labour they are more likely to work in feminised occupations where the pay is lower than for men. Other issues that decrease women’s productivity are discrimination, harassment and violence in workplaces, public sexual harassment, domestic violence and limited reproductive control. In 2005, it was estimated that women in Timor-Leste earn one-eighth of the salary of men (ADB/UNIFEM 2005). Therefore, women have much less access to finance and resources than men, meaning SLGs have the potential to be an important resource for them.

Although economics are central to understanding gender relations in Timor-Leste we must also have a deep appreciation of local social systems taking account of their variety and flexibility. In Timorese communities strong attachments to customary practices have found different levels of accommodation with recently introduced national values of social inclusion and gender equity (RDTL 2011; 2013; 2015). Women in Timor-Leste are awarded status in local cosmology and custom and hold important roles within families and communities. However, this means that women from families who live largely according to customary social systems often have little mobility and are limited to the domestic sphere reducing their economic, educational and political engagement (Niner 2012). Changes to these ‘traditional’ gender roles can trigger a backlash against women which drives further conflict and violence in households and this has been noted in Timor-Leste as it has elsewhere (cf. Enloe 2004; Niner 2011:4; Niner et al 2013).

For all their lack of earning potential, women in Timor-Leste are believed to be better managers of money and more likely than men to spend money on their families and children. Women are expected to be less self-serving than men, and therefore put family considerations before their own. These beliefs not only reflect gender stereotypes and affect the possibilities of gender equity but also mean that women’s productive work is seen as an extension of their household and family responsibilities rather than an expression of their own economic independence and possibilities for empowerment. In the same way that women’s productive work is seen as a part of, or an extension to their reproductive work, it appears that women’s roles as Treasurers and Secretaries, in the SLGs are an extension of their roles as household financial budgeters or ‘money-managers’. However, as will be discussed below, although women are responsible for household finances, they seldom have complete control of them (Pyone et al).

² Sara Niner insert from bibliography

FIGURE 1:
MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY INDEX:
POVERTY RATE BY DISTRICT
(BASED ON 2010 TIMOR-LESTE DHS)



MICROFINANCE, MICROCREDIT, MICROSAVINGS?

Microfinance refers to a series or suite of new financial services established by development actors which aim to assist or 'include' poor communities in developing countries. They have become known as Financial Inclusion programs because previously those disadvantaged communities had no access to and largely excluded from formal banking services. These services and programs only deal in small or micro amounts of money and include microcredit, microsavings and more recently, systems of money transfers (Johnston and Langlois 2016).

(Microcredit) is based on the premise that the poor have skills which remain unutilized or underutilized. It is definitely not the lack of skills which make poor people poor....charity is not the answer to poverty. It only helps poverty to continue. It creates dependency and takes away the individual's initiative to break through the wall of poverty. Unleashing of energy and creativity in each human being is the answer to poverty."
(Muhammad Yunus, 2003)³

³ Muhammad Yunus, Expanding Microcredit Outreach to Reach the Millennium Development Goals, International Seminar on Attacking Poverty with Microcredit, Dhaka, Bangladesh, January, 2003

The term microfinance replaced microcredit in the 1990s after criticisms reduced its appeal (Karim 2011). Microfinance programs include private banking services which are self-financing and profit-making (Elahi and Rahman: 2006: 479). They often include traditional microcredit models but also more financial services such as the provision of larger loans based on collateral rather than savings. Both microcredit and microfinance programs claim to target some of the poorest people in the world: however, research highlights that this claim requires both clarification and context.

Microcredit or small loans are still the predominant form of microfinance (Mader 2014). Microcredit Programs tend to be run not-for-profit, depending on external donor financing, by the NGO development sector whose focus is on increasing poor and vulnerable communities access and control over income in 'bottom-up' models of development (Elahi and Rahman: 2006:476). The three big successes of the microfinance world as BancoSol in Bolivia, Bank Rakyat in Indonesia and the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh (Bhutt and Tang 2001). Grameen Bank

MICROFINANCE

MICROCREDIT

INFORMAL
FINANCIAL
SERVICES
(LOAN-SHARKING)

MICRO-SAVINGS

SELF-GENERATED
FORMS
OF
MICROFINANCE

CUSTOMARY
FORMS
OF ACCRUING
RESOURCES
(MONETIZED AND
NON-MONETIZED)

programmes epitomise microcredit schemes where the emphasis is generally on group formation, social collateral, mandatory savings, and dispersal of small loans linked to savings size (Elahi and Rahman: 2006: 478).

Micsavings belong to the earlier microcredit approach and include models such as self-help groups, rotating savings, SLGs or clubs. This still includes the practice of loaning money but from the pool of savings of members rather. SLGs in particular have most recently been championed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and are presented as the greatest innovation to raise communities out of debilitating and entrenched poverty. It is estimated that since formal introduction of the model in 1991, SLGs have benefitted more than an estimated 10 million people worldwide (Gates Foundation 2010).

Microfinance projects have been widely discussed in relation to their ability to support the empowerment of women involved in them... a clear... answer to the question of how helpful they are...[is] 'it depends'. One major factor is that projects which focus on savings seem to be more successful than those focussing on credit. Another is that 'transformative potential'... needs to be integrated consciously into these projects.

(Chant and Sweetman 2012)

There are currently many different formal Savings and Loans methodologies: popular ones such as the Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) that predominate in Africa.⁴ However, the model commonly used in Timor, and the one originally employed by Oxfam, was the Indonesian version, USBP (Usaha Bersama Simpan Pinjam). USBP⁵ were part of Indonesian state development programs introduced under President Suharto and like much development under this oppressive political regime were not known to be independently evaluated (Johnston and Langlois 2016). How successful these USBP programs were in Timor under the Indonesian regime is not known.⁶ Internationally Oxfam now promotes the Savings for Change (SFC promoted by Oxfam America) model however Oxfam in Timor-Leste does not consistently use this approach because many of the SLGs in TL pre-date the development of the model.

4 Originally programmed by a CARE practitioner in Niger as a ROSCA (Rotating Savings and Credit Association) and based on a West African tradition of group savings, the initiative has been extremely successful and sustainable in Africa. Accumulating Savings & Credit Associations or ASCAs often called Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are popular in both Africa and India. Similar to the USBPs in Indonesia, they are described as a credit union model (Matthews 2014a: 2).

5 The term USBP is often used generically in Timor-Leste to refer to the Savings and Loans concept rather than that specific model

6 This would require some further research with older Timorese, particularly from rural areas, if they remember these groups existing before the Indonesian invasion in 1975.

MICROFINANCE PROGRAMS IN TIMOR-LESTE

There are diverse organisational models of SLGs exist in Timor-Leste today, from informal arisans⁷ which are largely undocumented, SILC (savings and internal lending cooperatives), SHG (self-help groups) to USBPs which were introduced by various development programs since 1999 (UNCDF/UNDP 2014:2). Some of these were embedded within larger co-operative livelihood programs like Oxfam's COPE (Oxfam 2011). It is not clear if the indigenous form of savings co-operatives called arisans in Indonesia were introduced to Timor-Leste during the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999). It is also not known what indigenous modes might have existed prior to this and how these might compare or interact with introduced models. It may be the case that one village group

might have been part of several initiatives by a variety of development actors and taken advantage of multiple training programs and integrated services. In this environment the models and process will have overlapped or resulted in hybrid models. Oxfam in Timor Leste (represented historically by OAU, OGB and OHK) did not implement a specific Savings and Loans model, the concept was promoted largely based on the USBP model. The approximately 100 SLGs currently supported by Oxfam in Timor Leste represent a hybrid approach that has evolved based on the original USBP model influenced by existing social structures and norms. During 2013-2014 four major evaluations of varying emphasis and depth were carried out on the various savings and loans programs in Timor-Leste (Seeds of Life, 2013; INFUSE, 2014; UNCDF/UNDP 2014; USAID, 2014) with various divergent findings and recommendations (a literature review of these reports is available from the author).

7 Arisans are Indonesia's indigenous version of savings groups or clubs first documented by renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz in Java in 1956. He described them as, 'an "intermediate" institution growing up within peasant social structure, to harmonize agrarian economic patterns with commercial ones, to act as a bridge between peasant and trader attitudes toward money and its uses'. (Geertz 1956)



Rural Timor Leste

Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell



RESEARCH STUDY

In 2009, Oxfam Australia and Monash University agreed to a partnership (OMP) based on the simple idea that development organisations and academic institutions both play key roles in global development and poverty reduction; therefore working together can achieve more than working individually. At the end of 2014, Oxfam in Timor-Leste requested OMP funds to undertake a research study to examine the gendered impacts of SLGs which they had been supporting. In particular it was expected that this study would support the review and revision of the current Oxfam in Timor-Leste Country Strategy and feed into the redesign of the (then named) Community Led Rural Development Program, through which the SLGs were supported. Dr. Sara Niner from the School of Social Sciences at Monash University (MU) was appointed as lead researcher and the full research proposal was finalized and approved by the Committee in early 2015. MU Ethics Approval was approved in February 2015 (MUHREC Approval CF15/197 – 2015000089). This research specifically focuses on SLGs established as part of an Oxfam program in Timor-Leste.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This research aimed to examine the gendered social dynamics and impact (positive and negative) of Oxfam-partnered diverse SLGs in Timor-Leste, and further sought to understand the social dynamics of the SLGs to ensure that any negative impacts are mitigated and positive benefits are maximized.

The key research questions of this study were:

- What are the gendered dimensions of household income, assets, and expenditure in Timor?
- What is the relationship between women's control of economic resources and expenditures and women's wider social and political status.
- What are the positive or negative effects of increase or changes in women's economic control and empowerment?
- What is the role of economic empowerment in reducing gender inequality.

Further questions that Oxfam sought to answer were:

- Are these programs successful/unsuccessful and to what degree?
- What are the factors that enable and inhibit women and men to participate, lead and benefit from these groups and are there any related negative results?

FIGURE 2:
MAP OF TIMOR LESTE



RESEARCH APPROACH

The research was conducted with 17 SLGs in: Liquisa (2), Ainaro (4), Covalima (Zumalai) (4), and Oecusse (Pante Makasar, Bobometo and Nitibe) (7). The groups were both mixed-gender groups (11) and women-only groups (6).

As the research is qualitative, the sampling frame was purposive - different groups of participants were selected to provide an overall picture. Group selection was decided for each district by the OMP research team in partnership with Oxfam program staff on the following basis. Selection criteria of the participant groups included:

- Include different gender make-ups: mixed gender (women majority and men majority); women-only and men-only.
- Have been functioning for various lengths of time.
- Have been facilitated through different partners.
- Have significant savings, compared with those that do not.
- Have demonstrated use of savings, compare with those that do not.
- Represent different geographic locations and degrees of remoteness.
- Include groups with disabled members.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This research combined data collection about objective indicators (e.g. how members have used savings and loans, the amounts of loans, and how this was different for male and female participants) with more subjective notions (e.g. changes in women's roles within the groups, such as benefits, increased skills, confidence or participation in decision-making, or holding leadership positions).

Researchers further inquired about positive and potential negative impacts women experienced, and also elicited best case scenarios or significant stories of group membership. No informants, groups or NGOs are identifiable in this report as required by ethical research procedures.

The following data collection methods were applied in this study:

INTERVIEWS

Interviews with group officer bearers, including - Leaders (Xefes), Secretaries, and Treasurers.

29 Office bearers were interviewed including 15 Leaders, referred to as Xefes, (6 women and 10 men); 6 secretaries were interviewed: 3 men and 3 women and 8 Treasurers, 7 of whom were women and only one male.

Interviews with NGO partners, 11 program staff (8 men and 3 women) of the Timorese partner NGOs who continue to give ongoing assistance and training to the groups. Interviews were undertaken on the basis of interviewees responding in their official capacity as a representative of their organisation. Below is a discussion of their attitudes in which they and their organisations have been given pseudonyms.

FOCUS GROUPS

27 SLG member focus groups were held with a total of 55 men and 94 women in:

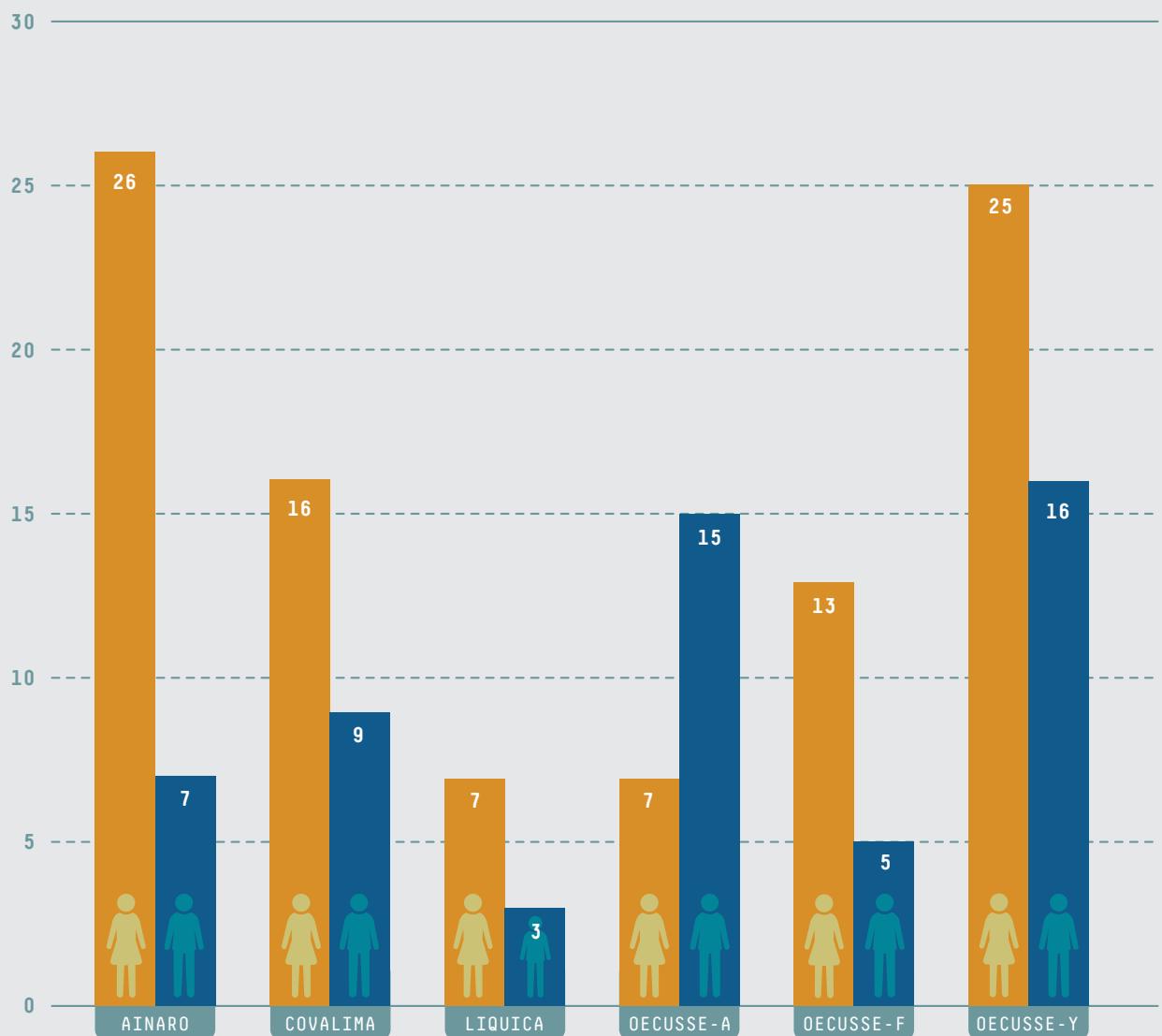
- Ainaro: 6 focus groups
(4 female only and 2 male only)
- Covalima: 7 focus groups
(4 female only and 2 male only)
- Maubara: 2 focus groups
(1 female only and 1 male only)
- Oecusse: 12 focus groups
(7 female only and 5 male only)

SURVEY

Survey forms involved the collection of demographic data.



FIGURE 3:
TOTAL SAMPLE PARTICIPANTS



RESEARCH FINDINGS

GENDERED DIMENSIONS AND GROUP DYNAMICS: EDUCATION, MEMBERSHIP, FINANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Formal Education

'In our group there isn't anyone who is literate. No-one has been to school. Our Xefe is male and the Treasurer and Secretary are female. The Treasurer knows how to save money but hasn't been to school' –Ainaro mixed gender group-female focus group

Over 41% of sampled participants (40% female and 42% male) in this study had no formal education. In Timor geography and age are significant in educational outcomes. Group members in Covalima and Ainaro were better educated across primary, pre-secondary and secondary education, than those in Oecusse. Participants in Covalima were better educated across all levels primary, pre-secondary and secondary education, whilst in Liquica although 30% of participants had completed primary, and 20% completed pre-secondary

education, none had completed secondary. Ainaro had the highest number of participants who had completed secondary education.

In Ainaro there was a significant (20%) disparity between men and women in education, with men being much better educated than women. Contrary to this, women in Oecusse were found to be slightly more likely to have some education than the men surveyed, although rarely were any members educated above primary level. The age of members dictates which national system (Portuguese, Indonesian or Timorese) was in place during their school years and how available it was to them.

FIGURE 4:
AGGREGATED PARTICIPANT EDUCATION LEVELS

	NONE	PRESCHOOL	PRIMARY	PRE-SECONDARY	SECONDARY	TOTAL
AINARO	30%	0%	12%	24%	33%	100%
COVALIMA	24%	0%	28%	28%	20%	100%
LIQUICA	40%	10%	30%	20%	0%	100%
OECUSSE	51%	0%	35%	9%	6%	100%
A-GROUP	82%	0%	9%	9%	0%	100%
F-GROUP	50%	0%	22%	6%	22%	100%
Y-GROUP	34%	0%	54%	10%	2%	100%
OVERALL	41%	1%	28%	16%	14%	100%

FIGURE 5:
AVERAGE LOAN SIZE (WOMEN & MEN)

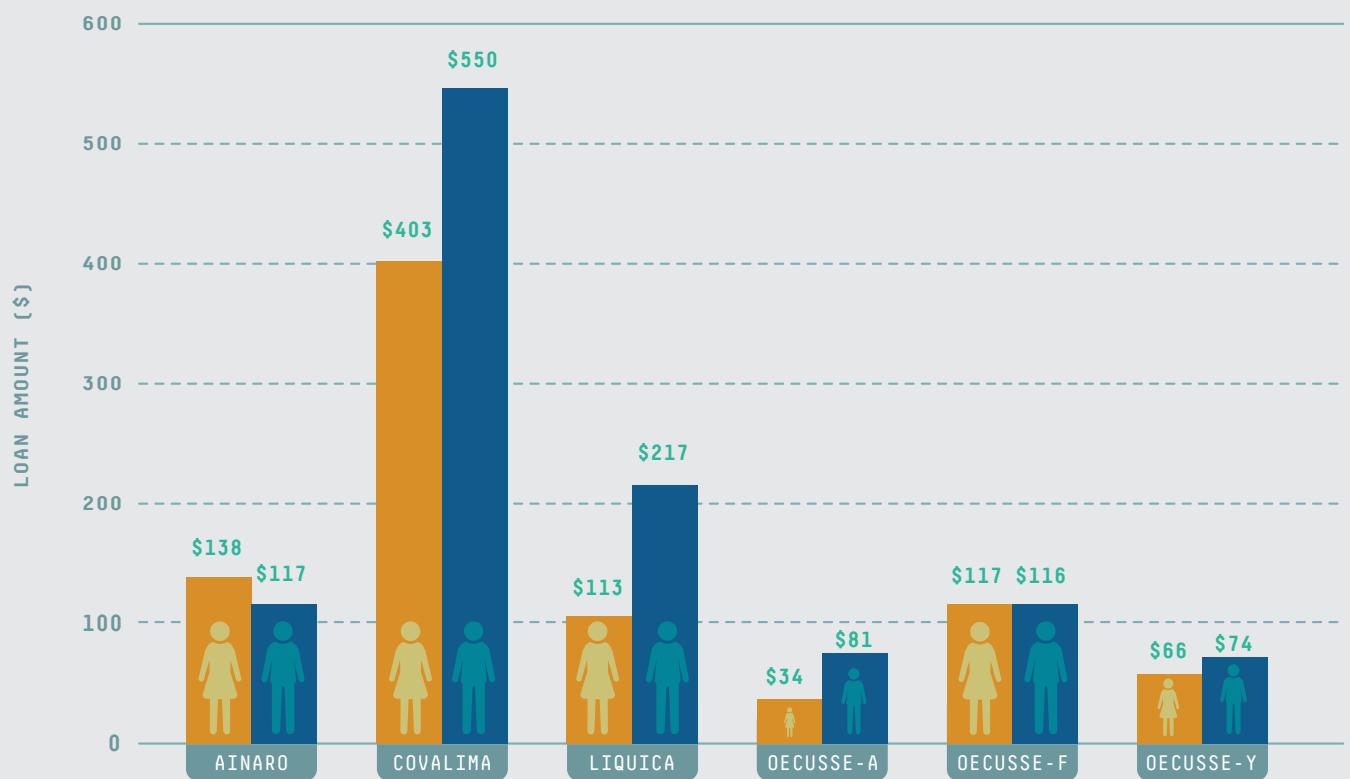


FIGURE 6:
LOANS USE - WOMEN

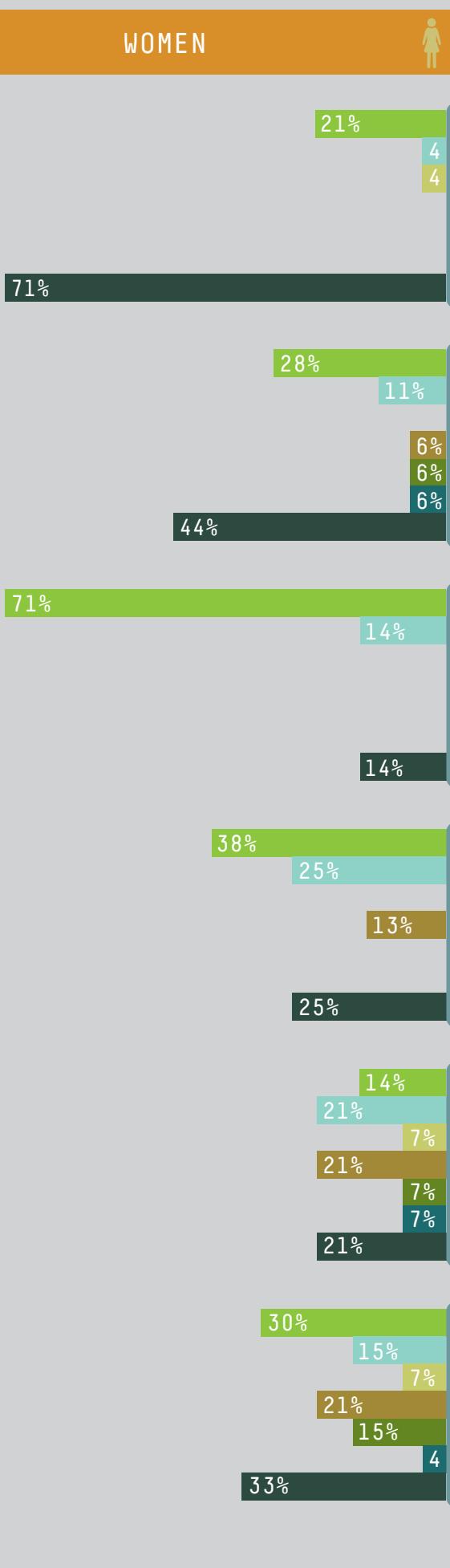
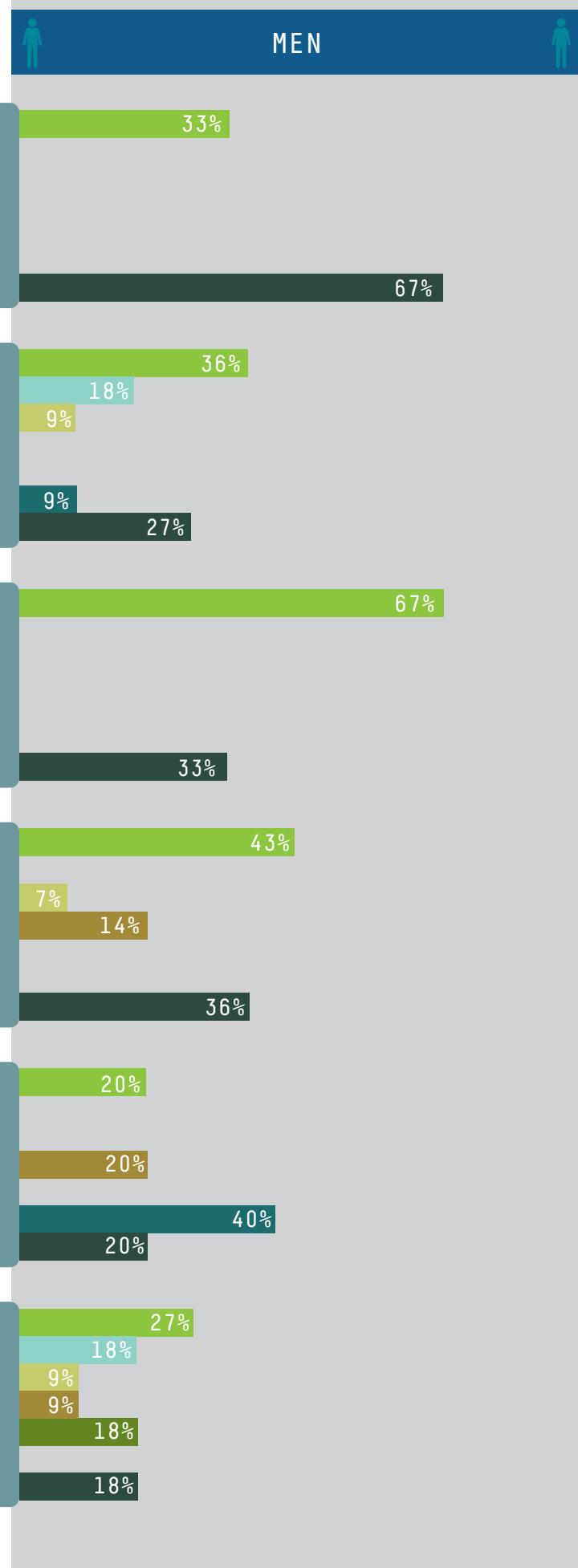


FIGURE 7:
LOANS USE - MEN



SCHOOL

HOUSEHOLD
AND
FOOD

HOUSING

ADAT

OTHER:
TRANSPORT
HEALTH

AGRICULTURE

BUSINESS

Loan Amounts and Use

On average members had an average of 3.5 years of engagement in the groups and had on average received 2-3 loans each year at an average value of USD\$147. Loan amounts in Covalima groups were significantly higher than all other areas at approximately \$477 loaned annually per member, three times the amount of the next two areas (Ainaro - \$128 and Liquica - \$165). This may reflect a greater degree of access in Covalima to the cash economy and income-generating activities, due to geographic location, road conditions, and as mentioned, consequently greater access to education, resulting in higher literacy and numeracy skills, which together certainly must contribute to member's capacity to access income-generation opportunities.

Men generally borrow significantly more than women (on average \$176 for men versus \$147 for women), although levels of disparity differ from district to district. In only two locations, Ainaro and Oecusse (A-Group) did women have slightly larger loan amounts than men. In all other seven locations men borrowed substantially more than women, resulting in unequal outcomes for men and women according to this objective measure of empowerment. This, coupled with admissions in women's groups that they take out loans on behalf of husbands increases this disparity⁸.

Overall comments on how men and women make, save and use money were fairly consistent across the focus groups. Women were a little more strident that women manage money better and were more likely to spend it well on essential items for the family, whereas men were less predictable and less likely to spend money on household essentials and more likely to spend it on non-essential luxuries and personal use such as smoking, drinking, gambling and travelling. Men were much more likely to present a more balanced scenario in which both men and women worked towards the benefit of the family. Even then, most men agreed that women were better at saving money and generally paid for the running of the household.

⁸ A true comparison between women-only groups and mixed-gender groups may also be revealing in this respect.

While there were major differences between groups and locations, there were only relatively minor differences in purpose or objective of the most recent loan between males and females.

There are different benefits or outcomes for men and women in the groups. Women borrow money to buy chicken, fish, fuel and then re-sell them, and also to run small business (kiosks). Men buy motorbikes to provide public transport (ojek), build houses, and run vehicle service workshops (fixing tyres etc.).

Overall 56% loans taken by women were predominantly used for welfare purposes (including school, household and food, housing and transport), whilst 44% of the loans were used by women for business purposes.

As previously noted, loan amounts in Covalima were significantly higher than any other area. The researcher team noted that all group members, including the women, from Covalima, seemed to have a clear "business" mindset, but it was the Ainaro women who, topped the scale for business loans (71%). Conversely women in Liquica groups spent most (71%) of their loans for their children's school costs (books, uniform), and only 14% on business loans. Whereas Covalima, Oecusse and Ainaro participants spent 28%, 27%, and 21% on school expenses respectively. Overall 62% of loans taken by men were predominantly used for welfare purposes (including school, household and food, housing and transport), whilst 38% of the loans were used by men for business purposes.

In Ainaro, men had the highest level business loans at 67%, double the Oecusse A-Group who spent 36% of loans on business. Liquica men spent 67% of their loans on Household expenses and food, significantly higher than any other area.

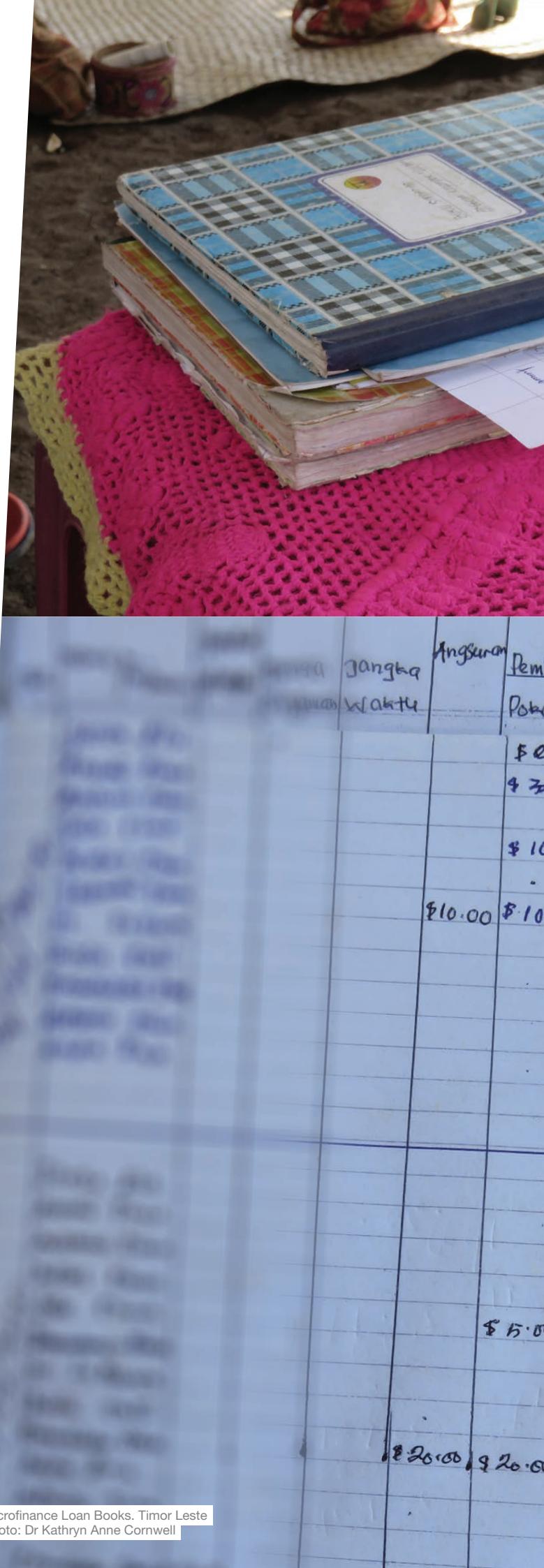
On average, 32% of men and 39% of women participants took out their most recent loan for schooling costs (usually books and uniforms for their children). Surprisingly Women (41%) took out more loans for 'Business' than men (32%), most usually for Kiosks or handicrafts production, while men were slightly more likely to take a loan

for 'Adat', 'Housing' and 'Agriculture' perhaps demonstrating traditional Timorese gender roles. Household expenses (including food) was the third highest loan objective for both men (12%) and women (13%).

Overall, men (62%) spent more of their loans on welfare objectives (school, food, housing, adat, transport, and other including health) than women (56%). Contrary to stated gender roles, overall women spent more (44%) on business (and agricultural) objectives than men (38%) and less on welfare than men. The data presented above highlights that men and women in these communities take out loans at similar rates for children's education, but that women take out more loans for business, which contradicts understandings that women are limited to their family or reproductive roles rather than productive or business roles. This might also be understood by viewing both male and female members of the groups as representatives of their households or families who take out loans for the most pressing need at the time they are eligible to loan.

Almost unanimously, it was clear from discussions that women spend their loan monies on the household and small businesses, usually kiosks and market stalls, and that men spend it on larger scale businesses involving selling the family agricultural produce (which men and women produce together), keeping and trading in livestock or in transport, perhaps demonstrating the greater social acceptance in Timor of men's mobility and the expectation that women are bound to business that can be run from the household or within local communities. The amounts men trade in are larger than women and this is reflected also in purpose and size of loan.

Traditionally, as household expenses are seen as a women's responsibility they may be expected to cover a larger proportion of these when their incomes increase, while men's income increases are spent on non-essential personal items leading to even greater gender inequality than before. As Mayoux (2005:14) argues that, it is not sufficient for development interventions to increase household income if this simply increases household inequalities.



Microfinance Loan Books. Timor Leste
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell



hari/tan	Denda	Total Setoran	Sisa Belum Ditunas	para/F
oh Bunga				
\$6.00	-	\$26.00	\$10.00	
\$3.00	-	\$3.00	\$30.00	
\$2.00	-	\$2.00	\$20.00	
\$1.50	-	\$11.50	\$5.00	
\$2.00	-	\$7.00	\$20.00	
\$1.00	-	\$11.00	-	
\$8.00	-	\$8.00	\$80.00	
\$3.00	-	\$3.00	\$30.00	
\$2.00	-	\$2.00	\$20.00	
\$2.00	-	\$2.00	\$20.00	
\$1.00	-	\$1.00	\$10.00	
\$7.00			\$20.00	
\$3.00	-	\$3.00	\$30.00	
\$2.00	-	\$2.00	\$20.00	
\$7.00	-	\$7.00	\$70.00	
\$0.50	-	\$5.50	-	
\$8.00	-	\$8.00	\$80.00	
\$3.00	-	\$3.00	\$30.00	
\$2.00	-	\$2.00	\$20.00	
\$1.00	-	\$1.00	\$10.00	
\$2.00	-	\$2.00	\$20.00	

Women's control of economic resources and women's wider social and political status

In Timor Leste, women are seen as better 'money managers' and are more likely, than men, to spend household income on the family , as already noted and discussed more fully in the next section of this report. This may support common beliefs in Southeast Asia and in many places in the world that, women are generally more trustworthy than men—a perception that may reflect the region's deep belief that honesty, self-sacrifice, and fortitude are feminine and maternal attributes. Such beliefs while perhaps flattering toward women can and do limit their roles and opportunities.

According to Pyone et al (2016), household budgeting and petty trading in local markets is typically regarded as women's responsibility in rural Timor Leste. It is important to note however, that Timorese women seldom have complete decision making power and control over household finances, and are less influential than men in overall household decision-making particularly on larger purchases, mobility, health, education. Decision making may be distinguished into specific aspects of household livelihoods. Women's productive work is usually an extension of their home-based activities (e.g. kiosks will be run from an extra room in the home or on a local street corner), and does not greatly increase women's public engagement, entrenching restrictive social conventions and lack of mobility

Structure and Organisation of the SLGs

Development interventions in Timor-Leste, and particularly Savings and Loans schemes, rely on already existing indigenous social structures and modes of sociality even though they are very often unacknowledged or simply unseen or unknown. Researchers found that, the SLGs surveyed were all based on already existing social formations, hierarchies, and power relationships. Trust is a key factor in group formation and sustainability, as member's livelihood and economic progress is dependent on all the other member's reliability to actively participate. A reliance on group members as people previously known and trusted was a crucial factor in the functioning and sustainability of groups as this foundation of trust enabled compliance with the savings and loan regimes. This has both positive and negative implications: while long-term social relations and trust amongst members ensures a certain level of functionality, and sustainability within groups, it may also further serve to entrench pre-existing unequal relations of hierarchy of class, gender and age that are present. Also, according to such logics, marginalised people without strong social networks, perhaps the poorest of all, might well be excluded from these programs.

Three key modes of sociality were continuously referred to across all the groups during discussions:

1. That 'men and women complete each other' (mane ho feto kompleto malu):

based on indigenous cosmology and the understanding that men and women are complementary parts of a whole social system. Working together in equilibrium men and women's roles are complementary and fixed by tradition—working as equally hard as one another men do the 'heavy' work (e.g. harvesting trees, ploughing and planting crops, breeding larger livestock, building) while women do the 'light and easy' work (e.g. weaving, growing and trading vegetables, harvesting crops, breeding smaller livestock, running kiosks). What is left out of this customary schema is women's almost total responsibility for all domestic and care work within households which generally means they work for longer hours than men.

Resistance to women working on their own was apparent in many groups. Focus groups had negative

reactions to the example of a women-only group in Manatuto (from a previous Oxfam evaluation), who had formed their own group because they said men wouldn't listen to them or work with them. Nearly every group, including women-only groups, said this would not happen in their community because 'Women and men must work together' and 'men and women always listen to each other' (women-only group- Oecusse 9). Only two focus groups disagreed. In response to the Manatuto example, three of the men's focus groups quoted the traditional adage that men and women complete each other (mane ho feto kompleta malu), one explaining:

Women and men always listen to each other. **Women and men complete each other.** In our group yes, they listen to each other, because the men help with things the women can't do.
(Mixed focus group- Covalima)

2. To 'sit together' (tur hamutuk or halibur malu):

customary practices of consultation and reaching a consensus as a group or community. It might be described as an indigenous form of democracy and occurred frequently in the focus groups when talking about how groups make decisions, agree on loans and membership, plan for the future, select leaders and resolve conflict.

A member (male) took money and gave it to another person [without consulting the group] and we found out at the group meeting. Then there were more problems because the money was paid back late. To solve the problem the members **all sat together** with the Xefe, Secretary and Treasurer as mediators. (mixed gender group- Oecusse)

The notion of '**sitting together**' continues in decision making processes about loans. The Xefe, Secretary, and Treasurer make the decisions: they all sit together. We look at who needs loans urgently and we trust each other. (women-only group Ainaro 2)

In our group, we '**sit together**' to give loans; no rotation. (women-only group Oecusse)

The process for taking loans [is] that they '**sit together**'. Members need to give a proposal to group first with vegetables as their guarantee. There is rotation. People talk together if there is an urgent need. Then the borrower has to take all the money that is there. There is no problem with this; they also lend out to others [outside the group although only loan what they can guarantee]. Every year they split the money so the total amount doesn't get too big. (male focus group Covalima)

All groups generally agreed they solved their problems by 'sitting together to resolve' and that the Xefe, Treasurer and Secretary acted as mediators and on rare occasions if an issue could not be resolved the partner NGOs might be asked to step in. Each group has developed their own method for making these decisions which was also acknowledged by UNDP as a strength of Oxfam's approach.

3. An established customary social hierarchy:

in Timor-Leste the belief and acceptance of customary leadership and the associated social status is strong and enduring. Customary leaders are part of an indigenous upper class, dato, who are obliged to lead and serve their communities and also entitled to a level of reciprocal exchange and community tributes for this work.⁹ Most groups chose leaders through a process of leadership by customary consensus and rarely change these leaders. These leaders are usually men, with women leading only when these is not elite male able to take up the role or if the role is traditionally seen as women's work which managing money often is.

[Selecting the leader of the group] involves, 'Sitting together and just pointing out the leader. No voting.' (women only group-Oecusse).

Yes we [can change the leaders]. We changed our Treasurer because she lived too far away. Can't have just women leaders and can't have just men leaders. The Secretary could become Xefe because she has experience. (male focus group Covalima)

We have not changed leader before. According to the rules, we should change every three years, but this Xefe is good so the members don't want to change. The group is all family. (women-only group Covalima)

Timorese social structure is strong and flexible and room is often made for clever, hardworking or entrepreneurial others who are willing to volunteer and serve their communities. Key leadership qualities identified by participants include: level of education, representative of the group and community, good communication skills, trustworthy, and confident public speaker.

Our Xefe is literate, articulate, has experience dealing with important people (used to work for NGO). (Female focus group-Oecusse 2)

Our Xefe is a good organiser and good communicator and has other NGO connections so knows how to write proposals. (Male focus group: Covalima 6)

The majority of group leaders were selected through customary consensus. This means that customary leaders (or their family) were favoured and were more likely to embody the selection criteria, including experience of leadership and representation, public speaking, negotiation, business skills and the higher levels of education. These criteria greatly favour men as they have been customarily seen as men's roles and rights. Traditionally men rather than women, and the elite level of Timorese society more generally also had greater access to educational opportunities and therefore have maintained their leadership positions in more modern times when leadership has become contingent also on education, although all these practices have been greatly disturbed by colonialism and conflict.

⁹ In traditional Timorese society leaders or liurais received a symbolic tribute or tax in the form of contributions from community members. This was in exchange for 'spiritual services' such as blessings of fertility, rather than their community or public services as a leader. This changed under Portuguese colonial administration to a forced labour system when it became common for each community to work for the liurai for a week. Some of the practices mentioned in the focus groups such as the Xefe, the leader of the group, being entitled to keep half of the interest for himself on any external loans the group made or the Xefe appearing to be entitled to take the first group loan might be explained by these traditional practices and why group members might think these privileges are socially acceptable. These practices may not be part of the normal rules for SLGs and may otherwise be explained as some kind of corruption of them. Such sentiments were expressed in several of the evaluations reviewed in this research.

Women's Leadership in the Groups

Our Xefe knows how to write (pre-secondary school) and speaks well. The Secretary and Treasurer know how to write (but haven't been to school), and manage money well. A woman can be Xefe if she can read. (Female focus group-Oecusse 11)

The majority of the participants agreed that women could become the leader or Xefe of the group, while many, both men and women, were wary of men becoming Treasurers, which was seen as a role that women were naturally better at and many men could not be trusted with. It was also clear from the discussions that women could only be Xefe of the group – if certain conditions were met:

Women also have the right...but they need experience and to be able to write.
(Female focus group-Covalima 7)

A woman can be Xefe if she is brave and articulate. A man can't be Treasurer because they take money.
(Female focus group-Oecusse 6)

... [Women can be Xefe], if she talks well and can get people to participate in the group. No [a man can't be Treasurer]. (Female focus group-Covalima 5)

... [A woman could be Xefe] but she needs to have experience, education and speak well.
(Female focus group Oecusse 5)

Women's focus groups were supportive of women's leadership but also recognised that women would find it difficult to manage the duties along with their other domestic responsibilities. This conflict for women is discussed further below under 'Barriers to women's participation' in the next section.

Several men's focus groups recommended women as Xefes for the following reasons:

Yes [women can be Xefe]. Really women are best, because they have transparency, speak gently, and can gather members.
(Male focus group Oecusse 4)

Advantages of women leaders: Calm, listen, patient.
(Male focus group: Ainaro 5)

Advantage of women's leadership: women are calm, patient, listen to each other. They are gentle, patient and listen to what people say.
(Male focus group: Ainaro 3)

Overall there was a positive attitude to women leaders but this hinged on their own confidence and education.

Discriminatory attitudes, by both men and women, certainly limit women's opportunities, capabilities and leadership. Women are perhaps judged more harshly than men who hold a higher status in the gender hierarchy and who are considered to naturally embody leadership attributes. The assertions that women can be leaders if they display certain attributes and capabilities is undermined when the attributes proffered are those typically cultivated and expected of men (such as the ability to speak in public) or based on resources and opportunities difficult for women to access (such as mobility and being skilled at negotiating with outsiders). Therefore, while women are considered to have some positive stereotypically feminine qualities that are good for leadership (like being calm and good money managers) they hardly ever have enough of the stereotypically masculine qualities (like being confident at public speaking or forceful with debtors) that people expect in a leader of a group. At the heart of advocating more gender equitable leadership ratios in Timor is changing attitudes about gender attributes, not just about what are biologically or naturally occurring attributes but what is acceptable for a women or a man to do.

Women's leadership of mixed-gender groups

Of the 10 mixed gender groups consulted, two had a female Xefe or leader, one in Ainaro and one in Oecusse. The Ainaro female leader of the mixed gender group was also the local catechist and local government or suco representative. She explained that three women from her family had established the group with men only joining later. The group aimed to improve the standard of living of families by supporting the women in their families to be more productive and earn an income.

The Oecusse mixed-gender group with a female leader, was also established by a particular family, who completely reversed the typical gendered leadership structures by having a female leader and secretary and two male Treasurers. The Xefe was chosen because she had some experience already and had attended some civic training (with another NGO that runs S&L programs). The support of her husband was crucial, and was largely due to the fact that she contributed to the household income. It is clear from these examples that while there are significant barriers and restrictions on women's leadership there are particular 'conditions' in which women can emerge as leaders. Family support, especially that of a husband, is crucial as is experience in the wider community and a woman's productive capacity to support the family.

Men's Roles in Women-Only Groups

Majority of women's only groups were not so by design but based on circumstance. One group indicated that 'Men were not interested in joining the group', another that 'the men don't want to be involved', a third that they were all unmarried or widows or separated because the men were away working in Dili. However, all women-only groups highlighted their reliance on men in their families and communities to support the groups by fulfilling traditional roles 'heavy' male duties such as building the meeting place, and as business advisors.

[We] need the Katuas (old man) for heavy work... the Katuas is a good business man. He helps with group activities...we need men to give their opinion so that the group's work can advance.'

'Men are needed for the heavy work but not for the UBSP work' (male focus group Covalima -HB)

'...apart from organising the money, men do the most work' (male focus group Oecusse 10).

'We need men in this group as members to help increase savings in the groups: to increase the fund balance (that's all)' (female focus group-Covalima -HU)

'We don't need the men that aren't good at working like those that didn't come to build the meeting place' (female focus group-Covalima 2).

Women-only group members also spoke of men being members of the groups even when there were none listed and of making loans to men even though it was recorded in a woman's name because it was a women's only group. Women taking out loans for men is common in micro finance programs internationally and has indeed been a problem in other programs where men appropriate monies and women are left with the debt. In these ways women-only groups can serve to simply re-entrench gender discrimination (Mayoux 2005). It was clear from these discussions that the families and communities that the women represent are implicitly always part of the group and cannot be separated out.

It cannot be assumed that women's groups are so by design or designed to solely serve women's interests, or even that they do not include and serve men in some capacity. The most overtly women's empowerment organisation consulted was Oxfam partner NGO, F-Group. Two groups overseen by this NGO were visited: Oecusse 1/2 and Oecusse 3, a women-only group and a mixed gender group. Case studies of these positive examples of women's leadership and participation (Oecusse 1/2; Oecusse 3 and Ainaro 1) should be developed in a program of mutual learning and information exchange as a tool for encouraging women's empowerment and this is a recommendation listed below.

CASE STUDY 1: A women-only group by design (Oecusse 3)

Oecusse 3 is a women's only group by design although they said they still needed men to help them or perhaps needed male approval to be able to operate. They have a male advisor and said that their husbands support them and had built the meeting place for them. All members had built a house for themselves and acquired basic household goods. They were proud of their group and development and achievements and offered clear evidence of personal empowerment:

CASE STUDY 2: A women-only group by circumstance (Covalima 3)

Although Covalima 3 was a women's only group this was by circumstance rather than design. The group explained they had formed a women-only group because their husbands are away working in Dili. The group did not have a clear plan of activities and the leadership was also unclear. An elderly man referred to as a business advisor was present during the focus group. When members explained how they chose their nominated female Xefe:

All members just pointed out the leader. The old man also chose her as Xefe, she can write, manage money.

This group had no obvious gender aims and the association with the elderly man may have been to conform to Timorese custom of male leadership and protection. In this way his presence allowed them to continue with group activities without criticism or conflict with customary practices.

Now we can support our family economically. Before we were involved in the group we didn't look after ourselves or present and groom ourselves well but now we do. Before we were shy, our confidence was low: we were scared to speak up. Now we are used to it and can talk confidently, make our own decisions, and exchange opinions with each other.



EFFECTS OF INCREASE OR CHANGES IN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC CONTROL AND EMPOWERMENT

Increased household Income

SLGs have assisted many members in increasing household incomes and meeting their immediate basic needs, for example many are now able to pay for school and university for children; have built permanent, modern housing and are able to furnish it and 'live well'. Members also stated that they felt secure in that they now had access to emergency funds if needed.

CASE STUDY 1: Female Headed Household [A-Group Oecusse]

A daughter in a poor female-headed household was able to support her widowed mother and younger brother through her membership of an S&L group. Since joining the group she was able to get a loan and invest in a small kiosk and develop the family farm. She is now able to pay for her brother to continue his study at school. This example offered by the A-Group NGO working in the poorest district in Timor and is evidence that this program is reaching the poorest of female-headed households.

CASE STUDY 2: Agricultural Group [Y-Group Oecusse]

Seven members started an agricultural co-op in Oecusse which grew onions and garlic. In 2012 they produced 2 tons and in 2014 increased their output to 4 tons. They have been able to transport produce to Dili and find a market for it there. This year they are planning to transport and trade in Kefa, Indonesian West Timor. This example assumes the S&L group facilitated the money required for transport and trade.

Increased standard of living

Participants were overwhelming affirmative in response to the question about why they had established or joined a group. Members were proud of their groups and presented a sense of achievement at being able to support their families:

We can now support our families economically. Before we were involved in the group we didn't spruce ourselves up (wash, wear new clothes, brush hair), but now we do. Before we were shy, our mentality was down, scared to speak. Now we are used to it, can talk, make decisions and share our opinions with each other.
(Women-only group Oecusse 3)

The Xefe's family. Before they had a traditional thatched house (uma duut), but now they have been able to build a modern block house (uma mutin), things for the house are complete—have a TV, chairs, table etc. from making tais.
(Women-only group Oecusse)

Education of families

Providing an education for children was a key reason that many participants took loans

One women didn't have any money to send her kids to school before but now she has paid to send her kids to university. Another woman borrowed money to open a workshop to make furniture.
(Female focus group-Ainaro 4)

One elderly man had a lot of benefit, he borrowed money and paid for his children through to graduation, and some are now at university. ...they borrow money and run business and can send their kids to school through to university.
(Female focus group-Ainaro L)

Accessible Credit

[We formed the group so] we could cover our urgent needs. Groups don't take up too much time, or require transport, and we don't need lots of documents. We just talk to each other if there is an urgent need. (Male focus group, Covalima 4)

Majority of participants much preferred the savings and loan schemes to microcredit because they benefited from the payment of interest rather seeing it go to outsiders. ...Before we borrowed from other people and paid a lot of interest. Now we have formed the group we feel good, we can borrow money and the interest is our own. (Female focus group-Oecusse 13).

Participants were adamant that otherwise inaccessibility of credit from formal institutions such as banks had resulted in the need to develop informal credit groups, as noted,

We formed the group to have access to money. Credit at the bank is hard to get: it's a long process, needs transport, and the interest just goes to the bank. Before life was difficult, now life has changed. (Female focus group-Covalima 7)

Group members noted that managing their finances through their own savings and loans schemes was more satisfying than using microcredit programs or formal banking. However, groups continue to expect support and assistance from mentor NGOs and no expectations of self-sufficiency or 'graduation' from this reliance was mentioned.

Financial Independence

Financial independence and management of their own financial affairs was an important benefit highlighted by the participants.

When they need urgent money they can take it. Can also save and borrow. Money saved in the house gets used up quickly; we formed group to save money. The benefits are that we can open a kiosk, pay for younger sibling's school.
(Women only group Ainaro 2)

Lack of Training and links to economic opportunities

Majority of participants indicated that they had received a variety of agricultural or food production training. Six groups mentioned training in UBSP methods. One mentioned training in 'sanitation, clean water' and another 'SISCA for child vaccinations'.

Most groups wanted more training and assistance in a myriad of ways:

We want the partner NGO to give the training they promised... [want to] make cakes, plant vegetables, weaving, sewing clothes with a machine.
(Women-only group Ainaro 1)

Need to trust each other to develop. [Want to learn to produce] Local food from partner organisation: cassava cake, banana/taro chips, steam cornflour, make noodles from wheat flour, bakso. Training about UBSP, cook local food, traditional medicine, animal husbandry, fish, plant vegetables.
(Women-only group Ainaro-H)

One weakness of microfinance programs is that they cannot or do not address the wider economic environment and in fact some negative impacts have been recorded in this sphere (Mader 2014). Members here are alluding to the lack of wider markets to sell to and lack of entrepreneurial capacities that these programs cannot or have not assisted with.

EFFECTS OF PROGRAMS ON GENDER DISPARITY AND INEQUALITY

A key finding of this research is that ‘women-only’ groups are not representative of the kind of aims of women’s empowerment, raising women’s status and gender equality that micro-credit programs are often credited with. Apart from one or two notable exceptions, the rationales that women-only groups offered in this research had nothing to do with gender concerns. These groups were essentially an act of social solidarity amongst women with the central aim of raising their families and communities out of deep poverty. They chose this particular strategy because it was one of the few available to them and socially acceptable, family finances being seen as a women’s traditional domain and responsibility. Therefore few effects on gender inequality as expressed in the attitudes of participants below were found.

However, like all groups canvassed they are proud of their achievements and there is evidence that for some women it has led to increased economic empowerment which for some has raised their social status within the household leading to further freedoms and opportunities. There is also a small amount of evidence of personal empowerment and boosted confidence amongst some women, as discussed in several places in this report. However, there is no evidence to support broader changes to gender roles and relationships, although this cannot be ruled out entirely and is extraordinarily difficult to ascertain and measure.

Men and women’s roles are indivisible: mane ho feto kompleta malu

The mixed gender groups and women-only groups both operate in the same broad social context of customary or traditional gender roles, relationships and norms. Women-only groups hold very similar gender attitudes to the women and men in mixed gender groups. The common adage was repeated—that men and women complete each other (mane ho feto kompleta malu) and must work together to achieve a better life.

Men and women need to work together to ‘complete each other’. Want to work together in unity.
(Male focus group Ainaro 5)

This encompasses the belief that men and women’s roles are complementary and fixed in tradition as modelled by their ancestors—men do the ‘heavy’ work and women do the ‘light’ work as explained above. This categorisation is notional or symbolic as some of the women’s work is arduous, such as harvesting, planting, carrying water and washing clothes, while some traditional tasks of men do not appear to be any more physically demanding.

This understanding of women and men working together in unity in these customary, symbolically defined roles was presented as the only way poor men and women could develop socially and economically. Women’s domestic or reproductive labour was not explicitly mentioned in most responses meaning it is not counted in this social schema. Anecdotally, it is understood that when this ‘invisible’ domestic or reproductive labour is counted women work for far longer hours than men and for no remuneration (de Araujo 2014).

The repetition of the ‘mane ho feto kompleta malu’ adage may well also be a response to researchers attempting to separate out the roles and duties of men and women, along with identifying separate issues, needs and outcomes, when these roles and needs are understood by local peoples to be inseparable. By asking members to identify differences might have resulted in the repeated response that men and women’s roles ‘complete each other’ or are inseparable. It may indicate a fundamentally different world-view on gender issues or a discomfort or disagreement with the process of the gender analysis being undertaken.

Mixed gender groups either treat men and women unequally or have become places that create more equality between men and women and even foster women’s leadership. To challenge this and build gender equity, strategies such as gender balance (critical mass of women), effective gender awareness and enabling policies in groups are required.



Focus Group, Timor Leste
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell

Attitudes to gendered work

There were few differences in perceptions of gender roles between women's and men's focus groups or between districts, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Women's Focus Groups (mixed groups):

Yes, we need men to build houses and do the heavy work. Women alone can't do it.
(Female focus group Covalima 7)

Men do the heavy work. Women look after the light work. They help each other.
(Female focus group Ainaro 4)

Men look after the heavy work and women the light work. We have a plan for activities for men and women: men plough the land and women plant. Men: make the fishpond, work the farm. Women: weeding, planting (female focus group- Ainaro 6)

Yes need men to help each other. Help with heavy work (making wine). Roles in group: Men and women work the same amount: women plant vegetables, cook, collect wood, work in the kitchen; men make the wine, collect and split wood. Our men and women always listen to each other.
(Female focus group Oecusse 2)

Yes we need men in the group but it depends on the men: if they want to come we will accept them.
(Female focus group Oecusse 5)

Men's Focus Groups (mixed groups):

Yes we need women because they manage money well and they can 'complete the men'. (Male focus group Oecusse 4)

Need both women and men working together: to give ideas to advance the group's interest. Heavy and light work we all do it together; we have the same roles in group. (Male focus group Oecusse 1)

Men and women 'complete each other'. Men need women to make the coffee and cook. (Male focus group Covalima -HB)

They help each other but divide the work – heavy for men and less heavy/light for women. Men's work is to plough the land, build fence, weed, make the fishpond, grow chickens to eat, build house. Women's work is to cook, make coffee, and help collect water, tais. (Male focus group Ainaro 3)

When groups were asked explicitly if the women (in a fictional scenario) could separate from a mixed-gender group and form a women-only group, the response from both men and women differed. Some women were less supportive of this scenario and highlighted that the separated women only groups would only succeed if the women were 'united' (Oecusse 2), 'brave' (Ainaro 6) and, ready and willing to '...help each other, [but] still need men to help; need help for building' (Maubara- 2).

Majority of men in the mixed groups said 'yes' and some indicated that the separation would be conditional on the women's attitude, 'If the women think that, then women-only is good' and the second, 'women would need patience for the future because they will then have [to do] the heavy work¹⁰ in group activities' (Ainaro 5).

As noted previously, it was evident that women were the financial managers or Treasurers, for their groups by extension from their roles as money managers in the household and was understood as their role in Timorese culture and society. The groups were a culturally acceptable vehicle through which woman can extend her sphere of influence from the private domain of the household to the public domain of the community which is a positive outcome.

Gendered economic strategies: women as economic managers and administrators

In each household it is the women who budgets-men don't know where the money goes. Women take money and tell each other. Men earn money but they give to their wife to manage. (Women-only group Oecusse 3)

A clear gender stereotype was expressed in focus groups that women were better money managers than men, stemming from the fact that women normally manage the family household including its budget. This was firmly seen as part of a married women's role and most agreed women generally were the ones who were responsible for supplied the basic necessities for the household

¹⁰ This may mean the building of the meeting place which many groups referred to or that the group is also a farmer groups

and for this reason were more trusted economic managers. To varying degrees most suggested this was something that most men could not be trusted with.

While there was general agreement that women made better group Treasurers for all the same reasons listed above, there was a significant difference between men and women's answers. Men indicated that individuals and their experiences were also very important:

Depends on the man or woman.
(Male focus group- Oecusse 10)

Depends on the individual person's capacity. (Male focus group- Oecusse 4)

Some [women] are good [Treasurers], some are not good. (Male focus group- Covalima 1)

It's about rules and experience with managing money. (Male focus group- Covalima 4)

Agree, that's true indeed [women are better Treasurers] but women refuse to take power, their 'mentality' not good; they are more interested in their own lives than the group.
(Male focus group- Oecusse 12)

The men in one group explained that women had left their group because management was inadequate and lacking in transparency, much like the example given in the initial scenario.

Before there were even numbers of men and women in the group but a lot of women left because transparency was lacking and group administration not good. They were influenced by the community to leave.
(Male focus group Oecusse 12)

However a representative of the partner organisation (A-group) had a conflicting explanation saying that the women left to get married outside the community.

Attitudes to gendered economic strategies

Women-only groups:	Women in mixed-gender groups	Men in mixed-gender groups
All (women) members have built a house with loan money. The Xefe has a big house, and bought household furniture and purchased household necessities. (Women-only group Oecusse)	Women have less money than men but manage it better—men just waste money on gambling and drinking wine. Women save more than men because women sell things and save the money and men only help them (the women) do it. (Female focus group-Maubara 2)	Need to work together to ‘complete each other’. Want to work together in unity. Borrowing depends on needs, time and situation. Women manage money better. (Male focus group Ainaro 5)
[Women are better with money] because women think about business (fila liman) but men use it for smoking, drinking. Men earn money and give to their wife but they don't know how to manage money. Men and women are not the same: women manage money in the house, but men are in the market or out on farm... men smoke, drink wine, go to cock fights, but women don't. In general, women are better because they save well. Women manage money, thinking about the monthly payments, but men take money and just spend it. (Women-only group Ainaro 1)	Men borrow larger amounts of money (\$500-600) to buy big animals. If they borrow more than this the group would be angry. They also pay for tractor fuel, ploughing the land. Women buy goods for the kiosk, betel, and some buy animals for resale. Men use money on their mistress. (Female focus group-Covalima 2)	On average women and men both seek to advance their families: men through productive projects outside the home and women through kiosks and self-employment. (Male focus group Covalima 6)
Loans are the same: men buy animals for resale, sell betel; women buy sewing thread, things for the house like tea and coffee. Women use money better because they buy things for the house. We use our group money for things in the house: coffee, sugar, vegetables. Men are good at making money, but don't manage it so well – they drink and gamble. Women are good at managing money and men are not. They go to the market and drink wine with their friends, problem for their wives. [Women] are scared if there is a lot of money saved that men will have a fight with them [over the money]. (Women-only group-Oecusse-B)	Women always use money in consultation with their husbands but men take the money and don't tell their wives. Women use the loan money to buy household items like plates, beds, cupboards, pay for kid's school. Men use the loan money to give to their wife to buy things for the house but some take money to buy wine to drink. Yes, women are good money managers. Women save money well because don't spend without a good reason. Men waste money. Women borrow more in our group. (Female focus group-Oecusse 2)	Men and women are the same and use money to strengthen their family. All group members have the same need: to improve the economics of their family. Women manage money better; they are also usually the ones who buy things for the household. The women run seasonal businesses e.g. selling vegetables, coconut. Only one or two have kiosks that run permanently. The men catch fish, keep chicken, pigs, goats and cows in far places and then resell them in the market to make money. When the women sell vegetables it is only seasonal, while the men sell produce for larger sums throughout the year. (Male focus group Ainaro 3)
	Men just gamble and drink wine. Women use money for household needs and paying for children's school. Women spend money on school, ceremonies, vegetables, planting vegetables. Men spend on motorbikes (ojek), pay for children's school and ceremonies. Benefit is the same, women and men all feel good that they can borrow from the group and can pay for kids' school. Men and women borrow the same; money is split evenly. (Female focus group-Oecusse 5)	Husband and wife listen to each other, they manage money well. Men might waste money on gambling but so do women on card games. (Male focus group Covalima 4)
		Women use money better and buy only things that are important. Men waste money, sometimes buy wine, cigarettes. All the same, people support their kids to go to school, pay for funerals and weddings (lots of these here). (Male focus group Oecusse 11)

Although there is variation in these comments from men and women it is clear that it is normal for women bear more responsibility for spending on the household and for men to have more disposable income. Men were commonly known for spending monies on travel, drinking, smoking, and gambling. Not surprisingly, women asserted this much more strongly than the men, and demonstrated some resentment about it. The trap here is that if there is no renegotiation of these economic practices and women's productive work and incomes increase that they are expected to work harder, on top of their heavier burden of reproductive labour. Without directly addressing these restrictive gender norms and attitudes, which leads to inequality and discrimination in household budgets, loan amounts, participation and leadership positions, there is a limit to the kinds of changes that can occur.

A further potential harmful outcome for women was conflicts with husbands over their participation in groups, including their increased mobility and a husband's sense of loss of control over a wife's activities. Several groups already had mitigation strategies in place to combat this highlighting it as a problem. This involved briefing men and families about the benefits of women's involvement in the groups for households and the support that women required to take part (FCW provide a good example of this and also A-Group advocates 'participation agreements'). Such programs prevented conflict, broke down a barrier to participation for women and created greater gender awareness amongst men.

The entrenchment of gender discrimination in the groups has already generally been discussed in this report. More specifically some women say they are not listened to or respected in their mixed-gender groups and are apprehensive that if they are too successful that men might come and take over and appropriate monies. Some men have demonstrated discriminatory attitudes by commenting critically that women lack capacity to make loans, are reluctant to take power or lack confidence, all the attributes required to lead the groups. When members were asked directly about negative impacts for women there were few other responses except for:

Yes, when women come to meetings sometimes their husbands forbid them.
(Female focus group-Ainaro 4)

No impact, because they have the right to participate in this group.
(Female focus group-Ainaro 6)

One men's group noted that they tried to encourage women's empowerment:

We encourage women to improve their mentality [confidence], give them opportunities to talk and give opinions about their group and we listen to whether their decision is good for our group. (Male focus group- Ainaro 4)

No explicit question about group aims of female empowerment or gender equity was included so as not to suggest any such responses to participants and none of the groups clearly expressed these aims. Many people in Timor see these new national values enshrined in the national constitution and the national development plan as values imposed from outside their communities or foreign (Niner 2013) so this is again not a surprising finding. The most overtly women's empowerment organisation consulted was partner NGO, F-Group.

Barriers to women's participation

A key but unsurprising finding is that the main barrier to women's full and active participation in the group is based on the conflict between reproductive and productive roles that women fulfil.

Sometimes women abandon their housework because they are working in the group. Dividing time is a problem. (Mixed gender group-male focus group Oecusse)

...women can't participate if kids are sick. Some don't come to group activities, they have work in the house or kids are sick. But we are not angry, we understand each other.
(Female focus group - Ainaro 2)

If women have small kids or are pregnant, we understand their situation
(male focus group- Ainaro 5)

However, there was a lack of formal acknowledgement of women's extra duties and this conflict for women both in the policies of groups or in any formal solutions to these barriers. However, several groups had found ways around these issues and these solutions deserve to be promoted and shared with other groups in cross-learning events and this features in recommendation 5.





Rural Timor Leste
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell

RECOMMENDATIONS

1: Balance Timorese traditional and cultural strengths with ‘new’ national values

Groups use hybrid organisational structures based on prior networks and modes of sociality mixed with introduced microfinance methodologies.

Indigenous social systems have combined current with traditional savings and loans methodologies, such as arisans and UBSPs, creating unique Timorese hybrid forms of S&L Groups. The Groups principles and ways of working are based on three core indigenous modes of sociality: ‘sitting together’ (halibur malu, tur hamutuk); reliance on an established traditional social hierarchy; and finally acceptance of customary gender norms and relations such as the belief that ‘men and women complete each other’ (mane ho feto kompleto malu).

- i. The strength of communities and their continued respect for Timorese values and customary practices must be acknowledged as the foundation of groups but groups also need to consider ‘new’ national values of social inclusion and gender equality.
- ii. Hybrid Timorese models of SLGs from this and further research could be documented and promoted as effective models by Oxfam within groups from this and other research in a program of mutual learning and information exchange.
- iii. Develop programs that ensure have greater access to the most marginalised and poorest sections of the community - however, further research and policy development would be required.
- iv. Discussions about the limitations of gendered roles and activities can be addressed in a culturally appropriate gender awareness and training program with different strategies and activities for mixed-gender and women-only groups.

2: Balance economic and social development

Groups are a vehicle for building economic and social resilience and protection including a sense of agency or empowerment.

Economic development opportunities were limited and varied widely across the districts. Opportunities depend upon geography, seasonal variation and capacity of groups but creativity was apparent within groups in past experience and future plans for livelihood projects. What was understood to be appropriate as economic activities (such as kiosks for women and animal trading for men) was extremely gendered and limited women's mobility (to attend meetings, working groups, training and cross-visits) and opportunities. Assistance to improve plans, prospects and access to markets is requested by many groups. This also requires some linking to economic activities and initiatives at local, regional or the national level to be successful.

However, group members expressed pride in being able to meet their own needs and create their own livelihoods, as well as, their capacity to manage and administer their own groups. The capacity to manage the group is as much a measure of success as the volume of funds managed by the groups. While groups are important in building the economic resilience of communities they also play a significant role in, increasing social capital through the building of (and new learning) skills, knowledge and confidence of members and building solidarity or social connections between women and men is as important as increasing economic capital (high savings and loans amounts).

- i. Continue the focus on social outcomes that meet the needs of the most vulnerable, marginalised, and excluded community members who have no access to S&L Groups.
- ii. Share successful examples of SLGs within (and with other) Timorese communities to inform existing groups and encourage new group formation.
- iii. Peer learning can be set up between older more experienced groups with new groups.
- iv. Oxfam should develop and discuss clear exit policies from S&L Groups that are self-sufficient and sustainable.
- v. Groups all have different needs but to increase success of the groups in terms of economic opportunities, new, innovative ideas need to be shared, rather than a continuation of traditional occupations. Innovative case studies from Timor-Leste (and elsewhere) should be shared from this and other research in a program of mutual learning and information exchange.
- vi. Outside assistance to S&L groups develop plans, prospects and access to markets is essential to the success of these plans. Market and business development (business planning and assessment; cost budgeting; value added supply chains) must be provided to groups in culturally-appropriate but innovative ways.¹¹

¹¹ One suggestion for an innovative project targeting at women is the addition of a program for 'tech-agents' selling sustainable technology designed for the developing world (see <http://www.kopernik.ngo/technology/tech-agent-starter-kit>).

3: Integrate culturally appropriate adult literacy programs

Lack of literacy and numeracy hampers individual and group development and the implementation of more complex microfinance methodologies.

Education was very low in some of the locations visited indicating high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy. This means that poorer, less educated communities are unable to maintain complex records and in many cases, difficult to understand and implement complex savings and loans methods such as UBSP. Lack of education (and low literacy) can be a barrier to individual opportunity within groups and may entrench traditional social hierarchies, including gender hierarchies. A culturally-appropriate, adult literacy and numeracy program for groups could be transformative. However, older groups that simply relied on trust and memory similar to the arisan method also demonstrated positive outcomes resisted further education. Alternative savings and loans methods that do not rely on literacy and numeracy could also be explored.

- i. Community consultation and technical skills audit is required to assess educational needs and preferences of groups.
- ii. A review of already existing adult literacy and financial literacy programs developed should be made and an appropriate program adopted.
- iii. Alternatively review the methodology and consider modifications to the approach to make it less reliant on literacy. (E.g. trialling oral book keeping and transparent transaction processes). The Savings for Change model being introduced may assist with this.

4: Promote equal women's leadership and active participation in decision making in mixed groups

Groups demonstrate women superior status as money managers, more trustworthy and transparent group administrators and calm and patient leaders.

Timorese beliefs that women are superior money managers and therefore serve best as group Treasurers, were held by all groups. This is an extension of women's role as household budgeters and brings this accepted traditional role for women out of the private domain into the public. This is a positive change increasing women's mobility and public engagement but restricts them to this gendered role. Mixed gender groups tend to entrench gender discrimination but can become vehicles for building gender equity and fostering female leadership.

Most members also expressed attitudes supportive of women as group leaders because they were more trustworthy and transparent, calm and patient although few women leaders existed and this was dependent on certain conditions. Mixed-gender groups are a good place to discuss the roles and relationships between men and women and mobilising support from men for a change in gender relations although this has to be done carefully (see gender synchronisation techniques Greene and Levak 2012). This would include issues such as: customary attitudes to men and women's attributes and roles; men's traditional privileges inside the home and in leadership; decision-making and access to resources including money and land; and barriers to women's participation and can form part of a gender awareness training program referred to earlier.

However, different strategies are required for mixed-gender and women-only groups and this may also assist in mitigating any negative outcomes for women.

- i. Mixed gender groups should be encouraged to introduce policies of a balanced memberships between men and women with equal space for discussion of women's interest and concerns as well as ensuring that decision making processes give at least equal weight and importance to women's interests and concerns.
- ii. Groups should encourage women's equal participation through an understanding of men's and women's roles (as above) and barriers to participation and leadership of women. Workshops or training on gender roles as per the recommendation for a gender awareness training program.
- iii. Promoting public recognition of women's greater skills with money and organising can increase their mobility. Group structures should promote and ensure that women have equal leadership and decision making opportunities within SLGs as part of a comprehensive culturally appropriate gender awareness and training program.

5: Acknowledge and support women's 'triple burden' in group policies

A barrier to women's participation in SLGs was the added duties of group membership and the tension caused between their reproductive and productive roles.

Commonly referred to as 'women's triple burden' in gender and development theory, tension for women between their work in the home (reproductive), their work outside the home (productive) and their community work in groups such as these was raised in focus groups and interviews. This tension was highlighted, but not much was discussed in depth on the difficulties this causes for women in their private lives. There was acknowledgement but little awareness expressed about how much longer women work because of their unpaid domestic work (which were often referred to as 'light' or 'easy' work). This lack of awareness was a barrier for women's participation in SLGs.

- i. Further gender assessment of women's reproductive roles is required and how this may conflict with increasing their productive roles and community work in groups.
- ii. Socialisation about men and women's roles and work within and outside the home is required. Groups should understand that if women's work outside the home increases (participation in groups and productive work toward family income) that requires renegotiation of domestic and care duties inside the home. This should include discussion about women's need for assistance from husbands and families with domestic duties so they can have time to attend groups meetings and working groups to improve their groups and family income.
- iii. Introduction of 'Contracts' or 'participation agreements' between husbands and wives to make time for group work should be discussed with partner organisations and groups for their consideration.

6: Understand the positive changes that women's groups have made and share these stories

Women-only groups can be avenues for empowerment but currently few have this agenda.

Most 'women's-only' groups are not so by design but circumstance. Their aim was to help their families and communities economically rather than increasing gender equality or raising women's status in their communities or women's empowerment. There were several positive examples of women's leadership and participation amongst the groups canvassed (Oecusse 3 and Ainaro 1) and there may well be more amongst the many groups not visited in this study and they could become case studies and models for other groups.

- i. Case studies of these positive examples of women's leadership and participation (Oecusse 1/2; Oecusse 3 and Ainaro 1) should be developed in a program of mutual learning and information exchange as a tool for encouraging women's empowerment
- ii. Strengthen women's solidarity building in these groups through workshops or training about women's basic and strategic needs, women's triple burden and male privilege as per the recommendation for a gender awareness training program above in 1(iv) (this recommendation is appropriate to several findings sections here as noted).
- iii. Through a process of community development strengthen women-only groups as a form of social action for raising the status of women in their communities. Provide links for women-only groups in Timor-Leste with civil society and government agencies with similar agendas. Pathways for women to informal and formal political participation (PNDS, Suco Councils) could also be included if groups are interested.



Village 'kios'.
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell

7: Gender awareness training for partner organisations.

Partner organisations require further gender awareness training to participate in the implementation of gendered strategies.

Partner organisations demonstrated fairly typical attitudes reinforcing customary gender attributes, roles and relations. A greater awareness of gender as a concept and Oxfam's goal of gender justice is required if this aim is to be pursued in these programs. A discussion of the limitations for women and men in the acceptance of these customary roles is required, particularly the understandings of binary gendered work (feto/mane=light/heavy; easy/hard) along with ideas for capitalising on women's accepted strengths in administering group finances and management and strategies to strengthen women's roles in mixed gender groups.

- i. Further community reporting sessions need to be organised in co-ordination with partners (budget may remain for this and requires a budget variation). Recommend specialised train-the-trainer workshop(s) for partners to understand these findings more fully including follow-up mentoring and coaching. An experienced Timorese gender trainer and facilitator needs to be employed for this to be successful.
- ii. Oxfam is encouraged to work with partners regarding using the savings and loans grassroots base for developing advocacy strategies for the members around gender issues (including preparation of tools for working with members). Again an experienced Timorese gender trainer and facilitator needs to be employed for this to be successful.



Moris Hamutuk women group. Manufacture of tais and other handcrafts, Oecussi, Timor-Leste
Photo: Alfredo Prado/OxfamAUS

CONCLUSION

ARE THESE PROGRAMS SUCCESSFUL OR UNSUCCESSFUL?

Methodological success

The success of groups' organisational development was judged differently by previous evaluators, Oxfam staff, local NGO mentors, and group members themselves, depending on whether they believed that groups should develop their own models or follow a set model (i.e. the UBSF from Indonesia). Through various combinations of planning, training and no doubt instinctual processes of members, SLGs had created hybrid organisations that have merged indigenous modes of sociality with elements of introduced models. It would be very difficult to

pull apart these pre-existing social networks and strategies of local people from the introduced ideas. However, it is fair to say that hybrid models have been the most successful and sustainable solution in serving the needs of local communities. However one criticism of method that should be noted is the lack of 'graduation' of SLGs from reliance on mentor NGOs. If there is an aim or expectation of self-sufficiency of groups a policy to achieve this needs to be developed and implemented.

Building social and economic capital

All groups reported financial success although to significantly different degrees as shown above. The SLGs ensure that members are significantly able to meet immediate basic needs for food, housing and education for children. Most felt secure they had access to emergency funds if they needed them. While groups are important in building the economic resilience of communities they also play a significant role in increasing social capital through the building of skills, knowledge and confidence of members and enabling that community to function more effectively. The capacity to manage the group

is as much a measure of success as the volume of funds managed. The real success of programs was apparent in the pride of members in being able to meet their own needs and create their own livelihoods expressed in focus group discussions. Group members were proud of their capacity to manage and administer their own groups, including management of funds, and also reaping the financial benefits from this, infinitely preferable to microcredit programs. The building of social and economic capital may also be based on the social hierarchy in place in groups so impact will be uneven.

Social change and empowerment

Members were essentially proud of their groups and presented a sense of achievement at being able to manage and improve their own financial affairs, which fits the definition of a poverty alleviation paradigm's definition of empowerment rather than a feminist one (Mayoux 2005). As Oxfam's program can be

categorised as a poverty alleviation program this measure too can be judged as achieved. However, implementation of their gender equity policy cannot be judged as so successful as many of the groups are networks for the entrenchment of customary practices which are inherently gender inequitable.



Rural Timor Leste

Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell

MOTIVATIONS FOR MEN AND WOMEN TO JOIN THESE GROUPS, AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP

Overall members made loans for welfare purposes more often than business loans. One third of all of member's most recent loan was for the costs of schooling costs their children. Women took out more loans for 'Business' while men were slightly more likely to take a loan for 'Adat', 'Housing' and 'Agriculture' demonstrating traditional gender roles. Household expenses (including food) was the third highest loan objective indicating that loans for basic needs including emergency food is not the primary purpose of the groups. Members of groups gave a variety of examples of success from their groups ranging from being able pay for school and university for children; building a permanent, modern house and being able to furnish it and 'live well'.

In the businesses category members usually mentioned farms and kiosks but a few mentioned more entrepreneurial ventures (textile production; furniture production; providing transport; renting event furniture; reselling clothes; and making value added agricultural products). Members were now interested in further developing their businesses, looking for and developing markets and requested assistance with practical business and marketing skills. This perhaps can be seen as a limitation of microfinance programs that do not engage with the wider economy.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE GROUPS

The groups tend to reflect basic Timorese customary practices of gendered roles and relationships as described fully in the discussion. In this gendered social system both genders are fixed in traditional roles and cultivating preferred gender attributes. This means in groups that men fill leadership positions and women are the financial managers as an extension of their household budgeting role. Overall women do more unpaid domestic labour, have less decision making power than men, access to fewer

resources and opportunities. Mixed gender groups maintain these traditional hierarchies or can become places that create more equality between men and women and even foster women's leadership. To build gender equity, strategies such as gender balance (critical mass of women), effective gender awareness and enabling policies are required. Groups also have the potential to be a grassroots base for developing action on gender issues by discussing the roles and relationships between men and women.

ENABLERS AND INHIBITORS FOR WOMEN AND MEN'S ENGAGEMENT

Most agreed women's leadership was possible but few examples existed. Although there were significant barriers and restrictions some groups had afforded women the opportunity to become leaders and decision-makers. Women's individual motivations played a factor but education and prior experiences of leadership were other key factors. Single women without children or those with support from their husbands were other conditions under which women could be leaders. Having access to very limited resources and opportunities (such as training offered by some of the NGOs) was also a consideration but not yet enough to overturn the historic imbalances in terms of access to education and opportunities. Discriminatory attitudes, by both men and women, limited women's opportunities, capabilities and leadership. Women must compete with men who hold a higher status in the gender hierarchy and are considered to naturally embody leadership attributes.

The main barrier for women's overall participation was the conflict between reproductive and productive roles which can lead to stress for women. Without renegotiation of gendered duties there may have also been negative effects on households although no specific instances of this were mentioned. There was a general lack of formal acknowledgement in the policies of groups of women's burden reproductive duties or formal solutions to this barrier. However, some of the women's groups did have suggestions for mitigating the barrier for women highlighting it as a problem that had only been addressed in environments where women's issues were given higher priority. For women living in patriarchal social structures such as in Timor-Leste, any increase in women's activities or status due to participation in SLGs may also be interpreted as women stepping beyond accepted roles and creating conflict and subsequent adverse outcomes. Several cases were cited of husband's refusing to let wives participate and controlling their mobility.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

From the earliest critical literature the social change and empowerment potential of microfinance (including both microcredit and self-help SLGs) has been limited by concerns about broader patterns of inequality. The Oxfam programs analysed here were designed primarily as poverty alleviation programs that never had the explicit objective of empowering women and therefore this outcome cannot fairly be expected. However, Oxfam includes an overall gender equity policy in its programming and if this aim is fulfilled there may also be the potential for women's empowerment and this research attempted to assess this. As several of the groups demonstrated, they do have the potential to

empower women but this was rather a result of the transformation that took place due to the women's hard work than as a consequence of any formal aims or programming associated with the group. A 2012 quote from Chant and Sweetman above concerned the ability of micro-finance projects to support the empowerment of women involved in them, noting that savings programs were better than credit programs at this, but also that programs required the conscious integration of this aim. It is a strong recommendation of this research that this aim should be sensitively and appropriately be included in all further programming.

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Woman with Tobacco and Betel Nuts, Timor Leste
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell



Rural Timor Leste

Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell



Group meeting 2015
Photo: Dr Kathryn Anne Cornwell