

# Timor's First Lady Speaks of Violence and Hope

*Monash Alumnus Kirsty Sword-Gusmão speaks at Castan Centre Event*

*By Jonathan Devenish*

Only days before the high-profile assassination attempt on Xanana Gusmão at his home in February 2008, another vicious attack occurred just next door, when the Gusmãos' neighbour was brutally beaten by her husband. The woman lost several of her teeth, sustained injuries to her abdomen and left a trail of blood when she was brought to the Gusmãos' house by her daughter soon afterwards. The woman and her children were still staying at the Gusmão home when the assassination attempt occurred.

When she recently addressed almost 200 people at Monash Law Chambers in September, Ms Kirsty Sword Gusmão, wife of Timor Leste's Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, related this story as an illustration of the plight of women in her country. While the Australian press focuses on the country's seemingly endless political machinations, Timor Leste's women still face a long climb towards equal rights.

Ms Gusmão, who was born and raised in Victoria, traces her involvement with Timor Leste back to the 1980s when, after studying Indonesian language at Monash University, she worked as a volunteer in Indonesia while simultaneously assisting the East Timorese independence movement. It was during this time that she met her husband, who was then leader of that movement.

Once Indonesian rule ended in Timor Leste, Ms Gusmão dedicated herself to working to assist the women of Timor Leste. In 2001, she established the ALOLA Foundation. The foundation was named after Juliana dos Santos – or *Alola* – the nickname her family gave her. Ms Gusmão told of the fifteen year old Juliana's rape and abduction to West Timor by a militia leader in 1999. Juliana's only sibling, her brother Manek, is also thought to have been murdered by the same militia leader. Juliana's mother came to Ms Gusmão in 2001 seeking help to get her daughter back. Having just given birth to her first son, Ms Gusmão was deeply moved by the circumstances of the dos Santos family and felt compelled to become involved in the struggle to get Juliana back.

Ms Gusmão's experience of advocating for Juliana became the catalyst for her to help reduce the scourge of gender based violence in Timor Leste. She established the ALOLA Foundation with the motto "Strong women, strong nation." ALOLA focuses on the economic empowerment of women as a primary means of capacity building. This has helped enable many women in Timor Leste to break free from violent relationships. A 2003 International Rescue Committee Survey in Timor Leste estimated that 51% of women feel unsafe in their relationships and 25% have experienced violence from a partner.

Ms Gusmão also discussed broader issues facing the nation. She stressed that after decades of political violence, peace cannot be taken for granted. The people of Timor Leste have had to "rebuild a nation virtually from scratch with the majority of the infrastructure destroyed – both physically and institutionally", she said. Notwithstanding all that has been achieved the stark reality is that life in Timor Leste remains a struggle for most people: 40% of the population live on roughly 55 cents per day; 28% of women suffer from malnutrition; 53% of women are illiterate; and it has one of the highest infant mortality rates coupled with the highest fertility rate in the world – with an average of 8 children per family.

Despite the realities of living in one of the poorest nations in the world, Ms Gusmão assured the audience that the outlook is looking more positive every day for one of the world's newest nations: the economy is growing at 8% per annum; an unprecedented amount of anti-corruption legislation has been adopted; and a level of stability and security has been achieved that hasn't been witnessed for decades.

What has been achieved for the advancement of women in Timor Leste has also been remarkable. In 2001 Timor Leste held its first ever Constituents Assembly Election and 22 of the 88 members elected were women – which is the highest female representation in the Asia Pacific region. In 2002, only 7 months after formally gaining independence, the country acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol (Australia is yet to accede to the optional protocol). And, almost 25% of Timor Leste's civil servants are women.

In concluding her talk Ms Gusmão acknowledged that it will take a long time to achieve lasting peace and prosperity in Timor Leste. She explained that there remains a struggle in terms of creating the mechanisms, institutions and structures to properly defend the most vulnerable section of the community – women and children. As the former First Lady, Ms Gusmão has done more than just advocate for the improvement of women's lives. She has gone to great lengths to ensure that, slowly, those improvements happen.

*Kirsty Sword Gusmão's lecture was generously sponsored by Holding Redlich.*



*Kirsty Sword-Gusmão, centre, with (L-R) Heather Gray and Andrea Tsalamandris of Holding Redlich and Professor Sarah Joseph and Marius Smith of the Castan Centre*