



**P R I M E
M I N I S T E R**

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF TIMOR-LESTE KAY RALA XANANA
GUSMÃO TO THE GENDER IN PARLIAMENT INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE HOSTED BY THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF
TIMOR-LESTE**

Dili,

23 October 2014

Your Excellency the President of Parliament
Your Excellencies the Vice-Presidents of Parliament
Distinguished Members of Parliament
Fellow members of Government,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be speaking at this conference on Gender in Parliament organised by the National Parliament of Timor-Leste.

We are all aware that Timor-Leste is a very young nation, and that our history has been marked by centuries of colonisation, occupation and resistance.

When we became an independent nation in 2002 we had to rebuild roads, bridges, schools, medical clinics and houses destroyed during our violent birth in 1999. And at the same time we had to establish parliamentary democracy, executive government, a functioning bureaucracy, legal and policing systems, and all this happened at the same time.

In the lead up to our independence we held national consultations on a constitution for our new nation. Even though traditionally men and women had different roles, our people wanted a Constitution that made it clear that men and women must be treated equally in all aspects of life.

Our people wanted a Parliamentary system that promoted the democratic participation of women and harnessed the resources and skills of the whole community.

We wanted a system that recognised the fact that, during our struggle for independence, women participated actively in all fronts of the struggle. Today, almost a third of registered veterans are women.

As a result of these consultations, our Constitution guarantees protection against discrimination based on sex and equality of rights and obligations in familial, political, economic, social and cultural life.

Unfortunately, entrenched gender bias does not disappear just because of words in a document. We knew it was necessary to create opportunities for women to be represented in Parliament. That is why our National Parliament passed laws to encourage women to put themselves as candidates for Parliament and, in 2011 the law was changed from the perspective that one in every three parliamentary candidates would have to be a woman.

Following the general election in 2012, 25 of our 65 members of the National Parliament, are women. That's a percentage of 38.5 which is the highest percentage of women representatives in parliament in Asia and the Pacific, and 16th highest out of 140 countries surveyed in 2013. The world average for women parliamentarians is only 20%.

Our high levels of female political participation have assisted Timor-Leste towards achieving Millennium Development Goal 3 which seeks to promote gender equality and empower women. One of the targets of Goal 3 is to have 35% of seats in the national parliament held by women.

We are pleased to be able to report to the United Nations that Timor-Leste has achieved this target.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While we can be proud of the number of women representatives we also know that this is only one measure of progress for gender in parliament.

It is also important that we have a gender sensitive parliament that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women and provides for their equal participation.

A gender-sensitive parliament is founded on the principle of gender equality and operates without discrimination. It also means that not only are women members of Parliament but that they participate fully and equally in Parliament's conduct and proceedings.

This includes women assuming leadership positions, such as the head of parliamentary committees, and that they are actively involved in decision making processes.

We must make sure our parliamentary culture is always comfortable for men and both women and free of sexual harassment and discrimination. And we must also make sure that the conduct of parliament is civilised and respectful. We need less shouting and more listening.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In discussing gender in parliament we must also consider the central role that political parties play in shaping our parliamentary democracy.

Political parties are the gatekeepers of political office. To improve women's political participation, political parties must take responsibility for promoting women from the grass roots up.

Political parties must ensure that members of parliament reflect not a narrow elite but that they represent the full mix of society. This includes ensuring that all voices are heard and that the marginalised and the vulnerable are encouraged to participate in our political process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A diverse parliament is a better parliament, and a full role for women in our parliament can lead to better outcomes for the Timorese people.

International experience suggests that women in parliament bring different perspectives to legislation and policy issues.

While we must remember that it is not just the role of women to promote and advocate for gender equality, we know that having women in parliament can also help to ensure that legislation is not discriminatory and that it actively promotes gender equality and inclusion.

Women can also express a particular interest in social policy and help to ensure that public policy in the areas of health and education best provide for the needs of the people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I cannot come here today to talk about gender in parliament without reference to gender issues across the broader society that parliament represents.

The National Parliament represents the people and advocates for their dreams and aspirations. It works to further the cause of our people and ensure the development and progress of our nation.

We know, however, that we cannot meet our development goals if we do not improve the situation of women and address pervasive gender and economic discrimination. And we know that healthier and better educated women leads to healthier and better educated families.

It is my view that a society can be judged by the manner in which it treats its most marginalised and vulnerable. And likewise, the performance of a parliament can also be measured by how it supports the most disadvantaged.

Timor-Leste has made great progress in fighting poverty and improving the health, education and quality of life of all our people. And we are providing pensions to our most vulnerable, addressing the scourge of domestic violence and building our education and health sectors.

I also know that making progress on gender means more than speaking about rights. It also means talking about obligations of each person in the community or society in which they live.

As for the Government, this year the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality made a magnificent effort in travelling through the country to shake the lethargy that was dominating this issue of 'women's participation'. The purpose was to guide the discussions in order for the

women in each district to feel motivated to participate in the full and inclusive development of the country. The Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality noted that in some localities there was a greater dynamism in terms of debates so that the women could start preparing themselves to participate in the future municipalities, understanding better what they may want and what they can do.

On 7th November, we will celebrate the National Day of the Timorese Woman in Manatuto in memory of Rosa Bonaparte.

And so, I urge us all to work together, the National Parliament and the Government, along with the people of Timor-Leste, to continue to improve the situation of women and ensure that women have the same opportunities as men to contribute to the development of the country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I commend the National Parliament for holding this conference on gender in parliament and for being a regional and global leader in supporting female representation.

I wish you all the best in your discussions and trust that together we can strengthen even further our progress on gender in parliament.

Thank you very much.