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# International Approaches to Literacy for Gender Empowerment:

A Review of the Literature and Analysis in Relation to Timor-Leste

A research project presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of International Development

Development Studies

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## **Abstract**

After 400 years of colonial rule and illegal occupation Timor-Leste gained independence (World Bank, 2004). However, in the wake of this, as they sought to rebuild the country, the newly founded government was faced with numerous development challenges, such as wide spread illiteracy and a non-existent education system. Given this non-existent education system and the extent of illiteracy noted more in the rural areas and in relation to women, part of the solution to addressing the issue was to implement informal literacy programmes. It was argued that increasing women's literacy was an important strategy for increasing women's social, political and economic participation and achieving empowerment (Olufunke, 2011). However there are also debates contesting that participation in literacy programmes automatically leads to the empowerment of women, rather the programmes on offer need to be understood in the context of the place where they are being delivered (Stromquist, 2002).

With this in mind this research project seeks to critically explore firstly, international approaches to adult literacy with a specific focus on gender and empowerment, and secondly, the relevance of these international approaches to adult literacy as an empowering tool in relation to women in Timor-Leste. This desk-based exploration unpacks four international approaches to adult literacy, which come under the umbrella of critical literacy approaches, these are: 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS), 'Real Literacies Approach' (RLA), the 'REFLECT' Method, and the 'Community Literacy Approach' (CLA). These four approaches are critically discussed in relation to women's empowerment focusing specifically on debates by Rowlands (1995, 1997) and Kabeer (1999), who draw on Freire's (1970) concept of empowerment, conscientization.

Having interrogated these four approaches I then reflected upon them in terms of the Timor-Leste situation, focusing specifically on issues of effectiveness and appropriateness. I conclude that rural women can experience empowerment through participation in adult literacy programmes. In considering the REFLECT Method, the common empowerment dimensions experienced are the personal sphere or dimension (Rowlands, 1995, 1997), the achievement dimension (Kabeer, 1999), with evidence of 'conscientization' or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). The REFLECT Method is thus considered to be the most appropriate and effective

approach to adult literacy and gender in Timor-Leste. However, this approach can also be combined with other approaches (in particular the RLA), which is implemented nationwide in Timor-Leste. However it is important to note that literacy itself does not guarantee empowerment, there is a need to think beyond literacy and how (within) this process women can access their fundamental rights, as well as possibilities of power (Archer, 2002).

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*A Luta Continue,,, Viva Timor-Leste!*

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AODETI – Associação Popular Democrática Timorense <sup>1</sup>  
ASDT – Associação Social Democrática Timorense <sup>2</sup>  
CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women  
CLA – Community Literacy Approach  
DAWN – Development Alternatives with Women for new Era  
EFA – Education For All  
ETTA – East Timor Transitional Administration  
GAD – Gender and Development  
FALINTIL – Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste<sup>3</sup>  
FRETILIN – Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente <sup>4</sup>  
MDG – Millennium Development Goal  
NGO – Non-governmental Organisation  
NLS – New Literacy Studies  
NSD – National Statistic Directorate  
OPMT – Organização Popular de Mulher Timorense <sup>5</sup>  
PRA – Participatory Rural Appraisal  
RLA – Real Literacies Approach  
REFLECT – Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community  
Techniques  
TLSLS – Timor-Leste survey of living standards  
UN – United Nations  
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme  
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation  
UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund  
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund  
UNTAET – United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor  
UNW – United Nations Women  
WID – Women in Development

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<sup>1</sup> English Translation: Popular Democratic Association of Timor

<sup>2</sup> English Translation: Timorese Social-Democratic Association

<sup>3</sup> English Translation: The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor

<sup>4</sup> English Translation: Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor

<sup>5</sup> English Translation: Popular Organisation of East Timorese Women

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