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## In the Shadow of Absence

### Women Searching for the Disappeared in Indonesia and Timor-Leste

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*We aren't advocacy machines, so having boundaries is important for the ability to keep going. – Lia*

*After he was killed, we heard that his shirt and bones were found, but people were not allowed to go to the forest ...[Yet] my aunt went to retrieve them ... She told the [Indonesian] army she was in the forest to gather tamarind and firewood. She hid the bones under a bed. – Rosi*

#### 1. Introduction

In Indonesia and Timor-Leste, enforced disappearances<sup>2</sup> remain an unresolved legacy of past conflicts and authoritarian rule. The majority of cases of enforced disappearances in Indonesia and Timor-Leste are men, leaving women to search for their missing family members. As men are typically

<sup>1</sup> This report was written by the Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) team in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. It would not have been possible without the guidance and input from the survivors involved in the workshop.

<sup>2</sup> According to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), “enforced disappearance” “is considered to be arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State...”.

responsible for earning a living, the disappearance of fathers, husbands and brothers causes severe financial hardship and social stigma for women. While official efforts to seek justice have been uneven, it is women, in their role as wives, mothers and daughters, who continue to search for the disappeared, often at great personal cost. Their efforts are time-consuming, disrupting their daily lives and exacerbating gender-based vulnerabilities. Women's experiences are significant, as they often bear the burden of searching for missing loved ones in the midst of state hostility (Dewhirst and Kapur, 2015). Often forced to take on this responsibility in the absence of effective state action, women's relentless pursuit of justice comes at great social, economic and psychological cost (Kent, 2016).

This research by Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) explores the gendered impacts of the search for the victims of enforced disappearances through the eyes of six women from the two countries. Using participatory methods developed over years of working with survivors, the study uncovers how searching disrupts women's lives, especially in the economic, social and emotional spheres, and how they navigate stigma, state inaction and deep personal grief. This study fills a critical gap by centring their voices and offering practical recommendations for institutional responses to support women's search for the disappeared. The research is particularly timely in the context of renewed political impunity in Indonesia and stalled accountability mechanisms in Timor-Leste.

The following section situates enforced disappearances in Indonesia and Timor-Leste within their historical and political contexts. After that, the economic, social and psychological impacts on women caused by the search for the disappeared are illustrated. The subsequent section describes sources of healing, resilience and strength for women, before the legal frameworks in place that are meant to assist search efforts are examined. The final section offers recommendations to relevant state institutions in the two countries, including establishing commissions, providing legal protections and better access to information, developing reparations mechanisms and supporting memorialisation efforts.

## **2. The search for victims of enforced disappearances in Indonesia and Timor-Leste**

Enforced disappearances in Indonesia and Timor-Leste are part of a dark legacy of political repression and human rights violations. Characterised by mass detentions and kidnappings, disappearances took place as part of the political upheaval and massacres in 1965/66, when Suharto took power. Hundreds of thousands of people were victims of gross human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and sexual violence by the Indonesian state apparatus. Scholars emphasise that disappearances were systematically employed by the New Order regime in order to instil fear, suppress dissent and consolidate political control (Roosa, 2006; Robinson, 2018). These violations remain unresolved, as survivors and relatives continue to demand recognition, truth and justice in the face of institutional silence and impunity (McGregor, Melvin and Pohlman, 2018).

Enforced disappearances extended beyond the anti-communist purges of 1965 and 1966. In Aceh, Papua and East Timor (now Timor-Leste), disappearances became systemic tools of counterinsurgency. At least 53,000 people were disappeared during this period, excluding disappearances in West Papua

(ELSAM & IKOHI, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste on 7 December 1975, immediately following Fretelin's declaration of independence from the Portuguese. Between 1975 and 1979, Indonesia's brutal military campaign resulted in tens of thousands of civilian deaths from unlawful killings, disease and starvation, as well as thousands of disappearances (CAVR, 2005; CTF, 2008). Violations continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, while Indonesia masked the violence by developing infrastructure and claiming Timor-Leste as an Indonesian province. Following Suharto's fall in 1998, Timor-Leste held a referendum, voting overwhelmingly in favour of independence. Following the referendum, violence intensified, displacing hundreds of thousands, with women bearing the brunt of the violence.

After Suharto's fall, the Indonesian military's role was curtailed and human rights instruments ratified during the *Reformasi* era. Several high-level military officers were discharged, including Prabowo Subianto, the commander of *Kopassus*, Indonesia's special forces, who were responsible for kidnapping student activists in 1997 and 1998. Prabowo was accused of serious human rights abuses in Timor-Leste, West Papua and Jakarta, but was never tried and was allowed to remain in politics. He served as Indonesia's Minister of Defence from 2019 to 2024, and was elected President in October 2024, reintroducing a climate of fear among human rights activists.

The legacy of the disappearances related to the 1965/66 massacres and the occupation of Timor-Leste has never been fully addressed. Truth-seeking and justice efforts remain sporadic, with survivors often being left in limbo, without recognition or reparations. Mass graves remain unmarked, and a reluctance to properly investigate perpetrators hinders the fulfilment of victims' rights. Former military figures' rise to political power deepens concerns about proper accountability and the further marginalisation of survivors unable to heal their ongoing trauma.

In both countries, search efforts to locate the disappeared have been dominated by women, given that most victims were men. Supported by national civil society organisations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and churches were involved in search efforts in Timor-Leste in the first instance. These efforts were often inspired by the mothers of the disappeared and often involved advocacy work for legal redress. Women's organisations, such as FOKUPERS<sup>4</sup>, and later victims' associations, ensured that the search for the disappeared was integrated into broader human rights and reconciliation initiatives (CAVR, 2005; CTF, 2008). In Indonesia, the legacy of the 1965/66 massacres and the 1997/98 student disappearances prompted similar mobilisations, with the formation of victim groups like YPKP 65 and IKOHI to advocate for the rights of the disappeared. The Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence or KontraS, a prominent NGO, was itself inspired by the advocacy of Tuti Koto, the mother of a disappeared student activist. Often, women were compelled to take on the burden of searching due to the state's inability or unwillingness to resolve these cases. As a result, several prominent human rights organisations in Indonesia and Timor-Leste have been established specifically to support mothers and siblings searching for their loved ones.

<sup>3</sup> These numbers were documented by the Indonesian Association of Families of the Disappeared (IKOHI), established in 1998 and led by families of victims from the 1997/1998 cases. The organisation then expanded with the involvement of families of victims from various enforced disappearances in Indonesia since 1965.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Forum Komunikasaun ba Feto Timor-Lorosa'e (FOKUPERS), see: <https://www.fokupers.org/about/>

The involvement of women in search processes underscores the gendered dimensions of enforced disappearances. These efforts exposed women to enduring socio-economic shocks, psychological trauma and entrenched gender-based discrimination (Dewhirst and Kapur, 2015; Kent, 2016). Bridging the history of past violations with present struggles, this paper examines the specific obstacles confronting women searchers in Indonesia and Timor-Leste, situating their experiences within broader debates on truth, justice and gender in transitional justice processes.

### **3. Impacts of women's search for the disappeared**

To understand the social and economic toll on women who search for disappeared family and community members, AJAR hosted a three-day research workshop in Bali, Indonesia. Six women participated in the workshop – three from Timor-Leste, two from Indonesia and one forcibly abducted as a child from Timor-Leste and raised in Indonesia. These individuals were carefully chosen as they represent women from a variety of abduction contexts. The workshop employed several participatory exercises developed by AJAR over a number of years. These exercises, described in AJAR's Stone and Flower publication (Wandita and Campbell-Nelson, 2017), elicited participants' personal experiences of searching for the disappeared, as well as their knowledge of historical and political events. Other exercises were designed to celebrate and reinforce participants' resilience and strength. Some participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities for security reasons.

### **Workshop participants**

*Rosi, who always misses them* (her siblings disappeared in 1975): Born in Timor-Leste, Rosi is a sister and survivor who spent decades searching for her three disappeared siblings who were members of the resistance during Indonesia's occupation. Despite the trauma, secrecy and lack of evidence, her commitment to finding them has never faded and she continues to push for her siblings' dignity.

*Elisa, tossed by heavy waves for 26 years* (her husband disappeared in 1999): Elisa's husband was shot and disappeared during the Liquisa church massacre, leaving her to raise three young children alone. She searched for her husband's remains for years, but his body was never found. In 2025, Elisa held a symbolic burial. Now she has found purpose in life working for a victims' association.

*Ana, coping with depression* (her husband disappeared in 1999): Ana's husband was forcibly disappeared during the post-referendum chaos in Timor-Leste. The couple married just a week before the attack. After years of searching, official silence and conflicting reports, she never received confirmation of his fate – only her husband's ring was found in a burned-out car. Today, Ana works with the UN, carrying the memory of her husband with her.

*Maria, a child stolen from Timor-Leste and taken to Indonesia in 1979*: Maria was stolen and became a searcher and advocate for other "stolen children" in Indonesia. Taken

from Timor-Leste at the age of five by Indonesian soldiers, Maria grew up in military barracks in Java, enduring beatings and sexual abuse from the man who posed as her “adoptive” father. In 2012, she reconnected with her birth family and helped launch the grass-roots network that has since reunited more than 100 Timorese “stolen children” with their families.

*Rahmah, the daughter of a disappeared man, still pressing for justice* (her father disappeared in 1984): Rahmah was 17 when her father disappeared during the Tanjung Priok massacre. Together with other families, she formed the “12 September” group to demand exhumations and trials, but split from the group when the military intervened and offered cash “peace” deals or islah. Now part of a Jakarta cooperative, Rahmah sells food and organises and fights for justice, seeking acknowledgement and reparation.

*Lia, a daughter and activist silenced by cyber-harassment* (her father disappeared in 1998): Lia never knew her father, one of the 1998 Jakarta disappearances linked to today’s President Prabowo. Inspired by her father, she joined the advocacy movement, only to be brushed off as someone who should move on. Background checks have cost her jobs, and she has experienced cyber-harassment, with people questioning if the person who disappeared is actually her father. Despite this, she continues documenting her father’s disappearance.

In doing this research, it became clear that women suffer both from the loss caused by disappearances and from the social and economic burdens of searching, making it difficult to disentangle the effects of the search from the absence itself. Even before beginning the search, the disappearance of family members put women in a difficult situation, affecting their agency to conduct the search and their ability to find solace. The women reported that the disappearances caused them severe financial hardship and social stigma, while disrupting their family roles and forcing some to rebuild their lives from zero. The losses caused them deep emotional and psychological distress, ranging from depression, anxiety and insomnia, to feelings of isolation, generational trauma and fear, often compounded by insensitive societal attitudes. Many struggled with identity issues and social belonging due to a lack of official recognition of their status as widows, orphans or displaced persons. Despite this challenging point of departure, women still begin their search for the disappeared, in which they face further obstacles. The next sections describe the specific impacts brought about by the search process.

### ***Social and economic impacts***

Several women highlighted that their economic situation worsened as a result of the search. The quest to locate loved ones had intertwined economic and social consequences for women, where job loss, debt and loss of benefits both stemmed from and reinforced social ostracisation, stigma and exclusion. Maria lost pay because of the amount of time she spent searching for disappeared Timorese in Indonesia. Lia faced social ostracisation because of her family history and her involvement in advocacy efforts to find her father. This resulted in a prospective employer carrying out an online background check and responding: “You were involved in a criminal case; we need someone with

a different background.” Rahmah’s mother’s business collapsed without her husband’s support. Using up all her savings to search for him forced her into debt and poverty. Her mother faced shame when she returned to her village destitute, and Rahmah herself was ostracised. Ana, after all her efforts looking for her husband, was denied veterans’ benefits as she lacked proof of her husband’s death.

*“To support myself, I sold cakes and worked as a maid at a UN staff member’s house, earning a little money. I didn’t know where my husband was, whether he’d been taken to Indonesia or the forest. My gut feeling was that he was gone. We searched for him, on the beach, in the well and so on.” – Elisa*

There were further social impacts when parents sought to protect their children by limiting their movements during the search. Rosi’s parents would not let her children participate in social activities for fear that they would disappear, like their older siblings.<sup>5</sup> When Rosi joined FOKUPERS to help displaced Timorese and when she returned to the forest in 1999 to look for her siblings, she did not dare tell her father as he would have prohibited her from leaving. Lia had a similar experience: her family was afraid she would disappear, like her father, if she looked for him in Jakarta. Rahmah often lied to her mother when she participated in demonstrations or other efforts to demand the disappeared be found.

There were also social impacts as a result of discrimination. Rahmah’s loss of a university scholarship after a family screening<sup>6</sup> conducted by a jury limited the kind of work she could get, demonstrating how stigma not only restricted her educational opportunities, but also reinforced broader patterns of marginalisation that shaped her future.

*“Every time my older sister applied for a job in Tanjung Priok she was rejected. I experienced the same thing. When my diploma was checked, it was not accepted.” – Rahmah*

### ***Emotional and psychological impacts***

Many women highlighted the emotional and psychological toll stemming from the search for their loved ones. According to Maria, searching for Timorese, sometimes in places far from home, only to find they had moved, was exhausting and separated her from her children for long periods of time. She felt this had a psychological impact on her children, who felt abandoned and became increasingly irritated with her. Many stolen children who Maria found accepted and trusted her, which placed new expectations on her: they expected her to find their families, reunite them in Timor-Leste and provide financial assistance. Some called her in the middle of the night with questions like, is it safe there, how’s the economy and have you met my family? While some men

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<sup>5</sup> One of Rosi’s older siblings was prevented from continuing her studies in Kupang, Indonesia. Her brother was not allowed to join the Indonesian military.

<sup>6</sup> Suharto’s New Order regime institutionalised a “family screening” system called bersih lingkungan that traced not just individuals, but their entire family background. Anyone connected or suspected of violating “stability and order” was severely impacted.

put her in uncomfortable situations, Maria understands this as part of their journey, but it places yet another psychological burden on her.

*“The risk is losing time with my children. At first, they might be happy, but after leaving them alone for a long time, I worry about their psychological well-being. That was back then, because they were still small.” – Maria*

Most participants lived for years with the uncertainty of what had happened to their loved ones – were they still alive, were they dead? In the case of Rosi, she wondered about stories concerning the pregnancy of one of her sisters – was there a child? Lack of a death certificate or forensic examination added to this uncertainty. While this motivated Rosi to search for her siblings and establish the whereabouts of her nephew, she was overwhelmed by feelings of uncertainty and loss.

*“There’s a feeling of uncertainty about a lost family member. For me, I need to know for sure whether I’m a widow or still married. I don’t know.” – Ana*

Rahmah shared the burden she continues to carry, as her husband only half-heartedly supported her search for her father. Also, her husband protested and disagreed with her involvement in the victims’ organisation that demands truth and justice for victims of Tanjung Priok. This has affected her confidence and limited her ability to take on more responsibilities in the organisation.

Search efforts also had negative effects on women’s self-confidence. Lia was mocked when an edited video of her from 2014 went viral during the 2024 presidential elections. The old video shows her criticising the lack of government efforts to search for her father. This affected her mental well-being. When she had an opportunity to study abroad, she sought to distance herself from her life in Indonesia, where there was a tendency to conflate her identity as protesting injustice with being a political dissident. A common sentiment felt by women searching for the disappeared was one of victim-blaming. This was evident in the experiences shared by Rahmah, whose mother was stigmatised for her poverty, by Lia, who was labelled a trouble-maker for seeking justice, and by Ana, who was mocked as mentally unstable.

### ***Sexual harassment and violence***

The lives of the women who shared stories of their search for the disappeared were further complicated by widespread gender-based discrimination and violence. Maria, for instance, was especially vulnerable to sexual abuse by the soldier who forcibly took her as a child. For years, she depended on him for survival, but eventually escaped. Today, she still faces harassment in her search for work. Out of concern for her safety, she prefers to approach retired soldiers, having observed troubling behaviour from others. For example, some men, themselves abducted as children, would call her late at night to harass her. She described feeling unsafe during searches, including an incident with a driver whose behaviour made her uncomfortable.

*“During the search process, I initially dared to go alone, but now I don’t want to be alone, especially on long trips. I get tired and feel alone. Especially if the location is far away – in East Kalimantan, for example. I feel anxious, especially as a woman. I feel uncomfortable.” – Maria*

Rosi shared an incident of sexual violence, recounting how soldiers attempted to rape one of her missing sisters. She felt her parents became overprotective of her as a consequence. She was initially forced to spend time at home rather than join a human rights organisation. Lia described harassment related to gender biases within family decisions about continuing the search efforts. Comments such as “What do you know? You’re just a girl” reinforced gender discrimination. Additionally, the harassment Lia experienced due to her viral video, mentioned above, included abusive comments from various men, heightening her sense of vulnerability.

#### **4. Sources of healing, resilience and strength**

Despite the various adverse consequences that women face, they were also able to identify sources of strength that help them face the challenges of searching for the disappeared. Often, the first source of strength mentioned was faith in God and the power of prayer. The women participating in this research also spoke of the importance of parents, in-laws, siblings and husbands who supported their searches, as well as being motivated by their children (signifying a desire for them to have a better life, with parents able to find work, free from social stigma). Maria gained strength from fond childhood memories of Timor-Leste, while Elisa felt a strong connection to her family’s ancestral home. Women found real support from their families, who accepted them and gave them unconditional love. This allowed them to open up about their uncertainties and fears and, by sharing their burdens, their feelings of loneliness diminished. Love gave them the strength to keep searching. Establishing goals and self-care kept Lia going, while helping her children complete their education was an important goal for Rahmah.

*“At first, we just shared stories about our difficulties, but then we formed a cooperative to sell vegetables, packaged rice, gasoline and so on. That was a source of strength ... I was happy to get trained. Now I sell cookies for Idul Fitri and I can cook.”* – Rahmah

Some spoke about the role of the disappeared in resisting injustice and struggling for democracy and independence as a source of strength. The last message and the final embrace of a disappeared loved one became powerful symbols in their fight for truth and justice. A positive experience was Rahmah’s connection with a human rights organisation, which provided her with employment when her husband lost his job. Despite challenges, she funded her children’s education, showing resilience through financial empowerment.

*“In the middle of my search, my husband lost his job. I worked at the NGO canteen so I was able to put my children through school and university. Whatever happened, I needed to get my children through school, even if it meant having hard discussions with my husband.”*  
– Rahmah

The role of dreams and soothsayers in the stories of the Timorese is noteworthy. As formal mechanisms in Timor-Leste often do not provide answers, families seek solace through rituals or dreams instead. Dreams were a medium through which women connected to their pasts or communicated with the disappeared. Sometimes, to “free” the family from the burden of searching for a body or information about a missing person, they perform rituals to place the missing person’s spirit in its proper place. Rosi told the story of her child who, in 2016, years after the referendum, broke a tooth. Rosi’s family

was sure there was a reason, and urged her to find the cause. She consulted a soothsayer who told her the broken tooth was a sign that a family member had been killed between 1975 and 1979. The family should conduct a ritual, or something would happen again. They held a ritual to call the spirits of their ancestors, conducted a symbolic funeral and built a monument to remember the departed.

## 5. Legal frameworks and mechanisms to protect and support women's search efforts

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), each country has an obligation to protect individuals from enforced disappearances, and to implement effective measures to prevent these crimes from occurring.<sup>7</sup> This obligation includes both preventing disappearances and ensuring effective and accountable investigations into cases where individuals may have been subjected to such acts. Each country must ensure that domestic laws recognise enforced disappearances as criminal offences. Article 24 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) requires states to actively search for disappeared persons and provide support to their families. It recognises that both finding the disappeared and assisting their families are fundamental responsibilities.

However, neither Indonesia nor Timor-Leste is a party to the ICPPED, which means there is no domestic legal framework in either country to criminalise enforced disappearances, and no definitions of victims of enforced disappearances and ways to protect them. Although Indonesia signed the ICPPED in 2010, the country has yet to ratify the Convention, while Timor-Leste has neither signed nor ratified it. Lack of regulations regarding enforced disappearances increases women's vulnerability as they receive no protection during search processes.

Most bilateral mechanisms on enforced disappearances did not come into effect until about a decade after the fall of Suharto and the 1999 referendum in Timor-Leste. In 2008, the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF), established by both countries, published the "Per Memoriam Ad Spem" report, which recommended the establishment of a bilateral commission on the disappeared to search for persons who went missing during conflict. As follow-up, Indonesia passed a presidential decree in 2009, and several Senior Official Meetings (SOMs) between Indonesia and Timor-Leste were held between 2010 and 2016. However, these SOMs never included discussions on disappeared persons.

In 2015, the first reunion of "stolen children" with their families, after some 30 years of separation, was held in Timor-Leste, supported by national human rights institutions in both countries. The reunions have been conducted every year since then, with women searchers like Maria accompanying the event. The reunions are subsidised by Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Timor-Leste's Centro Nacional Chega!, Presidential Office and Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion.

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<sup>7</sup> See UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36, CCPR/C/GC/26, para. 58. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/GC/36>

### ***National steps and mechanisms: Timor-Leste***

Since independence, Timor-Leste has made several efforts, albeit uneven and often incomplete, to address enforced disappearances. While the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR), established in 2002, documented over 1,400 testimonies related to enforced disappearances, it lacked authority to conduct exhumations, and many families of the disappeared were never interviewed, including Rosi. Recommendations from both CAVR and CTF have been followed up by CNC, but it has yet to prioritise cases of enforced disappearances or provide structured support to families or women searchers. Some families have received symbolic recognition, such as certificates from the Office of the President or the “Martires” of the Veterans’ Commission. The veterans’ registration process is complicated and time-consuming and, while veterans and martyrs registered in 2004 have received certificates, medals and subsidies, those registered in 2009 only had their names announced in 2025.

Draft legislation to establish a Commission on Missing Persons was finalised in 2005, but the political crisis in 2006 halted progress. Timor-Leste’s political leadership has prioritised reconciliation with Indonesia over justice, resulting in a lack of political will to establish a commission. Similarly, there is no desire to ratify the ICPPED, for fear that it might provoke Indonesia.

### ***National steps and mechanisms: Indonesia***

Indonesian efforts to address the legacy of enforced disappearances have taken only a few steps forward, with several setbacks, and the official narrative remains resistant to accountability. The National Human Rights Commission (*Komnas HAM*) conducted investigations, including into the 1997/98 enforced disappearances of student activists. In 2006, it declared these disappearances to be gross human rights violations, but the Attorney General’s Office refused to pursue prosecutions, citing insufficient evidence. However, *Komnas HAM* provided a breakthrough for victims’ rights by issuing disappearance certificates as a substitute for death certificates. This initiative helped families overcome administrative hurdles, including banking regulations and other official documentation requirements. This effort was pioneered by the demands of Siti Dyah Sujirah or Sipon, the wife of an activist and poet, Wiji Thukul, who disappeared in 1998.

The Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission took testimonies from over 5,000 individuals, including many involving disappearances committed during the armed conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement. The final report in 2023 officially acknowledged hundreds of cases of enforced disappearances and recommended reparations and further investigations. However, follow-up by the national government has been limited, and there is no dedicated search mechanism to support searches by civil society, including women.

In 2022, a team for the Non-Judicial Resolution of Past Human Rights Violations established by Presidential Decree 17/2022 rushed documentation through to acknowledge 12 gross human rights violations, including enforced disappearances. The team reported to the President and was followed up by another Presidential Decree that involved 17 ministries to implement reparations. However, its focus is on compensation rather than justice, which runs the risk of erasing any form of accountability for perpetrators.

### ***Civil society initiatives and the influence of women searchers***

In both Indonesia and Timor-Leste, the absence of formal state mechanisms to search for the disappeared has meant civil society, often working closely with victims' communities, has carried the responsibility of sustaining truth-seeking efforts.

In Timor-Leste, a civil society movement emerged after the restoration of independence in 2002 to demand justice for victims of human rights violations during the occupation, which implicitly included demands for clarity on the search for the missing. At every commemoration of past violations, such as the Marabia incident of 10 June 1980, the Santa Cruz massacre of 12 November 1991 or the massacre during the 1999 referendum in Maliana, Liquisa and Suai, the families of the missing always bring photographs of their missing loved ones. Furthermore, women victims' organisations such as Ratelaek were established to seek justice for the disappeared.

In Indonesia, inspired by Tutu Koto, the mother of a disappeared son, Munir, a prominent human rights advocate, created KontraS in 1998.<sup>8</sup> KontraS gives a voice to families of the disappeared, and demands truth and accountability. The families also established IKOHL, a victims' organisation which advocates for the search efforts. In 2007, victims' families started a peaceful action, called Thursday Vigil or Kamisan, wearing dark shirts, holding black umbrellas and standing in front of the State Palace in Jakarta. In 2009, several representatives from Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina joined their Indonesian counterparts at Kamisan to express their solidarity. Other initiatives like YPKP 65, a group representing victims of atrocities committed during 1965/66, conducted a mapping of grave sites, collaborating with researchers and supporting forensic studies.<sup>9</sup>

## **6. Recommendations**

Given the profound social, economic, and psychological burdens – as well as the risks of sexual harassment – that women face in their search for disappeared persons, coupled with the lack of adequate legal and institutional protections in both Indonesia and Timor-Leste, urgent action is needed to strengthen support for and safeguard the rights of women searchers. This section provides recommendations based on the voices of the participants involved in the workshop and aimed at supporting women in their search efforts:

1. Establish dedicated commissions on disappearances in both countries. The commissions, at the very least, should have the following mandate: (i) To compile comprehensive lists of victims of enforced disappearance in Indonesia and Timor-Leste, based on data, archives and documents from the National Human Rights Commission, the Provedor for Human Rights and Justice, the Truth Commissions (CAVR and CTF) and documentation by civil society. The commissions should have access to military archives and the authority and resources

<sup>8</sup> More information available at: <https://kontras.org/static/profile>

<sup>9</sup> For more information see: Bedjo Untung 2017. Award for Martyr of Mankind [Speech transcript]. Available at: <https://www.tribunal1965.org/en/award-martyr-mankind/>

to conduct exhumations; and (ii) To provide space for recognition for families who have conducted searches and continue searching, in consultation with victims' families. The space should acknowledge the gendered impacts on women searchers, provide adequate support and compensation for their time spent searching, and grant access to archives.

2. Develop legal protections for human rights defenders, including women searchers. This should be realised by: (i) Providing travel permits from both governments, guaranteeing that searches can be carried out by families looking for victims; (ii) Cooperating across borders to ensure security for Timorese families and implementing the principle of non-intimidation; (iii) Providing safe houses and hotlines for cases of gender-based violence resulting from searches by women human rights defenders, including in the context of advocating for missing persons; and (iv) Reviewing the Witness Protection Regulation in Law 31/2014 in Indonesia, to include the protection of women human rights defenders, including searchers.
3. Provide reparations that include gender-based psychosocial and care services, such as counselling services for trauma due to loss. A key element is to strengthen efforts to provide peer support and reparations for children of women searchers who have exhausted their resources in the search process. In addition, accessible social and financial services, such as scholarships, medical insurance and health check-ups, need to be provided. Governments should also ensure that job security, housing and pension funds are available for families of victims.
4. Establish a conditional dual-status scheme or 10-year visa-free status for "stolen children" in Indonesia, while also recognising the inheritance rights of Timorese children in Indonesia and vice versa.
5. Form a joint forensic team, prioritising locations where there are strong indications of human remains, such as Santa Cruz, Tasi-Tolu, Kramat Ganceng and other identified sites. The Minnesota Protocol<sup>10</sup> must be ratified and implemented, and a DNA Unit built at the National Laboratory.
6. Support and conduct memorialisation efforts, including public education, in consultation with the families of victims. This includes: (i) Recording stories of disappeared persons, especially disappeared women involved in the resistance; (ii) Integrating the Veterans' Museum in Timor-Leste, by presenting narratives of women who have disappeared, as well as women's search efforts; (iii) Establishing a museum and meeting space for victims' groups; and (iv) Integrating stories of human rights violations and search efforts into school curricula, and developing training modules for officers from both countries.

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<sup>10</sup> The Minnesota Protocol is the UN Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions. It provides a standard framework for investigating deaths and suspected enforced disappearances, setting out guidelines for forensic and criminal investigations. For more information see: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-executions/minnesota-protocol>

7. Ensure representation of women searchers in developing agendas, not just as “service recipients” in civil society organisations, and provide updates in advocacy or legal processes by truly listening to the needs of victims. In addition, enable space for learning about ways in which human rights defenders should approach victims, especially ways to engage women and sensitively deal with issues of harassment and security, using a victim-centred approach.
8. Underscore the need for holistic care that integrates legal aid with psychosocial, financial and memorialisation support and treats victims and families as active participants rather than objects of litigation or advocacy efforts.

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## ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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