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Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Timor-Leste

54th session (Jan - Feb 2027)

Joint Stakeholders' Submission on:

Human Rights in Timor-Leste: Violence against women and girls

Submitted by:

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delle Salesiane di Don Bosco**

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and

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Province of Timor-Leste and Indonesia**

Geneva, June 2026

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This stakeholders' report is a joint submission of the above-mentioned organizations. The report highlights key concerns related to **violence against women and girls** in Timor-Leste, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, incest, gender-based violence in educational settings, and the vulnerability of women and girls living in rural areas. The report also addresses challenges affecting access to protection services, justice, education, and psychosocial support. Each section conveys recommendations to the Government of Timor-Leste.

2. The data and information contained in this submission are derived from various sources, including a 2025 community survey conducted in the rural communities of Baucau Municipality, in the eastern part of Timor-Leste. This data collection involved direct engagement with educators, social workers, women, children, and other community members to provide a first-hand assessment of the current human rights situation on the ground. All information concerned the period from January 2022 to May 2026.

3. **IIMA** is an international NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. IIMA is present in 97 countries where it provides education to children and adolescents, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

4. **VIDES International**, established in 1987, is an international NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council operating in 49 countries. It promotes volunteer service at the local and international levels to ensure the implementation of human rights to vulnerable groups, especially children and women.

5. **The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians of the Province of St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello Timor-Leste and Indonesia**, inspired by the Preventive System of Education of St. John Bosco, work in formal and informal education. They run schools (from preschool to secondary education) as well as vocational technical training centers. They are committed to the protection and empowerment of children and youth, especially the most vulnerable children, orphans, boarding girls, and women in the rural areas. In partnership with other Religious Congregations, they work for the protection of more vulnerable and poor families in the peripheries.

II. GENERAL REMARKS

6. This NGO coalition welcomes the constructive participation of Timor-Leste in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).¹ The present joint submission represents a follow-up to UPR recommendations accepted by Timor-Leste in 2022, with particular focus on the protection of women and girls from violence, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination.

7. **Girls and women, especially in remote and rural areas** are among the most vulnerable groups in Timor-Leste, due to the discrimination and human rights abuses to which they are subjected. We recognize the efforts undertaken by the Government of Timor-Leste to strengthen legal and institutional frameworks related to child protection, gender equality, education, and domestic violence prevention. However, significant challenges remain in the effective implementation of human rights, particularly in rural and remote areas where women and girls continue to face barriers in accessing justice, healthcare, psychosocial services, and educational opportunities. Women and girls with disabilities, adolescent mothers, and those living in remote rural communities face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

8. First-hand testimonies gathered in Venilale and Baucau² for this submission reveal continuing cases of domestic violence, incest, sexual abuse of girls, corporal punishment within educational settings, and under-reporting of violence due to fear, stigma, and social pressure. Even when they decide to report abuses, survivors in rural areas often face limited access to legal remedies and protection services.

III. RIGHT TO EDUCATION

9. During the 3rd UPR cycle, held in January 2022, Timor-Leste accepted several recommendations to ensure inclusive quality education.³ In particular, recommendations n. 116.109, 116.111, 116.112, 116.114, 116.115 and 116.116 particularly focus on improving access to education and quality of education in rural areas, especially for girls and children with disabilities.⁴

¹ The last review of Timor-Leste was held on 27 January 2022. See Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Timor-Leste, 4 April 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12; and its Addendum, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12/Add.1

² Venilale is a town located about 30 km south of Baucau, the second-largest city in [Timor-Leste](#), after [Dili](#), the capital.

³ Recommendations n. 116.107 to 116.118. Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Timor-Leste, 4 April 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12; and its Addendum, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12/Add.1.

⁴ 116.109 Ensure the right to education for all children by removing the existing disparities in access to education between urban and rural areas (Lebanon); 116.111 Improve the infrastructure of schools in remote areas to ensure access to education for all (United Republic of Tanzania); 116.112 Continue its efforts with regard to education, adopt policies to enhance access for children from urban and rural areas, and ensure inclusion in education for girls and children with disabilities (State of Palestine); 116.114 Improve school infrastructure with a view to achieving higher enrolment in rural areas and in secondary education (Poland); 116.115 Promote education for children and young people by improving education accessibility and attendance for rural areas, increasing investment, and taking further steps to eradicate

10. Despite progress in expanding educational access, significant challenges remain regarding the quality, inclusiveness, and safety of education, particularly for girls, children with disabilities, and students living in rural communities. As a contributing factor, the digital divide is particularly prominent in rural communities, where limited internet connectivity, inadequate access to computers, and insufficient technological resources continue to affect educational outcomes.

11. **Digital divide in education.** Limited access to digital technology and internet connectivity continues to affect the quality of education, particularly for children and adolescents living in rural and remote areas. Many schools lack computers, reliable electricity, internet access, and digital learning resources, restricting students' ability to benefit from modern educational opportunities.

12. The digital divide disproportionately affects girls, children with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged families who often lack access to devices and digital literacy training. These inequalities became more visible during periods of remote learning and continue to hinder equal participation in education.

13. Educational disparities between urban and rural communities remain evident. **Children living in rural and remote communities** continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality education, including shortages of qualified teachers, limited educational materials, and inadequate infrastructure. Poor roads, transportation difficulties, and geographic isolation frequently limit attendance and educational achievement. Even when they successfully complete their studies in primary and secondary education, children from rural areas are often discriminated against when it comes to accessing higher education or job opportunities in the most highly skilled professions (medical professions, positions in public administration, etc.).

14. **School dropout among girls** remains a serious concern. Poverty, domestic responsibilities, child marriage, and early pregnancy continue to negatively affect girls' educational opportunities. Testimonies gathered for this submission indicate that adolescent pregnancy often results in interrupted schooling and reduced opportunities for further education and employment. According to UNICEF Timor-Leste and the Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey (TLDHS), adolescent pregnancy continues to affect health, educational attainment and socio-economic outcomes for girls.⁵

15. We welcome the ratification by Timor-Leste of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 17 January 2023,⁶ as recommended in the UPR of 2022.⁷ However, we remain concerned that **children with disabilities** continue to encounter additional barriers in accessing

corporal punishment in schools (New Zealand);116.116 Guarantee access to drinking water and sanitation in rural areas, especially in school settings, to prevent school dropout, especially among girls (Spain). *Ibidem*.

⁵ Government of Timor-Leste and UNICEF, *Situation Analysis of Children in Timor-Leste* (Dili: Government of Timor-Leste and UNICEF, 2020); General Directorate of Statistics (GDS), Ministry of Health (MoH), and ICF, *Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey 2016* (Dili and Rockville, MD: GDS, MoH, and ICF, 2018).

⁶ See https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-15&chapter=4&clang=en

⁷ Recommendations n. 116.9, 116.11, 116.15 – 30, and 116.33 – 35. Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Timor-Leste, 4 April 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12; and its Addendum, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12/Add.1.

inclusive and quality education due to insufficient infrastructure, limited transportation, inadequate support services, and lack of trained teachers.

16. Gender-Based Violence in Educational Settings. While welcoming the acceptance by Timor-Leste of recommendations 116.177-181 and 116.115 aimed to eradicate all forms of **corporal punishment** in all settings, including in schools,⁸ we report that testimonies collected from educators and community members in Timor-Leste indicate that this practice still persists. Girls are particularly exposed to sexual harassment and abuse, corporal punishment, and gender-based violence within educational settings. Fear of stigma and retaliation often discourages victims from reporting such incidents, while limited accountability mechanisms contribute to continued impunity.

17. Human rights education and child protection awareness, including dissemination of information of protection mechanisms, remain limited in many communities across the country, particularly in rural areas. Many children, adolescents, and families lack sufficient knowledge regarding their rights and available protection mechanisms. Lack of human rights awareness contributes to the occurrence of violence against children and adolescents, especially girls, and of under-reporting abuse. Social stigma, fear of retaliation, and cultural pressures continue to discourage survivors of violence and abuse from seeking justice and institutional support.

18. Enhanced cooperation between governmental institutions, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, educators, and local communities is essential to ensure effective implementation of child protection and education policies, including through systematic human rights education and effective sensitization campaigns.

19. *This NGO coalition recommends the Government of Timor-Leste to:*

a. Adopt all needed measures to ensure quality education in rural and remote communities;

b. Strengthen measures to ensure safe and inclusive educational environments free from violence, harassment, and discrimination;

c. Ensure effective investigation and prosecution of cases involving sexual abuse and

⁸ 116.177 Explicitly and legally prohibit corporal punishment in all settings and take the measures necessary to prevent such punishment (Montenegro); 116.178 Intensify efforts to fully eradicate corporal punishment against children in the home, at school and in alternative care and day-care settings by explicitly prohibiting it in national legislation (Marshall Islands); 116.179 Adopt measures to promote the full enjoyment of the rights of children and prohibit all forms of corporal punishment (Italy); 116.180 Strengthen measures that specifically prohibit corporal punishment of children (Dominican Republic); 116.181 Explicitly prohibit corporal punishment of children and take concrete steps to ensure that all children, including girls, have access to education and to reduce high rates of child malnutrition and teenage pregnancy (Portugal); 116.115 Promote education for children and young people by improving education accessibility and attendance for rural areas, increasing investment, and taking further steps to eradicate corporal punishment in schools (New Zealand). *Ibidem*.

gender-based violence within educational settings.

d. Increase investment in educational infrastructure and transportation services in rural and remote areas;

e. Promote programs aimed at preventing school dropout among girls, including support for pregnant adolescents and young mothers;

f. Strengthen inclusive education policies and provide adequate training for teachers working with children with disabilities.

g. Prohibit de facto corporal punishment in all settings, including schools and homes, and promote non-violent disciplinary approaches;

h. Expand digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, and access to digital learning tools in schools, particularly in rural and remote communities;

i. Systematically integrate Human Rights Education into the national curriculum and expand awareness-raising programs on child rights, gender equality, and protection mechanisms, especially in rural communities;

IV. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS, ECONOMIC AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

20. This NGO coalition welcomes the acceptance by Timor-Leste of recommendations 116.154, 116.126 116.138, 116.148, 116.149, 116.152 and 116.153 aimed to eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls.⁹ However, despite legislative and policy efforts, violence against women and girls remains a significant human rights concern in Timor-Leste. Women and girls with disabilities face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, increasing vulnerability to violence and exclusion.

21. First-hand testimonies collected for this submission reveal cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse of adolescent girls by teachers, and incest occurring within families, particularly in rural communities. Survivors frequently face fear, stigma, social pressure, and dependence on

⁹ 116.154 Address issues of gender inequality by implementing policies and practices to reduce domestic violence and other discrimination against women and girls (New Zealand); 116.126 Step up efforts in preventing and addressing all forms of violence against women and children, including through public awareness campaigns and capacity-building for duty bearers (Philippines); 116.138 Ensure that all criminal complaints of violence against women and girls are thoroughly investigated and prosecuted in accordance with the law (Iceland); 116.148 Adopt legislation to criminalize marital rape and incest (Ireland); 116.149 Strengthen efforts to eliminate domestic violence through legislation and increase awareness-raising programmes (Indonesia); 116.152 Criminalize marital rape and incest as distinct crimes (Luxembourg); 116.153 Continue efforts to address violence against women and girls, including by ensuring access to justice through judicial and institutional training on gender-based violence awareness and responses (Malaysia). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Timor-Leste, 4 April 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12; and its Addendum, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12/Add.1.

perpetrators, which discourage reporting and limit access to justice. Similar concerns have been documented by UN agencies and other civil society organizations, which identify gender-based violence as a persistent challenge affecting women and girls throughout the country.

22. Moreover, information collected for this submission indicates ongoing concerns regarding **labor exploitation and trafficking** risks affecting young women and vulnerable populations. Respondents reported that young Timorese are sometimes recruited through promises of employment abroad and may become vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. Young women appear particularly vulnerable due to economic hardship, limited employment opportunities and inadequate awareness of trafficking risks. Reports from international organizations have similarly identified trafficking and labor exploitation as emerging protection concerns requiring stronger prevention, monitoring, and victim-support mechanisms.

23. Testimonies gathered for this submission indicate continuing cases of **domestic violence**, incest and sexual abuse affecting women and girls in rural communities. In connection with this, early pregnancy, domestic responsibilities, poverty, and early marriages continue to negatively affect girls' rights, often resulting in interrupted schooling and reduced opportunities for further education and employment. According to UNICEF and the Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey (TLDHS), adolescent pregnancy continues to present challenges for girls' education, health, and long-term socio-economic development.

24. Victims frequently experience fear, stigma, social pressure and economic dependence upon perpetrators, discouraging reporting and limiting access to justice. Respondents reported that survivors often face difficulties accessing legal assistance, psychosocial support services, and confidential reporting mechanisms, particularly in remote communities.

25. This NGO coalition recommends the Government of Timor-Leste to:

- a) Establish confidential reporting mechanisms and strengthen investigation and prosecution of perpetrators.***
- b) Expand survivor-centered services and improve access to legal and psychosocial support.***
- c) Strengthen the capacity of Gender-Based Violence desks and ensure they are accessible in rural wards, accompanied by specialized training for officers to handle cases with confidentiality.***
- d) Strengthen anti-trafficking measures, including by developing a Standard Operating Procedure for early identification of victims of trafficking and those at risk of trafficking.***
- e) Increase investment in awareness, protection services, and support mechanisms for the survivors of trafficking.***

V. RIGHTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

26. This NGO coalition welcomes the acceptance by Timor-Leste of recommendations 116.83, 116.100, 116.101, 116.103, 116.115 aiming to ensure adequate access to education, health and work for young people in Timor-Leste.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we remain deeply concerned that young people in Timor-Leste continue to face barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights, particularly in relation to education, participation, protection, and health. Limited educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas, inadequate access to health services, and incidents of abuse of authority in higher education institutions still persist.

27. First-hand testimonies collected for this submission expressed concerns regarding unequal access to scholarships, higher education opportunities, and public employment. Political affiliation, family connections, and social status were identified as factors influencing youth access to opportunities. Young people from rural communities appear particularly vulnerable to exclusion despite possessing the qualifications necessary to compete fairly. Such practices contribute to social inequality and undermine confidence in public institutions.

28. This NGO coalition recommends the Government of Timor-Leste to:

- a) Expand youth leadership opportunities and strengthen youth participation in policy decision-making.***
- b) Develop a youth centered integrated policy framework that identifies and effectively addresses interconnected human rights gaps affecting young people, including with regard to their right to health, right to work and protection from exploitation.***
- c) Promote transparent and merit-based processes in access to higher education and job opportunities, to fight discrimination and expand opportunities for rural youth.***
- d) Align vocational training curricula with current labor market demands to reduce the skills of mismatch and enhance the employability of graduates.***
- e) Strengthen access to adequate health services for young people, especially in rural and remote areas.***

¹⁰ 116.83 Continue its efforts to provide education and training opportunities to strengthen the capacity of Timor-Leste workers, particularly young people and the unemployed (Algeria); 116.100 Take measures to strengthen the public health system, including by increasing the availability of sexual and reproductive health information and services, as well as mental health services, adapted to the needs of young people (Uruguay); 116.101 Implement the commitment made at the Nairobi Summit on the International Conference on Population and Development to strengthen national HIV programming and prevention policies that encompass the active promotion of condom use, beyond key population groups and with an emphasis on youth, coupled with awareness-raising on evidence-based HIV-prevention information for the general population (Panama); 116.103 Increase the availability of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and information, including on HIV, sexually transmitted infections and access to family planning services (Netherlands); 116.115 Promote education for children and young people by improving education accessibility and attendance for rural areas, increasing investment, and taking further steps to eradicate corporal punishment in schools (New Zealand). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Timor-Leste, 4 April 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12; and its Addendum, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/12/Add.1.