

**Statement by Finn Reske-Nielsen,**  
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**International Women's Day**  
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We are celebrating the International Women's day this year under the banner of *Women, Peace and Security*. This theme beckons us to reflect on the vital role women have played, and continue to play, in ending conflicts and building peace throughout the world.

In the last century women have been at the forefront of protest marches that ended wars, action that brought opposing sides to the negotiating table in countries gripped by civil conflict, and campaigns to ban landmines and other indiscriminate weapons. In East Timor women supported the struggle for independence.

However, the theme also asks us to reflect on how conflict affects women. In East Timor, women have suffered brutality and oppression, but also gender-based violence such as rape and sexual assault. Violence against women continues today.

Participants at the First Congress of Women of Timor Loro Sae referred to a culture of violence and intolerance against women that has become deeply embedded in East Timorese society. During the Congress a platform of action for the advancement of women was adopted which draws specific attention to the gender-based violence, including domestic violence.

In the process of building a new nation, East Timor has the opportunity to redress former violations and set new standards of equality and protection for women. By promoting and protecting women as equal partners, a society can emerge which women have helped to shape and can feel secure in.

Traditionally in East Timor, women have tended to hold only a small percentage of public service and decision-making positions. In addition, poverty in East Timor has a female face. Two-thirds of women are illiterate, many have large families, tend to sick children, and have heavy responsibilities within the household and in the village. As a result, women's health suffers. The fact that mothers in East Timor are amongst the most likely in the world to die as a result of childbirth is a tragedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, representatives of 189 countries unanimously agreed that, "the advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women's issue." The platform of action, which was designed and adopted at the same conference, states that promoting women and ensuring their equality is the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society.

Nowhere in the world today can women claim to have equality with men. The majority of the world's 1.3 billion living in absolute poverty are women. Three-quarters of women aged 25 and above in much of Asia and Africa are illiterate. Women still earn less than men for the same work and they are still victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. By enabling women to become full and equal participants in the re-building and long-term development process, East Timor can champion and protect the fundamental human rights of more than half this emerging nation's population – women.

I thank you.