

Growing LGBTI movement in East Timor

Tuesday 24 April 2018, by [POWER Shannon](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2018).

One of the world's youngest nations is powering ahead on LGBTI rights and has come up with a clever way to promote inclusion.

Last year, East Timor's first Pride March made headlines around the world, not only for its color and celebration, but because it was a remarkable achievement.

It only became an independent state in 2002 after decades of authoritative Indonesian rule. In that time it has had to build itself up very quickly.

There has been little time to give attention to the LGBTI community. Like many others around the world LGBTI face a lot of violence, discrimination and family pressures.

Just days before the Pride March, former Prime Minister Rui Maria De Araujo became the first South East Asian leader to publicly call for acceptance and protection of LGBTI people.

'Everyone has the potential to contribute to the development of the nation, including members of the LGBT community,' he said at the time.

'Discrimination, disrespect and abuse towards people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity does not provide any benefit to our nation.'

Just last year, a shocking report revealed the extremely high levels of violence LBT women face in East Timor. LBT women reported violence like being dragged behind cars, corrective rape and being strangled with hoses and other horrific acts. Often this violence happened at the hands of their own families.

We are family

But the East Timorese are family oriented and the first part of overcoming stigma is to increase family acceptance of LGBTI people.

Youth organization, Hatutan Youth, has come up with a really clever idea to promote acceptance and inclusion. There were no resources in local languages — Tetum and Portuguese — about the LGBTI community so they decided to make their own.

'The Road to Acceptance' is a 15 minute-long video features inspiring stories of renowned LGBTI people. 'It is time we make our own video,' Hatutan Youth coordinator Natalino Guterres told Gay Star News.

'We understand Timorese people are very visual, and it is our hope that such powerful and positive stories can help change people's perspectives on the issue.'

The Father of East Timor

In a country like East Timor, it was tough getting people to share their stories in such a public way. But it is also important to have the right allies help get the documentary accepted in the wider community.

So when Xanana Gusmao turned up at the documentary launch it was a massive coup. Guterres said having Gusmao and other influential dignitaries there 'makes us feel that we are not alone in this fight'.

Known as the 'Father of East Timor', Gusmao was its first President after independence. Gusmao was a critical figure in gaining independence from Indonesia.

'Xanana Gusmao is one of the most influential people in the country. Having him there was another step on the road to acceptance,' Guterres said.

'We hope his presence can influence positive changes. Never in the past we have seen our national leaders openly showed such support and solidarity on the cause.'

We're not alone in this fight

The documentary is just a first step in promoting acceptance. The next will be up to LGBTI allies to help the community. 'We see this video as a first step on the family acceptance initiative,' Guterres said.

'We hope that in the long run it will be able to spark a movement of its own, composed of parents, siblings, and friends who are supportive of their LGBT children, brothers and sisters, which is something we don't see here (in East Timor).'

The Road to Acceptance

Audiovisual production company, PixelAsia, supported Hatutan to make the video. 'Film is such a powerful medium to show positive role models — with our protagonists we were privileged to capture the stories of energetic and diverse members of the LGBTI Community in Timor-Leste,' said PixelAsia's Lena Lenzen.

Shannon Power

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