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## **Obstacles to internet access faced by women in Timor-Leste**

Review prepared in light of resolution 32/13 of the Human Rights Council on  
'The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet'

### **Information submitted by:**

#### **Provedoria dos Direitos Humanos e Justiça (PDHJ)**

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The Provedoria dos Direitos Humanos e Justiça (Timor-Leste National Human Rights Institution) was established by the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste in May 2002 and first opened its doors in 2006. It is charged with providing oversight over State entities. The main activities of the PDHJ include: cooperation with national and international entities for the advancement of a human rights framework in Timor-Leste, good governance and human rights monitoring, activities for the promotion of human rights and good governance principles, reporting to the United Nations treaty bodies and the UPR, activities for human rights education as well as conducting investigations in relation to human rights issues or abuses.

Subject: Input of PDHJ Timor-Leste regarding obstacles faced by women in Timor-Leste to access the Internet, sex-disaggregated data on access to the Internet, measures taken or envisaged to bridge the gender digital divide and any other issues

Dear Ms. Prouvez,

Following your letter to National Human Rights Institutions dated 6 January 2017 concerning resolution 32/13 of the Human Rights Council on ‘The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet’, the Provedoria dos Direitos Humanos e Justiça (PDHJ – Timor-Leste National Human Rights Institution) has prepared the following information.

Since restoration of its independence on 20 May 2002 the State of Timor-Leste has gradually continued its development in various areas including Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

Since its independence in 2002 until 2012, Timor-Leste has only had one telecommunication company, Timor-Telecom, to provide for all services, including internet. This has had consequences for the ability of the population to gain access to the internet. The cost of accessing telephone and internet in Timor-Leste was comparatively high and it provided only limited coverage throughout the country. The majority of the rural population could not access telephone and internet services either because they could not afford it or because they lived in areas without coverage of the Timor-Telecom network.

In 2012 the government of Timor-Leste commenced a liberalisation of the telecommunication sector with the promulgation of a telecommunication law enacted in 2012. Two new operators started operating in Timor-Leste, providing a more competitive market and reducing costs and increasing pressure to improve services to the population. The two new operators were Telkomcel Indonesia and Telemor Vietnam.

Another important aspect of the telecoms/ICT sector reforms was the establishment of an independent regulatory body, the Autoriedade Nacional de Comunicações (ANC). The ANC is mandated to ensure competitive practice by the operators, compliance with new regulations typical for a competitive market with multiple service providers, and to develop a program to support universal access in commercially less viable areas of the country.

It is difficult to obtain reliable data on internet access and availability in Timor-Leste, in particular because the physical infrastructure of the telecommunications sector is very limited. Comparable to many countries in development, Timor-Leste’s internet users mainly do so through smart phones and not with fixed internet connections in the house such as broadband. It is not possible to determine the exact extent of fixed broadband penetration but sources indicate that the penetration rate is around 0.1% and the fixed line penetration around

0.25%.<sup>1</sup> Mobile subscriber base has expanded rapidly with currently well over 100% market penetration, indicating that on average there are more active sim cards than people in Timor-Leste.

Information provided by Timor-Telecom suggests that the overwhelming majority of people use 'non-smartphones', and are thus not connected to the internet. Although again hard data is not available, these impressions are deducted from mobile phone sales, in which it seems that smartphones are less popular than basic phones without internet options. In particular in rural areas these phones will be less affordable for the population as well as less useful due to poor coverage.

There are no accurate data that relate to internet users in Timor-Leste. Considering the absence of broadband and fixed line subscriptions, the total number of people using internet regularly or every now and then is simply not available. The only indicators are the number of mobile phone subscribers (>100%), the number of smartphone sales (unknown but thought to be relatively low), the coverage of mobile networks (poor outside urban areas) and the cost of using the internet (high). These indicators suggest that internet usage overall is relatively low.

It is impossible to disaggregate these indicators by gender. However one set of data that may suggest different internet access for men and women is subscribers to social media. Generally speaking, women are more active on social media compared to men. It is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of Facebook users in Timor-Leste are male. Out of a total of 330.000 Facebook users, 35% are female and 65% are male.<sup>2</sup> This strongly suggests that women in Timor-Leste have poorer access to internet than men.

There are many socio-economic explanations for this, although once again it has to be stressed that these explanations are not supported by hard data. However, men are more likely to have jobs and thus are more likely to be able to afford a mobile phone, in particular the type of phone that has internet functionality. Furthermore men have more freedom to spend the money they have as they wish and also have more freedom

There is not currently any information available regarding government policies, current or planned, aimed at bridging the gender gap in access to internet.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Timor-Leste-East-Timor-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>

<sup>2</sup> September 2016, source: Facebook.