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Ageing at the margins: gendered and southern narratives of displacement among the East Timorese in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature on older refugees has primarily focused on the experiences of those living in more developed countries in the global North. This paper examines later-life experiences in displacement settings and the global South by discussing the East Timorese case in West Timor, Indonesia. In considering how the ageing and forced migation nexus manifests in a Southern context, the paper argues that global, regional and local histories matter and profoundly shape older people's ageing and displacement processes. Specifically, they produce multiple gendered marginalities and possibilities relating to older persons' perceived (im)mobility to travel to their places of origin and the meanings they attach to place. Although East Timorese people's experiences of displacement and resettlement are diverse, the male perspective often takes precedence in scholarly and public discourse. This article thus zooms into older East Timorese women's experiences and how after over two decades of living in Indonesia, the conditions shaping their everyday lives remain deeply entangled and are negotiated within the gendered narratives of displacement and citizenship.

KEYWORDS

Ageing; displacement; gender; global south; East Timorese

Introduction

'It is like we don't exist,' Avó (grandmother) Jovana told me on a sweltering hot day in March 2019.[1] She had fled Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, in 1999 after militias burnt down her house and wreaked havoc across the then-occupied territory. Together with her husband and children, they sought refuge at the district military base camp with other residents from Manatuto district, located on the north coast of Timor-Leste. On the first night, her son-in-law went missing while on patrol. His friends later found him in the woods, badly beaten and left for dead. Avó Jovana, her daughter, and their in-laws took turns safeguarding him after bringing him back to the camp. 'We prayed, if God lets you live, we all flee to a land owned by others. We will bury you here if God decides otherwise but take your wife and children to Kupang,' Avó Jovana remembered clearly the words she whispered to her son-in-law. He died at five in the morning the next day. After performing a hasty burial, they left on the military trucks that took them to

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Dili, Timor-Leste's capital. These would later board the Indonesian navy ship that brought them to the port of Kupang, the capital of Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province situated in the western tip of the Timor island.[2]

Twenty-one years later, Avó Jovana spoke with me from the same camp where they first arrived as refugees in the outskirts of Kupang. Her husband died in the fifth year of displacement, leaving her a widow like her daughter. 'Nobody cares for widows like us. We don't get assistance (*bantuan*, I.) anymore. Others get *bantuan*, but we don't. People come and take our data, but nothing ever materialises,' she said.

Avó Jovana was one among the tens of thousands of East Timorese residents who chose to stay in Indonesia after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) ended their refugee status on 31 December 2002. Like many other East Timorese men and women of her generation, she was growing older in exile and on a land 'owned by others'. While her new settlement was at a far distance from her ancestral home, these places remain connected and disconnected by colonial legacies, memories of violence and re-established national borders. Writing about the East Timorese displacement in 1999, anthropologist Andrey Damaledo emphasises that for those who chose to stay, their exodus marked the beginning of people's resettlement and emplacement in Indonesia. He underlines people's resiliency in this process and ability to 'adapt and maintain their cultural identity in a situation of disadvantage' (Damaledo 2018, 51). This paper agrees with this idea but further explores how differently marginalised people within this group, namely older East Timorese women, experienced and confronted ongoing displacement conditions.

In line with this special issue on 'Southern re-configurations of the ageing-migration nexus' (see Sampaio and Amrith, 2023), this paper is concerned with the consequences of forced migration in and across regions of the South from older people's perspectives (cf. Wolter, 2023). I reflect on literature dealing with ageing and forced migration in the North and consider this nexus's conceptual relevance to understanding older exiles' experiences in the East Timorese context. The paper traces the historical and geographical resonances and the (dis)continuities shaping older people's ageing and displacement processes. It draws on long-term ethnographic research among the East Timorese and calls for a deeper understanding of past experiences and present needs of this population. Ageing in displacement and the South produces multiple gendered marginalities and possibilities. These may relate to older people's perceived (im)mobility to travel to their places of origin and the meanings they attach to place. Although East Timorese people's experiences of displacement and resettlement are diverse, the male perspective often takes precedence in scholarly and public discourse. This article thus zooms into older East Timorese women's experiences and how after over two decades of living in Indonesia, the conditions shaping their everyday lives remain deeply entangled within the gendered narratives of displacement and citizenship. As a result, their ongoing needs and contributions to family and social life often go unrecognised.

My intention in this article is not to construct older people, particularly women, in exile in a vulnerable light. Instead, I aim to demonstrate the importance of recognising the intersecting vulnerabilities that are often at play in ageing and displacement processes, and how global, regional and local histories profoundly shape them. What follows this introduction are sections on literature and context, a description of the methods and approach, and analysis of the gendered narratives of displacement and

how East Timorese women confronted structural barriers from their position in the margins of society.

The ageing and forced migration nexus

As the world's population ages, humanitarian crises increasingly impact the lives of older people. Yet, research focus on older refugees is a field that is still emerging. Existing literature on ageing in forced migration contexts primarily focuses on the experiences of those whose forced migration journeys followed a presumed 'South to North' or 'East to West' trajectory. This focus approaches the lives of refugees who arrived from developing regions of the world and are spending their later life in more developed or Western countries located in Northern America, Europe, and Australia (e.g. Becker and Beyene 1999; Bolzman 2014; Lewis 2009; Nguyen 2019).

In his overview of literature on older refugees, Claudio Bolzman (2014) underlines the need for more research exploring the experiences of this population group in the global South. He contends that the living conditions associated with refugee camps are often only of minimum survival standards and can have detrimental impacts in the long term on the most vulnerable of them, including older refugees. The need for research focusing on older refugees' experiences in the South becomes pressing when we consider that around 90 per cent of displaced populations worldwide live in increasingly protracted situations in countries located in developing regions of the world (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016).

Recent literature on ageing experiences in displacement in Southern contexts includes the work of Ilana Feldman (2017). She writes about the politics of ageing and dying in a Palestinian refugee camp from a humanitarian regime perspective. Her article prompts us to think about what it means to be a refugee over the long term. And the implications of life in relief when the costs of caring for ageing bodies and the end of life are beyond the financial capacity of humanitarian organisations. Other contributions include the work of Lamb and Hoffstaedter (2020) on the experiences of older Chin women in Kuala Lumpur as they await resettlement. Their article provides valuable insights into the lives of older women refugees in urban settings and how they played a crucial role in sustaining families and communities. In a previous publication, I examined how older East Timorese refugees turned residents in West Timor, Indonesia, cope with family separation and life in exile, their aspirations, and how they enact transnational care across borders (Sakti 2020). All these articles draw on ethnographic work as well as oral history methods that aim to elicit the perspectives of older people. They also engage, to different extents, with literature on older refugees or migrants in and developed from the vantage point of the North.

In studies carried out in Northern contexts, scholars of ageing have explored questions related to belonging, intergenerational relationships, social support networks, as well as the multiple meanings older people attach to place (cf. Miah and King, 2023). Bolzman (2014) argues that older refugees face more difficulties in the process of adaptation when compared to younger family members as they are often less flexible in dealing with new social situations. Moreover, the sense of loss that exile creates intensifies when refugees perceive their displacement as becoming a permanent state. Bolzman points out that this sense of loss relates not only to the homeland, but also to the loss or decrease of status and

cultural value attached to age in the new place. He writes, 'the elderly in urban or industrialised societies are usually seen as non-economical viable and therefore dependent' (Bolzman 2014, 413). This newfound dependency on younger family members can result in low self-esteem and loneliness (Lewis 2009). Additionally, older refugees' difficulties in adapting to the new place can be further compounded by language differences and the absence of social support and diasporic networks.

Family plays a central role in the life of older refugees (Bolzman 2014, 413). Lewis's (2008) study among Cambodian refugee families in the US found that family members modify types of intergenerational exchanges to fit their current circumstances better. However, they hold onto those aspects of Cambodian culture considered essential, such as filial piety and elder reverence. The elderly, in this case, are respected figures in the family and to whom younger members 'owe their debt' (Lewis 2008, 710). Wangmo's (2010) comparative study among older Tibetans living in India and Switzerland also examines intergenerational relationships and the changes to filial piety over time, context and socioeconomic conditions. She raises the issue of old-age benefits as crucial in shaping older migrants' independence from and relationship with their children. With limited resources in old age, most of her research participants in India needed financial support. In contrast, the participants in Switzerland were entitled to state old-age benefits, and so required mainly affirmation and emotional support (Wangmo 2010, 880). Wangmo's findings raise an essential point to consider when thinking about ageing and forced migration experiences in the South, namely the differences of state resources between a developing country and a developed country in providing old-age care.

The following pages build on the dialogue emerging from the body of literature in this field and between findings from the North and South. By 'southern narratives', as depicted in this article's title, I refer to the need for a decolonial positioning and reflecting on the categories used to understand displacement in analysing ageing and forced migration experiences in and of the South. As decolonial scholars have argued, the question of who and how long one is considered a refugee has colonial roots (Krause 2021). It ignores historical and sociocultural contexts of local and regional legal orders and conceptions of mobilities (Ho and Robinson 2018). It is also a question that requires us to think beyond legal categories and linear understandings of displacement and resettlement (Nguyen 2019; Ramsay 2017). The following pages build on these debates.

The East Timorese in West Timor

Older East Timorese people's displacement and subsequent resettlement in West Timor unfolded within the context of Timor-Leste's prolonged struggle for independence. A Portuguese colony for over four centuries, Timor-Leste was in the midst of a decolonisation process when their direct neighbour, Indonesia, invaded on 7 December 1975 and illegally annexed the territory for twenty-four years until 1999. Truth-finding documents estimate that during this period, between 100,000 and 200,000 people lost their lives due to a combination of direct military attacks and war-related illness and starvation. Following the fall of Indonesia's then authoritarian regime led by the former president, Suharto, in 1998, the East Timorese people gained the right to determine their own future. The UN facilitated a referendum on 30 August 1999 and provided two options for the East

Timorese: (1) to accept the proposed special autonomy within Indonesia, or (2) to reject the proposed special autonomy, leading to independence from Indonesia. The vote resulted in an overwhelming majority (78,5%) supporting full independence. It also triggered widespread violence carried out by disgruntled Indonesian occupying forces and their East Timorese militias. The violence was brutal and destroyed 90% of the country's infrastructure, killed at least 1,200 civilians and displaced over 240,000 people to West Timor (CAVR Executive Summary 2005).

At first, the East Timorese who fled to West Timor were given refugee status as according to the international definition. Following the gradual repatriation of nearly 90 per cent of the refugees (around 225,000 people) back to Timor-Leste, UNHCR ended their status and all accompanying humanitarian aid in the end of 2002 (for a closer read on this topic, see Dolan, Large, and Obi 2004). The Indonesian government continued assistance to the remaining East Timorese population in West Timor through various programmes and presidential decrees but permanently ended their refugee (*pengungsi*, I.) status within the domestic frame in 2005. Government assistance has included essential food packages, monetary compensation and building materials for homes. These were often of small amount and unevenly distributed (Maing and Jatmika 2021).

After 2005, those who chose to remain in Indonesia were given legal identity and subsequently referred to as 'new citizens'. This label followed other identity markers given to the East Timorese in West Timor, including 'former refugees' and 'ex-Timor-Timur residents', all of which emphasise their 'otherness' from the surrounding communities. Building on his research findings and census data, Damaledo estimates that more than 88,000 East Timorese currently live across West Timor. These include an estimated 14,000 government employees and about 6,000 members of the Indonesian military and police force with their core and extended family members (Damaledo 2018, 14–16). Over time, those who were recruited into the formal sector in the early occupation period (in the late 1970s) have retired and received pensions and retirement benefits under the Indonesian civil service law. The following generation, who were recruited in the 1980s, were nearing the Indonesian formal retirement age of 58 at the time of study. Apart from this formal sector, many East Timorese are subsistence farmers and work as sharecroppers on land owned by local West Timorese (Damaledo 2018, 14).

Displacement is not a new phenomenon for the East Timorese. Indeed, the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste's (CAVR) final report states that 'most individual East Timorese alive today have experienced at least one period of displacement. Many have experienced several' (CAVR 2005, 72). East Timorese displacements to West Timor can be traced back to the anti-colonial uprisings against the Portuguese, during the Japanese invasion in the mid 1940s, in the time of internal political conflict in Timor-Leste in the mid-1970s, and in the course of the Indonesian invasion. The most recent mass displacement occurred during the post-ballot violence in 1999. In my interviews with older East Timorese men and women residing in Kefamenanu, a territory in West Timor that shares direct borders with Oecussi, Timor-Leste, they spoke of multiple displacement stories to the same area. When they had to flee again after the vote result was announced, they went to settlements they were already familiar with from prior displacement experiences or where they had extended family members. Recurring experiences of being forcibly removed made some older adults hesitant to return permanently to their places of origin as they anticipated violence to happen again.

Indonesian West Timor and Timor-Leste share historical and linguistic connections, as well as kinship and cultural ties. The border separating the two areas roughly in the middle has colonial origins. The (Catholic) Portuguese colonised the eastern half of today's Timor-Leste, and the (Protestant) Dutch controlled the western side. Colonial legacies in addition to the Indonesian occupation and regime of centralised policies left behind enduring impacts on both territories. These include poverty, lower levels of formal education among older populations and women, as well as exploitation (and depletion in some cases) of natural resources. Historical and geographical resonances and cultural connections provide a sense of place-based kinship (of being from 'Timor') among its inhabitants, particularly those living along the borderlands where generations of intermarriages have occurred. This sense of kinship is one that can co-exist with separate national identities (Damaledo 2018; Sakti 2017) and which could have been drawn by the Indonesian government to lay the foundation for better social relations between the refugees and their host communities. Alas, as Soehadha (2019) argues, the central government's choice of resettlement policy failed to consult with local communities and ignored displaced populations' needs. This top-down approach led to the construction of refugee camps and resettlement sites in locations separate from existing settlements, even when they are located within the same villages, contributing to their social exclusion and hindering meaningful interactions with neighbours (Soehadha 2019).

Nevertheless, spaces of encounter exist. These include markets, banks, hospitals, schools, and the farming fields where East Timorese farmers work on land owned by West Timorese neighbours. Everyday sociality unfolds primarily within the camps and resettlement sites and the places on which East Timorese women and men depend for livelihoods. However, their demographic differences and the existing prejudice within the host society held against East Timorese groups as violent and not trustworthy limit people's engagement with activities outside their settlements. For instance, religious differences and social segregation resulted in an outreach activity for older people's health, which an East Timorese health worker regularly carried out during my fieldwork, only being visited by people from the host population. East Timorese elders did not attend the event because the organisers held it in a Protestant church. Likewise, older East Timorese adults arriving from the middle and eastern sectors of Timor-Leste to West Timor often did not share the same language with the host population. Unless they had some command of Bahasa Indonesia, they often faced difficulties communicating with nearby communities. Additionally, land and resource issues give rise to potential conflicts and have resulted in violent incidences between local and East Timorese communities (Maing and Jatmika 2021).

While the East Timorese are no longer refugees according to the international definition, their everyday circumstances are far from improved. As of 2014, the National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas) recorded 4,762 East Timorese households living in former refugee camps with poor living conditions. This means that thousands do not own the land they reside in and live with the constant fear of eviction (Davina 2014). Their case demonstrates the limitations of linear assumptions underlying prevailing theoretical and policy approaches to displacement. Georgina Ramsay (2017) argues that understanding displacement as a liminal condition, or as a state of being 'betwixt and between legal categories', implies that the experience of resettlement, which provides

refugees with legal identity, thus 'resolves the 'problem' of their displacement' (Ramsay 2017, 517). She argues that such an analytical framework overlooks how resettled refugees may be continuously subjugated as threats to sovereignty through implicit forces of racialisation and other modalities of exclusion. Linear assumptions of displacement also ignore the prolonged needs displaced people and resettled refugees may continue to have long after the point of the exodus.

In the East Timorese case, district-level officials I interviewed often dismissed East Timorese residents' claims for assistance and the idea that they have displacement-related needs. In most, if not all, conversations with these authorities, they would constantly remind me that the East Timorese were no longer *pengungsi* but legal citizens. 'They have equal rights to access government programmes,' one official told me. Yet, Avó Jovana's statement that opened this article provides a different picture of what 'equal access' might mean when perceived from a marginalised position. Like many of my interlocutors, Avó Jovana referred to herself as *pengungsi* (refugee). In her usage, the term was not to evoke the legal understanding of refugees but was used to convey her needs related to ongoing displacement conditions.

Research methodology

This paper draws on ethnographic research on ageing experiences in displacement among the East Timorese in West Timor, which I conducted over multiple fieldwork visits in 2019 and 2020. My methodology involved qualitative techniques such as participant observation and in-depth interviews that invited older East Timorese interlocutors to talk about their lives in Timor-Leste before their displacement and everyday life in Indonesia. In order to better locate their narratives within the broader scope of policies concerning ageing population, I also conducted expert interviews with district officials from the social, health, and regional planning agencies, respectively, of Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) province of which West Timor is a part. Other expert interviews included speaking with fellow researchers and activists focusing on East Timorese-related issues both in West Timor and Timor-Leste, and leading scholars on ageing in Indonesia who were based in Jakarta. In addition to interviewing older interlocutors, I also interviewed their adult children, whenever possible, and visited some of their family members who had returned to live in Timor-Leste.

The paper is further informed by empirical data I collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Timor-Leste and Indonesia between 2010 and 2015 for a past research project. Altogether, I have conducted 22 months of anthropological research among the East Timorese on both sides of the border. Together with a research assistant, who herself is East Timorese and grew up largely in West Timor, we worked closely with an East Timorese healthcare worker who oversaw a clinic for the elderly at one of the community health centres in the wider Kupang regency. We joined him in his bi-weekly outreach activities to older patients in their homes. My interviews with older interlocutors took place at their homes and some were done over multiple visits. I visited different East Timorese settlements across West Timor, including the camps and resettlement sites in Kupang, Atambua and Kefamenanu districts.[3] By 'older interlocutors', I refer to those who were around the age of 60 years or older when they were displaced or at the time of interview. This chronological age follows typical

understandings of retirement age adopted by both Indonesia and Timor-Leste. However, in everyday usage, people understand older age as a social, cultural and relational category.

The research used purposive sampling to reach a diverse group of older East Timorese in West Timor. I interviewed pensioners of East Timorese origins who worked as civil servants during and after the 1999 displacement. I also interviewed retired military and police officers of East Timorese origins and their spouses whenever possible. While women also constituted the first group of pensioners, the second group comprised only men. In the effort of amplifying marginalised voices within this population, I sought and interviewed older East Timorese women, widows and those who did not receive any financial support from their spouses nor the State. This deliberate search for female research participants was necessary. Older East Timorese men, who held influence in settlement politics, were often the ones a researcher would first have to meet and introduce themselves. They would often suggest other male participants for me to interview rather than women from their community. Damaledo makes a similar observation and relates this to an East Timorese expression '*feto rona deit, mane poder barak liu*, which means a woman should only listen because it is the man who has more power' (Pakereng cited in Damaledo 2018, 15).

In all stages of research, including writing up, I took an intersectional and feminist approach. I was attuned to how aspects of a person's or group's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. An intersectional approach is sensitive to the importance of race and processes of racialisation, gender, sexuality and age as mutually constitutive and attends to how these relate to the diverse and overlapping power structure and systems of inequality, marginalisation, exploitation and violence. In the context of displacement, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020:, 5) argues that 'the relative significance of these identity markers and related power structures shift across time and space, including in processes of displacement, demonstrating the extent to which vulnerability is contextual rather than related to particular 'categories' of identity.'

Gendered narratives of the East Timorese displacement and resettlement

Much anthropological research on the East Timorese in West Timor has prominently focused on, among others, questions of displacement, belonging, citizenship and return (Damaledo 2014, 2018; Sakti 2017; Thu 2015). Studying this population group is important because the East Timorese in West Timor are often assumed as supporters of the Indonesian regime and, thus, are living the consequences of their political choice. East Timorese men who had joined the Indonesian forces are often labelled as traitors by people in the homeland because of their allegiance with Indonesia during the occupation (Damaledo 2018, 121). A similar assumption extends to those who were active civil servants for the Indonesian government. The political climate had expected them and their family members to vote in support of regime stability. Most notably, this population also includes former militias who were involved in the 1999 atrocities as well as the brutal attack on the UNHCR office in Atambua, which killed three UN international staff on 6 September 2000. Their ongoing silence about the past and refusal to take accountability perpetuated negative sentiments toward this group and the East Timorese in West Timor

in general. Yet, scholarly and public discourses, which in turn influence policy decisions, are more often informed by narratives of and by East Timorese men.

These narratives typically centred on notions of 'loyalty' and 'sacrifice' related to preserving the unitary state of Indonesia. Narratives among retired East Timorese men who were part of the Indonesian military, police force and public administration included accounts of different periods of armed combat, displacement and captivity. Some older respondents were East Timorese soldiers of the Portuguese army and spoke of the bloody internal conflict between newly emerging political parties in the mid-1970s. They also recounted stories of being captured and tortured by Fretilin (The Revolutionary Front of East Timor), which led to their joining the Indonesian forces. A slightly younger generation of men, who were approaching the official retirement age at the time of the interview, spoke of being recruited at a young age by Indonesian forces to assist in daily military operations. Older interlocutors who were not involved in militia organisations or past crimes spoke of having maintained good relations with family members and former neighbours in their places of origin and have visited Timor-Leste over time. Many others have never returned and relied upon their wives or other family members to maintain kinship and cultural connections through cross-border visits.

Older East Timorese women's narratives similarly entailed stories of multiple wartime and displacement experiences. Whereas older men recounted their roles in taking up arms and administrative positions, East Timorese women's stories centred on the suffering they endured in the different times they were displaced. The majority of East Timorese people fled to the mountains when the Indonesian forces invaded in the mid-1970s. Some stayed between one and three years in the interiors before Indonesian troops captured and brought them back to their villages or relocation sites. Some surrendered to the military because the living conditions in the mountains were too dire over time. While others never fled at all and received the Indonesian military when they arrived.

Two elderly East Timorese women originally from Viqueque district, Avó Elisa and Avó Ilda, were around 70 years old when we spoke and lived in a resettlement site nearby the Atambua market. They spoke of the difficult time in the mountains and when children died from hunger and diseases. It was a time of suffering they remembered to be far worse than the displacement in 1999. 'We had to drink dirty water. Sometimes from a river where we later found a dead body floating in,' Avó Elisa said. Her granddaughter, 30-year old Francisca, joined the conversation and shared how she grew up listening to her grandmother's stories about surviving the mountains. She said:

> Sometimes, when we complain about the situation in the camp now or when we first arrived, Avó would remind us about how much harder it was in the mountains and how they had no choice but to survive. My mother was with her as a child and she still remembers the hunger. When we listen to her stories of that time, we feel sorry and do our best.

Francisca teased her grandmother lovingly, 'They dug up cassavas from nearby fields. They stole from local farmers to feed their children. They were thieves!' Avó Elisa and Avó Ilda laughed, each showing arrays of missing teeth, 'We were hungry. We were fighting to stay alive.' Francisca caressed Avó Elisa's arm and told her that she was

only joking. Sitting next to them, Avó Ilda reflected on the different displacement periods and life thereafter:

> When the military captured us they took us back to town. They gave us food to eat, tarpaulin to sleep under. They didn't capture us to neglect us. When it was war in 1999, the Indonesian military took us to NTT. Then they brought us here (Atambua) and gave us rice and a little money. They gave us plates and tarpaulins. But that was a long time ago. They don't help us with anything anymore.
>
> We have to go every day to break stones because we don't have land. Where can we grow our food? How can we can make a living without land? With the little money from breaking stones, we buy food and salt and support our family. At night, I lay awake thinking about how I can eat the next day.

Avó Ilda raised a central issue shared by East Timorese subsistence farmers in West Timor: the absence of land ownership. For older East Timorese people I spoke with, not owning land to cultivate marks the break between the past and present. They explained working on land not only as a way to sustain themselves and their families, or make a living, but also an expression of their ethnic belonging and personhood. Old age is often connected with land-related activities and the physical inability to work on the fields as a marker of the senescence and time of receiving personal care from family. Despite the dramatic changes displacement brought to the lives of older East Timorese women, they strove to provide for their families either by working on someone else's land or other forms of informal labour. They were instrumental in sustaining familial survival in displacement (cf. Lamb and Hoffstaedter 2020), rather than posing an economic burden to the younger generation.

Older women's narratives in West Timor differed from their male counterparts in that they did not engage in armed fighting. The majority of them carried out informal work and had not or enjoyed lower levels of formal education. Although their narratives of displacement centred on suffering, these do not imply passivity. Like the stories of Avó Elisa and Avó Ilda, as well as Avó Jovana, older East Timorese women demonstrated how they dealt with extreme hardship while caring for family members amid violence and unthinkable loss. While men referred to sacrifice as forms of patriotic devotion in war or as family separation to sustain their society (Damaledo 2018), women engaged in what Merav Shohet (2021, 10–11) describes as '"everyday sacrifices", which involves suffering in silence for the sake of intimate kin and which binds families together'. Thus, their everyday activities in the resettlement site and their places of origin continue to centre on the spheres of home and family.

In contrast, older East Timorese men who served in the Indonesian military and police force and the public sector received monthly pension payments.[4] They described later life in the new settlement as sitting at home, engaging with community life and guiding the younger generation. Senhor[5] Julio, a respected elder for the East Timorese community in Naibonat camp, Kupang, described his everyday:

> It is like this. I like to sit here at the terrace to catch some breeze. Sometimes, I receive guests like you. I am also active at the sub-district community centre. We have to, you know, get involved with the neighbours. It is important to keep good relations. I also help other East Timorese whenever they need assistance. For example, when someone dies and the family wants to have the burial in Timor-Leste. They come to me to assist them with all

> administrative matters. We help get permission from the Timor-Leste consulate in Kupang, a death certificate from the sub-disctrict office, an ambulance to transport the body so that the family and deceased can cross the border.

He also spoke about their role as elders to mediate conflict within their communities and with local groups.

> I get called when our youths are in trouble. They get into fights with local youths. People say these fights are between martial arts groups and our young men should not get involved in this violence! The fights between neighbourhoods have become more violent. Lives are at stake. So, I organised a meeting between all camp elders and the young men involved in this trouble. We made them take an oath to stop the fighthing. This is an ancestral oath so they must abide to it. We have to respect our ancestors and way of life.

Similar to Lewis's (2008) findings among elderly Cambodians, older East Timorese men continued to receive respect and reverence from younger family members. They retained their status as elders in the place of resettlement. They held on to the role of passing ancestral knowledge to future generations as a way of sustaining their identity. Although Senhor Julio's camp was located on and surrounded by military grounds, he has attained a sense of place by fulfilling his role as an elder in the new settlement. This sense of belonging relates to what Damaledo writes about loyalty and sacrifice among the East Timorese in West Timor, 'Indonesia is regarded not as the place from which they came, but the nation they chose to belong [for which] they struggled and sacrificed' (Damaledo 2018, 61–62).

Older women also received respect and reverence from members of the younger generation. They provided guidance and passed on resilience to the younger generation, as Francisca and Avó Elisa's story highlights. The gendered meanings of sacrifice and how they shape citizenship relates to Kent's (2016) work with East Timorese women in Timor-Leste. She builds on feminist and postcolonial scholarship to demonstrate how liberal assumptions related to citizenship ignore how the notion is mediated by social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate the exclusion of certain social groups, including women and poor people. In the East Timorese context, she argues, 'women's citizenship remains constrained by and negotiated within deeply gendered narratives of nation-building that are informed by historical experiences of the resistance struggle' (Kent 2016, 53). These accounts valorise men's sacrifice in fighting at the battlefronts against Indonesian forces over women's silenced suffering of being left behind in military-occupied spaces, in their clandestine work supporting the guerrillas, and even the sacrifices made by female resistance fighters. Pervasive structural discrimination and socially constructed beliefs about women's and men's 'traditional' roles in society continue to circumscribe East Timorese women's full participation in public life, both in Timor-Leste and West Timor (Kent 2016). In the next section, I look at how women confront these challenges as they grow older in exile and from their position in the margins.

How older women negotiate structural barriers in the margins

Das and Poole's (2004) pathbreaking volume, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, describes the term 'margin' as areas far from the centres of state sovereignty in which states are unable to ensure implementation of their programmes and policies. In the context of post-reform Indonesia, these centres have been moved away from Jakarta to

distribute power and fiscal control to local governments at the province, regency and city levels to administer their own affairs such as health, education, social service and land management. Since 2005, the heads of these local governments (governors, regents and mayors) and legislative seats have been directly voted by popular election, creating local hierarchies of political elites. While East Timorese men have played an active role in representing their groups' needs through rallies or joining political parties, their communities in West Timor remain vulnerable in the local political constellation. During elections, they become targets of political elites who would use land ownership promises and money politics to gain their votes (Maing and Jatmika 2021).

Avó Jovana, whose story opened this article, spoke of prolonged absences of assistance on the one hand and sudden appearances of incentives from local legislative candidates on the other hand. She knew from experience that these candidates' promises would not materialise, and their living conditions remain unchanged. Still, she would accept their 'gift' without feeling indebted to them as she perceived these legislative hopefuls as extensions of the State, which had forgotten displaced people like herself for far too long.

> People from political parties would come and ask about the living conditions here and promise change, but nothing changes here. No assistance come to us. We are *pengungsi* [refugee/displaced people] that came here not because we wanted to sit around. We came because of the war. When a political candidate comes during campaign season, sometimes they give us money. But the money we receive went through many hands. We get only very little.

It is necessary to locate East Timorese women's narratives of ageing and displacement in the context of power hierarchies within camps and resettlements sites. Older men's continued influence in the public sphere, especially those who held or are holding leadership and administrative positions within the camps, have established them as the gatekeepers of their communities. While Damaledo notes that a few East Timorese women do have leadership roles in resettlement politics, their influence in the public domain is often constrained by everyday structural barriers. For older East Timorese widows who received a fragment of or no survival pensions and were the household heads of their families, welfare assistance for the poor could support daily needs. Their knowledge of such programmes, however, are often dependent on their male counterparts in camps and resettlement sites. Nevertheless, older women did not wait passively for assistance even though they left administrative matters (registration of identity cards, family register and supporting documents for assistance) in the hands of men in leadership roles. They focused on bringing food on to the table and supporting their children's and grandchildren's needs by taking on informal labour. Older widows also supported one another in getting their voices heard.

At our first meeting, Avó Jovana barraged the neighbourhood leader (RT) of the camp section where she lived, who had accompanied me with questions and complaints. She asked him about RASKIN (a central government social assistance programme providing subsidised rice for poor and near-poor households) and how much longer she still had to wait to be a beneficiary. The RT did not immediately respond to her question and introduced me instead. When we all sat down to talk, Avó Jovana pressed on about the assistance and that she had handed her documents to the RT nearly half a year ago. The RT responded with dismissal, 'You have to be patient. I already submitted the data and it

takes a while.' He then excused himself to work on other matters and left us. Avó Jovana made a face that showed her displeasure and said that she knew that his family was already purchasing RASKIN rice. She and her immediate neighbour, Avó Juliana, who was also an elderly widow, would no longer stay silent whenever they saw the RT. The two women spoke of how they felt forgotten and that they had no husbands to speak for them so they must do so themselves:

> She (Avó Juliana) can't claim her husband's pension because she no longer has the necessary documents. Together, we work with our hands to support our families. When someone needs us to plant corn for them, we go and plant their corn. When they need us to plant paddy, we go and plant their paddy. They give us a little money for our work. If they don't have money, they pay with corn. If it's not planting season, we look for water spinach and sell them at the market. […] If we get a little money, we save it. Our life is like this. One single assistance [from the State] we do not get. Like that RT, he is busy just taking care of his own family.

When I spoke with the RT separately, he shared his frustration with the slow bureaucracy of welfare assistance. He emphasised that he looked after the widows in the community by providing them with work. 'Whenever there is a field that needs clearing or harvesting, I would go and let them know,' he said. In his account, the widows were the ones that needed looking after rather than those needing priority in social assistance programmes. Whereas in the women's accounts above, they perceived themselves as the backbones of their families and actively supported them with or without assistance. Yet, East Timorese women's efforts in seeking assistance or taking part in the central government's programmes for older populations also had their limits. Their group's marginalised position in West Timor and the social exclusion they experienced often made older women perceive State programmes and activities for older people as being prioritised for those originally from the area and not them. Avó Jovana's expression, 'It is like we don't exist', is evocative of the multiple marginalities she experienced as an elderly widow facing ongoing displacement conditions.

Programmes targeting older populations in West Timor were limited and its implementation differed between places. There were monthy outreach activities for elderly healthcare (*Posyandu Lansia*) and integrated clinic within community health centres (*Puskesmas*). There were also cash transfer assistance for poor households from which elderly family members can indirectly benefit. And there also event-based activities or food packages organised by the social department targeting older people living with poverty and disability.

On the other hand, older women's position in the margins enabled them to engage in practices away from the State's gaze. They were more able to cross national borders and carry out visits to their places of origin compared to East Timorese men implicated in past crimes. When I first started research with East Timorese communities in West Timor in 2010, my host mother in Kefamenanu had pointed out that for older women like her, crossing the borders was a less threatening affair (see Sakti 2017). She lived near the borders and would travel through traditional paths without official papers. 'If we get caught [by the authorities], we would say that we were visting family for *adat* (customary practices such as death rituals). Often times, they would understand', she told me back then.

The paths she took have historically connected borderland communities and kinship ties through the movements of people, money and goods across space and time. Older

East Timorese women, who travelled back and forth between the new settlement and ancestral land, with or without passports, reported a continued sense of belonging to the people and places significant to them. The continuity of meaningful relations can have positive impacts to people's perceptions of growing older in exile. In their visits, they represented the husbands and sons unable to cross the border into Timor-Leste for family gatherings and ancestral rituals. While these movements enabled women to take on a more public role, they remained within the spheres of home and family, which includes the work of maintaining kin relations. Nevertheless, through the acts of border-crossing, physical labour, caring for families and each other, and by speaking up, older East Timorese women negotiated and dealt with the conditions shaping their everyday lives in displacement.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I explored the nexus of ageing and forced migration in regions of the global South to contribute to the growing research field on older refugees. While the body of literature on this subject has predominantly focused on the experiences of those living in more developed countries located in the North, I suggest that the conceptual findings developed from and within these diverse contexts provide helpful ways to think about how the ageing and forced migration nexus is configured in the South. However, I argue that global, regional and local histories matter. Tracing their legacies, continuities, and discontinuities can give insight into how older people's ageing and displacement processes in regions of the South are shaped and negotiated. The narratives above demonstrated how for older East Timorese men and women who were spending their later lives in West Timor, Indonesia, historical, cultural and geographical resonances between their places of origin and new settlement sites enabled them to create meaningful home(s) across space and over time.

Scholars researching on older refugees in the North describe how immigrant groups often strive to retain ethnic identity while adapting socially, economically and culturally. Yet, they are subjected to '"multiple jeopardies" within the context of structural inequalities' (Lewis 2009, 381). East Timorese refugees turned residents in West Timor faced multiple forms of marginalities driven by the continued prejudice against them and disadvantaging resettlement policies. In this paper, I described their continued poor living conditions in camps and resettlement sites, loss of land ownership, and everyday social exclusion, which resulted in perceived unequal access to assistance and can intensify problems associated with growing old. The lived experiences of ongoing displacement in a global South context, thus, requires us to think beyond legal categories. As the East Timorese case demonstrates, providing citizenship status did not resolve their displacement problem. Instead, the conditions of life in exile persisted for the majority of the research interlocutors. Understanding displacement as a non-linear phenomenon rather than a state of being in-between legal categories helps us move away from Eurocentric constructions of the 'refugee' and attune ourselves to decolonial conceptions of mobilities as well as the long term effects of displacement through the conceptual lens of ageing and the global South (Sakti 2022). Furthermore, locating older people's contemporary accounts of resettlement in West Timor within a broader history of displacement is crucial in understanding how they experienced the events of 1999.

Importantly, this paper has shown how narratives of displacement and citizenship among the East Timorese are gendered. And how men's stories of loyalty and sacrifice have received priority in public and scholarly discourse over women's narratives of suffering. The paper showed how East Timorese women were instrumental in supporting economic and emotional support to their families through everyday sacrifices they engage with in silence. Older women's narratives also demonstrated the ways in which they confronted the structural barriers they faced within and beyond their communities through acts of physical labour, cross-border movements and solidarity. Travelling across borders, even translocally, entailed a privilege that not all East Timorese people in West Timor had. For those who chose not to return for reasons related to the past or did not have the financial means to travel, they sought other ways of establishing a meaningful life in exile.

Notes

1. I have changed the names of my interlocutors here to protect their identity. *Avõ* is a Portuguese-loaned word for grandmother in Tetum and is the respectful way to address older women. The terms in Bahasa Indonesia are indicated in this paper as (I.).
2. Situated between Asia and the Pacific, Timor island is divided between the sovereign states of Timor-Leste on the eastern half and a territory belonging to Indonesia on the western side, West Timor. Within West Timor lies Oecussi district, an enclave territory of Timor-Leste. The island covers 30,777 square kilometres and consists of narrow plains around the coast and belts of rugged mountains, particularly on the eastern half. The western side is rich with manganese stone, which provides for the livelihoods of communities through small-scale mining. Both sides of the border share a monsoonal climate, characterised by extreme conditions such as prolonged dry season and flash floods during the wet season.
3. The settlements visited in Kupang district included: Naibonat camp, Merdeka, Oefafi, Noelbaki camp, Tuapukan, Oebelo Atas, and Babau. In Atambua (Belu regency), a town directly bordering Timor-Leste, we visited settlements and homes located at the Loloa market, Tenu Kiik, Asu Ulun, and Fatu Biti camp. In Kefamenanu (TTU regency), also a border town, I revisited the homes of families I worked and stayed with during my past project. These homes were largely within Kefamenanu town, in Haumeniana, and at Naen camp in the town outskirts.
4. Older women who worked in the Indonesian civil service also receive state pensions as do widows whose husband had worked in the public sector or military and police force. The later receive survival pensions. For more on this topic, see (Sakti 2020).
5. Like the term 'Avó', 'Senhor' is a Portuguese word for older men. However, its usage differs from the more familiar meaning of grandmother or grandfather, and used as a respectful way to address older men who are influential within their communities, working in offices or as teachers (Senhora for women). My positionality as a female (younger) researcher originally from Indonesia prompted me to address research participants with prefixes. I would typically ask what prefix people preferred and at times also used the Indonesian 'Pak (Bapak)' and 'Ibu' in place of Senhor and Senhora, where ever appropriate.

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