

“THIS IS ME” Stories within the LGBTQ movement in East-Timor

By [Tiago Rodrigues da Costa](#)

Note about the characters:

Joker da Silva is a transman. Joker was born woman, but sees himself as a man and wants to be treated as a man. For that reason, the pronouns used for Joker are “He, his” and not “She, her.”

In other side, Romi Aty is a transwoman. She was born a man, but she wants to be treated as a woman. The pronouns used for Aty are “She, her.”

None of the transgenders interviewed revealed their real name.

In addition, the Catholic bishop in Dili, one of the most influential persons in East-Timor, was invited for an interview, but his office rejected.

It's 3 a.m. Not many people are awake in the neighborhood of *Has-Laram*, in Dili, the capital of East-Timor. The only people who remain awake are generally those who have no job and dropped out of school. The majority of them are young Timorese.

According to a study in 2018 by the United Nations, 20% of the Timorese youth between the ages 15-24 are considered NEET—neither in education nor in employment and training. These youth stay awake until late, doing nothing but drinking with friends. The majority of them are men and born into poor and broken families, where parents don't want their children to study, but only to work or help at home. Men are supposed to help their fathers, while women are supposed to help their mothers.

These are some of the norms of East-Timor and for those who play under different rules, then, discrimination, stigma and violence can be expected.

One of these is Joker da Silva, a 31-year-old transman and one of the leaders of the LGBTQ movement in East-Timor. Joker is one of the few members of the community who, since around three years ago, started playing a greater role in the Timorese society. While coming out in public, Joker and other members of this community are claiming their space and identity, while facing stereotypes and fighting back those who call them “monsters.”

Joker, as well as Bella Galhos, Romi Aty, Natalino Guterres, or Domingos

Barros are some of the leaders of a movement that is aimed to promote social change and empower LGBTQ rights in East-Timor. They want to help making East-Timor, one of the least visited countries on Earth, the one to be recognized worldwide by advancements in acceptance toward people with different gender of expression and identity, and sexual orientation.

East-Timor is young. The country turned 16-year-old this past year, which makes it the 5th youngest on Earth. Thus, in order to understand the struggles of the LGBTQ community in today's East-Timor, it's important to understand how recent historical events, traditions and God, influence the country's management and how the people behave nowadays.

East-Timor was a Portuguese colony from 1512 until 1975. During the majority of those years, the Portuguese used this island for commercial purposes only. The majority of the Timorese people grew up in tribal communities, where a person like the *Liurai* ruled the land and decided the norms for everyone. The society worked in a completely different way when compared to western cultures.

Just a few years before the end of the Portuguese leadership, the Portuguese started promoting the creation of political parties. However, the lack of political experience from the Timorese people birthed a civil war. In August 1975, the two political parties at that time were in conflict, which triggered Indonesia to invade the island at the end of the same year. The people of Timor were not yet celebrating the independence from Portugal when they had to face a war against their own neighbor. This war lasted 24 years, and during that period, about 25% of the Timorese population were tortured and killed. The people of East-Timor fought the way they could, and they never gave up. In 1999, Indonesia left East-Timor; and after that, the United Nations led a transitional period until May 20th, 2002, when East-Timor became independent for the first time.

“When I go to the church, many people keep staring at me, like I am a criminal. If I wear these kinds of clothes [like shorts and shirts], why should I go?” Joker da Silva said. “There are a lot of regulations, [like:] girls have to be this; the church has norms [saying] a woman has to marry a man and a man has to marry a woman. No tomboys. No one can break this... ok? I want to obey, but these [rules] are not from God.”

Joker grew up in *Has-Laram*, and despite he's now accepted by his family and his neighbors, Joker's early years were made of struggles.

“I realized having born into a woman's body, when it was my first time to have my monthly period,” Joker said. “I saw myself as a girl, but my feelings were as a boy. At that time, I was fearful as well, fearful to tell my fellow women that I had feelings for them.”

Life is not easy for women in such a patriarchal society like East-Timor. And when it came to Joker, the consequences of his actions could be even worse.

“I was afraid. I had my own family members who had the experience of

being beaten, just like my older sister, who is heterosexual—a lady who likes men only—[but] my family would still beat her when they caught her with a boyfriend. My brothers would beat her until she was bloody,” Joker said. “And here I was with this feeling. So, I needed to end this feeling. I tried very hard to let this feeling go, but I simply couldn’t do that.”

In many stories similar to the Joker’s one, family acceptance comes with financial independence. In East-Timor, generally, all the generations of a family live together and family members depend upon one another to provide basic resources like food, water and housing. Women are generally obligated to live under men’s rules, mostly because it’s the men’s job to provide money for the family. Thus, while seeing Joker as a more manlike member in the family, his father started treating him differently.

“[My father] used to say, ‘Joker, with this kind of life that you have, we are just wasting on you. I feed you just like I feed a crocodile. Why should I feed a crocodile? It’s better to feed a pig, so when it grows, I can sell it and have some money,” Joker said.

Joker understood he had two solutions: Either staying at home and obeying to his father’s rules, or leaving home to find a better life.

“When I left the house, I wanted to prove that I was not a crocodile,” Joker said. “I told my dad that I would leave the house for three months. So, I met my friends who were LGBTQ [members] just like me. ... We came together [and lived] in a village called *Kuluhun Kalifornia*, where Ateli lived. There were 59 of us who stayed together in a huge room. We slept together, because we were just looking for a place where we could just sleep.”

Zelia da Costa is Joker’s partner, but everyone knows her by Ateli. Unlike Joker, who wants to hide his birth name, Ateli, who’s 28-year-old and sees herself as a bisexual woman, is not ashamed of her identity and to explain how natural it was to fall in love with Joker when things were not so good.

“When I got this kind of sickness on my neck, ... I almost died,” Ateli said. “Joker was the one taking care of me; none of my family came to see me here. ... All of a sudden, I fall in love with him. I liked him, [and] I felt safe with him. There was peace and joy. I just wanted to be with him.”

Joker’s daily routines are made of hard work. At 3 a.m., he wakes up and goes to a slaughterhouse. There, Joker helps other men butcher livestock, which is to be sold in the same day at the popular *Taibesi* Market. Joker doesn’t make money out of it, but he gets part of the animals’ intestines, which are to be cooked in a soup called *Soto*. Around 5 a.m., Joker is back in her house and tries to sleep a little bit, but usually he doesn’t. That is supposed to be the time when little Neurgia wakes up, and when an 1-year-old baby is awake, everyone around the baby is awake too. Joker, then, goes to get clean water in a fountain a little far from home. He has to walk about 15 min there, and walk back with the gallons of water. At 7 a.m., Joker is back and the preparation for the day begins. Joker takes a shower, while Ateli prepares breakfast (normally porridge). Joker then leaves home and

takes transportation to *Bidau Santa Ana*, where LBT Organization Arco Iris is located. She has a full day of work until 5 p.m. In the evening, Joker comes home and by that time, *Soto* is already ready to be sold. Joker then goes on the street and sell it for \$0.50 each bowl. This may take until 11 p.m., when it's time to sleep. At 3 a.m., everything has to start all over again.

"I learned to live alone," Joker said. "With [my] identity, ... if I had to rely on my parents, I don't think that would work. I needed to be independent. I worked hard to be able to have food on my table, [and] I don't need to live with a man in order of being happy."

Joker and Ateli are today, one of the few same-sex couples living together in East-Timor. But, they are showing to be slightly different than the others; they are not afraid to come in public and share their life. They want their rights to be recognized and are fighting to be seen as normal humans.

Together, they are raising 1-year-old Neurgia, a little girl which is Ateli's daughter from a man she never loved, but was pressured to marry. Joker became family to Neurgia, despite not knowing yet if he is father or mother.

"I don't like [my] breast, [my] vagina, and anything [women related]," Joker said. "[But,] my daughter is my heart, ... I am convinced that she is my daughter. When she is able to speak, she can call me anything, either papa or mama, I would accept [it]."

By taking his story to the public view, Joker is hoping to influence others to do the same. However, Joker himself wasn't the first one. He was influenced by Bella Galhos, probably the most popular LGBTQ member in East-Timor.

"During that time, my friends and I were more into alcohol," Joker said. "When I met Bella, my life changed. ... She is a very important person in my life, and she is a big inspiration to me. ... I can create things [now]. With this kind of orientation, I will not have to fear anyone."

From all the LGBTQ members in East-Timor, Isabella Galhos, known as Bella Galhos, is the one who stands out more among the media.

The 46-year-old bisexual woman and human rights activist was exiled in Canada during the 90s, in a time when Indonesia was occupying Timor. She studied abroad at the University of Hawaii, and after returning to her homeland, she became adviser of the former Timorese President Taur Matan Ruak. Besides that, Galhos runs several organizations in East-Timor.

Politics were always part of Bella's life. "I've been always over the situation and putting meaning to it," Galhos said. "[I] try to actually make changes here and there, influencing people's way of thinking."

Galhos is a well-known personality in East-Timor, not only as a result of her distinguished career, but because she grew up during difficult times of Indonesian occupation. Nowadays, she frequently shares about her negative childhood in order to inspire others. She shared for several times, for

example, the story of her father who had 18 wives and 45 children, and sold her to the Indonesian for mere five dollars when Galhos was only 4-year-old. The reason was simply for considering she had male characteristics.

“When I was a child, it was already clear, I always considered myself a boy. I think my father was anticipating the future. ... I consider now that I was the unwanted child by my father, but the child that was loved by my mother,” Galhos said.

Her mother, Galhos said, was her protector, even though she suffered domestic violence on daily basis. One thing is clear: The way Galhos expresses the ugly and the beautiful things she lived, give not only a great understanding of her character, but it’s an extension to what happens within many family households in East-Timor.

“I was exposed to it as a victim. But also, ... I can also act on violence, do it myself,” Galhos said. “When I was young, that’s what we did. I learned about this whole thing by seeing it, and actually doing it. ... The parents did it to us, especially my father did it to all of us; ... [at] the same time that he acted, he beat the hell out of my mother, [and] he beat the hell out of all of us. And then my siblings [and I], we fought over each other too. ... [For] everything, we would use violence. ... A society like East-Timor, you see that violence is so rooted in many ways.”

Together with Iram Saeed, her partner, they have been building organizations that are aimed to help mistreated people in East-Timor. After meeting in Hawaii, Saeed, 47-year-old, decide to leave India, place where she is born and raised, in order to live closer to Galhos in East-Timor.

“I found in her something which I don’t have,” Saeed said. “She was bold, she had a big voice, she knew how to talk, she knew how to make people laugh, she was full of stories, she could tell stories for the whole night.”

Like Joker and Ateli, Galhos and Saeed are raising a 3-year-old little daughter too. Her name is Irabella — “Ira” from Iram, and “bella.”

The “Research Report on the Lives of Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Transgender Men in Timor-Leste” was one of the very first meaningful studies they did, and one of the very first investigative studies to be done in the history of the country. The study exposed a reality of oppression against members of the LGBTQ group, and despite the Timorese Constitution referring to equal rights as to be preserved in the Timorese society, the study, which was published in 2017, shows the opposite; it shows that East-Timor still have a long way to go when it comes to social equality.

From all the 57 volunteers who submitted themselves to the study, 86% said they suffered from both physical and psychological violence. To add to that, the study refers that some of the reasons why same-sex couples don’t live together in East-Timor are “shame, social embargo and fear of abuse.” Moreover, the study refers “the conservative nature of [the] Timorese society makes it very difficult for them to open up about their SOGIE

(sexual orientation and gender identity and expression).”

Some other findings show 66% of the respondents earn less than \$100 a month and only 2% have an income above \$1000 a month. Several of these quantitative findings are impressive for their dimension. However, what makes this study stand-out are some of the testimonies given by 57 people who anonymously responded. One recalls being tied by their brothers to a car and dragged, strangled with a hose and tortured in a water tank.

As a result of these findings, the Arco Iris Organization was founded.

“One of the recommendations of the study was that, ... there is a lack of space ... to meet, to share, to talk and to learn,” Saeed said. “We were approached by the Australian embassy, [and] they said they had a small grant available and that we should apply for it—in the context of creating that safe space for the women who are gay. So, we created that space safe for LBT members.”

The current focus of Arco Iris is to build solid foundations for all members.

“Most of the members are new, they are young and they are inexperienced,” Saeed said. “They are just coming out of their real life, to a place where they never been. They have never interacted with NGOs, they have never interacted with experts, they never had that kind of exposure. So, the whole idea of this space is to give them a chance to learn, within themselves and also invite some experts who can help them to create that positive energy.”

In a time where these and other members of the LGBTQ community are working to promote social change in the Timorese society, it's important that many other individuals cooperate and participate in this debate. Politicians and lawmakers should be the ones to take an action and address these problems before it's too late. However, Galhos argues there is a long way to go when it comes to the acceptance of LGBTQ rights.

“[Politicians] are not concerned; they don't even care,” Galhos said. “Honestly, why would they care about LGBTQ? Most of them don't know the meaning of it. ... [Politicians] pick up safe zones, or comfort zones, to act on things not because they know or they believe there is a case, but they do it because there are a lot of people that they might be able to get their votes.”

Despite that, there are some people with governmental connections that are aware of the social problems faced by the Timorese LGBTQ community and are willing to help promoting change.

The Ombudsman Silverio Pinto Baptista for Human Rights and Justice is an important person within the Timorese society. As public advocate elected in parliament, he connects the people with the government, and his role is to protect and promote debate around human rights.

“The ombudsman has to make advocacy so that public entities have the conscience that it's their everyday duty to serve the community—so they

won't discriminate LGBTQ members," Pinto Baptista said. "If one is a man, but he is [also] a transgender, our duty is to protect his rights. ... The government, including the ombudsman and public entities ... [like] police, community leaders and the educational sector; the school has no right to discriminate. ... For example, [if] a female student [feels] comfortable to wear shorts rather than [wearing] a skirt or a man [feels] comfortable to wear a skirt. They can do so, and the school has no reason to say these people have to wear according to what is already determined."

Many members of the LGBTQ community struggle to stay at school. Bullying and social pressure are reasons why many members feel they don't fit in an environment like the university. "I didn't feel comfortable to continue [my studies] at the university," Romi Aty said. "Because of [its] norms: If you [are a man], you must cut your hair like a man."

Among the transgender community in East-Timor, Romi Aty is seen as one of the first to claim transgender rights in the country. The 38-year-old transwoman came out in 2005, when many people in the Timorese society not even knew about the existence of people like the transgender.

Aty said, "They were asking questions like: 'Are you a man or a woman?'"

As a result of being one of the first to come out, Aty didn't have the support of organizations like nowadays exist. She had to face everything on her own. Aty said, while working as a volunteer for a teacher, she would be pressured to change her character. The pressure was so intense that she had to quit.

However, her interest for the community was bigger than her frustrations. She took workshops in topics like Portuguese, English, and in health and HIV prevention. Despite that, life wasn't easy for her and in 2009, Aty became a sex-worker.

"I wasn't a transgender sex worker for a long time, maybe only six months," Aty said. "Being sex worker is very hard; you'll find problems."

As a consequence of investing time in education, Aty worked for Timor Harii Foundation, ISEAN Hivos Organization and CODIVA Foundation. All organizations supporting equality and diversity. Most of the times, she worked as volunteer, sometimes as employer. Aty became so involved that she took the lead at CODIVA (Coalition for Diversity and Action), one of the most important Timorese organizations besides Arco Iris.

"CODIVA collaborates [with] all the community, not only LGBTQ. All the [Timorese] population can come and collaborate together," Aty said.

As a result of a partnership with the Ombudsman's office, CODIVA provides human rights training for police officers, members of the army and community leaders. Ombudsman Pinto Baptista said this effort is important.

"[Timorese officers should not] be like other nations [where they] are the

ones who arrest LGBTQ members,” Pinto Baptista said. “Here in Timor, we don’t want that to happen. ... Police [officers] have the obligation to accept cases coming from anyone, and if ... [officers] don’t take an immediate action, the ombudsman will take action against the officers.”

The Gay Pride is an important event around the world and it’s becoming a must in East-Timor, which helps promoting acceptance. Natalino Guterres is in charge of the event that was organized for the second time in July 2018.

“Pride is really important I think, because visibility is important,” Guterres said. “Because, we know that people like us exist, but nobody wants to talk about it. ... In order to address the problem, we need to make it visible. We need to let people know that ... we have been discriminated and marginalized for our differences. And I feel like, pride embodies that, the visibility of the LGBTQ community.”

Guterres said, “We are part of this country and a lot of us also contribute to [its] development, but we are forced to live in a way that is not us.”

Guterres, a 28-year-old man, is also one of the main leaders within the gay community. As a man in a patriarchal society, his responsibility and social pressures are even higher.

“I was bullied a lot, because I was really different,” Guterres said.

“At school, one day, one kid tried to pull my pants down in front of the class to see if I was a girl or a boy, and everyone was there and laughing,” he said. “It felt degrading. ... [In] another time, I was walking and some kids were trying to throw stones at me and their parents were just laughing, and they didn’t do anything.”

Moreover, when everything goes bad, home should be a safe place, but it wasn’t for him. For Guterres, home was an extension of all the trauma.

“[My parents] thought that the way I acted was wrong,” Guterres said. “I was just being myself and they thought I was wrong, that I should change, that I should act a bit more masculine.”

Guterres lived moments of pure trouble, and he got to a stage where he even said he thought about ending his life. “I was always told that if I kept being the way I was, I wouldn’t go far in life,” Guterres said. “My uncles would tell me, ‘you should not act like this. You see people who are like that... how they ended up in life.’ They would point out to some people, some openly gay men, ... and say, ‘you know, they don’t go far in life. It’s because they are like that.’”

Guterres tried to date some girls, he said, but he attempted to change wasn’t what he needed. His frustration increased even more with the lack of family support, even though he says, “to me family is everything. I love my parents, I love my brothers, [and] their acceptance is really important.” He said, “I don’t want to be hated.”

Despite all the negativity, Guterres found his way out of East-Timor. He got several opportunities to study abroad in countries like Norway, the United States, England and Costa Rica, where he completed high school, bachelor's and master's degrees. Studying abroad changed everything.

"When I left, ... I met people who treated me nicely, ... I felt loved for the first time," Guterres said. "I fully realized: This is who I am; I shouldn't hate myself; I shouldn't hide; I should be proud of myself. I feel loved and understood here, and it's time to fully embrace myself."

But, from realizing until coming out, it goes a long way. Topics like this one are sensitive and it takes time for members to come out in public as LGBTQ.

"I started coming out slowly," Guterres said. "I first came out to my brother, ... and he didn't take it nicely, we had a problem then. He was really upset, [and] we stopped talking for two years. ... I still actually haven't told my parents about it, they just guessed."

Guterres' plans are to not confront their parents with a reality they don't want to know. Instead, he works aside within Timorese communities, and hopes his projects can change not only the mindset of many Timorese, but also bring the acceptance to his family. Besides the gay pride, Guterres founded *Hatutan*, a group that promotes social inclusion. At *Hatutan*, they work with marginalized youth, and aim everyone to feel accepted and feel included in the country's growth.

Talking openly about sexual orientation seems to be more difficult to men, when compared to women. Other members of the gay community faced similar struggles as Guterres did. Domingos Barros, a 22-year-old from *Raikotu* neighborhood, and student at Dili Institute of Technology said, "I think [my parents] already know me, so they don't to ask me anymore."

Although the debate around LGBTQ is important, this debate is denied within the nest of many families. Families are too conservative, too attached to Catholic traditions and topics like this one represent a strong taboo.

Bella Galhos called it a "public secret."

"It means that people know, but people just don't want to talk about it," Galhos said. Likewise, this creates a lack of communication between those who may be in trouble, but just don't want to share with their closest family members for being afraid of the consequences. Barros said, when he suffered from violent attacks, he would keep it to himself.

"I didn't even tell my parents," Barros said. "I didn't even tell to the family as well. So, my friends were [my] protectors, because some of my family... They don't even understand."

As someone who is connected to a globalized world through social media, Barros is part of a new generation who is looking abroad to seek his own progression. He's a Business major, but his passion for fashion designing

makes him look abroad to bigger markets. While East-Timor's conservatism is getting too tight, especially for the new ambitious generations, Barros looks to the United States, Europe or Australia as some of the places where he would like to make a living.

Discrimination, stigma and violence are normal tools used by homophobic people. These forms of negative expression increase, because people in East-Timor believe members of this community go against important traditions.

"People think homosexuality is something abnormal," Guterres said. "It's something that is odd. ... They see this as something inferior."

The homophobic attack is often verbal, but many times is also physical. Barros will never forget the stories of drama that he lived while young.

"We shared the football club, and then I didn't want to get into it. And a friend of mine, he kept forcing me," Barros said. "I said, 'I don't want!' And he said, 'Why you don't want? You're a man, you're a boy, you have to go and play it.' I said 'I don't want,' and then he kept punching me."

"People are so scared of you, they think you are a virus," Galhos said. "They think you are a person who are after everybody; if you love a woman, then you'll be after every women; if you are gay and you love a man, you'll be for every men. That's how people describe LGBTQ. ... People just hate LGBTQ. And the way they hate, ... they [can] hurt you with words, hurt you physically, they name you. And mentally, they just put you in a way that you don't even feel you're like a human."

In addition, strong religious beliefs may also contribute for the increase of homophobia in East-Timor.

"LGBTQ is not a virus that will destroy the society," Ombudsman Pinto Baptista said. "Some people say that LGBTQ [members] are a 'curse from God' and it's actually not [truth], and [by] looking at the religious perspective, they are also God's creation."

The Catholic church is by far the biggest religious institution in East-Timor.

Catholicism in the country is a Portuguese influence, and although the Portuguese language was banned and effectively erased under the control of the Indonesian, Catholicism did not receive the same treatment. According to the Word Atlas, 97.6% of today's Timorese people are Catholic, which gives its bishops a bigger responsibility toward Timorese believers.

"The duty of the Catholic church is to increase moral conscience," Pinto Baptista said. "One of the doctrines in the Catholic church is the Lord's love and the love to others as you do to yourself. ... Even though people have differences in their [sexual] orientation, we need to respect and love them."

The church shapes the way people relate to each other and how couples behave in interpersonal relationships. In East-Timor, heterosexual couples

don't usually show affection in public, so when it comes to same-sex couples to show public affection, everything becomes even harder.

Besides that, marriage is a big Timorese tradition. Around the world, more countries are making legal for same-sex couples to marry; however, in underdeveloped nations, basic foundations may be a higher priority.

"[Same-sex marriage] doesn't really matter," Galhos said. "What it matters to me are the protections, social securities, opportunities, [and] resources. All being giving to everybody without looking at sexual orientation."

"When we do our work, people think we talk about gay marriage," Guterres said. "But, really, that's not what we are focusing on right now. ... When you see kids being discriminated, being bullied, [and] being kicked out of home, you should really prioritize on that."

East-Timor's LGBTQ community have no place to go. However, everything is recent. The movement and the country are young and will need time and solid foundations to grow. Also, it's not only the community that is growing, but the acceptance of many LGBTQ members have to become real.

Recent public events and the work done by leading members is allowing the public to know these members and respect them, as well as allows other hidden members to feel they can come out in public and show themselves with no fear. While this happens, East-Timor needs political and religious leaders to show openness for everyone and in every moment. No matter what the people's preference for their politicians is, leaders should not bring division upon citizens and make minorities like LGBTQ vulnerable.

"Changing minds is not an easy job, but, it is an important one," Guterres said. "Policies' change alone cannot always contribute to changes, because the real change as to do with changing the hearths and minds of [the] people. ... We want a future that is more inclusive."

This is just the beginning of the LGBTQ movement in East-Timor. As one of the worlds' countries with a higher percentage of young people, the Timorese society is expected to grow and change quickly in short-term.

"I'm not afraid anymore," Barros said. "It's my time to explode."

Note about the title:

"This is me" is an expression used by many oppressed people to counter-attack other people who discriminate them. Before I traveled to Timor, I had read and seen information about the movie *The Greatest Snowman*. The song "This is Me," from the movie, has a stong lyric and representats the fight of minorities like LGBTQ. While I was having my first meeting with Domingos Barros, he said about his acceptance something like, "This is me, and people would have to accept me like this." In that moment, I thought about the song and decided to choose "This is Me" as the story's name.