Discussing LBGTIQA+ Activism and Solidarity in Timor Leste with Upe and Bella Galhos - Transcript

Commons Conversation Podcast, 2024

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Welcome to Commons Conversations, a summer series of interviews with campaigners sharing their experiences and insights into activism, learning and movements, radical history and more. The program is broadcast by community radio, 3CR, and produced by The Commons Social Change Library, a website containing over 1500 resources for campaigners, which can be accessed for free at commonslibrary.org My name is Aoife and I'm the Engagement Officer at The Commons Social Change Library. This episode was recorded during my recent visit to Dili, Timor Leste in August 2024, where I had the honour of speaking with Upe, a human rights activist and member of the LGBTIQA+ community. In the interview, I refer to Upe as maun, which means brother in Tetum, Timor-Leste's official language. When I say mana, I'm referring to sister, which is a term of endearment and respect in Timorese culture. In this conversation, we discuss maun Upe's important work at human rights organisation HAK that involves interviewing survivors of mass killings during the Indonesian occupation. We also talk about the recent Pride Parade in Timor-Leste, and both the progress of the Pride Movement and ongoing challenges confronting the LGBTIQA+ community in Timor. We also discuss the power of solidarity across movements and maun Upe's contribution to the campaign to save Binybara, also known as Lee point in Darwin. Stay tuned for an insightful discussion.

Upe
Good afternoon, Aoife, thank you very much for having us and welcome back to Timor-Leste. My name is Upe, and I'm currently working on a writing project that involves collecting the narratives from the survivors of the mass killings by the Indonesian Army Battalion 745. The massacre which took place on 5th April 1980 in Koul, in our village called Ira Ara. It's located behind a former military district command codiv in Lospalos town. So, this mass killing is just one of the many atrocities in Timor-Leste that haven't been documented since the country gained its independence. In the reports you won’t find any information on this kind of massacre. So, that's why I direct my efforts towards documenting and collecting all the narratives. It requires significant effort and energy to gather all the testimonies from those who involved in the tragic event.

Thank you. Obrigada. So, last week Timor-Leste celebrated its annual Pride Parade, Upe can you speak a bit about your experiences of Pride over the years and how the movement has grown in Timor-Leste? I went to Indonesia in 2006, and I spent 8 years Indonesia, and then I returned to Timor in 2014. While I was in Indonesia I was studying sociology. I was doing Gender Studies in University, in college, so yeah, at least I gained some basic knowledge. So, when I came back to Timor and in 2014, I volunteered in PERMATIL - Permaculture Timor-Leste – where many young people from all across the country come all together. During that time, I was pushing myself to introduce things about gender stuff or queer stuff to the community, to permaculture community. So, during that time, for the very first time

there were French students, students from France. They visited PERMATIL and they started introducing what is family in France, like what kind of family they have in France. They introduce men and men, they raised kids, or two kids together, or woman and woman. At the time the audience was surprised, and then I explained what kind of family the queer families are. I start from there, very first time in Timor, and later on, one of my friends, who I used to study with in Yogyakarta, his name is Linga, he visited Timor in 2015 and he was working with an international organisation which support the LGBT organisation here in Timor. So, he introduced me to our friends in CODIVA. This was my very first time connecting with the LGBT organisation here in Timor. But I was surprised, because two of my schoolmates were there, which is Richella and the current Director of CODIVA Romiaty, so two of them were there, and I was surprised. Wow, it was great. And then, yeah, I'm feeling comfortable because we've known each other since we were studying in the Muslim school, near the Mosque. Then a few months later, I moved from PERMATIL to HAK. I worked for HAK, working as a database programmer, but I only looked after the data about the stolen children or missing persons during the Indonesian invasion, working with maun Sisto, our Late Comrade. At that time here in HAK, it was not easy, because I was here openly saying, "I'm gay" or whatever "I'm queer". At that time people were talking about the colour even of the curtains on the windows. We were like, having an argument about the colours. So, one of our friends, they bought purple curtains and some of them were saying "oh, it's very feminine" and blah, blah, blah. I was like, okay guys, it's only a colour. It's only a colourful curtain. And then, yeah, with Sisto we had very long conversations about LGBT rights. And then I worked at HAK for only 2 years and then I left, and I moved to England for 3 years. By the time I was in England, I was surprised that was a huge Pride here in Timor in 2018 or sometime around then. I was surprised because all of my friends were joining Pride. I was like I wish I was there during the Pride. I think it was a good start, because like in 2015, there was only a small pride in Xanana Reading Room. I was there in 2015 there was only gentleman from the Ombudsman and Bella Galhos. They were doing speeches there in Xanana Reading Room. But then when I left Timor, there was a huge Pride, I was like, oh, okay, great. I see everybody's there. The maun Sisto, our Late Comrade, was also there. Yeah, I only viewed the photos and video that circulated on the social media. What I was really very surprised about was one of my younger siblings also joined in Pride - supporting LGBT - even thought I hadn't told him about my sexual orientation yet. I shared the pictures to my friends in Yogyakarta, my Comrade in Yogya, and she said, "look your brothers and your comrades celebrated while you're in England". Yeah, it was funny and a bit emotional. Also, my uncle, he used to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was also posting a positive message on his Facebook account supporting the LGBT community. Because I think the Pride was marching or starting from the Ministry Foreign Affairs and going to the Government Palace, if I'm not wrong. Anyway, they were hosting. For me it was a big change that happened in Timor, like people close to me, they were all welcoming the LGBT community. But still I think there is a lot of things that we have to change and work to improve, not only Pride.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Thank you, obrigada. So, when you had Pride this year there was already some tension in the community, right? Going into it because, like you'd mentioned before with Bella Galhos, one of the co-organisers of the first Dili pride, was recently married to her wife in Darwin

and the President of Timor, Jose Ramos-Horta, was the witness at the wedding. What was the response of the public in Timor?

Upe
Okay, let's say that what Timorese people need to do today, we need to reflect on what the meaning is of independence itself, and reflect on how we actually reclaim our independence from Indonesia. It is crucial to understand that this struggle for independence and freedom, does not only involve heterosexual people, but it involves non-binary, for example Bella Galhos is the only one openly saying that she is a lesbian. But I think there's many of them out there who are not openly talking about their sexual orientation. If we look back to the middle of the 90's there are many Timorese people who were exiled in Europe, they were asylum seekers exiled in Europe. During that time most of them were supported by the queer movement in Europe. Like my uncle that I mentioned earlier, he was hosted by the queer community, who provided him with a place to stay there in Europe. As I mentioned before, the struggle for freedom, it's not only heterosexuals who fight for freedom, let non-binary citizens in Timor enjoy this freedom together with everyone else. Well, I mentioned the queer solidarity from Europe, like for example, like now here in Timor is we have our Comrade (now late Comrade) Tom Hyland, Malae Maubere - that's how we call him in Dili - he is an unwavering queer activist from Ireland who supported Timor-Leste during its independence. Now many years later he continues living here in Dili. I think that's the most prominent example for the queer solidarity for Timor-Leste independence itself.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Thank you maun. Yeah, I mean these are very interesting points, I think in two ways as well. I think in one way, when you're talking about liberation, you're also talking about, like, re-indigenisation and bringing back, you know, before Catholicism, or before, like Western religions were brought to places, you know, there were many gender identities in many countries and sexualities. There was no problem prior to the introduction of religions, generally speaking, in the world. And then the other thing that you're talking about there is solidarity. And like know, similarly in Narrm/Melbourne, the LGBTIQA+ community is always showing solidarity with every movement. It's a very strong community that knows the struggles and has continued to show up for other communities like Palestine. At the moment, we're seeing big movements. So, I'd like to ask, because this year's theme was solidarity for Pride, what does solidarity mean to you?

Upe
For me, particularly the queer solidarity serves as a powerful tool of resistance against all forms of social injustice like particularly human oppression. Participation in solidarity does not require any expertise in all areas of knowledge. I can tell that out there some people feel like, oh, I'm not able to join that movement, I don't know anything. I think that's why people need to know that in solidarity, we need to like, complete each other against the injustice, we are not there to show off our knowledge or capabilities. The sense of humanity, I think the most important thing that as human beings, we have to protect, that being in solidarity and devoid of all this selfishness and desire to monopolise the resources of this Mother Earth or the fruits of human labour, because we know in the capitalist system, our mindset is like we want to have everything for ourselves. We don't want to share it. I think that's the

main thing that we have to destroy before we're involved in any kind of solidarity movement.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Obrigada, yeah, I feel like you've talked a bit now about both the international solidarity, but also the solidarity the LGBTIQA+ community shows with other movements, like the evictions that have been happening and other issues both domestically and internationally. So, then I'll guess I will ask, how do you think working in solidarity strengthens your movements? How does building capacity across movements actually makes your movements stronger?

Upe
Well, as I mentioned earlier, I'm currently engaged in a writing project that involves collecting narratives from survivors. The aim of this project is to raise awareness among the younger generation, urging them not to repeat this tragic event. However, witnessing daily mass murders in Palestine has left me feeling powerless, like it's really hurt my feelings a lot, so I've haven't done my project for like, nearly four months. We have had to focus on that issue, and I think activists all over the entire of world can relate, everybody's focused on Palestine because every day you can see on your phone or on the internet that people are being killed. It really hurts my feelings because I've been to Europe and I have visited like memorials for the Nazi victims in Germany, and I also visited one of the memorials for queer individuals who were killed during Hitler's regime. Apart from that, I also visited Anne Frank's House, so, it's all about the memorial for the victims of Second World War, right? I was also like questioning myself with my project, because my project is for the people who are not like from the Government level. Nobody's there to interview those victims, so they've been marginalised in Timor history itself, right? So, I push myself to collect all the data and the narratives. Apart from that, I think it's I have my own problem, because if you are reading about all the past crimes, like what happened in Second World War, like, there are plenty of books about Second World War? I read some novels about Second World War, so I was thinking that when you write in this kind of narrative, then people are going to understand and then not repeat all those types of crimes. But now, what's happened? Like in Palestine, the Jewish people, they are repeating - they were victim, but now they are the perpetrators. So yeah, it's quite challenging, I think, for everybody, not only me, and it's quite distressing. Well, I nearly made the conclusion that all the books or memoirs or monuments that were erected and dedicated to the victims of the war are useless. Like if you went to Germany, you could see it's something they build, it's like graveyard, but it's a monument for the victims. It was the biggest monument I have ever visited. But then it's not funny, like you are victim, and now you repeat. And back to Timor's case, if we are not like collecting all the narratives and directing the younger generation to not repeat, we never know what's going to happen in the future. Who knows? Some people got offended and repeat the same thing to Indonesia. So, we are trying to like, yeah, cut it. Never again.

Well, yeah, despite dealing with my feelings of pessimism, I easily become a pessimistic person. But I do recognise the importance of sustaining hope and envisioning a world founded on justice of all its habitants. Also, regarding my project, all the survivors, they trust me and they share the information - like imagine in the family, these women, the survivors, most of them are women, they've been facing a lot of harm - like the Indonesian military raped them and so on - and they have never shared it before, even with their own children,

because they got have trust but they trust me. So, I got all the information now. So, yeah, I know that I'm pessimistic right now, but I will go back to work on my project and make it happen. They want me to put it in a book form. Yeah, that's all they want. Thank you.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Thank you. And, yeah, I think on that as well, like they say, violence begets violence. You can also look at Indonesia, Indonesia was colonised by the Dutch and then went on to colonise so it's a cyclical thing that happens when we don't break it. And you know, when they talk, the Jewish community talks about Never Again. And then, you know, a lot of Jewish people say, yeah, that means Never Again for anybody. And I guess with solidarity also, you're coming to the point of, like, collective liberation. So, you know, if you think Jewish people want a safe place for them, well you're never going to be safe if you're destroying another person's home. And so, we have to, you know, come together and realise that no one's ever going to have freedom or liberation in this world unless everybody does. And that's the main thing with solidarity. I'll finish up soon. But just two more questions. One, maun Upe you recently travelled to Darwin to show your solidarity with the Larrakia people fighting to save the sacred side of Binybara, also known as Lee point, from being destroyed. Why do you think it's important to show solidarity with your neighbours in so-called Australia.

Upe
Well, first of all, during my trip to Darwin last year it was my intention to visit one of my dearest comrades mana M. But during the time, there were protests and my comrades and other comrades, they went to the protests, and some of them were being arrested by the Australian police. These comrades got fines due to their unwavering efforts to protect Binybara from being destroyed by the DHA. Australia is a vast continent, so I'm sure that there are suitable alternative locations for constructing housing for the army or for Australian military. Why Binybara? Why did they choose Binybara or Lee Point? Yeah, that was always the question from the very beginning I arrived. So, I arrived around five o'clock in the afternoon, and then we went to a concert in Darwin Town Centre, and in the morning, we start the protest. So, my friend had invited me to be there for a holiday, but then things happen. So, me and my comrades stay for like nearly a month only stay in Lee Point.

Well, let's say Binybara holds profound significance as a sacred site for Larrakian people to honour their ancestors. Ecologically, Binybara serves as a habitant for the endangered birds and pivotal stop over for global bird migration. Yeah, if it's destroyed, and where are those birds going to? There are no other places. I think in our era, in the 21st Century, I think all the places have been destroyed, so please stop it. At least leave one spot for them, we occupy the whole rest of the world. Binybara, it's, I mean, the connection with Larrakia, Indigenous people in Darwin to their land. It's been there before white European people arrive. So, it's never been like appropriate land for war field or whatever it is.

I think one of the former Assistant Ministers of Defence, Matt Thistlethwaite, maybe I mispronounce it, but he said this land was defence land. It has been defence land since the Second World War. So, he said that Binybara is appropriate place to build defence housing. Well, if we look back to that time because he mentioned the Second World War, right? And during the Second World War, Australia and Japan and Australian allies, they use Timor-Leste as a battlefield. And many local peoples become victims of the war. They were innocent.

They didn’t know anything about the Second World War. By the time Japan and Australia started the war in Timor, they evacuated all the white people, white European people from Timor to Darwin, and only local people were left here. So, what I want to say in this conversation is it's all about the white supremacy. They want to control this planet, this planet Earth, that's it. And the construction of housing for Australian military soldiers in Binybara or Lee Point, for me, it will contribute to the cycle of genocide, because it's going to affect particularly the Larrakian communities. Their future generations are going to lose their land, their ancestral land, and face the identity crisis - in Bahasa Indonesia we call it *krisis identitas* because they have already lost their root, so they have nothing to hold them. Yeah, I think that's why I have to be there standing on the street and saying, "Save Lee Point".

In Australia, it's still ongoing colonialism. Most of our friends, they feel ashamed, so that's why they joined the movement to, like, stop all this destruction. Because what I can tell from the protest itself, most of the activists are European Australian, while the First Nation they are doing the paperwork, they are not on the frontline. So, it was really nice strategy that I had never experienced before. During the protest in Darwin, in Lee Point, most of the activists, they are from the queer movement. So, it was a really nice atmosphere, place to be, hang out, have conversations, and then like people are free to in solidarity, express themselves who they are, not like in Timor or Indonesia. That is why here in Timor, I think people in our queer community, they have to realise that this struggle of the sexual orientation is one part of a bigger struggle. There are many huge issues, so yeah, that we need to join and fight those. Yeah, thank you.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Thank you. Thank you so much. And yeah, I think for anyone listening after they've listened to the podcast, to look up more and find out more information, like maun Upe mentioned about World War 2, because the Timorese people fought alongside the Australians for no need of their own but did so much for the Australian people. And I think on that note, I'd really like to leave it with just asking you how people listening can support activists in Timor-Leste maun?

Upe
For that question, maybe I have to go back for the previous question about the ongoing challenges that we face here in Timor. Like I would like to give you one example, a recent one, the current challenge we face is the predominance of numerous cases of violence against the LGBTIQA+ community. But sadly, this violence goes unaddressed in the legal sphere, leading the perpetrators to believe that they have the right, or even they have a duty to engage in such bullying and killing. For example, one case that captured the attention of human rights and justice activists here in Timor, was a tragic case of a young man named Aldo. On social media it was mentioned that the young man, Aldo, committed suicide, but last year he met with the president Jose Ramos-Horta, and he told him about all the kinds of discrimination that he faced from his family because of his gender and sexual expression. So, the kind of discrimination that he faced from his family is all well documented.

So, from my point of view I wonder if there are any comrades from abroad who want to support Timor-Leste like queer movement, please support CODIVA. I think CODIVA is the

most inclusive, because they have gay, bisexual, transwomen and transmen. So, everybody's there, not like other organisations that are only focused on certain gender expression or sexual orientation. Most importantly, support CODIVA, not only by offering knowledge, but also supporting CODIVA by providing like advocacy training in the legal domain. The queer community here in Timor, they're vulnerable, most of us do not have access higher education, so we don't know how to defend ourselves. Because Timor - as a democratic country - everybody is the same under law, so at least providing like basic knowledge about the laws they can use as a tool to defend themselves. And I think if there is any support from abroad, maybe can contact the JU,S (Jurídico Social - Law Firm). Because from what I see there is only JU,S - who are lawyers who are sensitive about the LGBT issues, so I think they are the better one to provide that kind of training for legal support. Thank you very much.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Obrigada, thank you so much.

Upe
Thank you.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Thank you for listening to my conversation with maun Upe, whose work as a human rights activist and advocate for the LGBTIQA+ community in Timor-Leste sheds light on both the challenges and the victories in the fight for equality and justice. You're listening to Commons Conversations, my name is Aoife, and I'm the Engagement Coordinator at The Commons Social Change Library. Next up, we turn to another inspiring activist from Timor-Leste mana Bella Galhos. Mana Bella's story is one of extraordinary resilience and courage shaped by her experiences as a freedom fighter and her ongoing commitment to creating a better future for her country. Mana Bella was born in Timor Leste in 1972. After Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste in 1975 some of her brothers were killed and her father was detained by the military. Mana Bella herself was sold for a mere $5 to the Indonesian military, and was later forcefully injected with a contraceptive drug, leaving her unable to bear children. At the age of 16, mana Bella joined the resistance and spent her adolescence fighting for her country's liberation. During this conversation, mana Bella and I discuss a range of important topics, starting with motherhood and its significance. We also address the issues of family violence and its impact on individuals and communities. We explore LGBTIQA+ rights and women's rights in Timor-Leste, reflecting on the progress and ongoing challenges within the Pride Movement, emphasising the importance of visibility. We talk about what it means to be a changemaker and the significance of setting an example to inspire future generations. We also delve into the value of solidarity and the crucial role of using privilege to support marginalised communities. Mana Bella shares insights on the importance of lived experience and how her involvement in the independence struggle shaped her activism. Finally, we discuss how the international LGBTIQA+ community can show meaningful solidarity with the movement in Timor Leste. Stay with us for this powerful and thought-provoking conversation. I'm here in Dili, Timor Leste with Bella Galhos, who is a Timor-Leste independence, queer, human rights and environmental activist, and your current role right now is...

Bella Galhos

I'm working as one of the President's Advisors focused on Women's Economic Empowerment, as well as the Coordinator for the President's kitchen for the poor.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Amazing and you're also one of the co-organisers of the first Pride March in Timor-Leste.

Bella Galhos
I'm part of it as a member. I'm always active to involve and contribute whatever I can, I do.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Amazing, so mana Bella, you are very accomplished activist. You've done many, many things in Timor, but if you could introduce yourself and tell us a bit about you in your own words.

Bella Galhos
My name is Bella. My full name is Isabella Antonia da Cosa Galhos, but known as Bella Galhos, sometimes even people use my real name, I forgot, I'm known as Bella. I'm a mother, I have a 10-year-old daughter. I have a partner from India, recently we just got married, and I'm an environmentalist. I love gardening, I love landscaping, I love anything that is green I love and I'm an activist for human rights, for, I don't know, more than 40 years now, active in helping and empowering youth and vulnerable groups in the country. They need my voice, or my example, sometimes when you talk, people don't really listen, but when you do, people were inspired by it.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Absolutely. So, I guess a bit of context, like you said, recently, you were married in Darwin, and it caused a bit of a controversy with your wedding. Do you want to explain that a little bit as well.

Bella Galhos
Well, you know, my partnership with my partner, Iram Saeed, she's from India. It has been 15 years. We met back in 2010 in Hawaii, USA, when I did my studies there, and we've been living together in Timor for quite a long time. She's also another activist, she's a social changemaker. Having a daughter, and having a partner who are foreigner, based on the law in Timor is quite weak. It means that if something happened to me, my daughter would live in a limbo. And I want to make sure, I think, as a mother, every mother will make sure that their children are in the right hands, in the right environment, on the right path towards a great future, if they can. So, I'm just doing that. I'm not doing anything extra or less, just like every mother. So, I legalised my partnership with my partner, Iran, to making sure that she has the rights here in Timor and access to our daughter, whether I'm here or not here. The child should belong to another mother, if the other mother is not around, just for the safety of my own child and to guarantee her future in the right hand.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Absolutely. And I guess talking a little bit about your own story and your own upbringing. I've read a bit about it online but would much rather hear from you a bit of your story if you're happy to share that.

Bella Galhos
Yes, I am the oldest daughter of my mother, but I have one adopted sister, so all of us nine, nine siblings. Two died during the war, the occupation by Indonesia in my country, and being the oldest daughter, or being a woman in East Timor, I think, you know, Timor is pretty much a patriarchal society. There are a lot of duties for women, for a daughter, and some of the duties I do like, but there are some duties that I don't like. I try to work my way around them. And coming from a broken home family, my mother has been my inspiration. She has shown us - the children - the meaning of life, the meaning of our existence. She always emphasised education, because she herself was a teacher for 55 years. Those lessons that I got from my mother about being a woman, like I needed to be independent - not depending on or putting my life in somebody else's hands, especially your husband or your father or your brother. I guess her life lessons taught her enough. And being her daughter, watching her life since I was very, very young, I remember vividly, and I don't think I would like to repeat some horrible history that happened to my mother into my life. I want something new, and to make new, of course, I have to work hard and put in a lot of effort to make that difference. Being a mother myself now, you know, I have a daughter, I do want to make sure that my daughter taking up some of the values, being a person, being a woman, but also have her own independent way of thinking, things that she's capable of encourage her to do so.

The trouble that I've gone through since I was very, very young, as you know, I was an unwanted child by my own father because of my characteristic. I think I was born different. I am a woman, but with a muscular characteristic, which is, of course, based on the country's perspective of women, I am definitely out of the line, and that's a lot of pressure, you know, for me to deny who I am, acting to be, you know, being conformist, you know, being like everybody else. I just refuse to be like everybody else. I want to be me only. I want to be me. And those troubles I have to face, domestic violence, physical violence, emotional violence, so many things I learn, and I strengthen myself. I myself refuse to practice those things that I have been through. I think there is always another way of how to deal with issues, problems and how to deal with people. For me, the main point is you cannot bring in your perspective by using force or any forms of violence to make sure people obey or follow what your perspectives are. Everybody has a mission born with their mission and while they're around, they do what they're capable of or being gifted to them when it's gone, it's gone. I think I'm just like my mother, I want to leave a good legacy of being a changemaker. I have been a solid voice of vulnerable groups, women who are suffering from domestic violence in their homes, youth who are unemployed and who struggle to find their grounds or their path towards the better future in the country, and the vulnerable group as people with disabilities, who are being seen as the pity group. Meanwhile, the LGBT, has been seen as a disgusting group. So, I'm in between those groups that needed to be strengthened, because by strengthening them, I strengthen myself, and also, at the same time, I cure myself.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Absolutely, yeah, and I think it's really important as well, speaking with you, mana, because you know, I think particularly in Australia, we hear a lot of the independence activists, like in a patriarchal society, or anywhere in history, you always hear about the men in the movement. So, it's so important to highlight the women that have, you know, been involved in and the queer people who've been involved with the struggle of independence in

Timor-Leste and continue to fight for a better future for everybody. I think especially, like you're saying being an activist it's not for yourself, it's for future generations and you have to think about change beyond your lifetime as well and like what we can create for the young people and the future we can help to create for them, hopefully, a better future. So, I think one of the things I really wanted to talk to you about as somebody who is part of organising the first Dili Pride, who has been one of the first openly proud queer people in Timor, how do you think the movement has developed over the years, and in what ways have you've seen change?

Bella Galhos
As far as the movement and the progress it is happening, it's taking place. But of course, with each and every victory we have accomplished, the more you identify, so yes, there is so much more to do. Things are happening, changing, progressing, but there's a lot still to be done. What needs to be done here regarding the perception of the queer communities in Timor, it has to start from home, the process of acceptance or here in Timor we call it, *simu malu* (mutual acceptance), for me has to start at home. When your family, your immediate blood family, related to you, accepts you, it makes things easier. Also, for a big picture, it's safer for a person who with the identity as LGBT in the country when they are accepted. What I see is that a lot of young LGBT who are not being accepted in their family, they're facing more danger and higher risk of losing their life, losing opportunities, or resources either in the town where they live, the community where they live, or in their country as a whole. The rejection, disowning, violence against them, violence coming in many forms, can be physical, can be sexual violence or prohibiting them from resources and opportunities, starts with the family. Their family will believe that LGBT community is worthless, therefore the parents don't no need to invest in their education. But then, when we see some of the LGBT like me and many others all come, you know, seeing me in the community that we can be also a changemaker or agent of change, then it inspires some of the parents to look at us and then invest in their children, including protecting them. This is what lacking here in Timor, the parents themselves, or family themselves, are not giving enough protection to their children, which is putting them at risk of being harmed by others, or, you know, violating them. This is what I have been seeing in the country. A lot of young generation of LGBT drop out. Those who are in my care, in my organisation are Arcoiris, a lot of them are underage or under 30, all of them almost have not finished University. You can count with your fingers, those who are able to make it. For some, organisations are able support them by providing them whatever basic needs they need. Like myself and my partner, we are the first couple who actually created a shelter in our own home where we provided a safe place where the community can come anytime, they want to, or they can run to if they don't have any home or place to live for a few nights or so, or to wash their clothes or just access basic thing. So, we always open our door for all these young LGBT who are kicked out of home.

The Government's stance, they do have rhetorical policies about No One Left Behind. Everybody hears that, everybody talks about it. But when it comes to implementation, I think it's still far from there, still far from that. We do need to emphasise that, when looking at all the Prides that happen in Timor, they are actually organised by organisations, individuals and supported by internationals. There is no single Pride which is actually supported by the Government. So far, Government has yet to put a penny on the community. So yeah, let alone with all the rhetorical politics and stuff. But we do need to put

things in the perspective of actually counting the community that belong here. They are Timorese. Sometimes Timor tries to compare ourselves to countries like Indonesia. They even say, oh, you know, at least Timor is not like Malaysia where they criminalise it or not like other parts of Africa that's actually killing the LGBT. For me, it doesn't make sense to you compare yourself, just to make an excuse, that you are actually better then. There is no such thing as better than, it's about doing the right thing in order to count all, each and all of your citizens. Because even one person complained or feeling like isolated or left out, there's already an issue. But we're not talking about one or two. We're talking about 1000s and 1000s of community that exist in the country. But many believe, many believe that we made ourselves to be one, or we've been imported somewhere from other countries, like for me, having lived in Canada for a long time, some even believe I bring this here. So, yeah, I admit there is progress. In 2016, if I'm not mistaken, I came out, I came out to the public about who I am, and I use the LGBT I am members of LGBT I don't, I do not single out any of the alphabet, because I don't think it's necessary. Most of all, I don't like to be in box. Yeah, I don't like to be in a box. I am just a human being who loves another human being. It is as simple as that, and I wanted to keep it that way. I am looking forward to seeing more progress taking place. Nowadays, no more only Bella. There are so many voices. There are so many activists in the movement. We have the younger generations who start to speak up, actively involved in their movement. And we have a few other we have CODIVA, we have Arcoiris and now we have another one called Antana, the movement. This is very good, and I'm hoping that these kinds of branches keep on growing and being rooted, and, you know, continue to make their part to put that progress and differences in the country.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Absolutely. Yeah, I've been really lucky actually. I met a few activists from CODVIA yesterday and got to speak to them as well. I also met, I guess you would call one of your children, or one of the people that had been in your care here, who had mentioned, maun mentioned, their experience of you helping them come out to their family. And you're saying that sort of because you think the change starts with families.

Bella Galhos
I took the time. I'm the one actually. I'm the one that actually travel across Timor-Leste or whatever district they live. If their parents are too harsh or who have practiced violation towards them. Yes, I have no hesitation to travel to their home and talk to the parents and whenever I travel to their home, I'm making sure that change is taking place before I leave. Because I'm a person who don't like to waste time.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Get to the point. Yeah, that's amazing. Thank you. Awesome. And then I think I was talking to somebody else, actually, that I interviewed yesterday, and they were talking about, you know, how independence includes everybody. Because freedom for Timorese people is not just like a free country, but also freedom for the people and all the people in Timor-Leste. Then we were also talking like, you mentioned, like, about solidarity. So, you're like, you're working to support different marginalised communities in Timor-Leste, and I know this, the theme for Pride was solidarity. So, what does solidarity mean to you personally?

Bella Galhos

Well, you know, solidarity means that we admit that we are part of the movement. You know, I don't like the idea of somebody come and help us, or somebody come and be a saviour. You believe that this is your struggle too. So, the solidarity is taking place because the sense of owning, the sense of being part of it. This is what the LGBT community is fighting for. Even if we are at home, we want to be, be part of that family, not being counted as a number of the family, but then never being recognised. You're always somewhere in the dark. So, having that solidarity which is rooted by the sense of this is us, this is all of us. We should not differentiate ourselves as if we're different, we're better. Whatever privilege that you have from the movement of solidarity towards the vulnerable group such as LGBT or people with disabilities, because they believe that this privilege should be also felt and owned by others, by everybody. So, solidarity, to me, is this, it is an action that a person or group implements because they believe this is something that they are responsible for too, they are part of it too. And through them, and with them, the change will happen.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Absolutely and I guess another thing that's quite interesting to reflect on in the difference with like, what I've noticed in Timor-Leste, compared to some of the activism in Australia, is for us, we're now kind of focusing more and bringing in more people with lived experience. Whereas I've noticed in Timor that seems to come a bit more naturally, maybe, if you could reflect a little bit what you think the importance is of highlighting people with lived experience.

Bella Galhos
I think we're putting the weight in the visibility of a person, an individual, and then that really inspires others to also identify. Because people come in at a different level of expression, how they express themselves, and people have different ways of how to go through, you know, their paths. Some people are so easy. Like for me, I have been hunted, been pushed down for so long, that when I got up, I raised up, that's it, you can't put me down again. If you put me down, I'll raise up again anyway. But there are people who feel like they should be waiting for others to do it, and then they will follow. And there are people who think that, yes, it is our job to continue the progress that is taking in place. So, it's a group of people with differences. But I think putting the visibilities of a person, their experience, into perspective and being seen and then appreciated and recognised by the other or the rest, is very important, because, like I said, not everybody can express, not everybody can actually come out of their skin or their cocoon to actually be who they are. But by doing the work, there will be a lot of inspiration and especially if they see the progress. In the beginning, of course, like, if I'm looking at my life in the beginning, my family will be, you know, trying hard for me not to come out and stuff like that. But and then they also have no idea of what it is. So, a lack of information, is so rooted in this country that people just go through their feelings just guessing. And you know, bringing in science, information, and all the studies it's taking some time, but there are people stuck, especially the younger generation. So yes, it is very important for people to become themselves and when looking at themselves say, I'm worth it. This is who I am. This is my life. And I have a mission while I'm here in this world. And when I'm done, I will leave something to be you know, remembered by. I think everybody should be given the chance to leave their legacy. It's very important.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Absolutely and how do you feel your experience as an independence activist has impacted your experience now as an activist like, how do you think that shaped you as a changemaker?

Bella Galhos
Well, first, I think I have a lot of progress inside me. I've seen a lot of change in me. How I see people, how I see the world, how I do things. You know, coming from a very broken home, you don't have much of an example to look up to. You don't. You only have a few like me. I'm looking at my mother and then try to grasp her way of living, how to survive. But thanks to God, you know, I was exposed to the world. I left Timor and went to Canada, so I was exposed to and meeting so many people, areas of life and experiences. It really enhanced me as a person, and made me, you know, created a frame for me, what it is that I want in life. Of course, I see a lot of problems, I was a person who could articulate in things, but I didn't have enough information. So, I learn, I study, I read. This is not the culture of this country. Timor, reading is not a culture. People are just telling stories - it's verbal. So, getting into reading, getting to know things before you speak. For me, when I don't know things, I rather not say a thing, because why would I say something that I don't even know? And I rather preserve if you know, if I don't not have enough information. Observing and then speaking. And there's a lot of people coming out after my breakthrough, especially in 2017, when I brought up the issue of me being discriminated as an LGBT who's supposed to have the chance to be member of Government. I was dismissed because of my sexual orientation and when I went crazy about it single handedly, none of the organisations for women actually stood by me. None. I did it myself, single handedly. I make a huge impact and that was the moment that I see a lot of young people coming out, and more people every day, my house was crowded. My house crowded with the presence of young LGBT who felt that finally we have a voice, who can actually put a lot of weight into them. Yeah, so I became somehow an icon. But you know, I'm not a person who have a big head or a big nose. I take it more as a responsibility, because I do have privilege. I was a veteran. I fight for independence for Timor-Leste and for that I am respected for what I have contributed to the country. For me it is a privilege, so I use that privilege to expand the things that really need expanding and put weight in things that people don't see, show the things that people don't see. So yes, today a lot of young people are coming out, they're speaking out, they're walking in the street, you can see they're not so hesitant anymore, some still, but it's not like if you compare 10-15 years ago. Back then you hardly see, especially the lesbian community, lesbian, transmen, you don't see much, but today, boom, they are everywhere. For transwomen and gay guys, they are quite visible, quite visible, but they don't talk about it as much. They are just there. But the lesbians and transmen today, they're coming up, they're coming out, and they give themselves, and some of them are clearly open with their partners. Start to live, still hiding, but they're already living in there with their partners.

Aoife Carli Hannan
That's awesome. I won't hold you too much longer. Thank you so much. But the last question I would like to leave it with for people listening in so-called Australia is, if there's any way that we can support and show solidarity from where we are with the LGBT community here in Timor Leste.

Bella Galhos
I think it would be great to have the movement of LGBT in Australia, and people who have the privilege and the resources and opportunities - share and help in the visibility of the LGBT movement here in Timor, and your experiences are absolutely important to us. How we can enhance what we have here. A lot of LGBT here in Timor are so young, very young age. If they could have the opportunity to be granted education, resources, opportunities for them to go back to school or be grounded economically, I think that would create a lot of good change for them, to be who they are and gain their independence. I think that's what I needed from everybody, whoever is listening. Amazing.

Aoife Carli Hannan
Obrigada mana. Thank you so much. It is an absolute privilege to speak to you today. Thank you. You've been listening to Commons conversations produced by The Commons Social Change Library, a website containing over 1400 resources for campaigners, all of which can be accessed for free at commonslibrary.org.