

———— PRACTICE BRIEF

# Supporting feminist leaders through investing in collective care

Lessons from *Bin-Alin Hakbi't Malu*  
(Sisters Empowering Each Other) Phase 1

APRIL 2022



Illustration by: Scarlett Musu

## About Bin-Alin Hakbi'it Malu

From January-November 2021, *Bin-Alin Hakbi'it Malu* (BAHM Phase 1) supported 16 Timorese feminists, activists, and leaders to enhance their confidence, leadership qualities, self and collective care skills, and knowledge foundation in feminism. The program opened and closed with in-person retreats to build trust and community and take a trauma-informed approach of centring the wellbeing of participants.

The core component of BAHM Phase 1 involved a curriculum of 19 weekly sessions, delivered by 14 Timorese and international facilitators, covering topics including mental health, feminist values, intersectionality, engaging men in gender equality work, and resourcing feminist activism, among others. This practice brief documents lessons learned, with participants reporting a strong sense of ownership, personal transformation, and benefits to their families, communities, and organisations.

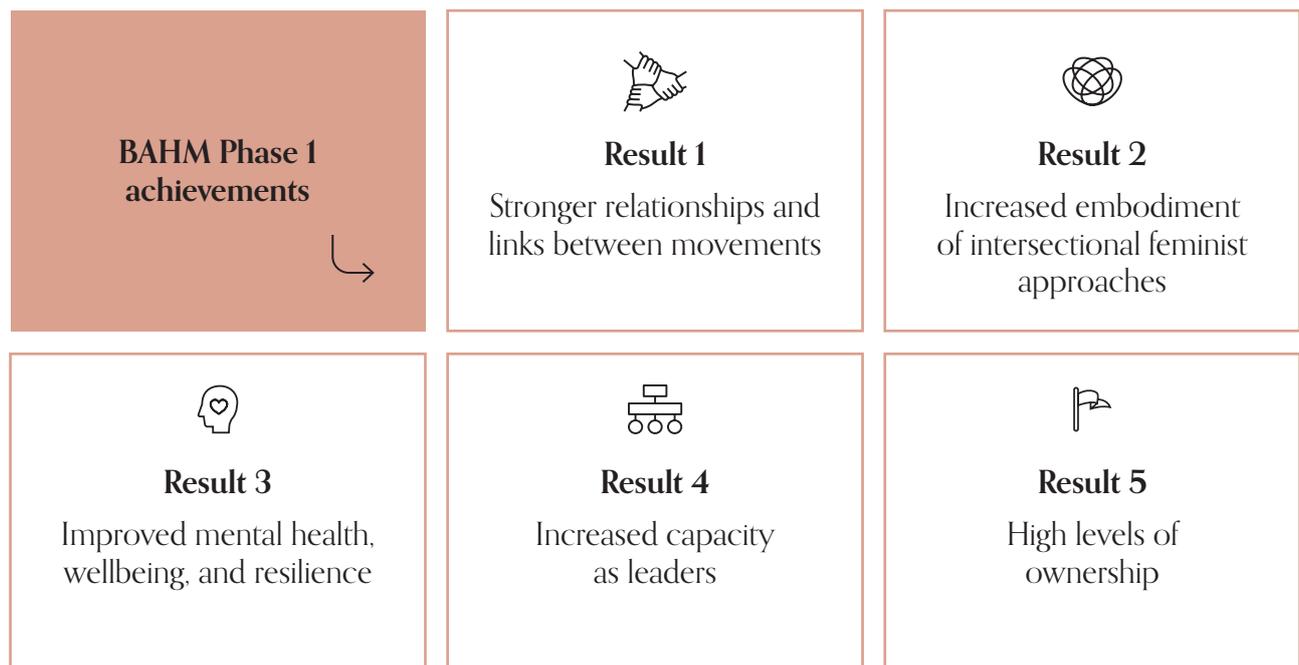
Activists and feminist leaders are crucial in achieving gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. Yet in Timor-Leste, and globally, resourcing for the people behind these

movements is scarce. BAHM Phase 1 used intersectional feminist approaches to build a leadership program that centred individuals. A feminist curriculum, co-mentoring, and spaces for critical reflection, self and community care, helped to build connections across diverse sectors. It used highly localised, co-created, and low-cost techniques, such as facilitated analysis, breathwork, gratitude practices, ritual, and self-reflection.

Months after the end of BAHM Phase 1, participants who were brought together by the program continue to support each other through significant life decisions and are collaborating on new feminist initiatives.

The success of these methods complements, and provides an alternative to, project-based capacity development and leadership programs. Learnings from the BAHM Phase 1 apply to various contexts across the Timorese civil society sector and abroad.

*Bin-Alin Hakbi'it Malu* is now entering its second phase, which will begin in July 2022.





### Reimagining ritual and tradition

BAHM Phase 1 incorporated Timorese feminism, ritual, and tradition, including the use of the *biti* (woven mat) for discussion and sharing. Usually, the *biti* is a space for decision-making by male elders. In BAHM Phase 1, participants reclaimed the *biti* as a space for inclusion and equality between cis and trans peers.

A traditional cleansing ritual was also included at the start and end of BAHM Phase 1, in which betel leaves were used to cleanse people of negative energy. The ritual is normally led by a male healer, but the participants reclaimed the ritual, using the leaves themselves. To them, this symbolised reclaiming ownership over their healing.



### Transformational change within the program

BAHM Phase 1 provided open-ended space for growth and healing. Some participants noted that this resulted in transformation personal shifts. For example, after sitting side by side on the *biti* with their peers, empathy for each other's diverse lived experiences increased, and personal divisions and misunderstandings began to shift. Strong bonds of support and friendship were formed, and simple acts, such as breathing and gratitude, became, in the words of one participant, **'like a base... to solve problems and get through difficulties.'**



‘When women sit together in a circle, I believe something extraordinary happens’

———— NISIA, BAHM PHASE 1 PARTICIPANT

**Table 1: BAHM Phase 1 Curriculum Overview**

Session	Objectives
Mental health and wellbeing (Part 1 and 2)	Create a safe space for participants, acknowledge the importance of wellbeing for our role as activists, unpack common myths and misunderstandings around mental health, and explore practical strategies for self-care.
Feminism, power and privilege	Develop a shared understanding of foundational concepts of feminism and explore what this means in a Timorese context.
Understanding inequality and reclaiming your power	Reflect on how sexism and gender inequality impact our daily lives and explore ways to be a feminist leader and challenge everyday sexism and inequality.
LGBTIQ+ rights	Explore why allyship and intersectionality are crucial to feminist leadership and learn about LGBTIQ+ advocacy in Timor-Leste.
Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls (VAWG)	Learn about the context of VAWG in Timor-Leste, the referral network and approaches to prevent this violence across the ecological model.
A feminist analysis of the issue of abandoning babies in Timor-Leste	Explore a topical and controversial issue in Timor-Leste from a feminist lens, as a case study on feminist advocacy.
Protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation	Understand the importance of child protection, in physical and online spaces, explore age-appropriate strategies for teaching children about consent, and learn tips for handling children’s reports of exploitation or abuse.
Guest speaker sessions	<p>Based on participants’ requests, several successful sessions were held with Timorese and international guest speakers with an emphasis on Global South feminist leaders working from an intersectional perspective. Topics included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Disability and violence against women</li> <li>▪ Feminist leadership</li> <li>▪ Pacific-led South-South feminist organising for climate change</li> <li>▪ Land rights in Timor-Leste</li> <li>▪ Engaging men to prevent violence against women and girls</li> <li>▪ Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Timor-Leste</li> <li>▪ Feminist communication and storytelling for healing and justice</li> <li>▪ Women and the resistance movement in Timor-Leste</li> <li>▪ Raising children with feminist value</li> <li>▪ Feminist resourcing, fundraising and network building</li> </ul>

When Dili experienced catastrophic flooding in April 2021, some participants applied techniques they had learned in BAHM Phase 1 to the first response in evacuation centres, where they proved very effective.

## Recommendations for practice

- **Resource people, care, space, and safety:** In BAHM Phase 1 this led to personal healing and stronger relationships amongst participants, and transformation of personal beliefs.
- **Localise your program creatively:** Reclaiming Timorese history, ritual, and tradition, and contextualising BAHM Phase 1 within current feminist issues in Timor-Leste, led to high levels of buy-in and ownership amongst participants.
- **Build an evidence base:** Build upon the wealth of existing work on feminist leadership and contribute back to an independent base of evidence.
- **Use low-cost and adaptable methods:** Free or low-cost wellbeing and mental health practices allowed participants to adopt the methods themselves and share them more widely with their communities and organisations.
- **Plan for extra coordination needs, especially for co-mentoring or self-organised activities:** BAHM Phase 1 required commitment from participants, and time from facilitators to coordinate activities. Co-mentoring was a significant feature but was challenging to implement in practice, as it required participants to organise the sessions themselves.
- **Model feminism and intersectionality:** Diversity was one of our biggest strengths, and learning feminist skills of critical reflection and collective care increased participants' capacity as leaders.
- **Resource mental health:** Most participants had experienced first-hand and secondary trauma and were also disproportionately affected by emergencies. Trauma-informed approaches were beneficial, and participants reported BAHM Phase 1 would have benefitted from more support to mental health.
- **Deepen local and international mentor networks:** Local and international connections were key to its success. For multi-year approaches, include previous cohorts of participants in future work, and continue to invest in Global South-South connections.
- **Test methods in other contexts:** The low-cost and adaptable methods used have the potential to be applied in a range of contexts and with different groups of people, for example with social workers.
- **Meet in-person wherever possible:** BAHM Phase 1 would not have been successful without an in-person retreat and workshop to introduce the group to each other and the methods of the program. COVID-19 lockdowns meant that most sessions were delivered over Zoom, where unreliable internet connectivity was a recurring barrier and source of frustration for many participants.
- **Mitigate barriers to participation:** Extra resourcing was required, including phone credit, transportation, and resourcing of care needs, particularly amidst the flood emergency in April 2021, and subsequent COVID-19 lockdowns.
- **The process of change is not linear and is different for everyone:** Participants experienced different changes, in different degrees, depending on how personally invested they were in the program and how consistently they were able to participate.

## Why invest in feminist leadership?

- ◆ Increased relationships, learning, and collaboration across organisations and sectors
- ◆ Increased ownership and participation in projects
- ◆ Increased individual resilience, e.g., to trauma and burnout
- ◆ Increased embodiment of intersectional and transformational feminist approaches

Immediate impacts

Flow on effects

Long-term impacts



Stronger individual leaders and civil society organisations

More sustainable and aligned grassroots movements

More locally relevant, successful and transformational development programs

Gender equality

Reduced rates of gender-based violence



Photo by: Mariano Gonçalves Visual Art

## Get in touch!

If you would like to learn more about *Bin-Alin Hakbi't Malu*, please contact:

[admin@equalityinstitute.org](mailto:admin@equalityinstitute.org)