

# Angolan women in the aftermath of conflict

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**F**our decades of violent conflict have inflicted serious harm on the Angolan population and on women in particular. The gendered impacts of conflict and poverty in Angola are evident, as reflected in lower human development indicators for women than men. With lack of human security still an everyday reality, women and children comprise the most vulnerable groups, and along with old men, have typically comprised up to 80 per cent of the internally displaced population. In the aftermath of the war, Angolan women face new challenges as they struggle to overcome these obstacles and participate fully in their society. Yet, it seems the government has so far failed to address the changing role of Angolan women and the transformation of gender relations.

## Women's participation in the war

Women's recent history remains largely unacknowledged in public discourse on the war. The paths walked by women as soldiers, leaders, activists, survivors and victims of one of the most tragic wars in the African continent have yet to be widely discussed and their implications understood.

The Organization of Angolan Women (OMA), created in 1962 as the women's wing of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) played a crucial role in supporting the guerrilla forces from both inside and outside Angola. Reports on OMA's activities show that its members contributed to food production for the guerrilla army, organized literacy campaigns and basic health care and carried arms and food over long distances. There are no figures on how many women participated in the MPLA guerrilla army but oral testimonies indicate a substantial number.

OMA saw women's involvement and participation in the independence struggle as being "a testing ground where all who took part were called upon to make their utmost effort and develop their talents and abilities." As in other women's organizations linked to liberation movements, the OMA leadership comprised mainly



educated women with strong family or marital links to the political leadership of the party. Nevertheless OMA's main supporters were ordinary women from all social and ethnic backgrounds, who became involved in political activism and community work. Consequently, by independence, OMA had gained enough popular support to have delegates in every province and had an estimated 1.8 million registered members in 1983.

In turn, the Independent League for Angolan Women (LIMA), the women's wing of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was created in 1973 and also played an important role in the liberation struggle. It is said that women who witnessed the work of women's wings of other African national liberation movements instigated the creation of LIMA. In contrast to OMA, women in leadership positions in LIMA had no kinship ties to the UNITA leadership, due to fear of repercussions against men if women failed in their endeavours.

Women's role in UNITA during the liberation struggle involved the transport of materials, food and arms to men on the front line. Carrying was done on the head and involved long distances. Political activities consisted mainly of mobilizing people and particularly youngsters to join the armed struggle. Women were also trained as political activists. During the post-independence civil war, women remained active on all fronts and the leadership of LIMA was visible in political rallies both inside and outside the country.

## The legacy of war

Women suffered the direct effects of war in distinct ways. In addition to the large number of women who died as a result of combat operations, it is also acknowledged that many were raped by fighters on both sides. While soldiers were supposed to protect the population, many used their position to further subjugate women. Their behaviour and its impact on power relations between the sexes may have undermined the population's trust in those men. Women have also suffered most from landmine accidents, due to their responsibilities for gathering food. Many have lost their husbands and sons through the war, thus increasing the number of female-headed households.

The war and its impacts have increased women's workloads, as they have taken greater responsibility for activities usually performed by men, such as providing for the household, disciplining male children, building and repairing houses, dealing with community leaders and government officials, and fulfilling religious and social obligations. Many continue to perform these tasks even in peacetime, mainly because husbands have died or deserted the household. Women's earnings in the informal sector of the economy have started to pose a serious cultural challenge to men's income-earning abilities and to gender relations in the family. These changes may partly explain increasing evidence of an upsurge in domestic violence against women and children since the early 1990s.

At the household level, the long years of conflict have also created situations where women find it difficult to marry and remarry, especially if they have suffered sexual abuse. The shortage of available men also means that marriage is associated with accepting polygamous arrangements, which continue to be a common and socially acceptable practice in Angola. In situations when men had to fight in a different region for a few years, the forming of secondary households was seen as legitimate.

The interaction of thousands of soldiers in front-line regions with the destitute population also has tremendous long-term gendered impacts. For instance, young women who engaged in prostitution for survival during the conflict may suffer from serious health problems, poor self-esteem or social exclusion if they have become pregnant and/or contracted sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Following the *Luena Memorandum*, the government agreed a large demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programme. However, against the advice of the World Bank and other institutions, non-combatant women were excluded from any direct benefit as the programme covered only a set number of UNITA and Angolan Armed Forces (FAA) soldiers and failed to make specific provisions for vulnerable groups like widows and UNITA wives.

Women who were abducted by UNITA face the dilemma of whether or not to leave their UNITA husbands and return to their original homes, where they risk being rejected. In addition, the social reality of UNITA's supporters is critical for both men and women; relationships with non-UNITA supporters remain difficult, with people still suspicious of each other and some reluctant to provide UNITA supporters with jobs.

Further evidence suggests that women from UNITA who lived through the guerrilla years in the bush now have difficulty relating to men. Those in urban areas reveal that they can now enjoy expressing their feelings more openly but are not used to doing so; long years spent under a repressive system have made them reluctant to show their feelings in public.

## Participation in political life and women's involvement in peace initiatives

As in so many other conflict situations, Angolan women were excluded from meaningful participation in the formal peace negotiations between the warring parties. Neither OMA nor LIMA was able to play effective roles in bringing an end to the war.

Women's most vocal participation in political life has been their promotion of women's rights. Both during

and since the end of the war, they have been in constant negotiation with the political leadership, lobbying for their concerns to be taken seriously by policy-makers and government officials. In the past, OMA played a decisive role as a policy-driven outfit dedicated to fighting for the improvement of women's legal status as well as their economic empowerment, and above all, the integration of women's issues into mainstream policies.

Arguably, OMA's most significant achievements occurred in the 1980s. Their efforts led to the introduction of the Family Code and formulation and implementation of a policy to provide free family planning to women. The main features of the Family Code are the recognition of consensual unions as marriage, the protection of children born out of wedlock and the encouragement of a fair division of tasks and responsibilities within the family. OMA also provided technical assistance to women and encouraged debate and discussion on previously taboo subjects such as customary marriage and abortion.

Although OMA played an effective role in promoting these reforms, the reality is that the majority of women are still fighting for their rights to be respected in practice. And while OMA is still a strong reference point for the women's movement in Angola, it is no longer the leading group representing the women's agenda. Membership has gone into decline as the organization's continued ties to the MPLA have contributed to undermining its public credibility and ability to attract funding from the international community. Some members decided to create their own NGOs as a means of functioning independently of the party and have been more active and resourceful in responding to women's needs, through the instigation of development programmes and campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights and child vaccination.

It is important to note that some women's organizations have been visible in peacebuilding efforts. For instance, Rede Mulher has been an advocate for peace and campaigned against violence against women, and Women, Peace and Development (MPD) has also been active in peacebuilding. These initiatives have contributed to building a women's platform on peace and more importantly revealed that it is possible for women from different political parties and social sectors to combine efforts towards the same goal.

Nevertheless, the women's movement in general is weak. Like other social movements in Angola, it lacks capacity, influence and coordination. Many women's NGOs are unfocused in their role and objectives, reflecting a more general weakness in Angolan civil society, with the result that they have had little influence on policies that could improve women's lives.

Criticism has also been made of the movement's failure to represent the interests of women at the grassroots. Leadership is often in the hands of privileged women who have separate agendas due to their strong links with political parties.

One of the reasons why the women's movement has failed to unite on a common platform stems from the fact that the war has not meant the same to all women. Women have used a variety of means to survive and the social reality of poor women, whether in rural or urban areas, differs greatly from that of more privileged women. Larger numbers of poor women have lost their husbands and sons in the war and been displaced. These women are left with little hope for immediate improvement of their living conditions considering their low level of education and the fact that little is done politically to address their special needs.

In addition, women's organizations suffer from the same constraints as other civic organizations in funding and undertaking activities independently of the government. The non-governmental sector is still emerging and NGOs do not have much experience or capacity to respond to the enormous needs of many communities. The majority of civic initiatives are donor-driven rather than community-driven and have so far implemented short-term humanitarian emergency activities to the detriment of long-term development activities. In this context, significant assistance needs to be provided to local groups for them to start implementing sustainable long-term activities. At present, these are mostly left to international organizations, thus contributing to a wide disparity between the capacities of local and international actors.

## Current challenges

Today, Angolan social policies remain largely male orientated. Despite recognition of women's rights in the Constitution, these are rarely fully upheld in practice, as demonstrated by issues such as child support, where the government has no mechanisms in place to ensure men's compliance with their duty of parenthood. The right to inheritance is also an area where women continue to lose out, although this is more complex due to customary practices that place widows in a vulnerable situation after their partners' death.

The major obstacle to the realization of these constitutional provisions is that Angolan society remains predominantly a 'male preserve' in which women's rights are often violated for the preservation of a patriarchal structure inherited from African 'traditional values'.

Although higher than elsewhere in the continent, the number of women in positions of power and influence remains grossly inadequate. Although 54 per cent of the population are female, women are under-represented in all decision-making bodies. Just 34 of 183 parliamentarians and 3 of the government's 27 ministers are women and there are only 2 female Ambassadors, 3 General Consuls, and 3 Deputy Ministers. Women's participation in local government is also limited. This can be explained by many factors, including their comparative absence from the hierarchies of the political parties and time constraints that prevent them from competing on an equal footing in the political sphere.

Women involved in national decision-making are separated from the majority of ordinary women by life style, class and agendas. And although many women see the creation of the Ministry for Family and Women as a real advance in gaining political space, it can also be perceived as an institution that has helped to separate women's issues from the government's policy agenda. Many would argue that the government leadership does not take the Ministry seriously, allocating it one of the lowest budgets with the immediate consequence of under-staffing and limited capacity.

The Angolan media has also played a role in reinforcing gender-stereotyped images of masculinity and often providing rationalized support for the perpetuation of violence. Women are exploited through images of the female body. This can be seen through the highly publicized Miss Angola events, endorsed by the First Lady and greatly appreciated by many provincial Governors who in some cases provide large amounts of public funding for the spectacle.

## Conclusion

Despite the leadership shown by many women in adapting to new roles during the war, full gender equality in Angola remains a long way off. In some ways it is daunting to even talk about gender politics and balance in an environment where economic and social disparities are the only references left to the new generations.

However there are some practical steps that can already be taken. In the first instance, there need to be greater efforts to analyse and understand the gendered impacts of the war and their legacy for Angola. This would provide the basis for developing gender-sensitive policy and practice, which could enable greater participation by women in all spheres of society. This would in turn re-adjust gender relations to the needs of both women and men, as a fundamental component of the long-term process of peaceful and sustainable development.