

Angola

Accord 15 (2004) 'From military peace to social justice? The Angolan peace process'

Abstract

The ways in which women were affected by civil war in Angola conditioned their expectations of the post-war era. As well as being directly affected by violence, women adapted to changes in their socio-economic conditions in various ways. Yet in contrast to their active political role in the struggle for independence, women were largely excluded from peace negotiations and from political life after the end of the war. This was linked to the inexperience

of civil society organisations more generally, as well as prevailing patriarchal structures. Most importantly, the author argues that class and privilege affected the extent to which women were burdened by conflict as well as their subsequent political participation. She calls for more gendered analysis of the civil war to inform better policy and practice.

Background

After a 15-year liberation war, Angola attained independence from Portugal in 1975. Almost immediately the country descended into civil war as a power struggle ensued between the three former liberation movements, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) – which took over state rule after independence – the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). By the end of the 1970s the FNLA had disbanded, but with support from the US, Zaire and South Africa, UNITA continued its war against the MPLA government, which was supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba. The resources available to both sides, as well as profits from diamonds and oil production, ensured that Angola's civil war became one of the longest armed conflicts of the Cold War period.

From 1975 until the late 1980s Angolan society was moulded along 'classic' Marxist-Leninist lines. Private business, with the exception of the activities of foreign oil companies, was restricted. The state controlled the media and constrained the emergence of civil society organisations. The ruling party oversaw an increasingly repressive and corrupt state sector.

Peace initiatives mediated by Portugal, the US and the Soviet Union, eventually resulted in the Bicesse

Accords between the MPLA and UNITA in May 1991. These were followed by Angola's first ever general election in September 1992, under UN auspices. UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi expected to gain power; when he failed to do so he rejected the results and returned to war. This 'third Angolan war' was even more destructive than its predecessors. Whole cities were reduced to ruins, hundreds of thousands of people were killed, and millions displaced. UN-brokered talks resulted in another peace agreement, the Lusaka Protocol, in October 1994. Despite international sanctions against UNITA's supply networks, Savimbi was reluctant to surrender the military option. All-out war erupted again in 1998, ending only after Savimbi was killed in fighting in February 2002.

The Luena Memorandum of Understanding, signed in April 2002, acknowledged the ultimate defeat of UNITA and marked the end of four decades of war. It is estimated that between 500,000 and a million people lost their lives, with over four million displaced. In 2004, the year the Accord article was written, relative peace prevailed in mainland Angola, but in the enclave of Cabinda, which accounted for 60 per cent of Angola's oil production, a secessionist conflict persisted.

Angolan women in the aftermath of conflict

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Four 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 Angola's pre-independence struggle

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 Organisation 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, organised 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 organisations 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, who feared repercussions if associated with organised women.

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 mobilising 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.

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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.

“ 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 ”

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 demobilisation, 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 policymakers 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 organisation'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 organisations 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.