



The Angolan Women's Organisation in the vanguard

This article looks at the position of women in Angola and their role in the country's struggle for socialism.

The people of Angola will remember Deolinda, Engracia, Teresa, Irene and Lucrecia for a very long time. These five women were amongst the first militants in the independence struggle led by the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). At the beginning of the 1960s, a difficult decade in the struggle for freedom, they also participated in the foundation of the Angolan Women's Organisation (OMA). On March 2, 1966, while they were trying to join their MPLA comrades fighting the Portuguese occupation forces in the north of the country, they were caught by members of the puppet National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and assassinated.

Twenty years after these events, which established the role of women in the struggle for freedom, and ten years after independence, the organisation has more

than a million members. OMA's present general secretary, Ruth Neto, is another veteran of the anti-colonial war and also the youngest sister of Angola's first head of state.

In spite of the problems caused by South African aggression, OMA undertakes many different activities throughout Angola on a very limited budget. The government and President Jose Eduardo dos Santos himself have both paid ready tribute to the invaluable work carried out by the organisation in areas of health and education.

Legacy of colonialism

OMA is particularly concerned about the problems of peasant women in a country marked by underdevelopment and the after effects of colonialism, where agriculture is the main economic activity.

Women are generally responsible for the production of subsistence crops. In northern Angola, for example, men cultivate cash crops (such as coffee, cotton and palm oil), while women grow foodstuffs for direct consumption (such as manioc, sweet potatoes and groundnuts). In the southern central regions, men work in the maize plantations like their wives, but they usually produce only the extra crop destined for sale or exchange.

Since she is thus given the task of meeting the family's needs, the Angolan peasant woman is particularly cut off from the outside world. At its first Congress, held in March 1983, OMA recognised that peasant women are less likely than their husbands to change the old production methods that characterise their work, since it is 'difficult for them to understand the benefits they would gain from a new organisation of society.' OMA concluded that such women should lead initiatives aimed at modernising the countryside and raising the standard of living among the population in general.

In consequence, OMA organises periodic meetings in the villages. Peasant women are sometimes too busy to attend these meetings since, in addition to their work in the fields, they are also responsible for fetching water, making flour, preparing meals and educating the children. 'Despite all these tasks, however, women are showing increasing interest in coming to the meetings,' says Hilda Carreira, a leading member of OMA and an MPLA militant since the days of the

fight for independence. 'We discuss problems which arise in their daily lives. Men often ask whether they can also come to the meetings and we do not see any objection to this. On the contrary, it is good opportunity to remind them of their domestic obligations.'

Tradition and change

The matters raised at the village meetings are very diverse. Since they sometimes touch on deep-rooted beliefs and traditions, they have to be dealt with cautiously. OMA would like to see the elimination of polygamy and dowries, for example, but takes a tolerant attitude in practise. As Hilda Carreira explains, 'the younger generation will gradually break with these traditions when they are better educated and have access to the benefits of economic development.'

The resolutions of the OMA Congress take particular account of the problems of working women, and stress the need for government to pay special attention to the situation of peasants. Nonetheless their problems and aspirations are placed in the broader context of the reforms envisaged by the MPLA-Worker's Party, which 'are still not apparent' in the countryside. Many projects and programmes have been drawn up to improve the standard of living in rural areas, particularly for women.

However, a number of 'subjective and objective factors have rendered them impractical for the time being'. Apart from the permanent state of insecurity caused by enemy action in some regions, OMA lays some of the responsibility 'with the Party and the State'. Leaders of the organisation note that the Party has always shown more awareness of women's problems - and those of peasants in general - than the state, but party officials have not always exercised their authority to ensure that their policy guidelines are respected.

Training for midwives

OMA has therefore called on the state to direct the greater part of its development initiatives towards the countryside, where the majority of the population lives. OMA has opened several centres for 'development promotion

'in rural areas. Already the ministry of health offices has been asked to take measures to retrain the traditional midwives. The rate of infant mortality is still very high in the countryside.

Equal rights in the family

In urban centres, OMA activities are centred more around 'universal' themes such as the struggle for the emancipation of women and the establishment of equal rights within a family, at the workplace and in society at large. Information campaigns on family planning and various forms of contraception inevitably arouse much more interest among the women of the towns than among their sisters in the countryside.

OMA officials believe that the state is still reluctant to accept the fundamental rights of women concerning contraception and abortion

. Last year, on March 2, the date on which the five murdered heroines of Angola are nationally honoured, Ruth Neto made a speech in which she declared that health institutions have put up 'some resistance to the application of measures relating to sex education, family planning and the punishing of illegal abortion. We all know of cases where women and children have died as result of repeated childbirth and where young girls have carried out abortions on themselves with primitive means at hand'. Since it was impossible to ignore the reality of the situation, she concluded, the institutions concerned should be encouraged to take a clearer stance on behalf of women's basic rights.

Adult education and literacy

OMA has also given consideration to the special problems of urban housewives. It calls for the recognition of the social value of domestic work and wants housewives to be given the opportunity to learn skills.

'Domestic activities simply do not enable women to flourish as individuals and as full members of our society', declares the organisation. This implies the need for intensified efforts to educate adults, particularly women. At present 300 000 Angolan women are literate, but there still is a large number who are illiterate.

Even today, though 46 percent of the children who start at primary school are girls, they represent only 23 percent of those who finish their education. Consequently, there is a need to help women to take on responsibility and assert themselves outside the family circle, especially in the towns, so they can play their full role in the development process and in the economic growth of the nation.

New family code

In modern Angola, nevertheless, increasing numbers of women occupy highly responsible posts, including top level positions in the Party, the machinery of state and the army, where they sometimes carry out tasks which were once performed exclusively by men. Employment figures in Luanda, however, show that women are generally more highly qualified than their male counterparts in similar posts. In cases of flagrant injustice, OMA is ready to intervene. 'We receive complaints where the law has been breached and we help the parties concerned to transmit them. Says Hilda Carreira, 'The law is on our side in many respects. The implementation of the new Family Code, once the proposed legislation has been put to the population, should represent major progress in the defence of women's rights'. Amongst other things, this Code will accord established de facto couples the same rights and duties as married people, with particular regard to their children.

The achievements made, and those to come, however, will always be at risk until the aggression against Angola ceases. Speaking to the OMA Congress, Prseident Dos Santos pointed out that 'special features of the situation of Angolan women should not make us lose sight of the wider problems facing the nation. In the last analysis, the emancipation of women depends upon the resolution of these difficulties. We cannot offer adequate solutions to the problems of women until we have dealt with the major threat against our country; that is to say, imperialist aggression and economic difficulties.

OMA's General Scretary, Ruth Neto, expressed the significance of the organisations activities against this dramatic background. 'We should all be aware that our own generation will be sacrificed to the war and the material and social problems this has occasioned,' she said. 'But our sacrifice will not be in vain, for it will enable our children to live in a free nation, on the right path to development.

Presidential Support for OMA's Objectives

In his speech to the First congress of the Angolan Women's Organisation (OMA), President Dos Santos had some strong remarks to make about attitudes and practices unacceptable in revolutionary Angola:

"Having established equality on the battlefield, in the difficult conditions of guerilla warfare and clandestine activity, the Angolan woman of today is rightly calling upon even the most reactionary and selfish of her compatriots to respect her independence and her freedom to make decisions about her own life and that of her family [...] This is not an easy matter, nor is it a struggle that concerns women alone, for it involves all the progressive elements in our society..."

"Male authoritarianism-commonly known as 'machismo' - is still a serious obstacle to the full scale participation of women in political and organisational work, and in the efforts we intend to make in the fields of production, national defence and education. Underlying the 'macho' phenomenon, there is often a male feeling of distrust and a reactionary, possessive attitude which reflects insufficient mutual understanding. This is also a sign of the lack of patient educational attempts to combat superstition and other prejudices, rumour, intrigue and even idle speculation."

"Both the Party and the Angolan Women's Organisation have a very important role to play in struggling for the real emancipation of women by creating the conditions for the raising of their cultural level; for helping them to participate fully and consciously in economic, political and social life; and, finally, for establishing their legitimate right to decide freely when they wish to have children..."

"The defence of the interest and rights of children should also be an integral part of the fight for emancipation..."
