

Abstract

Women in Mozambique are represented in their government and within the ruling party, Frelimo, by an official women's organization, the Organização da Mulher Moçambicana (OMM). In this paper, OMM's history, policies, and activities are discussed in order to gain some understanding of the possibilities and problems concerning female and feminist organizing for power.

Despite important improvements in women's lives initiated by the socialist government of Mozambique, basic issues of gender inequality are not addressed. Women's issues are sometimes relegated to the "woman's organization ghetto" rather than being integrated into central policy-making. In addition, the ongoing brutal war by South-African backed Renamo forces has made social efforts of all kinds difficult, if not impossible.

By critically assessing the advances made thus far, we can learn from the approaches and efforts of Mozambican women in the women's organization. Despite the limitations, there are examples of women's empowerment in Mozambique.

About the Author

Kathleen Sheldon lived in Mozambique for two years (1982-1984) and returned in August 1989 as a consultant on Mozambican women for the U.S. Agency for International Development. She is currently an affiliated scholar at the University of California (Los Angeles), Center for the Study of Women.

Women and International Development

Michigan State University

202 International Center, East Lansing, MI 48824-1035

Phone: 517/353-5040, Fax: 517/432-4845

Email: wid@msu.edu, Web: <http://www.isp.msu.edu/wid>

"To Guarantee the Implementation of Women's Emancipation as Defined by the Frelimo Party": The Women's Organization in Mozambique

by

**Kathleen
Sheldon**

University of
California,
Los Angeles

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"TO GUARANTEE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION AS DEFINED
BY THE FRELIMO PARTY": THE WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION IN MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambican women have been seen as part of an international feminist vanguard, in part because of the presence of the Organization of Mozambican Women, commonly called OMM (for Organização da Mulher Moçambicana). Yet the quote in this paper's title--from the statutes of OMM--describes the contradiction that I observed while doing research on working women in Beira, Mozambique (Frelimo n.d.:7). OMM is the recognized voice for women in the structures of the ruling party, Frelimo, as well as in the government. (Frelimo, the acronym for the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, led the armed liberation struggle and upon independence became the ruling party). This legitimacy gives OMM a strong opening to push for women's needs, "to guarantee the implementation of women's emancipation." But the qualifying phrase, "as defined by the Frelimo party," positions the organization in a subordinate relationship to the male-dominated Frelimo party. This provides a way for male leaders to segregate and sometimes ignore the demands of women. Social issues, especially those dealing with marriage and the family, are commonly considered to be OMM's responsibility.

While trying to understand the contradictory position of OMM, I came across an article by Maxine Molyneux which discusses a similar pattern in Nicaragua (1985). I realized that despite divergent histories and cultures, the adherence to a common political philosophy brought about many parallels in the women's struggles in the two countries. This paper will apply some of Molyneux's analysis to Mozambique.

The Organization of Mozambican Women

Mozambique is a recently independent Third World socialist country facing so-called "low-intensity" warfare waged by South Africa (Marshall 1986; Thompson 1988). The government has articulated a strong position in support of women's emancipation. Mozambican women benefit from substantial legal and civic rights, including constitutional equality. Other legal supports include paid maternity leave, daily time off for nursing infants, and a commitment to developing an extensive system of day care centers.

Mozambique was a Portuguese colony that won its independence in 1975 following a lengthy armed struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, led by Frelimo. Women were active in the liberation struggle, and the Women's Detachment was developed as a vehicle of their involvement. OMM emerged out of the Women's Detachment, and was structured by Frelimo as an arm of Frelimo. Thus the women's organization was originally designed to bring women into the liberation fight, not necessarily to raise fundamental questions about gender inequality. The document announcing OMM's formation makes the relationship very clear: "To liberate herself, a woman must assume and creatively live the political line of FRELIMO" (Organização Mulher Moçambicana 1975:316).

Mozambique's approach to women's liberation was based on orthodox Marxism. They viewed women's inclusion in the economy, especially through waged employment, as a primary path to emancipation. The idea that women will be liberated through waged work has been widely criticized in socialist

feminist writings. Some central problems with this approach are that it ignores the work of women within the family and household, and that it attempts an economic solution to the social problem of male/female inequality (Molyneux 1981; Ong 1986).

That this approach was incorporated into the policies of the women's organization itself is suggested by a resolution from the OMM's Second Conference in 1976, which states that "the idle woman is not involved in collective production....She is an individualist with narrow horizons....She is an excellent victim for reactionary ideas." The plan of action for combatting this problem was to involve women in collective production, and to encourage all women to raise their "cultural, scientific and technical level" (Mozambican Women's Conference 1977:13).

Maxine Molyneux's analysis of women's interests and the state in Nicaragua suggests a useful formula for understanding these contradictions (1985). She points out that we must disaggregate women's interests in order to evaluate the record of socialist states regarding women and gender equality. She begins with a reminder that women's interests and gender interests do not always converge.

"Women's interests" are difficult to define, as such interests vary according to an individual woman's class and ethnic identity, among other variants. The term "gender interests" is more precise: issues can be classified as "strategic" or "practical" gender interests. Strategic interests include general social goals such as ending the sexual division of labor and other institutionalized forms of discrimination. Success in this area would require a major social transformation.

In contrast, "practical gender interests" are issues of survival that emerge from women's actual position in society. For instance, women in poverty may be said to have a greater interest in welfare programs whether these specifically target women or not. Rural women may give a high priority to acquiring better agricultural information and technology, or even an adequate supply of hoes.

Literacy campaigns are an excellent example of practical gender interests, as they provide an important way of increasing women's participation in the society and economy, yet they may not be specifically focused on women. In Mozambique over ninety-five percent of Mozambican women were illiterate at independence. The lack of a broader strategic gender component to the literacy program has had an impact, as women do have specific constraints to their participation, such as child care, the "double day" of work, and their lack of school experience as children. Nonetheless, literacy programs will benefit some women despite these problems (Marshall 1985; Urdang 1986).

Thus, a state may be answering certain practical gender demands, while avoiding or delaying action on broader strategic gender issues. In another example of the state appealing to practical gender issues, the introduction of child care programs in Mozambique is directed at working mothers rather than all parents needing such help. Thus, expectations about mothers being primary care-takers for children underlie the effort, and the broader strategic gender interests are not addressed at all within the child care program (Sheldon forthcoming).

It is useful to assess such programs by analyzing the extent to which they contribute to the empowerment of women. Literacy programs certainly assist women in gaining the skills necessary to increase their visibility in modern societies. Child care programs, by alleviating some of the daily tasks of women, allow them to contribute in other ways to their own economic and social development as well as to that of society.

By making child care a priority, and by other measures such as expanding health care programs directed at maternal and child health, or building community water taps in neighborhoods that lacked such amenities, women's practical interests are definitely being addressed by the Mozambican state, and their relative ability to participate in society is increased.

Because of women's primary role in child care, family health, and food preparation, such programs specifically address and alleviate women's daily work. Simultaneously, these efforts perpetuate assumptions about women's responsibility for children and food preparation. As Molyneux comments in assessing similar efforts in Nicaragua, "A feature of this kind of campaign is its recognition of women's practical interests, but in accepting the division of labor and women's subordination within it, it may entail a denial of their strategic interests" (1985:249).

OMM's Extra-Ordinary Conference

The process by which Frelimo directs OMM policy became clearer during preparations for the OMM's Extra-Ordinary Conference, which was held in November 1984. The preparations were based on meetings held throughout the country in villages, neighborhoods, and work places. The discussion topics included both traditional forms of oppression such as polygamy, bridewealth (called lobolo), and initiation rites, and contemporary problems such as divorce, family relations, single mothers, and the general situation of women in modern Mozambican society.

A regional meeting that I attended in September 1983 in Beira was typical; the women and a small number of male Frelimo members met in intensive sessions of small group discussion for two days. The topics followed an outline provided by the national organization, but those present did not feel constrained to adopt the official line. For instance, Frelimo had decided to abolish traditional practices that oppressed women, yet many of those present felt there were also good aspects that would be lost. Bridewealth, though its value had inflated in recent years, was seen to have a positive role in formalizing marriages. Initiation rites were an important forum for educating youth about sex and adult responsibilities, though there were admittedly elements that emphasized the subservience of wives. People at meetings all over Mozambique spoke out of their own experiences, and not simply according to official expectations.

The OMM's Extra-Ordinary Conference, originally scheduled for April 1984, was postponed until November, though the delay was not officially explained. Some believed that male Frelimo cadres felt threatened by the direction the discussions were taking, and that they wanted to regain control of the process leading up to the actual conference (Arnfred 1988:14-15). That this effort was at least partially successful is indicated by a comment of Frelimo Party

Secretary Jorge Rebelo at the close of the conference; "Thank you, OMM, for knowing how to take Frelimo's direction" (Pelo Sucesso...1984). Certainly women in OMM were aware of these problems. Graça Machel, a member of OMM's Secretariat and then Minister of Education, told a preparatory meeting: "The Party thinks that because it created the OMM it can direct it. So the OMM will have problems when it begins to threaten the privileges of men" (Hanlon 1984:169).

The final document from the conference is filled with rhetorical praise for OMM's role in advancing Mozambican women, but with little substantive policy change. This is in part a result of the discussions mentioned above. In some cases, such as the controversial issue of initiation rites, the outcome was to call for further study. The family is maintained as the basic cell of society, and relations within the family are not questioned. In what appears to be a compromise statement, the document calls for "each family [to] make an effort to create a new equilibrium based on equality of duties and rights in carrying out the functions of each one of its members, as father and head of the family, as mother and housewife" (Mozambican Women...1984; The General Resolution...1984:5). In preliminary documents and discussion, including the meeting in Beira, women were quite outspoken about the need for men to share housework and child care, but this was not incorporated into the final document (Organização Mulher Moçambicana 1983:33-36).

Within such a context, even the women's organization answers to larger social expectations about women's role. Thus, many OMM projects have involved activities such as teaching newly urban women how to care for their apartments, and to crochet or sew infant clothes for sale. These become ways of involving women in the socialist endeavor of developing Mozambique without raising more disturbing questions about male/female inequality.

Women in Mozambican Politics

In Mozambique women continue to promote women's needs within a male-dominated government. Following the January 1989 resignation of Graça Machel, the only woman minister in Mozambique, there have been no women at the ministerial level. It is not clear how OMM would advance women's issues if more women were in positions of power. There has been some attempt to bring more women into government, and statistics indicate that this effort has met with limited success. They also show that the Mozambican experience parallels evidence elsewhere, with the largest percentages of women at the local level and fewer at the national level. Elections in 1986 resulted in about 25 percent female delegates at the district, city, and provincial level, and 16 percent female delegates in the national Popular Assembly (the 249 delegates included 39 women) (Newly Elected...1987).

The Fourth Party Congress of Frelimo in 1983 slightly increased the relative number of women in Frelimo's Central Committee. The outgoing Central Committee had had five women among its 67 members. The new Central Committee was doubled in size to 130 seats, among them fourteen women. Four of the new women members were long-time activists who had been part of the Women's Detachment during the armed struggle (Special Issue: Fourth Congress of the Frelimo Party 1983:34-35).

It remains to be seen how effective these women will be in raising women's or gender issues from within the party leadership. One controversy over the question of nationality that may signify influence from the newly elected women has been resolved. At the time of independence, the nationality law decreed that women who married foreigners would lose their Mozambican citizenship, while men who married foreigners would not. The origin of the law reflected a desire to reject dual citizenship, but the section which discriminated against women was clearly based on assumptions about a woman's nationality being subordinate to her husband's. Many people felt that this was patently unfair, and it was raised at the 1984 OMM conference only to be dismissed by then President Samora Machel. In 1988, however, the newly elected People's Assembly changed the law to remove this discrimination against women. Now women who were affected in the past can simply declare their situation to the authorities in order to regain their Mozambican citizenship (New Legislation Approved 1988).

Further developments concerning women's involvement in national politics became evident in August 1989 when Frelimo held its Fifth Party Congress. Among the important decisions made at that meeting was the shift from self-definition as a vanguard party to a mass party. One method of accomplishing this goal was the expansion of the potential membership base to groups previously excluded. The groups included property owners, religious activists, and polygamists. The justification indicated that potential members should be analyzed within their own cultural context: for example, if a man had more than one wife but was treating them fairly, then polygamy alone should not be a prohibition against his Frelimo membership.

As polygamy was one of the first oppressive practices denounced by Frelimo and OMM, this new policy appears to be a substantial step backward for women in Mozambique. When I raised the issue with OMM members and leaders, however, I was met with further justifications. One OMM national leader spoke to me about the advantages of a polygamous relationship for women (a woman will know where her husband is, co-wives can cooperate in their work, and so on), and concluded by saying that the earlier anti-polygamy position had been premature.

The deep connection of polygamy to particular rural social and economic structures makes it difficult to proclaim its abolition without a deeper social transformation. There are no reliable statistics, but women with whom I spoke indicated that urban residents and people with some education tended to practice monogamy. Whether the practice will subside "naturally" with future generations remains to be seen. This new policy, however, does indicate the limitations of a politics that does not include broader strategic gender issues when discussing immediate practical reforms; in this case the expansion of Frelimo membership appears to require women's continued subordination.

The extension of Frelimo membership to polygamous men demonstrates a continued reliance of male ideas and less input of a substantial nature from OMM. All of the Frelimo Political Bureau members elected at the 1989 Congress are male, though some OMM members indicated that they had hoped a woman would be elected to that ruling body. Certainly women's presence at the party congress indicated growth; 29 percent of the delegates were female, double their representation at the 1983 congress (Who Was There? 1989), a larger

percentage than female membership. Frelimo's own document states their concern with the low percentage of female members: in 1989 women accounted for 25 percent of Frelimo members, a decrease from 30 percent in 1983. The numbers of women members are larger (51,659 in 1989 compared to 33,000 in 1983), but their relative weight has decreased (Partido Frelimo 1989:32). Many women are OMM members without also belonging to Frelimo, however; in 1989 OMM counted 281,000 members (Partido Frelimo 1989:134). Women's influence in national politics is at least at a standstill, if not actually losing ground.

Women in Cooperatives

In the 1980s the Mozambican government began a campaign of "Green Zones" in the urban areas, partially in response to the disruption of food supply from the rural areas to the cities. Part of the Green Zones structure includes developing cooperatives for agricultural production; these have become a center for women's political power. The Seventh-of-April Cooperative in Dondo (in the central province of Sofala) had 117 members in 1985, of whom 89 were women and 28 were men. The cooperative's directorate of seven included three women. When compared to a collective farm in Beira, another form of agricultural organization, it appeared that the cooperative "was more effective in giving women a greater voice in decision-making and leadership" (Davison 1988). Maputo's Green Zones are famous for the strength of women-dominated cooperatives. The national president of the cooperative association is Celina Cossa, a woman noted for her forthright and dynamic personality in the struggle for greater recognition and support for Mozambique's female peasantry (Salvador 1986; Marshall 1988; Arnfred 1988).

It appears that the cooperative organization has become a vehicle for raising issues central to rural women, as well as to urban women in agriculture. Perhaps because it was not conceived as a women's organization, it has not faced the same issues of gender segregation as OMM, despite the fact that the majority of members are female. Given the centrality of agriculture to almost all Mozambican women, it is important that their political impact is increasing through women's activism in agricultural cooperatives. Furthermore, this may demonstrate again how women's issues will be addressed as practical gender interests rather than as strategic interests. Through the cooperative union they are acting as peasants with agricultural interests, and are including their special situation as women as part of that effort. In light of this analysis, it is important to note that when OMM celebrated fifteen years of existence in March 1988, a focal point of the festival in Maputo was "an agricultural exhibition...set up to demonstrate the potential of the 'green zones'...around Maputo city, which have been developed chiefly by women." (Women's Role Reevaluated...1988).

Current Conditions

Women now face severe privations as a result of the brutal war being waged by Renamo, a group supported by South Africa. The war and the accompanying famine in Mozambique are seen to affect women more intensely due to their responsibility for food cultivation and preparation and their continuing primacy in child care (Matusse 1987a and 1987b). Women active in OMM are especially targeted by Renamo, as in the case of Teresa Liquice in Cheringoma

(Sofala Province). Despite the murder of her husband and son, the destruction of her home and her own sexual assault by Renamo members, she continues as district secretary of OMM, and works to draw attention to women's special suffering. She reported, "It's important to note that...the largest number of people displaced by the war are women and children....There are at least 5,000 women and children here [in one refugee camp]" (Women in Desperate Situation 1988). The large numbers of refugees and the disruption of basic agricultural production in many parts of the country make it clear that women are suffering the brunt of the destabilization. Many issues, including the expansion of child care centers and the delivery of health services, are adversely affected. In a society forced to militarize for its own protection, women and gender issues are put aside, however reluctantly.

In 1987 Mozambique implemented an economic restructuring program based on World Bank and IMF guidelines. In order to repay their foreign debt, they devalued the local currency and introduced austerity measures, which have had severe impacts on women and on OMM. Because of the mandated increases in salary levels, OMM has been forced to reduce its staff levels outside the capital. In Beira, the second largest city, there are only two paid staff members to organize a city of nearly half a million residents.

OMM projects, such as sewing cooperatives, have had to cut back severely. They cannot afford to continue to pay salaries to all previous members, and the costs of supplies such as cloth, thread, and sewing machines have become prohibitive. In August 1989 I spoke with women from all over the country who had come to Maputo for an OMM-sponsored course on sewing machine repair, and they all described similar problems: material was so expensive that they were forced to charge high prices for finished products, with the result that few could afford to buy the OMM manufactured clothes. Salaries had been raised, so that while some women were earning more, fewer women could participate in the cooperatives. And once women learned the sewing skills there were few opportunities to use them, as garment factories were generally not hiring.

Thus the war and economic demands are seriously compromising women's lives and forcing further delays in advancing women's issues. It should be no surprise that the women's organization has continued its historic role of bringing women into the larger struggle, but with less emphasis on raising strategic issues of gender equality. For instance, one of OMM's achievements, related in a Frelimo document, is the training of 10,000 women in the militias formed to combat Renamo (Partido Frelimo 1989:133).

The evaluation of women's victories and setbacks must, of course, be put into an appropriate context. The history of the development of OMM places it firmly within the struggle for independence and for socialism in Mozambique. Within the party and government structures OMM has the important task of drawing attention to women's needs, yet it is not an autonomous organization able to freely raise broader issues of gender subordination. While it is possible to see the restrictions faced by the women's organization, it is also important to see that the government has a commitment to improve the living conditions of the masses of women. The day care centers may be seen only as supports for working women with the assumption that women have primacy in child care, yet these centers exist throughout the country despite the war conditions and impoverished economy.

Actual advances in women's position can be measured through the implementation of practical gender interests, or through the feminist content in the way in which these advances are made. It is clear that strategic gender interests are not currently being addressed by the party and government. However, despite the limitations faced by the women's organization, many of women's basic needs are being met by the government, and these programs may contribute to future female empowerment.

In many ways it is a luxury to sit in the United States and critique women's politics in Third World countries, but I know that the women in Mozambique will continue to fight for women's rights in the face of formidable obstacles, and I have unlimited respect and support for them.

I take my cue from a cashew worker and OMM activist in Mozambique. She asked about American women's organizations, and was surprised to learn that the largest ones were not only outside of the formal governing structures, but were in openly adversarial positions. She suggested that I could bring my experience with Mozambican women back to influence American women. By understanding the advances and setbacks in organizing women for power in Mozambique, I hope that we can improve women's lives everywhere.

Comments

I would like to thank OMM for allowing me to attend the meeting in Beira in September 1983, and for supporting my research generally. In addition to discussions and interviews with Mozambican women, I learned a great deal concerning OMM from Signe Arnfred, and Bonni Carryer helped by providing citations and documents. Steve Tarzynski read the paper in various stages and his comments and those of the reader have been largely incorporated. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1988 annual meeting of the National Women's Studies Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 22-26, and at the 1988 annual meeting of the African Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, October 28-31.

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