

# Promise and betrayal: Women fighters and national liberation in Guinea Bissau

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## Introduction

Guinea Bissau presents an especially clear-cut case in which women's mass participation in the independence struggle was not followed by sustained commitment to women's equality in the post-colonial period. Amílcar Cabral of Guinea Bissau and his party, the *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC), realised that the national liberation war could not succeed without women's participation, not only as political agents but also as fighters. Cabral also understood, and attempted to convince his male Party members, that a genuine national liberation meant liberation not only from colonialism but also from all the local traditional socio-cultural forces, both pre-colonial and imposed by the Portuguese rulers, that excluded women from decision-making structures at every level of society. Sadly, many of the former women fighters also say that male PAIGC members did not fulfil promises of socio-political, economic and gender equality that were crucial to genuine social transformation. Because women participated in bringing about independence in very dramatic ways, because the Party that came to power actually promised equality, and because the Party then had women return to their traditional subordinate roles, Guinea Bissau provides an especially clear case for exploring the relation in Africa between broken promises to women and the unhappiness reflected in the saying "Africa is growing but not developing".

In May 2013, Africa's Heads of State celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Organisation of African Unity in a positive mood because of a rising GDP and positive view about African economies. These African leaders were pleased for what they did for African women and were very pleased to "discover" now that African women could be agents and not subjects of development

even though both sexes have been fighting together for a very long time. The general question that needs to be asked is: is the recognition, by Africa's Heads of State, of women as agents and equal partners true or is it just a hoax?

Guinea Bissau is one of the few African nations that gained independence through a long-fought and bitter war. As such, it presents an especially clear-cut case of massive women's participation in the independence struggle. What is the outcome of women's mass participation in the national liberation war since independence in 1974?

I reviewed volumes of 30-year-old literature on Guinea Bissau, in general, its revolution, in particular, and academic works on Guinea Bissau women (mainly by Urdang and Maloka). Most of the early literature romanticised the struggle for independence, in order to emphasise the progressive and forward-looking orientation of the new independent country with regard to women's emancipation and gender equality.

My research materials consist of personal oral histories, personal handwritten notes, photos, and documents of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde Islands (PAIGC) collected from 2008 to 2013, in periods of one to two months. During my stays in Guinea Bissau I interviewed former liberation war participants, PAIGC members, activists, civil society members, researchers, and students, with the help of my Bissau Guinean interpreters and guides. We conducted the interviews in French, Creole, Balanta, Fulani and English. I interviewed mostly women, because I wanted to depart from the official narratives or discourses of national liberation struggles given by male participants and the romanticising literatures of the period of independence struggles in Africa. Collecting war-participant interviews allowed me to participate in preserving memories of war participants and to give voice to marginalised war participants.

This article departs from 30-year-old literature of Guinea Bissau and its revolution offering revisions based on new oral history interviews and reflecting on these using gender analysis. Rather than reassessing fully the role of women in the Guinea Bissau liberation war I analyse the gender relations and the questions of women's emancipation, equality and rights in post-independence Guinea Bissau.

What I found is that, in Guinea Bissau, when Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC fought for independence, what independence meant to them was

freedom from the colonisers and social justice for Guinea Bissau's citizens. But the outcome of independence is a society that remains divided and unjust along gender and ethnic lines. Leaders focus on the abstract goals of the revolution (political and state independence) with the result that the women of Guinea Bissau have seen continued gender oppression, which has remained especially marked for indigenous women, in keeping with the manner in which gender intersects with ethnicity. Independent Guinea Bissau is one of many African states often described as a 'failed state', in part because it has failed to sustain the fight for concrete personal, familial, and regional social and economic improvements. Instead political independence has seen the male-dominated status quo and socio-cultural inequalities that women faced perpetuated without apology. In other words, the newly independent country ignored the material and historical basis of women's mobilisation in the fight for independence, and neglected their political aspirations. The question of whether the PAIGC actually betrayed women's interests is revisited here, along with the conditions under which the liberatory promise of gender equality appears to have fallen from the national political agenda, even while gender equality discourses have gained much ground within regional and international forums.

### **Why women entered the struggle**

The first real involvement of women in the PAIGC came in 1959 with a drive to mobilise the peasants in rural areas. This new tactic came after the failure of a three-year-policy of urban worker mobilisations. Bissau Guinean women who were members of the peasant class became participants. Women not only responded spontaneously and positively to the Party's call but also convinced their husbands to join the movement (Urdang, 1979: 115). Reasons why women entered the struggle were officially put under the umbrella of liberating the colony from Portuguese colonisation. However, they seem to me more complex, presenting several contrasts, such as running from the Portuguese colonial system or from traditional social structures and beliefs. Most of these young women, at the time of their enrolment into the PAIGC, had little political knowledge, but they were old enough to understand death, punishment, hunger, separation and emotional pain (Gomez, 2008). Teodora Gomes, who was interviewed by Urdang, recalled that police intimidation and army exactions made her and her family join the PAIGC (Urdang, 1979:

207–208). Sandé NHaga, another Balanta woman, was born in NXeia in the southern region of Guinea Bissau. She joined the rebellion after the Portuguese killed her brother in NTchalé (NHaga, 2010). There existed cases in which family reunions were occasioned by women joining the liberation movement. Wives joined husbands and mothers joined sons. Carmen Pereira recounted that her husband Umaro Djalo left Bissau for Conakry. Later, she decided to join him with their three children. She left Bissau for Ziguinchor (the southern region of Senegal), where the PAIGC asked her to set up a PAIGC transit house for newly recruited PAIGC members who were on their way to Conakry for military and political training. Mothers joined sons to make sure they were well nourished, and young women joined the guerrilla bases in order to run away from Portuguese harassment and forced labour.

Like Carmen, Fatoumata Diallo, a Fula woman from the Cacheu region, in her eighties, joined the PAIGC by accident in 1964. Her son, Alpha Dabo, was one of the fighters in the Northern and Eastern fronts. “He came to me and told me he had to leave in order to avoid being arrested” (Diallo, 2009). It was a sad moment because Alpha was her only son; she worried about his health and wellbeing. To make sure her son had food, she started taking food to the *maquis* on a weekly basis. She walked through the forest for hours to do so. One day she asked herself, “Why not live with them and cook for them and save myself from the risk of being arrested by the Portuguese army or police?” (Diallo 2009). As she was living with the *maquisards* and listening to their conversations, she became gradually more involved in the Party and the independence movement (Diallo, 2009). It emerges that women participated in wars for many reasons, some radical, and some conforming to women’s ascribed roles as carers and nurturers.

From the period of sabotage (1961–1963) to the declaration of independence, in 1967, female and male fighters lived together in camps and villages. Fatu Turé affirms, “They were cooking and washing clothes for the camp’s members. They all participated in military and political training and all worked for the success of the war” (Turé, 2010). Sandé NHaga confirms this view and said, “We were cooking, washing clothes. We were doing all the womanly tasks because if we as women do not do it who will do it? It was our job to take care of all the women’s tasks. While doing all this work we have to be alert and avoid being located by the Portuguese. In case of attack, our base commander in Ballacounda, Mamady Kamara, ordered us women to run

into the mangrove swamp, the rice field, or in the forest to protect ourselves” (NHaga, 2010).

### **The struggle within the party over women’s participation** *Amilcar Cabral’s position – Fighting colonial and traditional oppression of women*

Certain West African nationalists understood that successful national liberation required female participation but also required fighting against colonial systems and traditional socio-cultural odds that go against women’s emancipation and rights. In Senegal, as early as the 1930s, Lamine Gueye, leader of the Senegalese contingent of the French section of the International Workers Organisation affiliated to the French Socialist Party, recognised the importance of Senegalese women within his political organisation by championing the women’s emancipation question within the French African colonies (*Journal de l’Afrique de L’Ouest Française*, Paris; France, April 1th, 1939). During the Brazzaville conference in 1944, delegates from French African colonies insisted on the need to implement women’s rights, including measures on polygyny and child brides, and acknowledged women’s roles in resistance movements. They also proposed an agenda of equal rights and opportunities between the two sexes. In 1945 Fily Dabo Sissoko of French Sudan reiterated the same appeal for the emancipation of women. As a result, women in the African French colonies were granted the right to vote for the first time in 1945 (Morgenthau, 1964:40). In the French colony of Guinea, by 1953 women showed their ability in mobilising help and defending male strikers and their families. Their roles throughout the 1950s strikes and political turmoil led the Democratic Party of Guinea–African Democratic Assembly (RDG/RDA) to accept women members by 1954 (*Newspaper Liberté* 1956). Women’s participation led to the RDG/RDA successes in the 1956 local elections and the 1958 referendum (Morgenthau, 1964:106, 240).

In Guinea Bissau, Amilcar Cabral and some of the PAIGC executive bureau believed that it would be impossible to build a prosperous and progressive country without liberating African women from the burden of the traditional socio-cultural and economic systems (Urdang, 1979:125–126). Amilcar Cabral declared a true national liberation meant liberation from colonialist, but also from all socio-cultural, forces that made women take a back seat in the socio-political and cultural decision-making structure (Urdang, 1979:

125-126). These feminist ideas led the PAIGC executive bureau to charge women members of the PAIGC with creating a women's organisation in 1961 in Conakry, with the specific task of elevating women's consciousness and political activism (F. Pereira, 2008).

Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC executive bureau could see the need to emancipate Bissau Guinean women. Cabral and the PAIGC executive members were mostly Cabo Verdeans or people with Cabo Verdean parents, who migrated to Guinea Bissau as colonial administrative workers and Portuguese citizens (Lyon, 1980:157). Most Bissau Guinean women, on the other hand, were indigenous and Portuguese subjects as were most Bissau Guineans generally. The statuses of the two groups were different, as citizens went to Portuguese schools, attained higher education, worked as colonial administration personnel (Forrest, 2003: 138). In other words, they represented the middle class during the colonial period. So, asking for the emancipation of women would not challenge their social and economic status within the national struggle.

### **The imposition of traditional gender hierarchies during the war**

PAIGC male members, mostly indigenous, and some executive political and military cadres, did not follow Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC's executive bureau in their views of emancipating women in Guinea Bissau (Urdang, 1979: 97, 119-127). Male members often fell back to the old traditional attitudes and replicated the same social, hierarchical, and patriarchal familial behaviours in their relations with female members of the PAIGC. Their male behaviours were reinforced when, as often occurred, some women fighters showed signs of physical weaknesses on the frontlines. Fatimata Sibili's story had heavy consequences in the way in which several PAIGC officers characterised women in combat operations. At the age of sixteen, as the only woman member of a unit of thirty youths, she trained very well with the boys, to the point that she and the trainer felt that she was equal to her comrades. But once actual combat began, Sibili encountered problems (Urdang, 1979: 228). It was very difficult for her to keep up with the speed of marching, so her male comrades helped her carry her equipment. Sibili blamed her physical limitations on her gender, noting later that she was not as strong as the men. Stephanie Urdang's analysis of Sibili's experience concluded that this "account seemed to

corroborate what I was told on various occasions, that PAIGC experience had led them [women and men] to conclude that women could not fare as well in combat as the men. I wondered while listening to Fatimata, however, how much her performance could have been affected by attitudes, rather than her inherent capability” (Urdang, 1979:228)

While Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC executive bureau saw the question of women’s emancipation and role in the future Guinea Bissau as paramount, male members of the PAIGC saw it as challenging, because it attacked the foundation of the traditional socio-cultural identities that allowed them to be men. Cabral and the PAIGC, as part of the privileged Cabo Verdeans or descended from the Cabo Verdean ethnic group and of the colonial middle class, as well, would not be socially and economically challenged after independence (Mendy, 1999:25). As the educated leaders of the nationalist organisations, they became the leaders and decision-makers of the independent country—in other words, no loss of economic and social privilege. In the case of the PAIGC members who were not Portuguese citizens because from different African ethnic groups and hence considered subjects, and of whom most did not receive schooling or received very basic education through missionary schools—these were left out of the administration system in favour of the Cabo Verdeans and Cabo Verdean descendants. Most of them lived in the countryside, suffered from the colonial system exactions, and did not receive any benefits from the system. The PAIGC executives, by deciding to emancipate women, were attacking one of the basic foundations of the indigenous socio-cultural beliefs. As indigenous males had already lost all their decision-making power through social and economic changes brought about by the colonial system, they saw the PAIGC as attacking their remaining familial power, something they would not accept readily. Indeed, the PAIGC leadership’s insistence on women’s emancipation was one reason why some Bissau Guinean nationalists created political parties along ethnic lines or pro-indigenous groups, rejecting any alliance with Cabo Verdeans and descendants of Cabo Verdeans (Romalho Cissokho, 2008).

Most male PAIGC members and fighters supported the idea that women had to stay behind the front lines. Each of them had specific explanations about why women should stay behind. Barnaté Sahna said, “Women got scared easily and put always the life of the fighters in danger. They are not suited for combat operations” (Sahna, 2010). Hutna Yala, another Balanta

man and combat veteran, believed that a woman's place was in the home, not fighting against the Portuguese. For him, "men are suited to fight. Women are suited to take care of the family and their husband, not to fight. Women can't carry heavy loads for long distances and they can't stand blood, and killings" (Yala, 2010). For example, one of the maquisards under the command of Osvaldo Vieira, Barnaté Sahna, affirmed his commander never wanted to have women participating in direct combat operations and he never addressed the women's emancipation question to his fighters (Sahna, 2010). Osvaldo was not the only one who had been disturbed by the idea of integrating the women's emancipation question into the liberation war agenda. Luis Cabral was, also, according to Carmen Pereira (2008). Amílcar Cabral recognised that some Party members did whatever they could to prevent women from taking charge (Cabral, 1969:71).

From 1961 to 1974 PAIGC all women participants had charge of so-called "women's tasks", such as cooking, laundry, weapons transport, spying, and nursing care. Throughout different periods of the war and for different reasons, women were assigned "male tasks", such as participating in full combat operations, working as sentinels in guerrilla camps and protecting liberated zones.

From 1967-1972 the PAIGC adopted a policy of explicitly forbidding combat by women. Most PAIGC fighters argue that the Party discontinued women's participation in direct combat operations because of physical weakness and a lack of courage enough to participate in direct combat operations. Alternatively, leaders felt that the female population must be preserved for population reproduction and growth for the post-war period (Urdang, 1979: 226-228). This decision had several implications, such as reinforcing ideas of inequality between the sexes, thus weakening the struggle for women's emancipation. This masculine ideological narrative sought to subordinate women, and it reinforced existing customs and views about women. In doing so, the Party explicitly emphasised gender differences.

Some women challenged the Party's decision to restrict women's participation in direct combat during the period 1967-1972, as they were already exposed to military training and direct combat operation while assuming their "women's tasks". Titina Silla represented women who challenged the gender roles, participating in direct combat operations all along. Titina exemplified the typical woman fighters and refused to face any



restriction regarding participation in direct combat operations, thus serving as an example for other liberation movement participants (Urdang, 1979: 226-228; C. Pereira, 2008). Many unknown or lesser-known women played key roles on the Guinea Bissau battlefields. Theresa NQuamé, a Balanta woman who joined the PAIGC's guerrilla army in 1966, was on the Northern front for two years. She was part of a group of the PAIGC naval corps that was setting land and maritime mines along the rivers and roads of the Northern front. Theresa sank two embarking Portuguese vessels, at the Yado port entrance and at Tchacal, and damaged a third one in Tenkrua. In her group in the Northern region they were two women in a group of men. The second woman was Joana Mai (NQuamé, 2010).

### Limitations of women's political organising

In 1961 the PAIGC central bureau tasked its female members with creating UDEMU (*União Democrática das Mulheres da Guiné*/ Women's Democratic Union of Guinea). The formation of UDEMU and the organisation's history offers a unique perspective on the complicated role of women's issues in the context of African liberation movements. Fighting for national independence and women's issues engages the struggle against colonisers but also against large sectors of the nationalist organisations, as men nationalists also were the oppressors of women in general and women nationalists in particular. While nationalist leaders may have supported the women's agenda, nationalist participants fought against it or refused to play an active role in the social struggle.

The PAIGC made a decision in 1965 to dismantle the UDEMU for lack of results. What caused the women's organisation to fail? The paramount reason for the failure lay in the fact that the idea of the creation of the women's organisation came from the PAIGC's male-dominated executive bureau and that the women's organisation did not receive full support from the leadership. Francisca Pereira stated that in Conakry PAIGC women members and Party headquarters workers regularly faced gender discrimination. Many PAIGC male members considered them as servants and asked services of them that they would ask of their wives on a daily basis (F. Pereira, 2010). Some of these leaders, even though they advocated for gender equality, and changes in gender relations, kept acting as if nothing need to change.

Large numbers of PAIGC women did not push the women's emancipation question, because for most of them it was not the reason why they joined the national liberation struggle. In their reasoning the struggle was against the Portuguese colonial system and not against "their men". These women believed their conditions were the result of external economic exploitation. They did not see the link between their conditions, the socio-cultural inequalities within their societies and the colonial system. Reason for that could be found in the fact that the deterioration of the economic and social environment corresponded with the implementation of the colonial system.

Among all the women participants in the national struggle only two of them, Francisca Pereira and Eva Gomez, saw a correlation between women's socio-cultural conditions and familial economic difficulties. However, Francisca believed no one should go against their own society, and that it was better to accept the gender relations rather than singling out oneself and bringing shame to one's family and oneself.

## **Gender and Cabo Verdean identities in post-colonial Guinea Bissau**

After the war Luis Cabral and most of his followers were not interested in changing the social dynamics of the country, even though laws advocating equality between the sexes and protecting women had been set in place. Instead, they developed new economic and social classes within the Bissau Guinean society, in which those of Cabo Verdean background and guerrilla-military officers were favoured. The dichotomy between Cape Verdean background and indigenes ultimately led to the 1980 military coup under the leadership of Nino Vieira, a Balanta and former southern front commander during the liberation war.

Many former women fighters believe if they had to fight the national liberation war over again, they would not, because Cabral's male followers never respected his promises. One of my interview subjects, Bacar Cassama, explained it this way: "Combatants did liberate the country but they also made mistakes" (Cassama 2008). Instead of fully recognising the roles of women in the war, male fighters called the female participants in direct combat operations heroines to set them above ordinary women. They described the nurses and logistical transport supporters as simply women who had been doing their regular tasks as women. Mary Ann Tetreault argues:

What any group gets after the revolution is at least in part a function of what that group is perceived to have earned by the blood of its members (Tetreault, 1994:19).

Male fighters in the liberation war wanted to see women fighters only as engaged in housekeeping tasks and as occasional, unique or isolated cases of heroism; hence, men left them out of the discourse of the liberation.

Among its other goals, the liberation war sought to emancipate women and establish gender equality. The success of the political revolution masked the failures of the women's emancipation and liberation agenda. Many of the former male fighters kept their old misogynistic and sexist attitudes. Most women refused to challenge old socio-cultural behaviours and laws. Those who were ready to challenge conventions or to implement laws promoting equality faced male resistance.

The necessity of women's equality to true post-independence development is further shown by the intersection between gender and ethnicity. The two liberations always go together. The leaders wanted to maintain their privileges both as Cabo Verdeans and as men. Some scholars, such as Joshua Forrest, look at this discrepancy as an indication of the lack of serious commitment to certain social issues. For him, post-colonial society was unsupportive of women's causes and the Women's Commission was simply a social club centred in Bissau (Forrest, 2003:127). For Bacar Cassama, after Independence PAIGC leaders and government officials referred to women's issues only during meetings and when foreigners were visiting the country (Cassama 2008). Yet the official programme of the PAIGC declared that 'Men and women will have the same status with regard to family, work and public activities' (cited in Lobban and Forrest, 1988:205). Measures to protect women from spousal abuse also became a part of the new constitution (Lobban and Forrest, 1988:279). Furthermore, the new government guaranteed access to land to all men and women who want to farm, either by indigenous systems of land tenure or by government decree (Funk, 1988:33). While some women, mostly those involved in affairs of state, would have positive views regarding the effectiveness of official policies on equality, most of the women I interviewed blamed the Party-run state for abandoning women. As Binetou Nankin Seydi put it,

We as women have never been respected or included in the country policies since independence (Interview 2008).

Only 25 to 30 per cent of primary school children and one-quarter of secondary school students were female, reflecting the families' refusal to release their female children for formal education (Mendes Pereira 1986, 78). Women rarely occupied positions of crucial political leadership in the decades after liberation. Although women were free to run for political office, they have never held many significant political positions. The discrepancy between the official policy of gender equality and the low representation of women in political leadership has inevitably aroused several interpretations and speculation about the seriousness of Guinea Bissau's commitment to gender equality. By 1977 the number of women in top leadership positions remained low. As Urdang points out, the figures were not enhanced by the fact that some women occupied several positions, reducing the absolute total (1979:267, 269).

After independence, the issue of women's liberation gets into the intersecting relationship between women's issues and old social practices, generating new social political hierarchies based on ethnicity and gender, particularly with the persistent grip on authority held by people of Cabo Verdean and/or Portuguese ancestry. According to Fodé Cassama,

The truth is most of the people who profited from the war of liberation were people with Cabo-Verdean or Portuguese family names, because the Portuguese brought a lot of them from the Cabo-Verde islands to run the colonial administration. And because we were autochthones, most of us were not educated or went to the indigenous schools, while Cabo Verdeans went to the "civilised" and missionary schools in Cabo Verde (Cassama, 2010).

In this regard, when the political system chose to mention token women as exceptional heroines, to show they do believe in women's equality, this meant that the privileged heroines would also be Cabo Verdeans, with the exception of the late Titina Silla.

The historical record indicates that this is a correct assessment. In the 1977-1978 Council of State, only Umaro Djalo was not of Cabo Verdean descent (Galli and Jones, 1987:70). The 1977-78 Council of Commissars and ministers of the period were mostly of Cabo Verdean descent except Joao Bernardo Vieira (Nino), and Samba Lamine Mane, two out of 20 ministers (Galli and Jones, 1987:70). Regarding women's representation in State or governmental affairs, in 1977 Francisca Pereira was the only woman. The

same situation was repeated in the women's organisation Udemu and in all the different component sectors of political, economic, and administrative structures. For Mamady Kamara, whom I interviewed in front of a large crowd of PAIGC veterans as they were waiting for their monthly war-participant pension in Bissau, the problem was not that *women* were under-represented in the political and economic structures, but that the *autochthones* were under-represented (2010).

After independence, the PAIGC took up the problems of polygyny and forced marriages, among others, and began to campaign to end them. Ultimately polygyny was made illegal (Tertilt, 2006). However, polygyny has not ended, and its persistence may shed some light on recent experiences in Guinea Bissau. Men make a variety of arguments in favour of polygyny. Some men claimed that polygyny is part of the "African heritage" in contrast to monogamy, but this is mostly men hanging on to their social power over women. Men of higher social classes hang on to their colonial privileges. Men in lower classes hang on to their "African traditional privileges". These go together. How is this explained? Aliu Fadia, an old Muslim man married to a Balanta woman, claimed polygyny was an ancient tradition and part of the African way of life. He claimed that monogamy is a new way of thinking that modern governments are forcing on their citizens (2010).

Many men condemn the government's decision to impose monogamy as the only civil marriage recognised by the state. Diabira Gassama claimed he saw the imposition of monogamy as an institution imported from European culture in an attempt to make women equal to men, which he claims is foreign to Africa. In essence, he argues that the law did not reflect public opinion. For him, it is not unusual for men to resist legal reforms that undermine their authority over matters of marriage (2010).

Although a number of men defended or made reference to polygyny as customary or traditional, most of them also claimed that polygyny was a practical solution to a man's desire for cheap labour in the form of a large family and numerous children (Forde, 1950:250; Sheldon, 2002:10-12). Polygyny was not simply adopted into the society because men preferred having several to having one sexual partner. Polygyny arose directly out of the peasant economy. It was in a household's interest to have more than one wife to share work and to accumulate wealth (Urdang, 1979:202). Many farmers continue to believe in the economic advantages of multiple wives and

children. The urbanised wagedworkers with multiple wives whom I interviewed, favour polygyny for other reasons. Some men argue for polygyny as a way of emotionally controlling wives. For them, a single wife may become demanding and stubborn, because she knows that her husband depends on her alone. Another argument involves seeking social prestige or prestige among men through having many wives.

Men avoid civil marriage in order to avoid the constraint of monogamy. Most of the married men with whom I spoke said they did not contract a civil marriage. Aliu Fadia said:

Even when men were allowed to be polygynous, men rarely contracted a civil marriage, because it is not part of our culture and belief. These are most likely men who refused the new gender relations. They are not willing to make changes that put themselves in question, but want the government to change. Women's liberation is important, because it shows the links between the changes at every level of politics, society and culture. Now, with the constraint of having only one wife, do you think it will encourage us to get a civil marriage certificate with all the laws that may come with? No, I do not think so. (Interview 2010).

With the idea to keep the old behaviours and rejecting any potential challenges to male beliefs, Diabira said, the idea of contracting a civil marriage is not “African”:

Why should we copy the Europeans? You know, our leaders were brainwashed by the Europeans and they want to impose on us a European way of life. If at least they were helping the population to live a decent life and respect the institutions, we can follow them. They do nothing for us and want to impose on us a way of living, [but] it is not going to work. Look, most of the married men I know never contract a civil marriage because nothing comes with this contract. No help (Interview 2010).

Diabira and others see the law as something from outside their country imposed by their government, a government that does not respect tradition or fulfil its duties. Put differently, when it is about gender and women's emancipation, Guinea Bissau males found refuge in the idea of maintaining our culture or tradition to avoid any potential change, but they also forget that African social and cultural practices are dynamic and not inert. African cultures and social practices always adapt to new environments.

## Conclusion

Women in Guinea Bissau struggled to find a place for themselves in the war for independence but failed to change male attitudes toward the role of women in peacetime. As Guinea Bissau developed into an independent nation, women were locked out of meaningful political power. While some elements of a feminist legislative agenda were implemented, for example, a ban on polygyny, these changes again reflected more style than substance. The case of Guinea Bissau, in terms of unequal relationships between men and women politicians and the marginalisation of feminist ideas, was replicated all over Africa in the same manner. After independence African leaders have by and large expected African women to return to their old socio-traditional roles. I have argued that this may be one of the reasons why Africa is said to be “growing but not developing.”

## Interviewee profiles

**Francisca Pereira** was born in 1942. She joined the PAIGC in 1959 in Conakry Republic of Guinea at the age of 17. During the liberation war she represented the PAIGC at the Pan-African Women’s Organisation. After the war she held executive and legislative posts and was also the president of the Udemu in 1977. She is still active in Guinea Bissau politics presently.

**Eva Gomez** was 15 years old when she joined the PAIGC in 1963. She went to Ghana and the Soviet Union for medical training after receiving her military training in Conakry and in the Guinea Bissau liberated zones. Afterward she served in the Southern region. She is presently the president of the Women’s organisation.

**Sandé NHaga** was from NXeia. She joined the PAIGC struggle after witnessing her brother being killed by the Portuguese in NTchalé (1965). She worked as cook and nurse on different battlefronts (Eastern and Northern regions). Now she is a war veteran.

**Carmen Pereira** was the daughter of the first Guinea Bissau lawyer. She joined the PAIGC accidentally in 1962 as she was following her husband Umara Djalo, one of the early PAIGC members. She lived in Senegal before going to the Soviet Union for medical training in 1963. She was deputy President of

Guinea Bissau National Assembly, then Minister of Health and Social Services, before later becoming a member of the Council of State. As President of the National Assembly, she was Acting President of Guinea Bissau from 14 to 16 May 1984. She was politically active until 1992.

**Fatoumata Diallo** a Fula woman from the Cacheu region, in her eighties, joined the PAIGC by accident in 1964. Her son, Alpha Dabo, was one of the fighters in the northern and eastern fronts. Her son and other fighters often used to stop by her house looking for something to eat or to rest after long journeys of marches and fighting. Her son Alpha was a PAIGC sympathiser before he became fully involved in the party in 1962. She decided to become fully involved because the Portuguese police pursued her son and others in Cacheu. It was a sad moment because Alpha was her only son. She worried about her son's health and well-being. To make sure her son had food, she started taking food to the *maquis* on a weekly basis. She walked through the forest for hours to do so. One day she asked herself, "Why not live with them and cook for them and save myself from the risk of being arrested by the Portuguese army or police?" Since then, she stayed in the *maquis*.

**Fatu Turé** is from Gabu. She joined the PAIGC in May, 1963, after being recruited by Cau Sambu. Following military training she participated in the militia group, protecting villages and liberated zones, transporting weapons and military logistics from Guinea Conakry to different battlefronts.

**Mario Romalho Cissokho** was a member of the PAIGC since 1961 and former Director of the INEP (Guinea Bissau's National Institute of Research).

**Barnaté Sahna** joined the PAIGC in January 1963, in the Northern region, at the age of 18. After periods of military and political training, under Osvaldo Vieira's orders, in 1965 he entered the fight as fighter in the Northern front. In Mores he met Amílcar Cabral and Titina Silla. In 1967 he was sent to Nhakara. In 1968 he lost his right eye during a combat operation and was hospitalised in Dakar, Senegal.

**Hutna Yala** was recruited by Marciano Lima on 28 June 1968. He went to the PAIGC pilot school in Conakry before joining the Quitafine sector after



sojourning for two years in Cubucarre. Quitafine was an important zone in the PAIGC strategy, as most of the logistics coming from Guinea Conakry transited through the region before being transported to different sections of the warfront.

**Theresa NQuamé** was a *sapadura* (someone who set mines in water and on land to destroy Portuguese naval embarkations, bridges and roads) during the liberation war. She affirms that in her section in the North region two women were in the groups of men specialised for those tasks.

**Bacar Cassama** was one of the early Bissau Guineans whom Amílcar Cabral talked to about his political goal in the 1950s just as he came back from Lisbon, Portugal. He was working in a factory dedicated to agricultural practices where A. Cabral was sent as agricultural engineer in 1953. He became one of the key mobilisers during the period 1959-1963 and a member of the struggle under Domingo Ramos (Eastern front), 1963-1974. After the war, he was a member of the Council of State, National Assembly and others.

**Binetou Nankin Seydi** was a twelve-year-girl when she witnessed the PAIGC organising what is known as the CASSACA conference in her village Cassaca (South region). One year later the PAIGC recruiters sent her to the Conakry PAIGC pilot school for her education. She learned about the assassination of Amílcar Cabral when she was in La Havana Cuba where she was for secretarial training. She came back to pay respects to her leader and never returned to Cuba. She worked in different ministries as a typist and is now one of the executive members of the women's organisation Udemu.

I interviewed **Fodé Cassama** in his house, in Bairro Luanda at night, a house without electricity, as are most houses in Bissau. He joined the PAIGC in 1962 and went through military and political training in East Germany and the Soviet Union before being sent to the Southern front to join Nino Vieira's forces, and later to the Eastern front to join Osvaldo Vieira. Now in his seventies all his activities since he retired in 1995 revolve around the mosque and his home.

Mamady Kamara joined the PAIGC in 1961, recruited by Osvaldo Vieira. During the sabotage of the Portuguese infrastructures (1961-1963), he was arrested in 1962 and jailed for three months and twenty-seven days while his brother stayed in jail for two years. In 1963 he participated in the opening of the Southern front. He was transferred to the Eastern front under the leadership of Domingo Ramos and Malan Keita in 1965. He took part in the battle in which Domingo Ramos was wounded and died. He returned to the Southern front (Medina Boe) in 1966, as Osvaldo called him to come back. In 1971 again he was sent to the Northern front.

Aliu Fadia was born in 1933 in Boulama. A polygamous Fula man, he was the father of my host in Boulama. During the liberation war in Guinea Bissau he and his family migrated to Ziguinchor, Senegal. They went back to Guinea Bissau in 1974 after the declaration of independence. During his adult years he was a trader but also a seasonal acajou nut collector during the acajou collecting campaign. He passed away on May 21, 2012.

Diabira Gassama is a young Mandinka from the region of Gabu.

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