

# Reflections on Feminist Organising in Angola\*

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## Context

In the contemporary postcolonial history of Africa, Angola is known as the site of one of the most treacherous conflicts that has ravaged the continent. After independence from Portugal in 1975, the 27-year civil war among the three leading liberation movements – the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) – claimed the lives of millions and left thousands of others displaced. Besides the enormous costs to human life, the war resulted in massive destruction of physical infrastructure, erosion of the social fabric, and the establishment of a militaristic and totalitarian state.

Although Angola adopted a multi-party legislature in 1992, the political system remains largely single-party oriented. The MPLA has governed the country since Independence and, following the death of the first president, Agostinho Neto, José Eduardo Dos Santos has been in power as President of the Republic since 1979. Following the approval of a new constitution in 2010, the political system has been presidential, making the presidency the most powerful state entity in the country. As Schubert (2010: 68) argues, the strengthening of Dos Santos' rule through democratic elections was instrumental in consolidating the current power structure which “results in increasingly blurred distinctions between the dominant party, government and the state”. The conflation between the state and the ruling MPLA is felt at all levels of political organising, from the national to the lowest local authorities, making it impossible to think of the Angolan government outside of the MPLA. For this reason, we use the terms “government”, “state”, and “MPLA government” interchangeably. In fact, the influence of the ruling MPLA permeates all aspects of Angolan life.

\* This article was written before President José Eduardo Dos Santos retired and was replaced by the former Minister of Defence João Lourenço in the September 2017 elections.

This sphere of control and influence extends to civil society as well. This is manifested by the establishment and support of pro-government civil society organisations (CSOs) on the one hand, and on the other, excessive control and repression of the few nonpartisan institutions and individuals seeking to critically engage on issues of governance and public policy. A prominent example is the case of the 17 youth activists known as “15+2”<sup>1</sup> who were convicted of “preparatory acts of rebellion” and “criminal conspiracy”, following their arrest during a meeting where they were discussing peaceful methods of protest against the presidency of Dos Santos. The activists were part of the *Movimento Revolucionário* (Revolutionary Movement) group, which advocates for better social services, less corruption, and an end to nepotism, among other things. They were charged and sentenced to jail terms ranging roughly from two to eight years but were released after nearly one year, following the passage of an amnesty law pardoning crimes of a non-homicidal nature committed up to 11 November 2015. The latest Amnesty International (2017) report on Angola highlights other cases in which the state has used the law, the media, and law enforcement bodies to prosecute dissenting activists and human rights defenders. What this repression has effectively established is a culture of fear which continues to prevent most Angolans from actively advocating for their rights through organised civil society initiatives.

It is in this context that our reflection on feminist organising in Angola is located. We begin by presenting a brief history of women’s organising in Angola, starting from the anti-colonial struggle. We note that the social conditions of women in Angola are shaped by a system of two prevalent oppressive powers: the political regime and sexism, which works with other structures of power (class, ethnicity, race and sexuality) to oppress women. This situation creates various barriers for women organising collectively around a feminist agenda. We address these based on our experiences as co-founding members of the *Ondjango Feminista* (Feminist Gathering) and conclude with a reflection on the future of feminist organising in Angola.

### **A Note on Positionality and Timing**

Whilst our membership of the *Ondjango Feminista* might raise concerns regarding the partiality of some statements made in the paper, it is also true that our insider status positions us uniquely well to provide an account of the challenges to feminist organising in Angola. Our reflections are based

on the ten months in which the Ondjango Feminista has operated. This timeframe has been marked by rapid and significant shifts in key aspects of the movement, such as the size and nature of the constituency, ideology, organisational structure and practice. Because these aspects of movement-building are often defined and consolidated over vast periods of time, the challenges to feminist organising presented in this reflection are limited to the observations that we have made at an incipient phase of the Angolan feminist movement-building process. As the movement matures, the challenges it faces may shift in nature and/or priority.

### **Women's Organising and the Ondjango Feminista**

The official history of women's organising in Angola is conflated with that of the Angolan Women's Organisation (OMA), the women's wing of the MPLA. Created on 2 March 1962 with the objective of mobilising women around the nationalist liberation struggle, OMA was instrumental in ensuring that women were involved at all levels of political organising within the MPLA (Liberato, 2016). OMA carried out important activities that sustained the MPLA's resistance in the liberation struggle. Working as educators, teachers, secretaries, correspondents, campaigners, farmers, and caregivers, its members also provided radio programmes with information about the struggle, distributed pamphlets, and raised funds for the liberation movement (PAANE, 2014). The second of March is celebrated as Angolan Women's Day. OMA women were also actively involved in frontline fighting alongside men, facing the same challenges and suffering the same consequences (Carvalho, 2009). Women from Kamy Battalion were notable in this regard, including Deolinda Rodrigues, who is a leading figure for Angolan feminists.

Women in the other two liberation movements, UNITA and FNLA, also played an important role in the anti-colonial struggle. Like OMA, these women were organised in women's wings of political parties, namely the Angolan Women's League (LIMA) and the Angolan Women's Association, (AMA), respectively. The history of these groups' contribution to the liberation struggle, however, is obliterated by the dominant narrative of the OMA, arguably as a consequence of MPLA's control of the mainstream narrative about the independence struggle.

During the single-party regime from independence in 1975 until 1992, OMA was the main advocate on Angolan women's issues, undertaking various

political, economic, social and cultural actions. This included campaigning to end violence against women and children, and providing social and political assistance to the survivors (OMA, 2017). As the only recognised women's political organisation, OMA also represented the country on international platforms, including the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The decade that followed the transition to a multiparty system, although marked by a violent outbreak of war between the MPLA and UNITA, was characterised by significant growth and dynamism in civil society. This was facilitated by several positive developments, amongst which Pacheco (2009: 3) highlights the constitutional recognition of pluralism and the freedom to associate; the rapid increase in humanitarian aid to address the needs created by the war; the citizens' movement on behalf of peace and the need to defend human rights; the reduction in state capacity to provide social services and control social forces; and the involvement and influence of the international community, which not only provided resources but also leveraged its power to demand that the state should amplify the space for civil society engagement and should respect human rights.

Although OMA continued to lead the articulation of women's rights in and on behalf of Angola until the late 1990s, this decade saw the emergence of many thematic CSOs focusing on the issues of women. They started engaging with the state on issues pertaining to women's rights, much in line with the global agenda for women's rights at the time (PAANE, 2014). This was the case with *Rede Mulher* (Women's Network), the first women's civil society organisation in the country, founded in 1994 (although only officially registered in 1998) during preparations for Angola's participation in the Fourth UN World Conference on Women. *Rede Mulher* led the conversation around building capacity for women's leadership, focusing on political participation, and produced information on the social conditions of women in Angola.

In the following years, many other women's civil society organisations emerged, working on different thematic areas such as HIV and AIDS (*Rede Mwenho*); economic rights (*Federation of Women Entrepreneurs of Angola* (FMEA)); media freedom and women's representation in media (Forum of Women Journalists for Gender Equality (FMJ)); and others, including the influential Platform for Women's Action (PMA).

Founded in 2005, PMA expanded on the mandate of *Rede Mulher* by targeting issues of social and economic justice for women through budget advocacy, in addition to addressing issues of women's political participation. Unlike *Rede Mulher*, however, which was inspired by women within political parties and was directed towards promoting women's leadership within political parties, PMA sought from the very onset to congregate women from all walks of life (i.e. religions, political parties and civil society) around a common agenda to advocate for a more gender-sensitive national budget.

*Rede Mulher's* efforts to ensure that parliamentary quotas for women are met, along with PMA's advocacy around gender-just budget allocations and, most recently, the organisations pushing for the domestic violence law, are testament to the critical role that women's CSOs play in maintaining women's issues as a priority in national policy debates. The CSOs have also influenced the enactment of policies and legislation that advance the protection of women's rights. At the same time, however, it is also necessary to recognise the ways in which these organisations are limited either by the government's political agenda and ideology (exogenous factors), or by their own views and understanding of women's rights (endogenous factors).

Nowhere is the influence of government's political ideology clearer than in the case of the Bill on Domestic Violence. One of us, Sizaltina Cutaia, was involved in this process as an independent women's rights activist. The account of the events relating to the Bill is based on her experience and recollection of the time. Following the initial proposal of the Bill in Parliament in 2007, several women's-rights defenders and women's organisations raised two key concerns. First, limiting the Bill to the domestic realm left unaddressed the numerous instances of violence against women that occurred outside of the domestic or familial setting. Second, instead of the Bill defining domestic violence as a public crime, which would allow any witness to denounce the crime and force the state to investigate and charge, it was defined as a semi-public crime, which can only be reported by the victim. This definition ignored victims' general dependence on the perpetrator, which made it very difficult for the victim to report the crime. Activists and women's CSOs therefore advocated for changes in the Bill. Throughout the five years that the Bill remained in discussion in parliament, the activists and women's CSOs organised peaceful marches and protests to draw government's attention to the issues they were raising. In many instances, however, their efforts were

met with violent repression from the state, in terms of disproportionate use of police force and the arrest of activists.

In what many women's rights activists claim to have been a politically motivated attempt to secure the female vote in the upcoming 2012 presidential elections, the Bill on domestic violence was approved in 2011. Some concessions were made: specific instances of domestic violence were declared public crimes, and the scope of the "domestic space" was broadened to include certain spaces outside the familial setting – schools, old-age homes, crèches, hospitals, and asylums. What this example demonstrates is that, although women's CSOs play a critical role in exerting pressure on the process of enacting laws and policies, the final outcome in terms of timing and scope is controlled by the MPLA government's political agendas and ideologies.

Endogenous factors limiting the impact of women's CSOs are linked to the conservative gender ideology that many of them embrace, often underpinned by religious beliefs. This is clearly visible in the CSOs' engagement with issues of women's sexual and reproductive rights, such as the right to free and safe abortions, access to contraception, and sex work. In the case of abortion – which is particularly relevant given the recent approval (in February 2017) of a new penal code that criminalises the practice – women's CSOs have responded either with silence or by addressing the issue as a moral problem as opposed to a women's rights issue.

Also missing is a commitment to politicising the struggle for women's rights. Regarding violence against women, for instance, the narrative advanced by women's CSOs continues to focus on treating abusers as perverse and unstable, at the same time putting the onus on women to prevent themselves from being violated by "dressing well" or being "good wives". In doing this, women's CSOs fail to acknowledge that "violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women" and that it is "one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men" (United Nations, 1993).

One could argue that women's CSOs' failure to embrace a politicised discourse on women's rights does not necessarily derive from a lack of understanding of the structural and systemic nature of women's oppression and exploitation but rather from fear of subverting the existing social norms that sustain their ideology and practice. A politicised discourse would require them to question and challenge the different power structures in Angolan

society, which include the state as well as the religious, traditional and patriarchal authorities that govern women's public and private lives.

Given the Angolan government's history of repression of dissent, it is not surprising that many women's CSOs strategically adopt a cooperative approach to women's rights advocacy, positioning themselves exclusively as partners as opposed to critics of the government. This strategy has been adopted by many women's CSOs, and can be considered pragmatic because it allows the CSOs to continue doing the important work of defending women's rights, without much opposition from the state. However, it has also resulted in the co-optation of many women by the government, rendering many of them unable to take a stand on issues relating to state corruption, mismanagement of public funds, abuse of power, and other matters of political governance and social life.

It is this lack of political and politicised engagement with the issues of women's rights that prompted the creation of *Ondjango Feminista*. We took the decision after a meeting at the Sixth African Feminist Forum in Harare, in April, 2016. In choosing the name *Ondjango Feminista*, we conceptualised the creation of a feminist space that represented the traditional values of an *ondjango* – the Umbundu<sup>2</sup> word for the place where the family or community meets to share stories and to solve problems. The traditional values of an *ondjango* are understood to be: respect and freedom (each member gets a turn to speak and the opinion of each person is heard and respected by the others); solidarity (represented by the gathering's honest interest in the wellbeing of each other and the community); equality (since the participants of the *ondjango* traditionally sit around a circle representing the absence of a hierarchy among them); action (i.e. the solving of problems); and empowerment (since an *ondjango* is also a place where knowledge is shared). Moreover, by naming the space the “*Ondjango Feminista*”, we were subverting the tradition that an *ondjango* had to be convened by an elder male person and reclaiming the space for women's agency.

*Ondjango Feminista* understands itself as “an autonomous movement of Angolan feminists committed to a transformative feminist agenda that advocates for the human rights of women and girls in Angola from the perspective of social justice, solidarity and freedom” (*Ondjango Feminista*, 2016a). *Ondjango Feminista*'s self-understanding as an “autonomous movement” refers to autonomy from the state and any other existing establishment; it can be understood as a movement whose agendas are set

by its feminist constituents, based on what they perceive to be the priorities of action in their context. Abeysekera (2003, cited in Casimiro, 2011) argues that feminist movements are characterised by a commitment to critique male privilege and women's subordination, eliminate gender inequality, and adopt a transformative perspective on any issue to do with gender relations, thus challenging the way in which gender relations are socially constructed. Relatedly, Gaidzanwa (2006, cited by Wilson, 2011: 5) argues that feminist movements are "often a smaller section within broader women's movements, which tend to have a transformative agenda: going beyond opposition to patriarchy, to critiquing the architecture of oppression and the political struggle necessary to transform rather than reform the structural inequalities at national, regional and international levels".

By expressing a commitment to a "transformative feminist agenda", Ondjango Feminista adopts a clear ideological position. This positioning stems from an understanding that, as the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (the Charter) puts it, "the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political" (African Feminist Forum, 2017) and that, by advocating for gender justice, and social justice more broadly, from an African feminist perspective, Ondjango Feminista "place[s] the patriarchal social relations, structures and systems which are embedded in other oppressive and exploitative structures at the centre of [its] analysis" (ibid). In its broader questioning of oppression and exploitation, and commitment to social justice, Ondjango Feminista upholds an African feminist ideology whilst simultaneously holding true to the Third World feminist ideological commitment to critiquing and challenging capitalism, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, racism, heteronormativity, ableism, class oppression as well as the religious and cultural norms that affect the lives of Angolan women (African Feminist Forum, 2017; Mohanty, 2003).

The key actions of the Ondjango Feminista include consciousness-raising and awareness-building; mobilising and organising the constituency; strategic support; advocacy; and fund-raising. Although Ondjango Feminista is not a legally constituted entity, it is regulated by specific norms – the Charter's principles and the Manifesto of the Ondjango Feminista – as well as structures: the 15-member coordination team and the assembly made up of all women who agreed to the adoption of the Charter and the Manifesto.



The first meeting of the Ondjango Feminista was held in June, 2016. Since then, regular monthly meetings have been held in Luanda (totalling eight by the time this paper was written), and another two *ad hoc* meetings were organised in Lubango, the capital city of the southern-central Huíla province. Attendance at these monthly meetings was initially low in both provinces, with only eight participants at the first meeting in Luanda and five in Lubango. However, attendance increased progressively with each monthly meeting, ranging from 11 to 21 participants for the meetings in 2016. In the first two meetings of 2017, in Luanda, attendance averaged 41 participants, and in Lubango, the second meeting, held in February, had an additional three participants.

The meeting agendas are defined by a coordination team made of 15 volunteer members, and the issues discussed cover a broad span of topics. These range from understanding the ideological underpinnings of African feminism to discussing women's sexual and reproductive rights, civil rights and political participation, feminism and culture, among others. The meetings often comprise a presentation about the topic made by one of the participants with relevant experience or interest in the area, followed by breakaway sessions where the participants work together on specific issues and identify strategies to address them. These discussions are always recorded, and are used to inform the programmes developed by the coordination team. One example of the effectiveness of these monthly meetings is the creation of a bi-annual magazine focusing on the issue of violence against women in Angola. The magazine will seek to provide an alternative narrative to gender-based violence by addressing it from a feminist and multi-disciplinary approach as opposed to the moralistic, conservative and positivist mainstream approach.

In addition to these monthly meetings, a national forum was organised under the theme "Building Bridges of Solidarity" in November 2016, with the assistance of the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF). The forum brought together 60 women from four different provinces and different CSOs to share their views on the lived realities of women in Angola, based on their own personal experiences and their work in civil society.

Ondjango Feminista's overtly subversive agenda has led to some challenges in organising women around a collective feminist movement. We highlight three of these challenges: the prevailing orientations towards feminism, the difficulty in accessing feminist resources, and the struggle to create safe

spaces for feminist engagement. Our discussion focuses on the specific ways in which these challenges manifest themselves and, where possible, the ways in which they are being addressed by the collective.

## **Orientations Towards Feminism**

Besides the political polarisation that separated Angolans along party lines, an important legacy of the civil war was the isolation of the country – politically, culturally and to some extent physically – from other countries on the continent. This isolation, exacerbated by colonially imposed linguistic barriers, manifests itself in various ways, among which is the insulation from certain economic and social processes that were developed in other countries.

With regard to feminism, while women and women’s organisations from various countries across Africa have been organising themselves around an African feminist ideology since the early 1990s (Ahikire, 2014; Wilson, 2011), the debate on feminism in Angola only entered the public sphere in the last four or five years. So although the terms “women empowerment”, “gender equality”, “gender and development” and “gender-based violence” have been widely used since independence and are well integrated in government and civil society discourse, the word “feminism” is still a novelty. Not surprisingly, the idea of an African strand of feminism, conceptualised and advocated by African women with the objective of speaking to the experiences of the women on the continent, is still foreign and continues to raise many questions and doubts.

The process of discussing feminism in the public sphere in Angola has been aided by many factors. Particularly noteworthy is the influence of many young Angolan women who lived or studied outside of Angola, generally but not exclusively in European countries or in Brazil, where feminism and feminist ideologies have been explored substantially over many decades. Using different social media platforms to share ideas and resources, these women are doing the important and ground-breaking work of pushing the debate about feminism into the public sphere, which in the context of Angola is pioneering, albeit not revolutionary.

As observed by a participant at the sixth meeting of the Ondjango Feminista, Angola is a country that promotes individualism, which is still often imported into discussions of feminism (Ondjango Feminista, 2016b). This

individualism is manifested as a focus on each woman's ability to achieve and maintain her equality through her own actions and choices. A stark example of this was recently provided by a presenter on the leading provincial radio station, who claimed during a live programme that "everyone has their own feminism. If [a woman] defends a cause, then that is her own feminism" (Radio Luanda, 2017). None of the programme participants – three women guests and the presenter – distanced themselves from being called "feminists", but although one of the participants continually tried to shift the conversation to a more political level, it was dominated by a focus on the responsibility of each woman to "work hard" and to be "smart" about pursuing equality. Women were thought to be smart when they successfully achieved their goals without challenging their "natural" submissive status in relation to men (ibid).

More significant, however, is the neoliberal ideology advanced by the MPLA government. In his 2016 end-of-year national address, the president reinforced neoliberal discourse by proposing that Angolans should work together to "promote a culture of meritocracy, produce with better results, and in that way, increase national wealth and distribute it more justly" (Dos Santos, 2016). In the same vein, a popular quote by Isabel Dos Santos – oldest daughter of the Angolan president, richest woman in Africa and recently appointed by presidential decree to the top management position at the state-owned oil company, Sonangol – claims that "if you are hardworking and determined, you will make it and that is the bottom line. I don't believe in an easy way through" (Forbes, 2013).

In the context of Angola's wide social and economic inequalities, advancing merit as a way to achieve wellbeing and justice within a capitalist society is, at best, fallacious and, at worst, dangerous. This is because the "market", the underpinning of neoliberal policy, is particularly efficient at reflecting and sustaining the social divisions existing in society in terms of class, race, gender and others (Mate, 2011). Thus, in the neoliberal economy, people with higher incomes and wealth retain economic dominance and are the only ones that can fully exercise choice (ibid). In this setting, ability and effort become irrelevant markers of justice.

Another preoccupying feature of neoliberalism is that it absolves the state from the responsibility of redistributing wealth (Mate, 2011) and advancing social justice through the promotion of progressive and welfare-oriented policies. Additionally, it presents solidarity-based movements such as unions

as “market inefficiencies”, thus undermining the role they play in shifting power dynamics and advocating for just social relations (*ibid*).

The dominant narrative about feminism in Angola tends to hinge on a neoliberal “faux-feminist” (hooks, 2013) praxis. As Casimiro (2014) puts it, this focuses on the achievement of equal rights for women and men within the scope of a capitalist society, without questioning the dominant liberal notions of citizenship or politics, or the ways in which the operations of the global capitalist system contribute to the oppression of women (Mohanty, 2003). This liberal brand of feminism not only ignores the harmful impact that market-oriented developmental and social policies have had on women in lower social and economic classes (such as informal street vendors, sex workers and rural farmers), it also delegitimises those struggles by asserting that these women could be better off if only they “tried harder” or “worked smarter”. Many feminist scholars have argued that this idea that one can advocate for women’s rights while at the same time negating the need to challenge structures of power and privilege constitutes a hijacking of feminism (hooks, 2013; Mohanty, 2003).

In this context, how does one then mobilise women around a transformative feminist agenda? For Ondjango Feminista, the answer seems to lie in two critical movement-building strategies: raising consciousness and political empowerment. As Wilson (2011: 24) puts it, these activities allow people to move from “a naive awareness of issues that affect them to a critical awareness of the issues when they find themselves asking why, what and how”. Political consciousness-raising has become a crucial aspect of activism. This process has been facilitated through the Ondjango Feminista’s monthly meetings, where women collectively reflect on and debate the various issues that affect their lives and shape their experience of womanhood from a critical feminist perspective.

After almost a year it is possible to note some changes in the feminist consciousness of regular participants. This shift is evident in the interventions some participants make during the monthly meetings, either through the questions raised after the opening presentations or in the conclusions and actions they identify from the breakaway sessions at each meeting. After the national forum on the theme “Building Bridges of Solidarity”, participants’ contributions during the various discussions about “Why do women fight?”, “Patriarchy and the public spaces of oppression”, “Women and access to

healthcare”, “Sexuality: a freedom delayed”, indicated a growing awareness of the way in which patriarchal structures of oppression are present in various aspects of women’s lives, from the most private to the most public. Based on these observations, it seems plausible to expect that, as the Angolan feminist movement grows and matures, and as its members also deepen their understanding of feminism, this understanding will continue to shift towards an ideology that politicises the struggle for women’s rights and that locates that struggle within a framework of social justice and solidarity-based collective action.

### Accessing Feminist Resources

The limited availability of credible information about the social conditions of women is an important barrier to feminist mobilisation in Angola. Although national news channels report, almost daily, new cases of physical and sexual violence against women, it is still difficult to access gender-disaggregated data that point to the problems facing Angolan women. There are also few critical analyses of structural differences in the experiences of women compared to those of men (Liberato, 2016).

Thus, when Angolan feminists problematise the impacts of certain events or policies on women, the overwhelming response from both society and government officials tends to be that these problems are not specific to women and therefore do not need to be addressed from a gendered, let alone feminist, perspective. Whilst it can be said that these assertions are generally made due to a lack of understanding of feminist issues, they have also been used as a strategy with which to silence feminist discourse.

The case of the criminalisation of street vending is one prominent example. Whereas feminists tend to claim that this restriction poses substantially more challenges for women street vendors, *zungueiras*, critics tend to argue that street vending is not exclusive to women. Indeed, men also carry out such activities. However, the sector is dominated by women, particularly young women (Human Rights Watch, 2013), and a one-day informal observation of the dynamics of police harassment on the streets of Luanda will show that the methods and consequences are different for women relative to men.

The unavailability of relevant statistics becomes even more problematic when the issues at hand are considered taboo, such as abortion and sex work. In the absence of local data that document the burden of the

criminalisation of abortion – e.g. how many clandestine abortions are conducted in Angola, the profile of women seeking such services, where and how they seek those services, the risks they face and the death toll and other perverse impacts of criminalisation – feminist activists often rely on foreign data, mostly from Brazil (because of the common language) and aggregates from sub-Saharan Africa. Although these data might be useful for understanding the global reach of the problem, they cannot speak to the reality of women in Angola. This in turn weakens the legitimacy of the argument for decriminalisation.

There is also a challenge in accessing material on feminist theory locally. Women's and feminist studies are still not given the relevance they deserve, as is clearly attested by the nonexistence of feminist studies departments in local universities. For most women in Angolan academia – even those in social studies departments – feminist studies is still unknown territory.

An encouraging development is that a small but growing number of Angolan women are pursuing women's, gender, or even feminist studies in universities outside of the country. Many of these women are engaging in feminist analysis of the conditions of women in Angola, and are using such means as blogs and conferences to discuss and disseminate their work. This is true of Florita Telo, a founding member of the Ondjango Feminista, who is pursuing a PhD in Women, Gender and Feminist Studies in Brazil and blogs at [www.floritatele.wordpress.com](http://www.floritatele.wordpress.com).

Although the Internet is overflowing with feminist resources that can be accessed for free, and despite the growing number of these resources that are available in Portuguese – for which Brazilian feminists must be thanked – data costs remain prohibitively high in Angola. This creates a situation in which access to feminist theory and analysis is differentiated along class lines.

There are, however, reasons to be hopeful. Despite the unavailability of academic and formal content on feminist issues, many young Angolan women have been carrying out their own analyses of the social conditions of women and have been using alternative means such as social media platforms and the Internet to raise consciousness around the agenda. Much debate has been generated on these platforms and, in a context where few other options are available or accessible, this engagement has created a much-needed space for the transfer of feminist knowledge. The monthly meetings organised by the Ondjango Feminista have helped to shift this interaction from a virtual to a

physical presence, and have had an overwhelmingly positive response in terms of attendance and involvement.

Most recently, there has also been a surge in the independent translations of key feminist texts. Much of what is translated and subsequently serves as a reference for new feminists, however, are texts from black women in North America and Brazil, and not necessarily the work of African feminists, which speaks more closely to the experience of Angolan women. This is partly due to a lack of awareness of the rich archive of African feminist scholarship, and is to some extent justified by the language barriers since Angola is Portuguese-speaking and most African feminist work is written in English. In addition, however, there has been a general, and problematic, trend for post-independence Angola to connect more with Western countries than with other African countries.

By adopting the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists as its guideline for feminist ideology and action, the Ondjango Feminista moves away from this trend and charts new ground for feminist engagement in Angola. One of its first actions was to translate the Charter into Portuguese and make it available in print and electronic formats. The translation was done voluntarily by members of the coordination team of the Ondjango Feminista and was subsequently published by AWDF in time to be distributed at the first Ondjango Feminista Forum. With the launch of its website in mid-March 2017<sup>3</sup>, Ondjango Feminista plans to regularly translate highly influential texts and analyses by African feminists, and will make them available online for free, with due permission of the authors.

Before the Ondjango Feminista was formed, other platforms were already engaging with Angolan feminists on the need to localise their analysis and practice. A prominent example is the YouTube show, “Women, Rights and Participation”. Created by founding members of the Ondjango Feminista – Florita Telo and Sizaltina Cutaia – the show invites women from different fields to discuss various issues affecting women and girls in Angola. To date, it has covered a wide range of topics, from the way women are represented in media to how culture is often used to oppress women, and the need for a feminist approach to the making of public policies, particularly concerning women’s rights and choices.

Building solidarity and forging connections with other African feminist organisations and movements will be important in order to address the

challenges of access to feminist resources. Our participation in the last African Feminist Forum in Zimbabwe, 2016, not only inspired the creation of the Ondjango Feminista but also permitted the forging of a relationship with feminists and feminist organisations from other regions of the continent. This heralded a new era in cross-border relations that Angolan feminists are eager to harness.

In October of the same year, Âurea Mouzinho represented the Ondjango Feminista at a conference on political feminism in Maputo, co-organised by the *Fórum Mulher* (Women's Forum), a network of Mozambican associations, unions, grassroots organisations, government institutions, and international organisations, to develop a collective agenda to promote women's rights (Casimiro, 2011). *Fórum Mulher*, which started in 1993, has developed a wealth of resources on women's rights and feminism in Portuguese, also the official language of Mozambique. Hence Ondjango Feminista's participation in this conference was particularly valuable, given the possibility it opened for Angolan feminists to access these resources and to forge collaborations with various Mozambican feminists.

### Creating Safe Spaces

The Angolan government's considerable effort to control and repress non-partisan civil society organising is dedicated towards the surveillance of dissenting voices. This takes many forms, including the hiring of spies and informants, *bofias*, to infiltrate activist circles. The existence of *bofias* is widely known in Angolan society, particularly among civil society organisations, and poses significant challenges to mobilising around any issue. People's fear that they are being spied on limits not only their interest in getting involved in collective action or social movements, but also the extent to which they get involved. This is because the repercussions tend to be greater for those who are, or are thought to be, more vocal about the cause and play key leadership roles.

This dynamic has made it difficult for various activist groups, including the Ondjango Feminista, to create safe spaces for engagement. This constitutes an extra burden in our efforts to mobilise and organise around a feminist agenda. Although progress has been made in terms of expanding the conversations outside of virtual spaces, it remains difficult to get women to participate and commit to collective action in these circumstances. Safe spaces are vital for feminist activists, not only to openly discuss and share their stories, ideas,



feelings and strategies, but also to do so without fear of repercussions or state scrutiny. This is particularly important because there are few spaces like these for women in general and, in many cases, alternatives such as women's homes and families are the very sites where their personhood and bodies are violated.

As the Ondjango Feminista grows and gains more visibility, concerns about ensuring that its spaces are safe are becoming ever more real and will demand a strategic response. It is increasingly clear, however, that creative resistance is the only path. Perhaps doing research and connecting with feminist movements in other parts of the world that deal with the same challenges might shed some light on the possibilities available. What will remain important throughout this process of creating and maintaining safe spaces is that one must take good care not to replicate within the movement the same element of distrust that already exists in society at large. As Ondjango Feminista pursues this aim, it will be important to remain true to its values of action, diversity, inclusion, non-discrimination, non-violence, transparency, justice, freedom and solidarity.

## **The Future of Feminist Organising in Angola: A Concluding Note**

The discussion above has contextualised the formation of the Ondjango Feminista, given the history of women's organising in Angola, and highlighted some of the challenges for feminist organising in the country. Whilst these challenges are important, the future for feminist organising in Angola remains hopeful. For the first time in a long while – at least since Deolinda Rodrigues created OMA – young women are leading the debate around women's rights. The age range of the members of Ondjango Feminista's coordination team is 21- to 38-years-old and as many as 63% of the women who attended the last three monthly meetings of the Ondjango Feminista are between 25 and 35 years old (Ondjango Feminista, 2017).

As the Angolan feminist movement continues to grow, its success or failure will be determined by its ability to continue grappling with the challenges it faces. Success will also be shaped by how well the movement responds to other issues that require attention, such as mobilising outside of the urban areas, the condition of LBTQ women, and among others, the impact of climate change. We remain hopeful for the future not only because those leading the feminist organising in Angola are young but also because the Ondjango Feminista works

in an autonomous, critical feminist, and progressive way, marked by solidarity. Ondjango Feminista members are voluntarily dedicating their time, energy, and intellect to building a just Angolan society for women, free from all forms of patriarchal oppression. They are doing so by building bridges across the divides of class, ethnicity, race and sexual identity, structures which have for a long time been used to keep women oppressed and separated.

## Endnotes

- 1 Among the activists, there were two women, hence the “+2”. They were Laurinda Gouveia and Rosa Conde who, after their release from jail, became members of the Ondjango Feminista.
- 2 Umbundu is an Angolan national language spoken in the southern and central parts of the country by the Ovimbundu people, the largest ethnic group in Angola. *Ondjango* is an abbreviation of the Umbundu phrase “*ondjo y’ohango*”, comprising the words “*ondjo*” (home) and “*ohango*” (talk or conversation). *Ondjango* therefore means house or place of conversation.
- 3 Available at [www.ondjangofeminista.com](http://www.ondjangofeminista.com).

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