Policy Brief II
Gender, class and space in Maputo, Mozambique

Photo: Lizete Mangueleze

This is the second in a series of policy briefs relating to the research project, "The Ethnography of a Divided City: Socio-politics, Poverty and Gender in Maputo, Mozambique" (2012–2015), funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The objective is to contribute with ethnographic knowledge and 'views from below' to on-going urban development and poverty reduction debates and efforts in Mozambique.

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WHAT THE STATISTICS SAY

In the literature on urbanisation and urban poverty in Africa, the issue of gender has received limited attention – despite a focus on 'gender equality' from governments and donors and broad agreement among researchers about the link between the position of women and household well-being.

Most of the focus on gender has been on the role of women in the informal economy, where they tend to dominate, and on what is generally considered a 'feminisation of poverty' in the form of an increasing proportion of female-headed households.

Recent data from Mozambique and Maputo challenge these assumptions by showing that urban female-headed households have experienced a more consistent reduction in poverty than urban male-headed households over the past 15 years – from 65 to 45 per cent and from 63 to 44 per cent respectively.

In Maputo, where 29 per cent of all households are currently headed by women, this tendency is even stronger. Here, for the first time, female-headed households have a lower poverty incidence (34.6 per cent) than male-headed households (35.6 per cent).

At the same time, the proportion of female-headed households is as high in Maputo's most affluent urban district located in the city centre (KaMpfumu) as it is in the suburban district of Nlhamankulu and in the peri-urban district of KaMavota (see INE 2009 and 2010).

Figures on employment structure, cost of living, rate of inflation and low minimum wages on the one hand, and improvements in the options for income generation in parts of the informal sector on the other, may suggest part of the explanation for the reduction in female poverty (Jones and Tarp 2013) but they do not fully explain the dynamics of gender, space and class, and the reasons why a hegemonic perception of a 'feminisation of urban poverty' seems to be inverted in the case of Maputo.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS, MAPUTO DISTRICTS

Urban District	Proportion FHH	Poverty Rate MHH	Poverty Rate FHH
KaMpfumu	28.0	2.0	2.4
KaMaxaquene	33.6	39.0	35.1
Nlhamankulu	28.6	26.1	23.7
KaMavota	28.3	29.2	26.6
KaMubukwana	29.0	36.3	34.0

CURRENT POLICIES

Since the early 1990s Mozambique has put gender equality firmly on the policy map, as a combined outcome of a relatively strong political representation of women in higher political office and pressure from a dominant donor community for whom 'gender equality' is hegemonic.

The Mozambican Constitution declares that "The State promotes, supports and values the development of women and encourages their growing role in society, in all spheres of political, economic and social activities in the country", and Mozambique is a signatory to all international and regional initiatives that aim to promote equal rights for men and women.

More concretely, important tools for gender equality have been the establishment of a Ministry for Women and Social Affairs and of Gender Units in most public institutions; the passing of the Family Law 2002; and relatively strong gender-based NGOs in an otherwise weak civil society (Tvedten et al. 2010).

However, these tools are only partially reflected in policies and interventions for urban development. The Urban Poverty Reduction Plan (MPD 2010) outlines the special characteristics of urban poverty, advocates employment creation and social protection measures for the very poorest, and presents data implying a feminisation of urban poverty.

The 'National Strategy for Interventions in Informal Settlements in Mozambique' (MICOA 2011) analyses the current situation and outlines possible interventions based on the formalisation of rights and popular participation, but it does not mention gender specifically.

The Maputo Municipality Five-Year Development Plan (2009–2013) emphasises the importance of physical infrastructure for development, such as roads, water, electricity and waste collection, but it does not offer an analysis of poverty and gender.

The World Bank's Maputo Municipal Development Programme II (2010–2015) focuses on basic services, land management and public/private sector cooperation, but as with most other donor interventions the cross-cutting issue of gender disappears when concrete programs and projects are implemented.

The main reasons for the limited focus on gender in urban policy and interventions seem to be a male bias among policymakers, and the tendency for gender to 'disappear' as a category in aggregate statistics used for decision making. Moreover, the policy among donors of seeing gender as a 'cross-cutting issue' has effectively decreased levels of responsiveness to this issue and significantly reduces the willingness to take responsibility for it.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTRIBUTIONS

To better understand the dynamics behind the reduced poverty rate among female-headed households in Maputo, we use an analytical framework combining a focus on structural and spatial constraints and the agency of men and women. At the same time, we recognise that the activities people perform are governed by their particular position within unequal social relationships and dominant cultural discourses – including class and gender.

Historical Trajectories

From the time of the initial encounter between the patrilineal Tsonga and the patriarchal Portuguese at the end of the nineteenth century, Maputo's urban spaces were gendered and dominated by a male or masculine socio-cultural order both in terms of skewed power relations and by (explicit or implicit) gendered spatial rules.

Women were initially banned from urban space altogether, through a combination of pass laws introduced by the colonial regime, by the need for a signed agreement from a male family member, and by their effective exclusion from an urban labour market largely reserved for men.

Women who did move to the city, following male migration and the collapse of the rural support system, violated socio-cultural norms, mainly working in urban agriculture, as beer brewers or as prostitutes; by the middle of the 1940s most were single or single mothers.

Through the colonial period, the formal 'city of cement' continued to be inaccessible to indigenous women, while an increasing number of women moved to the informal 'city of reeds', which was largely governed by male-biased rules and regulations.

But cities like Maputo are also characterised by opportunities for alternative practices and strategies in the form of moments of disorder or resistance and consequent 'slippages' in gendered spatial reproduction – all of which challenge structural asymmetries in urban settings.

With population growth from the early 1960s, the 'informalisation' of formal colonial space, and the lifting of pass-laws, the informal economy

came to represent an increasingly important alternative source of employment and income for women who were still largely banned from formal employment opportunities.

From independence in 1975, men's formal employment opportunities were reduced and the informal sector grew with the departure of the Portuguese, the subsequent breakdown of the centralised planning economy, and unemployment following structural adjustment – all of which represented 'vital conjunctures' opening up new urban space for women.

At the same time the boundaries between the formal and informal parts of the city became more obscure and less restrictive, as the suburban part of the old *cidade* became overcrowded and poorer, and the better off settled in periurban areas where they found more space, more tranquillity and less violence.

Spatial Strategies

Currently, with partial economic recovery and heavy investment in Maputo's central city space, formal employment continues to be dominated by men, albeit earning low wages. This makes it necessary for the majority of the poor to combine formal and informal employment or to pursue other multiple income opportunities.

Analysing the spatial strategies of men and women in the bairros of 25 de Junho and Inhagoia, people tend to separate into one of three areas of the city: the wealthy and largely unattainable '*cidade*'; the congested and hectic but economically favourable 'suburban' space; and the 'periurban' bairros with a mixture of poor and better off people – who stay there either because they cannot afford anything else or because they prefer a calmer life.

We followed a number of men and women and their household members in their daily strategies through urban spaces: about one third of the household units did not have any members who left the bairro. They are effectively 'captured' in structures of oppression.

Women who left the bairro at regular intervals primarily went to the suburban bairros of Xipamanini and Alto Maé for informal trade (*comérçio*); to neighbouring bairros such as Luis Cabral and Bagamoyo to 'visit family or friends'; or to social/religious events, such as weddings and funerals, in rural areas.

Men made more frequent visits to the *cidade* for work, or in search of employment and income; to the suburban bairros to 'visit friends or colleagues'; and to nearby bairros – often the District centre – to solve formal issues with government institutions.

These moves are representative of the spatial outreach of men and women who find themselves in different socio-economic positions. For destitute women with few options for leaving, the bairro itself represents opportunities with its myriad of small markets and informal services in which women dominate.

Destitute men on the other hand have seen their position and status deteriorate: they are not able to support a family in line with traditional expectations. While many seem to give up and become idle, others do menial jobs – such as carrying goods for market women, sweeping up, or stealing – that further lower their position and self-esteem.

Poor women who leave the bairro on a regular basis for informal trade depend on wider horizontal social networks. Goods have to be collected at one of the major wholesale markets and transported to the markets in the city or suburbs; co-operation is also necessary in order for them to take care of responsibilities at home in 25 de Junho or Inhagoia.

Poor men with the capacity to leave the bairro usually do so because they have menial employment or to seek work. The bulk of the lower-paid formal employment opportunities (as guards in construction or as handymen) are located in the cidade or suburban parts of the city and necessitate vertical relations with employers and 'middlemen'.

Better-off men and women usually have higher education qualifications and formal employment in the city or run successful informal businesses. While the men in such positions are able to live up to expectations of being breadwinners and often have wives who stay at home, many women may earn less but spread risk by having several activities going on at the same time.

Multiple economic activities require relations of trust. This is often established with women in the immediate neighbourhood, but also by including additional members of the household – as evidenced by the fact that female-headed households tend to have as many members as male-headed households.

The position of many women in male-headed households inhibits their active economic engagement because of heavy domestic responsibilities, or because the men do not want their wives to work. In fact, men consistently talk about women's economic activities as '*actividades*' and not work (*emprego*), as if to underline their own superiority.

Given continued male supremacy in the private as well as in the public space, women who acquire a position of basic economic and social independence from men by being *de jure* or *de facto* heads of households seem to be in the best position to use the city's spaces of opportunity.

The significance of this development, and hence the emancipation the city spaces may represent for women, is indicated by urban female-headed households having experienced the most consistent reduction in poverty in Mozambique; also. female-headed households in Maputo currently have a lower poverty incidence than male-headed

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households.

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS
With the important role of women in household well-being and community amity, more attention should be given to issues of gender in Mozambique's urban development and poverty reduction efforts – from both government and donors.

In addition to strengthening the role and bargaining position of existing community-based organisations, the involvement of international organisations such as 'Shack Dwellers International' should be assessed.

Economically, the threshold for women to enter formal employment positions in male-dominated occupations should be lowered through proactive interventions relating to equal rights and equal salaries.

Informal economic activities should be protected from undue interference in the form of harassment and taxation – rather than regulated, which will reduce the flexibility vital for women involved in multiple income-earning and domestic tasks.

The political representation of women at higher levels should be reflected at the level of communities, by encouraging more women to involve themselves in community politics (as heads of neighbourhoods and quarters) and mediation (as members of community courts and community police).

For the very poorest, the focus must be on the emerging signs of a masculinisation of extreme poverty. This can be achieved by raising minimum wages and through the design of interventions for social protection.

Further reading

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