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Violence against women in the context of urban poverty in Angola

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Violence against women is widespread in Angola. This brief presents the main findings in a recent study of how violence against women is playing out in the context of urban poverty. Faced with day-to-day challenges for survival and social reproduction, women rank violence relatively low in their problem hierarchy. Victims of violence have very few venues for seeking help and support. Cultural norms and the country's political history seem to "normalize" violence, perpetuating low social awareness about the issue.

This CMI/CEIC Brief emerges from the joint CEIC and CMI research project “Cooperation on Research and Development in Angola”, and is based on qualitative research in two urban poor neighbourhoods (locally known as *musseques*) in the city capital of Luanda, conducted in February 2016.

Introduction

Our aim is to assess how violence against women is playing out in the context of poverty; i.e. how poverty and violence is interlinked in women’s own perceptions and experiences, and how these dual factors structure their *de facto* space for manoeuvre. Our analysis suggests that violence is widespread and that women have very few venues for seeking help and support. Yet, faced with a plethora of day-to-day challenges for survival and social reproduction, women rank violence relatively low in their problem hierarchy. Also, cultural norms and the country’s political history appear to “normalize” violence, thereby perpetuating low social awareness about the issue.

Country and legal context

In spite of Angola’s status as a middle-income country – due to its vast influx of oil revenues – income distribution is highly asymmetrical and poverty levels are high. The Gini-coefficient is 0,54 (UNICEF 2014)¹, whilst rural and urban poverty represent 57 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively (INE 2013). UNDP’s Human Development Index lists Angola as number 149 amongst 188 countries, whilst the World Bank’s World Development Report lists it as number 112 out of 188 countries.

The country is highly urbanized, with 62,6 per cent of Angola’s 25 million inhabitants living in urban areas and 41,8 per cent in Luanda alone. Out of these, 52,3 percent are women (INE 2016). The majority of Luanda’s inhabitants live in informal urban and peri-urban settlements. These neighbourhoods are predominantly characterized by entrenched poverty, limited access to public services and employment, poor infrastructure, and highly unhealthy living conditions. These aspects, constituting the social and material context for the present research on gendered violence, are furthered explored in Tvedten og Lázaro (2016).

NGOs and UN bodies have for several years pushed for legal and institutional measures addressing violence against women in Angola. In July 2011, the Angolan parliament passed a new law addressing domestic violence.² Previously, domestic violence was not illegal in Angola, and the few cases that reached court were prosecuted under rape, assault and battery laws (Redvers 2011).

Under the new law, victims of domestic violence are entitled to financial, legal, medical and other forms of state support, and violence is defined as a “public crime”, which implies that third parties also can report the crime to the police (*ibid*)³. A special court addressing domestic violence⁴ was set up in 2013 and a helpline has also been established, run by the Ministry of the Family and Women’s Promotion (MINFAMU).

However, there is a long way to go from legislation to implementation, as well as consistent political attention to the matter, though it is important to recognize the role of official legislation in shaping public norms about what constitutions normative and legal transgressions.

Gendered violence in Angola: Existing knowledge

Existing qualitative knowledge on poverty and gendered violence in Angola is scarce, and quantitative data are patchy and inconclusive. Angola ranks as number 126 out of 145 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index (WEF 2015). A preliminary study conducted in 2007 found that 78 per cent of women had experienced

some form of violence since the age of 15, and that 62 per cent of women living in poor suburbs around Luanda had experienced abuse during the past year (US State Department 2008).

Data from MINFAMU showed that out of the 2260 recorded cases in 2006, 92.6 per cent of the cases had a female victim. The main complaint (71 per cent) concerned what in academic terms is defined as economic violence (denial of paternity, failure to pay child support, abandonment of the family, eviction of the woman, and expropriation of the woman’s assets), followed by physical violence (10.5 per cent) and psychological violence (8.9 per cent) (Nascimento et. al 2014). Between January and September 2014, the National Directorate for Women’s Right (DNDM), recorded 6351 cases of domestic violence, out of which 5083 cases had a female victim (Gavião 2015).

A recent study on Angolan health care professionals’ perceptions about intimate partner violence found that attitudes toward the subject was coloured by patriarchal norms about male superiority and women’s roles as mothers and spouses (Nascimento et. al 2014). This resulted in a tendency to “blame the victim”, which, combined with an across-the-board lack of institutional and professional resources for helping and supporting female victims, resulted in inadequate support and follow-up except for mere treatment for physical injuries.

It is also relevant to highlight the influence of traditional patriarchal norms shaping social perceptions about the subordination of women in spousal- and family life (Nzatuzola 2005), as well unresolved traumas from the civil war leading to heightened levels of domestic violence (Development Workshop 2009).

Field site

Qualitative research informing this CMI/CEIC Brief was mainly conducted in the south-eastern *musseques* Wenji Maka II in the municipality of Belas in the capital city of Luanda, with additional interview material collected in the *musseques* of Paraiso in the municipality of Cacucaco in the northwest of Luanda. In Wenji Maka II, the main methodology applied was focus groups with women⁵, where broader issues related to poverty also was explored. The issue was also raised in individual interviews with local informal authorities.

Wenji Maka II (meaning ‘problems with trade’) is a peri-urban informal neighbourhood and a former agricultural area that has been occupied by migrants since the year of 2000. Currently, it has a population of approximately 22.000 inhabitants of mixed socio-linguistic and ethnic background. In spite of some pockets of relative affluence, it is a poor neighbourhood struggling with issues of basic sanitation, access to markets, education and health, precarious access to clean water (which is to be fetched from a communal pump) and unpaved and garbage-littered streets. The latter also leads to significant health problems related to malaria, chikungunya, yellow-fever and other sanitation-related diseases.

Poverty and violence

Prior to raising the issue of domestic violence, the focus group was asked to make a joint list over the ten biggest problems that their community was facing. Water, electricity, sanitation, health and education were rated as their main — and pervasive — problems in their everyday lives.

Asked if domestic violence was an issue in the community or amongst the households they knew, several in the group reluctantly raised their shoulders, and one woman answered that “conflicts abound, but...”. However, it soon transpired that domestic violence was indeed a frequent occurrence in the community, which they estimated to affect around 1 out of 10 households. References were made — in a rather casual manner — about how a woman in the vicinity of the neighbourhood had recently been murdered by her partner because she refused to have sex.

The “casual manner” in which this information was offered may reflect that 1) an occurrence of this severity had not happened within their immediate social circles and that they did not feel directly affected by it, and/or 2) that it is perceived as something that “just happens”, i.e. it is to a certain extent normalized as a fact of life. It is worth mentioning here that in Paraiso, a female member of OMA (Angolan Women’s Organisation, the female branch of the country’s ruling party MPLA) stated that sexual violence against women was widespread, offering as examples a four year old baby girl who had recently been found murdered nearby, and the 12-years daughter of a friend of hers who had been raped. She estimated that she heard about around three cases of sexual violence each week in the area where she lived.

Spousal mistrust and cultural gendered models

One of the women in the focus group in Wenji Maka II told that her partner had beaten her up because she had come home late from the market. He was stressed by being home alone with a crying child, she said, and accused her for having met another man in secrecy. This woman, aged 26, was now pregnant with her third child. Her account of this incident generated no particular reactions from her female peers, which may also indicate that these occurrences are to a certain extent normalized.

This incident may provide a good case for understanding local explanatory frameworks for why domestic violence occurs, when read in relation to a recent study of health professionals’ perceptions of gendered violence (Nascimento et.al 2014). This study cites cultural perceptions about how to be a “good spouse/mother” as a justification and/or explanatory framework for domestic violence, with violence occurring when men perceive that women—rightfully or not—have transgressed these boundaries. Accusations of infidelity constitute one of these transgressions that legitimizes violence, as does the perceived failure to perform domestic duties (ibid: 1232). One female nurse technician cited in the study said that they have to “talk to women about their behaviour in the home, prevent troubles by lecturing her, explaining women’s duties within the family” (ibid).

Nascimento et.al (2014) also cites women’s “socio-economic dependency on men, and unemployment as issues related to violence” (ibid: 1232). The health professionals interviewed indicated that women were assigned responsibility/blame for financial stress due to chauvinistic attitudes. One health administrator commented that “it’s for lack of salt or sugar that a beating can happen when the man of the house is a chauvinist and raises his hand to strike her...as long as she depends on him, she can’t say a word. Whatever she says will lead to violence” (ibid).

In Wenji Maka II, a male member of the resident’s association (*Comissão do Moradores*) stated that the main reason for domestic violence was financial troubles, i.e. that disagreements over money or other resource led to physical abuse. A woman affiliated to a church in Paraiso pointed to financial problems and chauvinistic attitudes as compound trigger factors: “men beat women. It may happen because

she has not made lunch or dinner, but that is because he has not left her with any money to buy food.”

Gender roles

The women in the Wenji Make II focus groups disagreed strongly amongst themselves whether one could “expect” that a male partner would chip in on household duties and childcare. One woman said that “whatever a woman can do, men can do as well”, but this generated loud protests amongst her peers. Another participant said that a woman has no right to tell a man to do things, and if she tried, her partner would get angry and say “this is your work, you are the woman”. Besides, it would represent a lack of respect to ask him to do things, she stated.

One of the elder women said that she got so much pain in the wrists from her household chores that her husband ended up washing his own clothes (but only his own clothes). He also started to go to the market to shop for food, but this was also because he suspected her of “tucking away” household money. She thought that it was an alleviation that he took over this chore, as it relieved her from being confronted with these accusations.

Eventually the women in the group agreed on that a man could help (*ajudar*) in the house by his own initiative if he saw that she was tired, but they had no right to demand it from him. All in all, these discussions illuminated that cultural models for “women’s role” in the family were firmly entrenched also amongst the women themselves. From the discussions it also transpired that if a man does too much work in the house, neighbourhood gossip would emerge and discourage him from doing it any more. Hence, the “community gaze” continues to perpetuate and regulate cultural perceptions of gendered divisions of labour.

Institutional and social resources

The participants in the Wenji Maka II focus group agreed that women who are exposed to domestic violence have limited to no institutional support. In cases of spousal disagreements or conflicts, the “conflict-solving route” was first to try to solve the matter amongst themselves, then to discuss the matter with the family, and ultimately, to split up. Other potential instances are the *padrinho*⁶ or a pastor. Battered women can also potentially seek help from the local branch of OMA. As regards the local municipal police “it is not worthwhile” (*não vale a pena*) to go to them, they said.

The women also argued that the resident’s commission does not get involved in cases of domestic violence. Partly countering this claim, a male member of the resident’s commission stated that they sometimes get involved, but only in severe cases of physical violence whereby they may refer the woman to the police.

Final reflections

The present research material indicates that domestic violence cannot be analysed without taking into account the full spectre of social, cultural and political factors generating violence as well as shaping poor women’s experience and perceptions of it.

The people interviewed — both men and women — live under a great deal of everyday stress; economic, physical and social. Post-war migration patterns and traumas, weakening of traditional family patterns (Nzatuzola 2005) and the rapid population increase in informal neighbourhood have to various degrees resulted in weak community- and family ties. Additionally, inadequate public service- and institutional

infrastructure related to physical and mental health creates barriers for seeking health care and support for both men and women.

The new gender violence law from 2011 is an important step in the right direction, not least because it recognizes the state's duty in supporting battered women. However, the law is of limited value if it is not implemented. The across-the-board fragility and inadequacy of Angolan public service infrastructure indicates that the state is not prepared to deal with the actual high number of women who live in abusive relationship.

When calculating the "cost" of staying in an abusive relationship

versus the "cost" of raising children alone without a spouses' support (financial and otherwise), poor women living in urban poverty face a complex scenario of entrenched vulnerability. In addition to cultural barriers, this includes discriminatory practices based on racial- and socio-economic stratification in public institutions, their hand-to-mouth struggle for everyday survival, their limited income opportunities, their often weak immediate and extended networks, their weak property rights, and their care burden, often for many young children. All these factors have to be added in when assessing poor women's *de facto* space of manoeuvre when faced with domestic violence.

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Endnotes

- 1 The Gini-coefficient measures the income distribution between high-income and low-income earners in a country on a scale from 0 to 1, whereby 0 is perfect equality and 1 is perfect inequality.
- 2 Angolan Women's Organisation (OMA), attached to the country's ruling party, Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), was one of the national organizations that played an important role in the elaboration and approbation of Law Against Domestic Violence (Lei nº 25/11 de 14 de julho), and in raising the issue of domestic violence on the public agenda.
- 3 However, prosecution of offenders and final verdicts have proven difficult to complete because of legal loopholes and poor investigation practices.
- 4 This special court is titled the 9th section of the Criminal Provincial Common Court of Luanda (9ª Secção dos Crimes Comuns do Tribunal Provincial de Luanda).
- 5 The focus group was conducted over a period of two days, comprising altogether approximately 20 women between 26 and 57 years old. The women were recruited by "the snow ball method" through a call from the local resident's association (Comissão do Moradores). Most of the women in the group engaged in some form of low-pay income-generating activity. Two of them had studied beyond high-school level, but were unable to find relevant jobs.
- 6 The padrinho in this context refers to a person in community, with a recognized good conduct, that may be called upon to help out in moments of conjugal crisis.



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