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Continuity and ruptures in the hegemonic model of femininity in Angola: an analysis of the experience of female lecturers at the Katyavala Bwila-Benguela University (Angola)

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Abstract: Life in Angola remains heavily influenced by the continued effects of the struggle for independence, followed by over 27 years of civil war. The civil war had a profoundly negative impact on all aspects of human life in Angola, including the perpetuation of traditional gender norms, which results in significant challenges permeating the lives of women in the Southern African nation, placing them in a particularly disadvantaged position in terms of health, education and access to resources. This article focuses on female lecturers at Katyavala Bwila University in Benguela (UKB) to explore their experiences and mainstream discourses in relation to their gendered position. Drawing from in-depth interviews and discussion groups, the article examines discursive practices of subjection or dis-subjection to identify possibilities of transformation which may emerge from the recognition of their gendered experiences.

Keywords: situated knowledge, gendered experiences, discourse analysis, male domination, symbolic violence.

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Introduction

Women in Angola face many challenges. Almost 27 years of civil war and a legacy of gendered cultural practices place them at a disadvantage in terms of health, education and access to resources. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (2021) ranked Angola 119th out of 156 countries, well below other Lusophone African countries such as Mozambique (32nd) and Cabo Verde (68th).

The 2015–16 Health and Multiple Indicators Survey (IIMS) found that while only 8 per cent of men aged 15–49 had no education at all, the figure for women was more than double at 22 per cent. A further 33 per cent of women aged 15–24 were illiterate, compared with 16 per cent of men in the same age group. Part of this is explained by the fact that in 2021, 30.3 per cent of women aged 20–24 reported being married or in a union before the age of 18, with a further 7.9 per cent before the age of 15 years old (UN Women 2021). Importantly, the adolescent birth rate as of 2014 was 163 per 1,000 women aged 15–19, down from 190.9 per 1,000 in 2009 (UN Women 2021). However, these factors continue to hamper women's educational prospects and consequently also severely limit their full participation in the formal labour market.

The socio-economic challenges faced by women in Angola are exacerbated by the significant levels of violence committed against them. UN Women (2021) found that 24 per cent of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15–49 reported being subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months. In 2017, this figure was higher, at 32 per cent (MINFAMU 2017). Despite gender equality being emphasised by both public policies and legal frameworks through official political discourse, there is very little translation in practice in terms of budgetary commitments for government programmes.

As argued by Anzaldúa (2004: 72–3), cultural norms and practices in Angola convey 'dominant paradigms', which are predefined concepts that are unquestioned and thus are almost impossible to challenge, leading us to perceive a certain version of reality. This is what Van Dijk (1999) calls 'social knowledge', a series of beliefs that are integrated in discourse without the need for them to be stated and taken as true. It is thus critical to take the time to reflect on general views about masculinity and femininity in Angola and to consider how these are incorporated in general discourses and how they impact the attitudes and experiences of men and women in the country. This is important because through the increased awareness that emerges from this process, women can begin to establish the alliances necessary to promote more gender equality in society.

As highlighted by Gómez (2004), grassroots politics on the level of individuals and communities, through shared meanings and non-discursive practices that question images and representations of women, simultaneously enable the emergence of new

ones. Thus, an increased awareness of gendered dynamics in society and a joint exploration of the existence of heretical discourses (Bourdieu 1997) is conducive to generating new meanings and modifying the established social order – a heretical discourse that 'tends to open up the future' (Gómez 2004: 99). At the same time, it remains imperative to also examine the possible strategies of resistance that emerge from the confrontation of traditional cultural norms by individuals who become active subjects by taking power and authority and thus play an active role in challenging inequalities through pedagogical tools. University teaching staff are a good example of such actors.

This article centres on female teaching staff at Katyavala Bwila University (hereafter UKB) to interrogate the extent to which their experiences, in both their social position as women and their professional role as lecturers, are shaped by dominant gender discourses in society. Focusing on female lecturers offers a lens through which to examine their contributions to the shaping of mainstream discourses as they are actively engaged in teaching the next generation of carers, workers and leaders. As posited by Bourdieu (2000), discourses constitute an important symbolic heritage that may trigger a series of symbolic associations that establish a non-natural division of the spaces attributed to men and women. The focus on lecturers in particular enables us to go beyond the analysis of how women's experiences are shaped by their gender identity to also examine how these are reinforced and regulated by important patriarchal institutions such as the family and the state, as well as education and legal frameworks and the media (Morton 2010).

The structure of the article is as follows: it starts by examining gender relations in Angola and their impact on the lived experiences of Angolan women. Then it briefly describes the research design and other methodological considerations in how the study was conceptualised and implemented. Lastly, the article reflects on the results and explores the main themes identified considering current feminist literature.

Contextualising gender relations in Angola

Angola is a multicultural and diverse country situated in the western region of Southern Africa; its extensive territory (1,246,700 square kilometres) is divided into 18 provinces. The Portuguese arrived in what is now Angolan territory around 1482–4 and established trade relations with the local kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo. Zau (2002: 44) argues that at that time, 'capturing and selling slaves was the business in which the Portuguese and Africans got involved, obviously to the detriment of the Africans'. Thus, Portuguese colonial exploitation was characterised by slavery, forced labour with physical violence, and relied on the collaboration of local native

authorities. By the mid-20th century, Portugal had already completed a cycle that redefined the economic and social dynamics in the region, characterised by extensive agricultural production on large plantations and the consequent breakdown of African societies in both rural and urban areas (Nascimento 2016).

It was only from the 1950s onwards that successive rebellious groups managed to consolidate in the form of nationalist organisations and began to challenge the hegemony of Portuguese colonisation, enabling the resurfacing of renewed claims for independence. These organisations began by promoting diplomatic campaigns in support of the struggle for independence, later triggering more direct armed conflict (Zau 2002). The three most prominent organisations were the Popular Liberation Movement of Angola (MPLA), the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA).

After many years of armed conflict, the nation achieved independence on 11 November 1975 under the leadership of the MPLA. Despite the existence of three liberation movements, the governance of the country was handed over to the MPLA, which generated discontent and sparked the beginning of a long civil war. Angola would live, therefore, 'a period of 43 years in a permanent state of war', from the struggle for independence (1961–75) to the ceasefire relating to the internal power struggle (1975–2002), becoming in the process the protagonist of one of the longest-running armed conflicts in the history of the African continent (Paiva 2016: 77).

In April 2002, after 27 years, the end of the war instigated a period of profound political and economic change in the country. The new politics were shaped by a period of consolidation of democratic institutions and the progressive opening of a multiparty system. Concomitantly, significant steps were taken to ensure macroeconomic stability and the adoption of a general system of market economy which was favourable to the private sector (Relógio *et al.* 2017). Despite many shortcomings in terms of reducing inequality, the progress after 20 years of peacetime was extensive as the nation transitioned from a communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s to a more open market economy in the 1990s, a process further consolidated after the end of the civil war.

The particularities of this historical context have meant that Angola is a nation characterised by deep social inequalities, built on the power asymmetries of colonial rule and years of armed conflict. In 2020 about one in two people (54 per cent) in Angola lived in multidimensional poverty and experienced, on average, about half of the identified 16 deprivations related to health, education, quality of life and employment (INE 2020a). It is worth noting that it was only in the last 10 years that statistical data began to be collected more systematically in Angola, with the first post-independence national census being conducted in 2014. Nonetheless, data disaggregation based on sex has only recently been prescribed, resulting in significant

limitations on data availability relating to the social and economic condition of women in society.

More institutionally, successive governments have made official pledges and commitments towards achieving gender equality and the promotion of women's rights. Since independence in 1975, the principle of equality between men and women has been enshrined in the constitution, completed by legal frameworks prohibiting any form of discrimination based on gender. The 2010 constitution further consolidated this position. Yet, beyond official discourse and rhetoric, there are very limited policies and programmes that promote equality, and the allocation of resources to this end remains rather scant.

Consequently, despite constituting the majority of the population (52 per cent) and heading 24 per cent of Angolan families (INE 2016), across all social levels, women remain under-represented and socio-economic indicators reveal a situation of profound inequality. The literacy rate for the period 2018–19 was markedly higher for men, at 82.6 per cent of the national male population, contrasted with only 57.2 per cent of the national female population. For women living in rural areas the statistics are even more startling, as only 29.3 per cent of women were found to be literate, contrasted with a more than double figure for men at 65 per cent (INE 2020a). As mentioned above, these figures are in part explained by the high rate of school dropouts among girls due to early pregnancies as well as well-known issues of predatory practices and sexual harassment perpetrated by male lecturers.

In relation to higher education more specifically, there are significant differences in the employment opportunities for men and women. In 2015, in terms of both administrative staff and professor-researchers, men outnumbered women, representing the majority of the workforce at 67.3 per cent (44.9 of whom were lecturers and 22.4 technical-administrative staff), while women represented 32.7 per cent of staff (14.7 per cent of whom were professors and 18 per cent technical-administrative staff) (MES 2015). In regard to students attending higher education, interestingly, gendered cultural norms influence degree choices, as there is a high representation of women in professional areas such as Health and Education Sciences, Humanities and Environmental Studies, while men tend to choose Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, Management and Administration, Law, Architecture and Construction (MES 2015).

This in turn shapes employment opportunities, as although employment rates are similar at 64.2 per cent for men and 59.3 per cent for women (INE 2020a), women are mainly engaged in activities related to agriculture (47 per cent) and sales/domestic services (34.7 per cent). This results in power asymmetries, relegating women to performing mostly unskilled jobs and being over-represented in the informal market. The vast majority of women (73.9 per cent) in the country are self-employed (INE 2020a),

which in most cases implies greater precariousness as they do not benefit from labour law protections.

Furthermore, despite the majority of the workforce consisting of informal labour, men and women tend to work in different sectors, with women over-represented in low-paid jobs, thus reinforcing occupational segregation and exacerbating the reliance on women for low-paid domestic and care jobs. There is thus still horizontal labour segregation, with a large number of women continuing to carry out work traditionally associated with women, such as decoration, cooking, sewing and hairdressing, among others, with a large representation in the informal sector of the economy (Domingos 2018).

When we examine the representation of women in decision-making bodies, including the executive, women represent less than 25 per cent of the seats within central and local administrative structures of the state (INE 2020b). The greatest differences are at the central level, as only 32 per cent of seats in Parliament are held by women and women represent only about 5 per cent of the total number of minister advisors. At the local level, women represent around 12 per cent of the leadership of the provinces, that is, out of 18 governors, only two are women (INE 2020b). It is important to note that although there are a considerable number of women in Parliament, it is often argued that their participation is strongly conditioned by the agenda of the political group they represent and therefore they are not vested with power (Valcárcel 1997). Their autonomy and freedom are therefore conditioned by the party's position (INE 2020b). Unlike other Southern African Development Community countries, Angola does not have legislative provisions for gendered quotas (SADC 2018).

In order to challenge the discrimination women experience in Angola, which is deeply rooted in cultural practices, the full engagement of all sectors of society is needed. The intersection between legal frameworks and the socio-cultural and institutional context creates important inconsistencies in the protection of women's rights (United Nations 2013). This is so particularly due to the continuing role played by local customary laws, rooted in the local culture, which continue to shape family relations and views on property rights. Therefore, oftentimes decisions are taken based on tradition, to the detriment of women, who have been historically discriminated against. For instance, in many communities, when a husband dies, the family of the deceased inherits all his property and belongings, leaving his surviving wife and children with nothing.

Such practices are difficult to challenge because personal identity derives from socio-cultural constructs, and in Angola, differences based on sex often form the basis of gender identity. Thus, gender roles remain deeply embedded in feelings and consequently condition the way individuals interact on a daily basis. Hence, the asymmetric power relations between men and women are understood as being 'in the order of

things' in the sense that they are seen as normal and natural (Bourdieu 2000). This results in the naturalisation and normalisation of discrimination, which is accepted as a way of fulfilling the 'cultural mandate' that must be upheld subject to the penalty of social punishment.

The normalisation of gender-based violence

In her book *O Estado de Wonderbra*, Barbara Biglia (2007) discusses the processes of naturalisation and the autonomic 'normativisation' of gender and gendered relations. These processes result in the emergence of inequalities of power and rights, which in turn generate discrimination and abuse of power and are the basis for the persistence of gender-based violence. Therefore, the biological differences between the sexes emerge as a natural justification for socially established differences. This legitimises a relation of domination inscribed in biological nature, itself a naturalised social construction, thus serving as the basis for a symbolic construction which is not restricted to the performative sphere and which is 'completed and realized in a deep and lasting transformation of bodies (and brains)' (Bourdieu 2000: 37). The work of reproducing male domination is done by institutions that take charge of ensuring what Bourdieu calls the order of the sexes. These include the family, church and schools, all perpetuating the androcentric vision and male domination.

Gender is thus the result of a process of social construction through which the expectations and values that each culture assigns to men and women are symbolically assigned. As a result of this learning, men and women display the roles and identities assigned to them under the label of gender, hence the preponderance of the masculine and the subalternity of the feminine. These are the essential ingredients of this symbolic order of male domination that defines the power relations of men over women and which is the basis of gender-based violence (Biglia 2007).

As such, the masculine position reveals the conditions of domination and symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is defined by Bourdieu (1999: 173) as 'that violence that starts submissions that are not even perceived as such, relying on collective expectations, on socially instilled beliefs'; it is an invisible, insensitive, muffled and unknown form of violence (more than just a set of beliefs) that traverses the body and is internalised, assimilated and naturalised. It is a form of violence that is exercised without physical coercion through the different symbolic forms that shape minds and give meaning to action. The focus on symbolic violence does not mean that physical violence and its impacts on the lives of women are minimised. Instead, the emphasis is on demonstrating how this form of violence, when normalised and naturalised, results in power and rights imbalances, which in turn generate discrimination and abuse of power, which is the basis for the persistence of gender violence (Biglia 2007).

Along the same lines, García Selgas & Casado (2010) place the emphasis on gender relations as a fundamental part of the explanation of the origin of gender-based violence, stressing that it is necessary always to analyse it based on the socio-cultural conditions in which it originates. Thus both gender relations and gender identities should be analysed with an emphasis on power relations, requiring an analysis of these power relations in their concrete contexts of production and, at the same time, seeking to make visible the power relations present in naturalised inequalities.

In Angola, violence against women continues to be experienced in private and there is some resistance on the part of women to address it publicly; yet, as Strønen & Nangacovie (2016) argue, when it is addressed, it is found to be a common experience among women. The socio-economic marginalisation that women face in society plays an important role in the normalisation of the violence that is inflicted on women and girls. The numbers are disconcerting, with 32 per cent (between the ages of 15 and 49) reporting being victims of physical violence from the age of 15, and a further 8 per cent reporting being victims of sexual violence. Among the women who reported getting married between the ages of 15 and 49, 34 per cent reported suffering spousal physical or sexual violence (INE 2017). Furthermore, in 2015 there was an increase of 57.2 per cent in reports of domestic violence compared with 2014. In 2015, the Criminal Investigation Service (SIC) registered 4,060 occurrences of domestic violence against women, which represents 78 per cent of the total incidents recorded by these services. The remaining 22 per cent were cases of violence that affected children (MINFAMU 2017).

Fundamentally, the constructed gender stereotypes form the basis of a normalisation or naturalisation that implies an acceptance and justification of the widespread levels of violence. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that 25 per cent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 consider conjugal violence inflicted by men to be legitimate, while 20 per cent of men share the same opinion (INE 2016). Thus, violence against women tends to be 'explained from the perspective of power and the inequality in the roles of man/woman or husband/wife' (Nangacovie & Strønen 2019: 62).

Methodology

Epistemologically, this article starts from a situated and partial position, incorporating a reflexive commitment. This means that the position of the researcher was important when it came to considering what to investigate and how to investigate: the fact of being a woman, Angolan and with lived experience of the adversities experienced by women in Angola, where a mixture of local beliefs and traditions, coupled with impositions from the Catholic religion introduced through the process of Portuguese

colonisation, intersects today with practices and discourses in which inequality is naturalised and normalised.

Methodologically, the present study seeks to analyse the specificity of knowledge and situated subjectivities (Haraway 1995) and thus adopts qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and discussion groups to gather insights on the experience of UKB female lecturers and explore their representations and meanings in relation to the construction of their gendered position. It draws from Murillo & Mena's (2006) framework of considering research to be flexible and open while at the same time allowing for adjustment of the research design, without forgetting that the analysis of the results should have a scientific and social impact. Lastly, a postcolonial perspective, as posited by bell hooks (hooks *et al.* 2004), enables or allows our own reading to coordinate, in the sense of a political articulation that transforms the starting positions and puts them in permanent dialogue without defining unitary and exclusive positions of victims and oppressors. Moreover, the analysis starts from an understanding of the specificity of our knowledge and specific situations which, not in vain, contribute to the process of construction of our identity (hooks *et al.* 2004).

It is thus important to resort to a methodology that proposes a new territory of political and theoretical alliances, a feminism that is better able to 'stay in tune with specific historical and political positions and permanent biases without abandoning the search for powerful links', challenging feminist politics to move towards the goal of building 'a place for different social subjects' (Haraway 1995, cited in Sandoval 2004: 89–90). At the same time, it is essential to place the Other and oneself in a context of collective action, as Martínez Guzmán (2014) argued when proposing the metaphor of engagement. This is to investigate in everyday life and 'position ourselves as competent members of those places and territories, which share codes and expectations and are therefore capable of developing a shared understanding (common understanding)'[1] – a position Spink (2007: 12–13) termed epistemological anticolonialism.

Being *involucrado* (involved/committed) in a research context implies not looking from an 'aerial perspective with a totalising and independent eye, but rather through an inner gaze, which occupies a place in the field' (Martínez Guzmán 2014: 19). Thus, the current project adopted a qualitative methodology and, from the ensuing results, drew conclusions on socially shared phenomena. In-depth interviews and discussion groups enabled the researcher to collect the experience of UKB lecturers and explore their representations and meanings in relation to the construction of their gendered positions. The use of open, non-directive and non-standardised interviews allowed both the researcher and the informants to better understand perspectives on their lives, experiences and situations, expressed in their own words (Taylor & Bogdan 1987).

[1] This term was proposed by Garfinkel (1967/1984, cited in Spink 2007: 12–13).

While the in-depth interviews were conceptualised as a conversation between equals in which the questions were adapted to the dialogue that developed during the interaction (Alonso 1998), the discussion groups were organised in the form of planned conversations, which helped the researcher obtain information on defined areas of interest, in a permissive and relaxed environment (Krueger 1991). The goal of the discussion groups was to create the ideal conditions to share experiences as women and as professionals. From a focus on everyday life, group interaction developed, and individuals shared how they felt while at the same time creating a safe space for such sharing. This contextual exploration, far from being absolute, revealed relative truths about 'being a woman in Angola' which were said and heard by all participants (Muraro 2010). These truths must be allowed 'to be spoken by the mouths of those who live them and with their words, except for the necessary mediations' (Muraro 2010: 91).

The aim was to explore the experiences and discourses of UKB female lecturers in relation to their gendered position. More specifically, we intended to identify discursive practices of subjection or de-subjection with regard to hegemonic identity models of masculinity and femininity, and to make visible the experiences linked to gendered position and that reflect asymmetries in the process of construction of femininity and masculinity. Thus, the sample selection process was based on the notion of criteria of relevance and not of representativeness (Conde 1994); that is, it is about identifying and selecting the participants who best represent the relationships that we intend to investigate, people who, due to their position in the social structure, have had experiences and discourses based on our objective (Murillo & Mena 2006; Cornejo & Salas 2011). The intention was 'to try to locate and saturate the symbolic space, the places of enunciation of discourses on the objective to be investigated based on the criterion of relevance' (Martínez Benlloch 2008: 246).

A total of four female lecturers were interviewed and six participated in the discussion group. All had been affiliated with the university for more than five years (some for more than 10 years) and belonged to different faculties (Polytechnic, Economics and Educational Sciences). All were mothers; four were divorced, one was a single mother and three were married. Interview recordings were subsequently transcribed. Through thematic analysis, different themes emerged from the personal stories and wider discussions. The aim was to search for 'a common element that indicates the way of socially constructing reality […] by the collective represented by our group' (Nogueira 2001: 116). The information was organised into two thematic nuclei: narratives of an assumed equality in the public sphere and the enormous difficulties of reconciling the personal (domestic work) and the professional (demands inherent to their profession); and narratives of an experience of subordination to symbolic power and naturalisation of gender violence.

Discussion

The narratives that emerged from interviews and group discussions reflected a sense of social analysis of the production of senses, meanings and references that are attributed to social actions (Murillo & Mena 2006). As Amezcua & Gálvez (2002) point out, discourses are linked to three main dimensions: use of language, communication of beliefs and interaction in social situations. Thus, as researchers it is important that we analyse not only the different positions, but also their practical effects in the construction of our subjectivity (the symbolic and the discursive and non-discursive present in the social).

Between tensions and discomforts: emancipation vs submission

Female lecturers were found to reproduce a discourse in which 'woman' and 'man' are constructed as essentially different. Their representations referred to meanings of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman. The woman was identified and subjectively constructed as different, so that she 'must' assume certain social roles. For instance, Prof. C highlighted:

> the man was conceived as the authority in the home, so we women, wisdom is in the woman, in the maintenance of the home […] the man was conceived as the head of the family, the head of the house […] the woman must be submissive, stay by the side […]

Prof. B added that:

> the African man is the authority par excellence […]

This form of essentialising discourse of difference leads certain women to assume a relationship of complicity with the symbolic power of male domination. This is the case even when it implies a continuum of discomfort for 'occupying' their gender role in the process of reconciling personal and professional life. For Prof. C:

> That is why the woman is seen as a 'superman', the woman basically gets to a point when she wonders: Oh my God, what do I want? I wanted to get to the top, but I'm already worn out here.

Prof. A added:

> I feel like a woman, still very overwhelmed!!! Why? Because I have to come to work besides continuing with my obligations at home […].

These statements illustrate the frustration felt by many women, as the incorporation of women into the labour market has resulted in the manifestation of a deep

contradiction between the logic of the sexual division of labour and the woman's need to practice an occupation not only as a source of income for the family, but also as a means of personal fulfilment and financial independence. When we examine female lecturers more specifically, despite their expressions of exasperation they make limited attempts to question dominant discourses (androcentric and heteropatriarchal). Thus, women, even professional ones such as lecturers, do not seek to redefine the hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity that dominate their societies. These deeply rooted gender relations have been shaped by a combination of traditional African culture, Portuguese colonisation and civil war, among other elements, and they continue to be reflected in family, social and political relations. Thus it is crucial to examine the continuities in the gendered interactions between traditionally constructed gender norms and the new dynamics imposed by the demands of modern societies and the conflicts that arise from them (Nangacovie & Strønen, 2019). This occurs as the symbolic order is (re-)established, ratified and reproduced (Bourdieu 1997) through these processes.

The concept of 'emancipation' was frequently mentioned by the lecturers to refer to their equal position in relation to men. It was particularly interesting to see how, on the one hand, their narratives emphasised the need for every woman to be 'emancipated', which was seen as a positive dimension that allows women to gain autonomy and independence from men. On the other hand, however, it was simultaneously seen as something negative. For instance, Prof. B posited:

> there are women who are very emancipated, but deep down there is something missing; they break up their homes [steal other people's husbands] because they do not feel totally fulfilled as women from a biological point of view.

Prof. C also offered limited endorsement for the idea of emancipation:

> Emancipation yes! But happiness, it's not emancipation that gives happiness as such, no.

The 'superwoman' narrative is essential for the reconciliation between the personal and the public, between the productive and the reproductive, leading women to feel they must endure much suffering and resignation in order to achieve 'emancipation'. The main discourses seem to construct subjectivity without resistance to prevailing norms, which has the effect of enforcing adherence to gender roles. This produces discourses that naturalise and recognise the asymmetries in the construction of identities, as well as naturalisation processes that make invisible the mechanisms of power and inequality that underlie mainstream discourses. At the same time, however, tensions, discomforts and sufferings arise in gendered relations in the process of articulation between desire for autonomy at the public/professional level on the one hand and

subordination at the private level on the other, based on the assumption of traditional gendered roles.

The experiences of discomfort, tension and suffering experienced by female lecturers, restricted to the individual sphere and not yet demonstrating the subversive potential of a social group, invite reflection on the need for collective work to be undertaken with other women in order to highlight dynamics that would otherwise go unmentioned, undisclosed and thus unaccounted for. This may presuppose possible resistance to established roles, leaving open the possibility of a transformation of the hegemonic model.

Maintenance of the generic female role

The narratives of the lecturers were infused with a symbolic order that is ratified and perpetuated by women in a traditional social reality, constituted by beliefs, norms, identities and roles that remain embodied in their identity and subjectivity and that condition their ideas and practices. Prof. A highlighted elements of the mainstream gender discourses that permeate the local culture:

> In our Angolan culture, the first thing a woman has to learn is to do things at home. Education comes after, the positions after … this is the woman seen from the cultural point of view.

This representation of traditional reality based on dichotomies of gender – man/woman, productive/reproductive – is marked by cultural notions of the subordination of women to men. The use of time, the beliefs (man: authority, head of the family, provider), the values attributed to him, the imposed norms, the construction of identities (male and female), as well as the status (good/bad, married/unmarried woman) and their respective roles in Angolan reality, all have different asymmetrical meanings. Prof. C stated:

> I think that women should not lose their role, the role for which they have been created. The woman was created – and she can study, have completed a university career, take courses – but the woman was created to be her husband's assistant.

Despite being at odds with discourses on the emancipation of women, such views are incessantly reproduced in the processes of socialisation: the identities and values attributed to gender produce ways to perceive, value, desire, respect, admire, love (Gómez 2007). These discourses are maintained regardless of education and financial independence because they are deeply rooted in bodies and habits and 'function as schemes of perception of thought and action' (Bourdieu 2000: 21).

Therefore, it is argued that the process of identity and subjectivity construction among the female lecturers at UKB is shaped by two key aspects: on the one hand,

the masculine (and heteropatriarchal) representation of production, and on the other hand, the feminine (and maternal) representation of reproduction. As such, as posited by Prof. A:

> The woman studied, has a profession, but she is obliged to fulfil her function. My husband can share some tasks with me, but when my mother is present, he cannot perform these (domestic) activities for reasons of obedience. Here comes the cultural aspect that is not innovative and does not allow us to evolve, does not allow us to be at the same level as our partner … if you can, I can!

For Prof. C, it is clear that:

> To be a woman in Angola is to be a worker, a fighter, and I even believe that if it wasn't, because it is a very pejorative and 'strong' term (laughs) … I would say slave […] woman is mother, father, they go to the market, wash the dishes, educate the children.

Meanwhile, Prof. B finds it less controversial to admit that, in her view:

> Men want to have a slave, ready for everything, to obey. And this happens even among intellectual men.

The construction of the identities manifested by the female lecturers presents the woman as the 'angel of the home'. They see cultural gender norms as 'normal'. This naturalisation of gendered roles and identities is assumed and incorporated in the identity and subjectivity of women, who see the care of the home and of the children as their natural role. This is the case even when they recognise that this places them in a position akin to a slave whereby despite being professional, educated women, mainstream discourses are interiorised and reproduced with acknowledgement, but without necessarily challenging them.

Prof. F shared her personal experience of being denied a job because of how her gender was perceived:

> I did a test for an oil company, ELF, in Luanda. I was one of the best candidates, I had the best score and yet I was not given the job. Because I was a woman and because I studied naval engineering (laughs). Because I was a woman, I couldn't go and work on a platform. I must say that it has been very difficult, that there is a lot of discrimination, and I say the same for both private companies and public administration, I had that experience … it is very difficult.

There is thus recognition of the role gender identity plays in the persistence of the discrimination women face. Yet the overall normalisation of gender-based discrimination in society means that asymmetric constructions of female identity are rarely challenged. It was revealing that none of the participants questioned the 'obligations' that society imposes on them as women.

Male domination and asymmetrical gender relations

Another important theme that emerged was the naturalisation of violence. It became apparent that mainstream discourses that legitimise and construct the subjectivity of women from a symbolic order marked by male domination and by the naturalisation of violence were identifiable through situated knowledge about relations and strategies of (de-)identification (Haraway 1995). This is because in Angola, female subjectivity shapes and incorporates cultural practices that acquire collective meaning in their historical context. These discursive constructions are permeated by practices with persistent marks that male domination imprints on the bodies of women (Bourdieu 2000). For Prof. F, it was challenging being:

> the only female naval mechanical engineer here in Benguela. But I had to do a thousand turns to get a job [they all laugh]. I must say it was very difficult.

Meanwhile, Prof. A argued that:

> As Prof. D said, society still doesn't accept us as women capable of holding a position of responsibility.

Prof. F added:

> We are not seen as capable of performing tasks on an equal footing with men. It is still difficult … it is a great injustice.

The symbolic values of violence can take a psychological toll on women. Prof. E shared her experience at home of being put 'between "the sword and the wall"', and being told:

> you already work and now you are also going to enrol in college, what about me? How long will I have to eat the food made by the maid or your sister? How long will I have to carry on picking up the children from the nursery? Madam, you decide … from today, if you want a husband, stay at home, if you want to continue studying, go back to your parents' home.

Others shared similar experiences, highlighting:

> He didn't want me to work, but when I got paid, he wanted to be the administrator of my money. He kept my money; he was the one who gave destination to that money. I could not touch my money. (E. 2)

Such narratives highlight how gender roles interrelate cultural symbols and normative concepts of what a woman should be, what she should do, what is permitted of her and who gets to manage her finances. This in turn evokes representations and meanings that contribute to the overall maintenance of male domination as they go mostly unchallenged by women.

It is thus argued that male domination in society generates a symbolic form of violence that is present in day-to-day life, which, as it is not always perceived as such, has a dual existence: on the one hand, it is naturalised, assimilated and internalised with the complicity of women (Bourdieu 2000), while on the other hand, it is also sometimes met with indignation and a clear recognition of the fundamental pain and injury it causes to women. This violence, often exercised without physical coercion, shapes minds and gives meanings to action because male domination contributes to the imposition of a symbolic order in which gender asymmetries are incorporated, favouring masculine positions which, far from being questioned, are assumed and guarantee inequalities between men and women. This goes hand in hand with the maintenance of the social order without the need to legitimise mainstream discourses. The frameworks of understanding and dispositions of the lecturers in the study incorporate this male domination. More importantly, this interiorisation can in turn result in violence that becomes physical and psychological, which, not being recognised as a problem, becomes naturalised.

Some lecturers demonstrated the deep-rooted nature of beliefs that legitimise violence against women. For instance, during one of the group discussions, Prof. B noted: 'A man who does not hit, is not a man.' This was followed by generalised laughter. For Prof. A, this is true even in cities:

> Even in the cities this is true. A man is a man, to make the woman feel that he is a man, first he shouts at her and if she doesn't understand, he slaps her. Then she herself says: 'my husband is a man …'.

The degree of interiorisation of this violence is exemplified by statements such as 'some women like to be hit' (female Prof. F.) or that women:

> provoke themselves saying 'hit me, hit me'. And then they have a good sexual relationship. Don't you see that many children are conceived after a good spank! (Prof. D)

Such comments were often followed by laughter during the discussion groups as women recalled personal experiences that reflected generalised practices and understandings about what men can and cannot do to women's bodies, all within the context of what is socially expected, thus without causing shock.

There were, however, also instances of outrage. E.1, for example, reflected on the fact that:

> Specifically in relation to me, I had a relationship of … approximately 15 years, where I was my husband's mother. I was the mother … He was much older than me, he was 13 years older than me […] I looked after him as if he were my own son. And if that was the problem … The problem was big, despite everything I did for him, he mistreated me … And he assaulted me!!! The violence was not only physical, moral violence is worse than physical. I say this with knowledge of the facts … [sighs].

> Because … when you know you are not what they say you are .... You know you do everything, everything!!! [Practically crying] to make the person feel good. And yet he humiliates you, treating you worse than a sack of rubbish [with an angry tone].

Other women also reflected on the extreme nature of some of that violence:

> One day I had to prepare a practical lesson … I was doing a poster, when he comes and slaps me […] and the next day you see me in class with this whole part of my arm bruised [points to right elbow] and upper lip swollen … [sighs] this situation was extreme. (E.2)

Despite the indignation or rage sometimes displayed by the women who shared their personal experiences of both physical and psychological violence, overall there was a naturalisation of gender-based violence. This was demonstrated by both generalised laughter and reproduction of dominant discourses of women needing a beating by their husbands. On the flip side, even when there was frustration and a sense that such behaviour is inherently wrong or 'extreme', this was not followed by any sort of action that could break the cycle of violence experienced by women. This in turn results in the 'minimisation' of often extreme cases of violence perpetrated by husbands based on the naturalisation of inequality, since the male figure (understood as an authority figure) is identified as superior and invested with the (symbolic) power to inflict violence if he considers it necessary. In this scenario the woman is left with no agency to challenge her partner, as by extension that would mean challenging a dominant cultural norm or belief that is yet to be generally contested or opposed in Angolan society, rendering the ensuing structural violence invisible and natural.

Conclusion

This article has sought to critically engage with reflections on the experience of female lecturers in the context of a provincial city in Angola, Benguela. The analysis of their discourses revealed a context in which the construction of identities in Angola is marked by a gender binary in which the differences between men and women are accentuated.

Through the analysis of their gendered experiences both individually and collectively, this article analysed how their views were shaped by a hegemonic model of femininity characterised by dominant discourses based on constructed differences that legitimise inequality and produce asymmetries between men and women. These discourses in turn are embodied and sustained by dynamics of recognition through a system of domination hierarchically establishing legitimate and adequate roles for men and women.

The article adopted an objectivity constructed intersubjectively, seeking to understand situated knowledge and subjectivities. It prioritised generating knowledge from a reflection on lived experiences and reality, always recognising that individuals are the product of socio-historical interactions that can be transformed when seen as problematic. Therefore, it allowed for the analysis of discourses that we frame and are framed by, making visible confusing discomforts, contradictions and erosions in the current models, all linked to gendered positions and giving rise to collective and self-transformative action.

The analysis of the experiences and narratives of female lecturers in Angola enabled us to identify main themes of analysis focusing on (1) the prescription of asymmetric roles assigned to each gender, determined by a symbolic power that legitimises male domination with the complicity of the women who adhere to and naturalise this difference; and (2) the naturalisation of various forms of violence that are normalised, accepted, interiorised and reproduced by a symbolic order marked by an overall framework of hegemonic masculinity. It was argued that while on the one hand professional women such as the female lecturers that participated in the study accept and reproduce the mainstream discourses that perpetuate the violence that women experience, on the other hand they also manifest, simultaneously, an underlying, for the most part passive, understanding of the injustice that is inflicted upon them by the normalisation of gender-based violence that is so widespread in the society.

To challenge and confront the dominant cultural constructions of female identity considering the male domination model, which results in symbolic violence, requires more than just being aware of it. It demands organised political action, starting from the courage to share one's indignation, thus igniting a sense of collective action that can break with the tacit complicity of the incorporated representations, in the sense of a symbolic revolution capable of calling into question hegemonic models of masculinity. In Angola more specifically, the analysis of the narratives and experiences of professional women such as the lecturers who participated in the study demonstrated the need to break away from gender binaries that reproduce and legitimise asymmetries between the sexes.

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