

Mozambique's ongoing war:

Gender-based violence

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ABSTRACT

In 1975, FRELIMO, and Samora Machel regained independence from the Portuguese. This signaled a new beginning for its citizens; however, oppression continued within their own society. This project analyzes how the current cultural model that maintains a gender-based hierarchical structure has regarded women as subordinate beings by forcing them into prostitution, exposing them to sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS, and pressuring them into unwanted partnerships that often have led to domestic violence. I explore the experiences that Mozambican women have endured from the start of the independent nation through recent times, using examples from Mozambican Cinema. These films and documentaries highlight the stories of victims and showcase women who have dedicated their lives to fighting the structures that continue to oppress. They raise their voices against inequality and hope to establish a free and just country that Mozambique women and their future generations deserve.

Keywords: Gender violence, Inequality, Mozambican cinema, Protest.

La guerra actual de Mozambique: La violencia de género

RESUMEN

En 1975, FRELIMO y Samora Machel recuperaron su independencia de los portugueses. Esto señaló un nuevo comienzo para sus ciudadanos; sin embargo, la opresión continuó dentro de la sociedad. Este proyecto analiza cómo el modelo cultural actual mantiene una estructura de jerarquía entre los géneros. Una que ha considerado a la mujer como un ser subordinado al forzarlas a la prostitución, exponerlas a infecciones transmitidas sexualmente, como el VIH/SIDA, y presionarlas a relaciones no deseadas que llevan a casos de violencia doméstica. Exploro las experiencias que las mujeres mozambiqueñas han tenido que soportar desde los inicios de la nación independiente hasta la actualidad usando ejemplos tomados del cine mozambiqueño. Estos filmes y documentales resaltan

Palabras clave: Violencia de género, Desigualdad, Cine de Mozambique, Protesta.

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The year 1975 marked the start of the independent nation for Mozambique. With the rise of power of a single-party state, FRELIMO and their new president Samora Machel were able to regain control of Mozambique from the Portuguese. This independence signaled a new beginning for the Mozambican people, however, even though they were able to gain freedom as a country, the oppression continued within their society. Mozambique's current cultural model maintains a gender-based hierarchical structure, where women are regarded as subordinate beings. This structure has not only permitted but also normalized physical and emotional violence against women regardless of their age or socioeconomic status. The subordinate position of women is imposed by distinct forms of violence that range from both physical and emotional. With the opportunities, or lack thereof, allocated to them women have been forced into prostitution, they have been exposed to sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS, and pressured into partnerships that have led to domestic violence. Even though women have continued to suffer the injustices that Mozambicans thought they halted as a civilization, there are currently collectives of women who have dedicated their lives to fighting the structures that continue to oppress them through artistic means, such as hip-hop, rap, poetry, and literature. These women raise their voices against inequality and with hope to establish a free and just Mozambique that women and their future generations deserve.

As a consequence of the independence, a large number of the Portuguese that once resided in Mozambique had to depart the country, either having to return to Europe or establish themselves in one of the neighboring countries. This sudden change caused a major challenge to the new government and its people, since most Mozambicans had low levels of education and skills, making it difficult to rebuild the country they desired and fought for. Only two years after gaining independence, the civil war in Mozambique struck, claiming not only the infrastructure but also over one million lives. As a survival tactic, many families fled the country and sought asylum, while

the remaining population was dependent on government-supplemented food aid for their survival (da Silva et al., 2000). Some families were provided with food aid until their first harvest, as it was expected for them to run small farms to provide for themselves and their families. Due to the wars and the displacement of communities, many women became the head of the household, requiring them to provide for their children in a country that had limited work opportunities, not only because of their lack of education but also because they were regarded as second-class citizens. With the employment options already restricted, women had two options: becoming petty traders or domestic workers. Unfortunately, petty trade was illegal in Mozambique until the end of the 1980s, which meant that much of the time the women selling small quantities of food to support their young children had to hide from the police, further inhibiting their opportunity to make money (da Silva et al., 2000). Combined with the fear of the police, more "professional" traders with more access to goods took advantage of these women's lower education and economic status and cheated them into accepting more work for less money. This left them in an inescapable, vicious cycle where they were too poor to be eligible for any kind of loan but also had no options regarding labor opportunities.

The lack of jobs and the desperation that was attributed to the pressure of having to sustain a family pushed women into prostitution, one of the most poorly regarded jobs and most taken advantage of by a patriarchal society. Women who are forced into sex work as the last resort to generate some income for their children become susceptible to physical assault at the hands of their "clients" without the ability to denounce said violence due to the illegal status of prostitution in Mozambique. These women not only lose complete autonomy of their body, but at many times are not regarded as victims of sexual abuse by reason of the ethical and moral traditional values that govern the country; prostitution thus became one of the demonstrations of female oppression. In the same manner, the limited opportunities and resources

manifested an increase in female child prostitution during the 1980s, which was attributed to factors such as "poverty, erosion of sociocultural values, cultural alienation, lack of children's occupation as a result of them not attending school, the growing materialistic values, and the negative cultural practices" (da Silva et al., 2000, p. 69). These young girls become victims of prostitution to support their homes since their ability to generate income is directly linked with their loved ones' livelihood. The familial and economic pressure strips these girls of any type of decision-making, where in many cases they are regarded as objects that both their "bosses" and "clients" can control. Some adults, who call themselves entrepreneurs, take advantage of poor young women by facilitating sexual contact between the clients and the girls, not only controlling their bodies but also the amount of income they can receive (da Silva et al., 2000).

The film *Virgem Margarida* (2012), co-written and directed by Licinio Azevedo, exposes the realities of the sex workers in Maputo right after the independence. These women were forced into re-education camps to become "mulheres novas com cabeças limpas". In this film, we get to see the corrupted nature of the FRELIMO soldiers, who did not care about the harsh living conditions these women had to endure. Instead, they are seen as *re-educadas*. Dirty and broken women that are portrayed by wearing mini-skirts and tight t-shirts, bumming cigarettes in the street corners, and therefore, need to be fixed (Tavares, 2016). Margarida, the character that inspires the title of the film, is a young girl who is wrongfully captured by the soldiers as a consequence of not being able to provide official documentation and is thus regarded as a prostitute. She is then put into an education center with a group of women, who in fact are not all prostitutes, and forced into physical labor in the hopes of creating a new and improved woman that fits into the ideal FRELIMO society.

In this film, we are introduced to the character of Susana, a professional dancer and single mom who is also wrongly placed into the camps. Susana is depicted to be a

caring mother who worked in order to be able to support her two children, but similarly to Margarida, she was unable to provide the soldiers with proof of employment and therefore was considered an outsider. This character, depicted to be a caring mother who worked to support her two children, symbolizes the issue of the lack of employment and the need to sustain a family that many women in Mozambique encountered right after the country's independence. She was the head of the household in a patriarchal society and even though she did not have to resort to prostitution, she still had to leave her house every night to earn some money to feed her kids at a time when a woman's only job was to be a housewife. Unfortunately, it did not matter to the soldiers if the women were prostitutes or not, Susana's word held no value in front of her male counterparts because being a woman alone in the streets at night was enough for her to be considered a corrupted being.

As mentioned before, Margarida was a sixteen year old girl who was forced into the re-education camp even though she was not a prostitute. Her character reveals the patriarchal values that were deeply integrated into the Mozambican culture, not only within the women themselves, but also with the same soldiers that sought to re-educate them. Her character reveals the patriarchal values that were deeply integrated into the Mozambican culture, not only within the women themselves, but also with the same soldiers that sought to re-educate them. This unjust placement of Margarida, quickly uncovered the flawed nature of the new education system implemented by the government; a system designed for failure due to the corrupt nature of the soldiers in charge of enacting the change.

Margarida was questioned not only by her superiors but also by all the women that were captured. This led to the first instance of sexual abuse faced by Margarida, as her peers held her down in the bed and performed the "finger-test" to prove that she was actually a virgin. After performing this test, they all clapped and yelled, "Virgem! Virgem! Virgem!" while Margarida lies on the bed, tired of resisting. It is only after having

proof of what Margarida has claimed all along that they go to their general to ask for her liberation. This scene demonstrates the *machista* culture that women also abide by as they believe in abusive tests to prove a woman's "virginity," and only give value to Margarida after realizing that she is not a prostitute. Maria Tavares (2016) claims that "the obsession with the idea of achieving purity in society by controlling women's bodies echoes the Estado Novo's posture towards women," demonstrating that women in this film internalized and held the same moral principles as their oppressors.

The second instance of sexual abuse that Margarida had to endure occurred right after her liberty was granted and Commander Felisberto, who was the highest local authority, drove to the camp to transport her back home. On the drive back, the commander forced Margarida out of the car, raped her to prove her virginity, and ordered another soldier to "take advantage" of her. When Margarida was able to escape, Commander Felisberto was relieved to know that he did not have to drive her back home and hoped that wild animals would eat her. By showing the highest local government authority as Margarida's rapist, the corrupted nature of the new government is exposed. Tavares (2016) declares that "despite the emphasis put on women's liberation, during and after the anti-colonial struggle, it is made clear throughout the film that dangerous stereotypes remain alive in the New Society." The value of a woman is not limited to her virginity because regardless of this status, they are considered subordinate beings, leading men to continue to take advantage despite attempting to impose the "*mulheres novas com cabeças limpas*" values.

Prostitution has been associated with sexually transmitted infections, since about 25-30% of all cases of STIs can be attributed to sex work (da Silva et al., 2000, p. 57). However, in the 1990s, there was a rise in HIV and AIDS-related infections, where most of the patients were young women from the ages 15-19 in heterosexual relationships. Young girls were 2.5 times more likely to contract HIV/AIDS, which was accredited to the lack of sexual knowledge and the pressure to please their male partners (Machel,

2001). Josina Machel performed a quantitative study in different educational institutions to discover why schoolgirls were more susceptible to contracting STIs. One of the most important factors that arose from her study was that of class-related issues. In many cases, the family income was directly associated with the education level some of these girls were able to receive. At times, when the family consisted of more than one child, parents valued the boys' education over the girls, limiting their schooling to only cultural teachings that favor patriarchal values. On the other hand, lower-income girls were coerced into participating in relationships caused by their need for money. Which exposes them to having relationships with older men, in order to help economically around their households. Since the foundation of these relationships was material support, girls in these situations had other boyfriends in which the partnership was motivated by "love". By exposing the young girls to not only dating older men, but also having partners on the side, they became more vulnerable to contracting STIs. Additionally, young women tended to condone multiple partners for men, creating a cycle that exposed them to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Regardless of whether women had the opportunity to attend school, their sexual education was limited either way due to the taboo view around sex that prevails in Mozambique.

Young women became socialized from birth to believe that they need to marry a man to be able to have a prosperous life, and lamentably, their sexual behavior reflects this belief. The patriarchal values that have been ingrained in society have made these young schoolgirls vulnerable to the STI transmission crisis, exhibiting another form of gendered violence that dominates the country of Mozambique. One of the reasons why young girls decide not to use condoms is due to the difficulty of obtaining them, because they are either not easily accessible or girls just can not afford them. Josina Machel claims that young girls have been socialized to equate sex with love and will abstain from using condoms because these are perceived as a challenge to masculinity by the men they want to please (Machel, 2001). As a proof of love, women

decide to not use condoms because they believe that it will not show commitment in their relationships. Josina Machel, in her study, anonymously interviewed a group of schoolgirls to try to determine the reasons why they opted out of safe sex practices. A girl mentions, "(condoms) are all right. The feeling does not change much with or without condoms for us (women). Men are the ones that always complain. My problem is that it prevents intimacy. I feel there is something in between my boyfriend and me," exposing that girls withhold from using contraceptives to please their partners (Machel, 2001). On the other hand, another participant mentioned, "I like him and trust him, and I believe he only has me, or I hope . . . I don't think I can just ask «for» those things (condoms), he will suspect me for that, and then beat me or leave me," demonstrating that even if the young women wanted to partake in safe sex practices, they could potentially be physically assaulted by their partners (Machel, 2001). Therefore, not only do these girls not have the ability to decide whether they want to use condoms during sex, but many times they are forced into unwanted sexual intimacy with their partners, revealing yet again the violence against women in Mozambique (Machel, 2001).

Currently, one of the most common forms of aggression inflicted upon women is domestic violence. In most cases, this form of violence, such as rape and physical assault, is enacted by a family member (da Silva et al., 2000). Some of the common causes of domestic violence in the country include: "lack of financial resources and economic hardships . . . the deterioration of moral values; . . . alcohol and drug consumption; . . . matrimonial infidelity; . . . and traditional education which makes women yield to these forms of violence" (da Silva et al., 2000). Many times when women are experiencing any form of domestic violence, they are too afraid to denounce their abuser and for that reason, most of these cases go undeclared. Domestic violence has become normalized in Mozambican society due to the belief, as previously mentioned, that the man is the head of the household. Due to this, many women have had to endure aggression throughout their marriage because their

cultural beliefs state that the man has the "right" over his immediate family (da Silva et al., 2000). Women are then left without the ability to leave their abusive husband because not only is he the main provider of the household, but also because they fear for their safety. Leaving their partners would compromise the availability of everyday necessities for their children. Teresa da Silva et al. share the testimony of a young 15-year-old who was forced into a marriage with a 40-year-old man. She was taken away from her family and brought to the man's home that he shared with his multiple wives. On her first night, one of the wives tied her up to a bed and allowed the husband to rape the young girl. After having multiple kids and falling in love with another man, her husband sent her away to his aunt, who then mutilated her genitals to ensure that she would never feel sexual pleasure again, not from him or any other man. This case exposes the different forms of domestic violence one child endured throughout her whole youth. Her parents gave her away to an older man who raped and mutilated her body, highlighting how "girls are brutally moved from their innocence and given an uncertain destination with no opportunity to complain and defend themselves" (da Silva et al., 2000).

The short-length documentary, *Woman* (2020), directed by Raúl de la Fuente, introduces the story of a new generation of women who are passionately fighting for a violence-free life for the women in Maputo. This documentary introduces us to Josina Z. Machel, daughter of former president Samora Machel and activist Graça Machel, and step-daughter to Nelson Mandela, as she shares the story of her experience with domestic violence. Her then partner of three years, Rofino Licuco, physically assaulted her after claiming that she was a "prostitute" for wanting to be out late at night, when in reality she had asked to be dropped off at her mother's house ("Justice for Gender-Based Violence Survivor"). While in the hospital, Licuco claimed that Machel had fallen; however, she bravely stood up for herself and pressured him into confessing to the assault that resulted in her losing an eye. Josina Z. Machel took her aggressor to

court, and despite his confession, the hospital claimed that they had no documentation to prove her case. She was then forced to retrace her steps in order to prove that she had gone to the hospital that night and was re-victimized for speaking out in the process. On June 12, 2020, after the filming of the documentary, "the 2nd Criminal Appeal Section of the Judicial Court of Maputo's City overturned the decision that found the aggressor of Women Human Rights Defender, Josina Machel, guilty for the crimes of physical and psychological violence" ("Justice for Gender-Based Violence Survivor"). This case is particularly interesting because it affected one of the most recognizable activists in Mozambique. Her recognizable name and years of political activism were not enough to find her abuser guilty of domestic violence, signifying that if a person with such recognition struggles to get justice, the other women in Mozambique have little to no chance to be heard. Regardless of the physical abuse that Josina Z. Machel experienced, she and many other women continue to fight for a safe Mozambique free of violence for all women.

The women currently fighting for justice in Mozambique use literature, hip-hop, rap, and poetry to raise their voices against inequality. Paulina Chiziane, one of the most well-known female writers in the country, uses her literature as a tool to denounce the abuses against women and claim their rights ("Women & Activism", 1999). In an interview with Chiziane, Nafeesah Allen (2020) claims that "Chiziane's audacity to write at all—much less to write controversial stories that challenge polarizing narratives—is a revolutionary act", confirming the strength and courage that female writers possess by sharing the hidden narratives that continue to oppress women. Additionally, the documentary *Woman* (2022) examines the lives of many brave women who also use the arts as a means of protest. The viewers meet women such as the poet Enia Lipanga, who uses poetry as a means to create consciousness about the practices that have been normalized but continue to harm women. We also meet Iveth Mafundza, a poet, rapper and lawyer, who was in charge of the Josina Z. Machel case. Moreover, the

documentary features Dama do Bling, a rapper, writer, and mother who through her music and social work continues to fight for the rights of Mozambican women. Lastly, Josina Z. Machel, a victim and survivor of domestic violence, who founded the Kuhluka Movement to represent millions of women who have suffered due to the *machista* values that prevail and continue to dominate the country.

Throughout Mozambican history women have been exposed to prostitution, STIs, domestic violence, and other forms of aggression that stem from their subordinate position. The brave activists of Mozambique are those who will continue to fight in order to dismantle the current cultural model that maintains a hierarchical structure with the men at top and create a country that values and cares for the women who have helped rebuild it since the colonial era. These brave women have led the feminist movement in Mozambique, one that has advocated for the law against gender-based violence, the decriminalization of abortion and other advances towards women rights in hopes for a safe and violence free Mozambique for all.

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