

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Maputo, Mozambique

Both during and after the struggle for independence in Mozambique, revolutionary cadres have given particular attention to changing women's oppression, which was severe. Women suffered under the double burden of traditional practices and colonial exploitation. Important progress has been made in changing women's lives and in bringing them into all aspects of work and political participation. Much remains to be done.

One of the most fundamental sources of female oppression lay in traditional marriage customs. Marriages were arranged, so that women had no choice about who or when they would marry. The bride's family received a large gift, called lobolo or bride price, to formalize the union. And a man was free to marry numerous times, an arrangement especially painful to many women.

Frelimo (Mozambique's liberation movement and now its ruling party) and OMM have indeed devoted a great deal of time and attention to these particular problems of women. At the 1976 OMM conference, the following resolutions were passed:

- On polygamy: "In our patriarchal society, the man is the owner of all material goods produced within the family. Polygamy is a system whereby the man possesses a number of wives. As head and proprietor of the family, he acquires more wives to augment the labor force at his service."

- On lobolo: "This practice exists throughout the country. Its rationale is that it is compensation for the transfer of labor power from one family to another. This puts women into a situation of total dependence on men who, because they have paid for wives, can use and disown them like mere objects. . . . Experience has shown that women are still not aware of their oppressed condition or of

the real implications of lobolo. Many still defend it on the grounds that without the payment of a lobolo they have not been taken as legitimate and honest women."

Communal villages like Tres de Fevereiro now hold about 1 million people, out of a total population of 12 million. In these villages, the building of a new social order is going on. These villagers are trying to put into practice—among other things—a new set of ideas about women and marriage.

Indeed, such customs as bride price, arranged marriages and polygamy are on the decline. But they have not disappeared altogether, and consciousness is slow to change.

An OMM secretary told me that a woman from her neighborhood had simply gone home to her parents when her husband took a second wife. The children spent time with both parents alternately. Other people told stories of men, returning from the South African mines with money in their pockets, feeling very satisfied with themselves and prepared to marry again. Then these men found that their first wives had moved into communal villages whose leaders were trying to eradicate polygamy. The men quickly found that village leaders would back up first wives in their objections to further marriages. The men succumbed, afraid of losing their first wives.

But polygamy is not simply a custom. It was closely tied to the peasant economy. The more women married into a household, the more workers there were, and the more food and financial security. A younger generation is growing up in a village economy which has been reorganized and collectivized, so that the actual need for more wives and children is diminishing. The youth in Tres de Fevereiro were clear about this. The young women insisted that when

they married, they would have an explicit understanding with their husbands that polygamy was not to be considered.

Jose, another cooperative worker, noted how the end of lobolo changes the personal relations of marriage for the young. "Now we don't have to buy our wife, and this is very important. I fell in love with my girlfriend, and she accepted when I asked her to marry me. We registered our marriage in Xai-Xai [capital of Gaza province, about 15 miles from the village]. Jose went on to explain the effect of lobolo: "If a man beats his wife, he feels he has a right. 'I gave such a lot of money for you. You must obey what I say.' . . . There may still be beatings, but men won't be able to use this as an excuse." Virginia nodded her head while he talked. "I agree. This custom must end. The men always say 'I bought you,' but we know you can't buy a person."

There is, of course, still resistance on the question of lobolo from the older generation. An OMM secretary explained, "There is a lot of complaining [at meetings], mainly from the older men. 'How can we end lobolo? What will we profit? We raised our child and now someone comes and takes her without paying.' " But, added the secretary, when a young couple discovers that their parents are negotiating about the value of lobolo, they refuse to marry. Jose explained that women are particularly concerned because "she saw the problems lobolo created in her own home between her parents or among her neighbors. So she understands that if she accepts lobolo, the problems will be hers."

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Special to the Guardian