



“ANGOLA WAS HELD TOGETHER BY WOMEN”

Angola is one of the world's forerunners as far as the number of women in decision making positions is concerned. Twelve Angolan women talk about this reality and its contradictions, telling episodes of their lives and what occupies their mind from day to day

Text and Photography: Joost De Raeymaeker in Luanda

Recent UN statistics about women in decision making positions show that Angola occupies tenth place, with 38,6% of parliament seats occupied by the so-called weaker sex. The usual suspects like Sweden, Iceland, The Netherlands, Finland and Norway are present in the first ten places, with percentages between 39 and 46 percent, but the big surprise, apart from Cuba occupying the fourth spot, is that four of the top ten countries are African, all sub-saharan.

Surprisingly, the first place doesn't go to one of these nordic countries, but to the very African Rwanda, with 56% of female parliamentary seats. Apart from Angola and Rwanda, South Africa (third place with 44%) and Mozambique (ninth place with 39%) stand out. Portugal is in 31st place, with its 27% barely ahead of Afghanistan. The USA share the 75th place with Turkmenistan, both scoring just under 17%.

As far as the future is concerned, there doesn't seem to be a lot of doubt. Idalina Valente, Angolan minister of Trade, dedicates some of her time studying the evolution of equality between the genders. She

**Luzia Inglês
'Inga' Van-Dunem**

Secretary General of the Organization of Angolan Women (OMA) - 62

She became an orphan at the age of 13, in 1961. Her mother died of a broken heart when she found out the Portuguese had killed her husband. Inga became a guerilla fighter at that age. After continuing her primary education she was transferred to Congo-Brazzaville in 1967 and later to Zambia. The bulk of her training was done on the eastern front. Inserted in a group of 30 young people, she went to the Soviet Union for military training for a year, as a communications expert. In 1970 she came back, and stayed in the guerilla movement until april of 1974. She married in 1970 and her first daughter was born in 1974; the child was two months old on April 25th 1974 (the day of the coronation revolution in Portugal, the colonizing country). Inga went back to Luanda after the Alvor treaty was signed. She was called upon to install the telecommunications central in Futungo. The Portuguese were very surprised. It was a world of military, all men, and when they saw a group of women, dressed as guerilla fighters, with children strapped to their backs show up to do the same work they had been doing all these years, they were left open-mouthed. Today, she's a member of parliament for the MPLA and secretary general of OMA.

**“SINCE A MOTHER PUTS
BEINGS INTO THE WORLD,
SHE'S THE MAIN DEFENDER
OF HUMAN KIND”**

tells us that a study of 2000 showed a balance between boys and girls in the first year of primary school. By the seventh, eight and ninth grades, there were already more boys than girls in school, mostly due to unwanted preg-



Cesaltina Major

Leader of the group of parliamentary women

Born in Luanda, she grew up in Uíge. In 1971, her family fled from the war to Luanda. In Medical school, she belonged to the group of students in support of the liberation war. 1980 saw her finish her education and become a provincial leader of OMA. She worked as health delegate in the Uíge and Zaire provinces and then went back to Luanda, to head the Center for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. Cesaltina went on to study Phisiatry for five years in East Germany on a scholarship. She was elected to parliament in 1992, proposed by OMA. Social issues are what move her.

“WE’RE ENTERING THE ERA OF COMPETITION BETWEEN THE SEXES”



Odete Tavares

Captain of the National Handball team - 34

Arrived in Luanda as a handball player. African champion five times over, Odete went to three Olympic Games, four Pan-African Games and five World Cups. She thinks she doesn't have many years left as a player, but wants to take a coaching and sports management course in order “not to be selfish, but to pass on what I learned”. She built a private school with her name in the house she grew up in, in the São Paulo neighborhood, with the help of her husband and her sister. Odete silently oversaw the construction, with the help of a bank loan.

“WOMEN ARE CONQUERING THEIR OWN SPACE, NOT BECAUSE IT WAS GIVEN TO THEM, BUT ON THEIR OWN MERIT”

Idalina Valente

Minister of Trade

Elected member of parliament in 1983, by the Huambo student circle, in 1992 she was proposed as a member of parliament for the province of Huila. From 1996 to 2000, she was vice-minister of Planning. She went back to parliament afterwards, as president of its administration council. Since 2008, she's Minister of Trade. Idalina graduated in economics in Huambo. During the war, she led the Southern Coordination Cabinet in Lubango. In 2002, she started teaching the seat of Micro-Economy at the Catholic University. Idalina is a founding member of AGDA, started up in 1992 after the Bicesse accords, to reintegrate soldiers in civil life. In Huambo, she was a leader of OMA. Idalina is a full member of the direction of the MPLA.

“BEING MOTHERS AND TAKING CARE OF A FAMILY MAKES US HAVE A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE IN DECISION MAKING POSITIONS”



Madalena ‘Kula’ Manuel

Catering Entrepreneur - 40

Used to be a handball player for the Cuca team, where she was paid in crates of beer that she then sold. There were months where Kula would win a truck of beer as game prize. At that time, she made more money than anyone else at home. Kula emigrated to Lisbon when she was 19, by herself. She didn't run into great difficulties, but she doesn't know if that was for running into the right people. Kula would work and attend hotel courses at night. One of the people she worked for offered her a business partnership and they opened the Jardim da Comida restaurant in Lisbon. She went back to Angola after the war and has a business making and selling cakes. There's no shortage of parties and weddings in Angola, so life is going great for her.

“A COUNTRY RAN BY WOMEN IMPROVES A LOT”

nancies and other factors. However, in higher education, there were more women than men. In the medium run, a reality with more graduated women than men looms on the horizon. Cesaltina Major, leader of the group of Angolan female parliamentaries, we're “entering the era of competition between the sexes”.

Cesaltina and Idalina are two of the 12 women we interviewed in Luanda, Angola's capital, in order for us to understand the reasons behind the rise of the number of women in important positions - not just in politics, but also in other sectors of Angolan society.

Woman, bearer of life

There seems to be some consensus amongst the interviewed women in relation to female capacities, and the general opinion is that they simply function better than men in leadership and decision making roles. Luzia Inglês ‘Inga’ Van Dunem, secretary general of the Organization of Angolan Women (OMA) resumes this opinion: “Man doesn't carry life inside him, doesn't take care of a baby, and that makes him a more egocentric being. Men have a very strong ego and want all care just for their egos. For men, taking care of others is not a natural gift”. According to this ex-

guerilla fighter, men make extreme decisions, while women always try to analyze, to ponder. She goes even further and states that when women rule the world, there will be no more war. “Women love the things they do more than men”, adds Karina Silva, international model. She's at home, on the sofa, gently rocking her newborn son to sleep in her arms.

While biological differences may explain to some extent the degree of aptitude women display for certain jobs, they are just a given to explain an existing situation. They don't tell us much about the origin of woman's

Júlia Rodrigues da Costa

Domestic Worker - 30

Mother of five year old Alice and pregnant with a son. She thinks about calling him Augusto. Júlia lives maritally with Amarilson. She's been working for D. Alice for eight years. D. Alice is her daughter's godmother. Júlia dropped out of school after the eighth grade, because of a lack of money. She would like to be a doctor, because she thinks it's fascinating. Going back to school is very expensive, but she's got her whole life ahead of her and hopes to be able to do it one day. A severe critic of promiscuity in modern society, she tells us old women would say that a man only leaves home in search of another woman if he's not properly taken care of by his wife, but she thinks nowadays lots of them do it because of illusions. Júlia says the same about women with loads of boyfriends for money.

“BEING A WOMAN IS HARD”



rise, and shed even less light on the differences on a global scale. In order to dig deeper into the matter, a look into culture and traditions is a logical next step.

The weight of tradition

On first sight, Angolan traditions don't seem to be working in favor of women at all. Polygamy persists in many of the local cultures. Women are supposed to be submissive and on top of that they get left behind in terms

of education, because men, typically heads of families and clans, prefer to send boys to school instead of girls when financial conditions are dire.

Today in the capital Luanda, things are different, and polygamy is illegal. There are, however, a lot of men who “sponsor” women out of wedlock in precarious economic situations, or in search of a better financial situation without having to work too hard for it. Karina thinks that women who don't

want to work and prefer to be supported end up fatally submissive to their husbands or backers.

Júlia Rodrigues da Costa is the mother of five year old Alice and eight months pregnant. She didn't have the financial resources to continue her studies after the eighth grade, so she started work as a maid to help support her family. She tells us that “being a woman is difficult”. She has to take care of her husband, her child, her house. Her

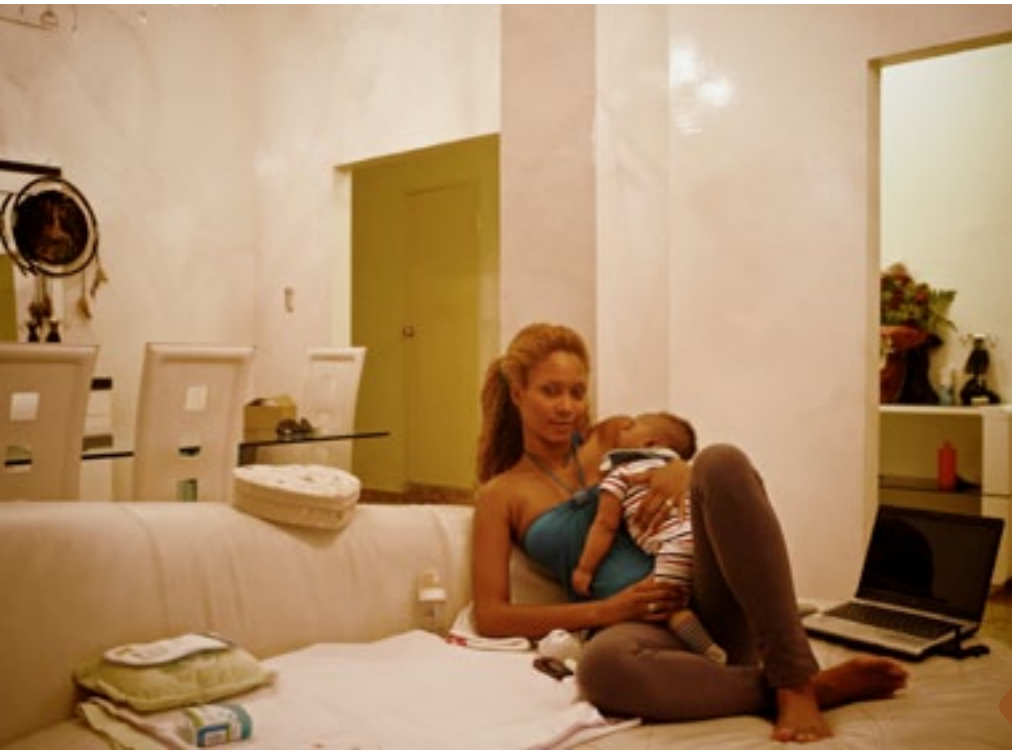


Mara Moreno

Head of a Ministerial Cabinet - 33

Used to be a handball player for the Cuca team, where she was paid in crates of beer that she then sold. There were months where Kula would win a truck of beer as game prize. At that time, she made more money than anyone else at home. Kula emigrated to Lisbon when she was 19, by herself. She didn't run into great difficulties, but she doesn't know if that was for running into the right people. Kula would work and attend hotel courses at night. One of the people she worked for offered her a business partnership and they opened the Jardim da Comida restaurant in Lisbon. She went back to Angola after the war and has a business making and selling cakes. There's no shortage of parties and weddings in Angola, so life is going great for her.

“DURING 30 YEARS OF WAR, THE COUNTRY DIDN'T GRIND TO A HALT, AND THAT WAS NOT BECAUSE OF MEN. WOMEN HELD ANGOLA TOGETHER”



Karina Silva

Model - 25

Karina has 12 years of professional modeling under her belt. At the age of 12 she took modeling courses in South Africa. She was born in Benguela, but grew up in Luanda. Karina always wanted to work in Angola. It was difficult to enter a world in which fashion was very little recognized. People associated fashion with prostitution. She's engaged to someone who's not famous or rich. Karina didn't want to marry being pregnant and he accepted. She recently became the mother of a boy. Her fiancé and herself look at things in a simple way. Love is what matters. It's not a matter of money. They are the same age. A lot of people suggest she should be dating rich men, a minister, but because of her education, that's not where she's heading.

“WOMEN LOVE WHAT THEY DO MORE THAN MEN”

husband comes home after work and relaxes. There are husbands who help out around the house, but hers doesn't: he prefers to go out. She could do what so many other women do when they say: “I'm getting another boyfriend, this one doesn't provide enough, I need to take care of my hair and do my nails”. But Júlia doesn't want to do what makes other women have three or four boyfriends and paints her nails at home.

The case of Paula Alberto, street seller of bananas next to the Martal supermarket, is not very different. Paula's husband only ‘helps out’ at home with his salary. She stands firm on taking her three children to school every morning. In order for her children to have a different future, she insists they have an education. She would have liked to have studied some more herself, but “life doesn't provide for that”.

By the next generation, the children of Júlia and Paula could be in the position some women, like Célia Araújo, working and studying mother of four, already feel is natural for them today. Célia moved back to Angola from a settled life and a career in Portugal, going after her husband who was homesick for Angola. She had to start everything from scratch, but she cur-

rently has a solid life again, and she is studying to be able to have a career in diplomacy.

Another example is Mara Moreno, single mother of a four year old boy. She works 12 hours a day on average, running a ministerial office, and attributes her success to a combination of character and education. Her mother is a very conservative person, but has always made a point of her two daughters getting a college degree, so they would never depend on any man in their lives.

Odete Tavares, captain of the national handball team and owner of a private school with her name in the São Paulo neighborhood, states categorically that women, “even with three or four children on their backs, are able to steer forward”. She adds that women are conquering their space, not because it was given to them, but because of their own merit. The difference with other countries? Angolan women simply more combative.

This opinion is shared by Neogilda Cosme, of the Ministry of Family and Promotion of Women. This combativeness is not only due to a reaction to a culture in which women had no deciding power whatsoever. Angola's

history, with its successive wars, which only terminated in 2002, created a reality that to a certain extent favored women's ascension.

The absence of men at war

The main reason is connected with the long absence of men. Many never returned. Women were compelled by circumstances to take control of their situation and to run not only their families, but generally also the whole country. According to Madalena ‘Kula’ Manuel, entrepreneur in the catering business, “women were practically forced to take matters in their own hands”, only to discover after the war that they could do anything men do.

For Célia Araújo, it's quite simple: the countries' history has created this grit in Angola's women. Turning back the clock after what's happened is not a possibility. Naturally, not all women stayed behind to take care of their homes, families and the country. Neogilda reminds us that in all ex-colonies, we can find women having been involved in armed combat. She thinks this happened more so in Angola, because women were simply a lot more caught up in war. Armed combat back to back with men is another reason women's position in society changed drastically.

Marcela Costa

Plastic artist - 52

Arrived in Luanda in 1964, with her mother. Her father died in the war in 1961. In the province, her mother worked in the field, and in Luanda she became a domestic worker. She demanded of her children they go to school and supported them during their studies. She died young, at the age of 48. Marcela herself became a widow at 27, the mother of five. Professionally, she was naturally attracted to plastic arts and as such went to the ‘Escola Industrial’. She was the first woman to be the head of a mass organization in Angola, the Association of Plastic Arts. There was talk about emancipation, but men didn't accept a woman in charge. Marcela was a member of parliament during the one party rule. She currently runs Celamar, a project of her own, with atelier and art gallery on the Ilha de Luanda, where she helps disfavored young people.

“ONE GIVES A FISHERMAN'S SON A HOOK, AND NOT FISH”

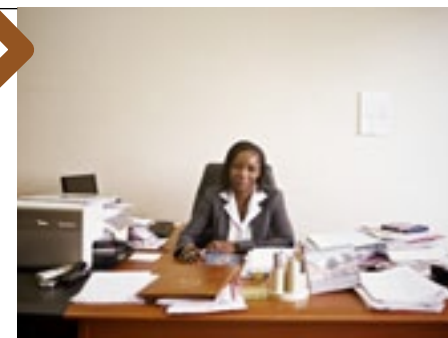


Neogilda Cosme

Director of the Cabinet of Planning and Statistics of the Ministry of Family

Lived part of her childhood in Huambo. After her secondary education, she went back to Luanda and had sort of a mixed trajectory. She studied at the Faculty of Science in Porto (Portugal), in computational science. Her bases in mathematics were not strong enough and being a scholarship student in Porto at the end of the 1980's was very hard. She learned to deal with discriminatory language in Portugal. Neogilda decided to drastically change course and country, and went back to Angola just before the 1992 elections, to study economics. She felt more at ease this way. Neogilda was still studying when she started her career at the Ministry of Family and Promotion of Women (before it became a Ministry).

“IN ALL EX-COLONIES, WE CAN FIND WOMEN HAVING BEEN INVOLVED IN ARMED COMBAT. THIS HAPPENED MORE SO IN ANGOLA”



Anyhow, the end of war and the return of many men to civil society will definitely put a burden on the evolution of the “competition between the sexes” that Cesaltina Major talks about. It could even dictate a certain reversal. We will have to wait and see.

Politics at play

Angola is part of the SADC (Southern African Development Community), who develop lobbying actions with the governments of the member countries, in order to have at least 30% of female members of parliament. Those 30% are generally agreed to be the ‘critical mass’ necessary to put things

in motion in favor of women.

José Eduardo dos Santos, Angola's president, being the strategist he is, saw the necessity to do something, since the majority of members of his political party, the MPLA, are women. After the general elections of 1992, only 12% of seats in parliament were occupied by women. The official election ballots of the MPLA had 42% of women for the 2008 elections, and it was with that basis the country got to tenth place in the world's statistics.

Nonetheless, Marcela Costa, well known plastic artist, warns that wom-

Célia Araújo

Working student - 35

Went to Portugal at the age of 15 and back to Angola at 32. She finished 12th grade and started working, got married and didn't pursue a higher education at the time. Her husband went back to Angola. Célia didn't want to, because she had a stable life and a good salary in Portugal. She had to start from scratch in Luanda. Things were very hard. In the beginning, she stayed at her parent's place. Later on, she rented a house without running water, electricity and paved roads, which led to a lot of problems in the rainy season. She used to cry every day. Her four children were constantly ill. Today she has a steady job and she's studying International Relations at night and hopes to start a diplomatic career. Célia also became a member of a political party in the hopes of being a parliamentary. Like all women, she tells us she's forced to be strong because of being a mother. Of four.

“WOMEN HAVE VERY STRONG LEADERSHIP CAPACITY”

Paula Alberto

Street seller - 24

Started to sell bananas when she was 12. Her parents are no longer alive. She has a husband and three children. Her husband is a construction worker. Every day, she gets up early to take her children to school. She then goes to the center of Luanda to sell bananas. Paula goes home at around 6 or 7PM and prepares dinner. Her husband ‘helps out’ at home with his salary. She wants her children to have a higher education. Studying some more herself is something she would really like to do, but life doesn't provide for that.

“ANGOLAN WOMEN ARE STRONGER BECAUSE THAN OTHERS BECAUSE THEY'RE POWERFUL”

en can't just enjoy their laurels and do nothing. Marcela helps out young women at risk of falling into the claws of prostitution with projects involving music and arts in her atelier on the Ilha de Luanda. “The new generation has to understand that they have to conquer things with sweat”, she assures. If Angolan women work hard at it, ‘Kula’, the entrepreneur, is certain there's a big future in store for them: “Why not have a female president one day? A country governed by women improves a lot. If a woman can govern a family, why wouldn't she be able to govern a country?”.