

# women challenge bride-price

**The Organisation of Mozambican Women recently held a conference which was notable for its thoughtful and realistic analysis**

The extraordinary Conference of the Organisation of Mozambican Women (OMM) held in Maputo in November to discuss the social problems facing women was one of the most thoroughly prepared events in post-independence Mozambican history. Pains-taking research into almost every aspect of women's lives had taken place over some three years (benefitting from the repeated postponements of the conference). As a result the documents prepared for the conference were short on rhetoric and long on thoughtful analysis.

OMM brigades travelled all over the country collecting data and hundreds of meetings were held, from village level upwards, open to both women and men, to discuss the factors that perpetuate the oppression of women. This was not easy under conditions of war and a collapsing economy.

In the meetings participants (especially men) were forced to face up to social practices such as polygamy and *lobolo* (bride-price) which had largely gone unquestioned before. Often audiences would split along predictable age and sex lines: older people defending traditional practices, younger ones rejecting them; men speaking in favour of polygamy, women opposing it.

The result of this "going to the people" was a detailed picture of how family life is organised from district to district across Mozambique.

The proposals which arose from this research and which were eventually accepted by the conference were, by and large, sensitive and did not suggest that traditional practices which discriminate against women can simply be legislated out of existence. Thus polygamy was firmly denounced as a practice which degrades women and exploits them economically: the motive in acquiring more wives (and through them, children) is to have a pool of unpaid labour available to work in the man's fields.

Nonetheless, no-one proposed making polygamy illegal. Instead, the stress was on education, and on putting social obstacles in the way of polygamists, barring them from public office or from FRELIMO membership, for instance. The role of Islam in the north of the country was recognised as a strong factor legitimising polygamy.

On *lobolo* despite evident pressure from a significant number of young men and women, for outright abolition, the conference took the more subtle line of arguing that the problem was not the practice itself but the way it had been commercialised. With the absorption of much of the Mozambican peasantry into the cash economy at the end of the 19th century, the price of *lobolo* began to rise sharply.

A contributory factor in Mozambican migration to the mines of South Africa was the need to acquire money to pay *lobolo*. Today, particularly in the south, parents' demands for *lobolo* have reached fantastic sums — figures of 50,000 meticals (about \$1,200) were cited, and on top of that the unfortunate bridegroom would be expected to hand over livestock and consumer goods to his future in-laws.

The conference condemned this price-tag that unscrupulous parents had attached to their daughters and suggested that *lobolo* should revert to a purely symbolic sum expressing the bridegroom's respect for his future wife's family. Even more important, the conference recommended that *lobolo* should never be repaid in the event of a marriage breaking up: many women's lives

have been ruined by an ex-husband demanding the return of his *lobolo*.

Equally sensible suggestions were made on the need for sex education in schools, for attacking deep-seated superstition and cruel or unhygienic practices surrounding initiation rites and for outlawing child marriages.

The main strategy for women's emancipation was seen in very orthodox Leninist terms: more women should be involved in collective and, preferably industrial, production. The conference noted that of economically active women the overwhelming majority (97%) were in agriculture. Women in industry faced a battery of problems ranging from their assumed responsibility for housework and for raising the children, to inadequate creche facilities and the low esteem in which their work is held by men.

One factor prejudicing women's chances in work is their lack of education. Too many parents are still withdrawing their daughters from school before they even complete primary education. Education Minister Graca Machel showed that, although girls accounted for 50% of the intake in the first year of primary school, this percentage tailed off dramatically as one advanced through the educational system. By fifth grade, the first year of secondary education, the number of girl students was down to 28%, while the number of women in higher and vocational education is derisory. It was in this context that Graca Machel made one of the most radical suggestions of the conference: that all vocational training institutes should have the legal obligation to admit a fixed minimum percentage of women every year. This is the first time that the concept of positive discrimination in favour of women has been promoted in Mozambique.

So far so good. Unfortunately the image that many retain of the conference is of President Machel striding the stage and stamping his forceful personality on all the public proceedings.

The response from delegates to the report on women's social situation read to the Congress was enormous. Over 50 delegates put in requests to speak. Alleging lack of time, Machel declared that only one representative from each of the country's 10 provinces, plus the city of Maputo, could speak. But when the second delegate to reach the rostrum started talking of personal hygiene and menstruation, the President cut her short. He then declared that everything had been dealt with so fully in the report, that there was nothing to add.

When, on the third day, delegates broke into small working groups, women did raise a number of awkward questions and discussion was lively. Some even criticised Mozambique's 1975 nationality law. This contains an openly sexist clause under which Mozambican women who marry foreigners lose their citizenship, while Mozambican men remain Mozambican no matter whom they marry.

This criticism found its way into the

synthesis of the working groups recommendations, read out in a plenary session. Clearly annoyed, Machel interrupted and declared that only "a noisy minority" from Maputo was worried about the nationality law, he defended the law at great length and argued, most unconvincingly, that marriage to a foreigner would lead to "two diametrically opposed cultures" under the same roof with subsequent problems for the children. He challenged anyone who disagreed to come to the rostrum: in the somewhat intimidating climate no-one accepted the invitation.

On matters of sexual morality the President's interventions were marked by a strong Calvinist approach. His sharpest attack was reserved for unmarried mothers, even suggesting that those in State employment should be sacked (although he had changed his mind on this before the end of the conference). But the delegates were not prepared to accept all of Machel's views — the recommendations from the working groups, for instance, declared that "unmarried mothers must not be treated as outcasts" and stressed that "repressive measures are not going to solve the problem."

This is not to suggest that Samora Machel is hostile to women's emancipation. Indeed he, and the rest of the current FRELIMO leadership, were instrumental in securing major gains for women such as the formation of the Women's Detachment in FRELIMO's guerrilla army during the independence war. The current debate on polygamy and *lobolo* would not be possible without the fight for women's rights waged by FRELIMO in its liberated areas in the 1960s and early 1970s.

It is from this past role that Machel's presence at the OMM Conference derives a certain legitimacy. But clearly there are sharp limits to what the President understands by the term "women's emancipation" — his definition does not necessarily coincide with that of OMM activists. Which clearly demonstrates that even the most well-intentioned men are unable or unwilling to reconcile their interests to those of women. As long as the leadership of FRELIMO is male-dominated, OMM will have to take the lead in the liberation of Mozambican women and that implies that it must have more autonomy than it does at present.

FRELIMO has gone much further towards meeting women's aspirations than most African political parties. However, there remain very real conflicts of interest between Mozambican men and Mozambican women, conflicts which FRELIMO either does not recognise or tends to reduce simply to class issues.

Nonetheless, it is very positive that debate on women's oppression is now taking place openly. The genie is out of the bottle. Let us hope that no-one in the party leadership is tempted to replace the cork.

**Paul Fauvet**