

3. The Role of the Angolan Civil Society in Peace

The war affects all Angolans. The large numbers of displaced people, refugees, abandoned children and victims of land mines continue to undermine the cohesion of Angolan society. While the war is waged almost exclusively by men, women are among those affected the most. Women are subject not only to interpersonal violence in their homes but also state-sanctioned economic violence whereby the resources necessary for their own and their children's survival are siphoned off to buy weapons and wage war.

While women are in many instances victims of a male dominated war, they can play a key role in the search for peace. The survival strategies they had to devise during the war as well as the roles they have taken up empower them in many ways. Women had the opportunity to learn certain skills, including management of household as well as marketing and business skills. Despite a law prohibiting vendors, women are compelled to manoeuvre within the confounds of the local informal economies, exchanging basic products and currencies. Therefore, women may be better prepared than men to become entrepreneurs and start new businesses. Their role as caretakers and household managers increases their stake in peace.

Individually women can spread the culture of peace within their own families. Women should be included in decision making processes so that their voice can be heard and their concerns addressed. Women have already began to organise in the past 5 years. Women's organisations in Angola work with communities and vulnerable women's groups. They not only support women but aim to empower them by raising awareness about human rights, civic education and the law. By breaking the silence around violence, opposing the war and its supporting ideologies, advocating for policies that support women's survival strategies and by looking towards a peaceful future, women can make a difference in Angola.

Churches are another force. Church initiatives are taking place all over the country, including UNITA-controlled territories. Networking with other NGOs and groups they provide social services, disseminate information and spread the culture of peace throughout the devastated Angolan territory.

While there has been an increase in activities by the Angolan NGOs and Churches as well as mobilisation for peace in the recent past, no viable third party has developed to counter the bipolarity of the conflict. There seems to be, however, a growing space for dialogue between the MPLA government and NGOs. The government appears to have made steps in improving state-society relations. Meanwhile, the elections have confirmed that the civil society in general is in favour of peace. Large numbers of people registered and participated in the 1992 elections including those living on territories held by UNITA. Hostilities on the individual level are minimal. The war does not have grassroots support. Therefore, initiatives aimed at building civic culture in Angola and making Angolans responsible citizens active in the affairs of their state should be developed to achieve peace. These initiatives should also include government officials. Here the dilemma of the causal link between security/peace and development comes to focus