

A Site of Struggle: Organised Labour and Domestic Worker Organising in Mozambique

by Ruth Castel-Branco

Though rooted in colonialism, domestic work has become a hallmark of modern urban living in Mozambique. There are more than 39000 registered domestic workers living in and around Maputo - a 30% increase in 10 years - and domestic work has become the most important occupation for urban women, after self-employment (INE 2007). So vital is domestic work to Maputo's economy that when the Mozambican state moved to extend labour protection to domestic workers in 2008, the Ministry of Labour removed minimum wage language for fear that employers, many who are themselves minimum wage earners, would no longer be able to participate in the labour force.

Despite the importance of paid domestic work, organised labour has historically paid little attention to this sector. In contrast to South Africa, where the extension of labour protection to domestic workers was seen as key to redressing the injustices of apartheid and engendering democracy, in Mozambique this was outside Frelimo's - and thus the *Organização dos Trabalhadores Moçambicanos's* (Mozambican Workers' Organization -OTM) - political imagination.

This article explores why domestic work developed into a strategic growth area for organised labour in Mozambique, arguing that ultimately, unions are themselves sites of struggle between competing interests and visions, capable of shifting direction, strategies and tactics.



Picture: SINED Secretary General Maria Joaquin (L) and member leader Albertina Mundlovo, lead the group in song, calling on the Mozambican state to ratify ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Work, during international domestic workers' day 2012. Photo credit: Ruth Castel-Branco.

Organised Labour Reorients

Three workers' organisations currently represent domestic workers in Maputo: the *Associação de Empregados Domésticos de Moçambique* (Mozambican Domestic Workers' Association - AEDO-

MO), the *Associação das Mulheres Empregadas Domésticas* (Women's Association of Domestic Workers - AMUEDO), and the *Sindicato Nacional de Empregados Domésticos* (National Union of Domestic Workers - SINED). All are affiliated with one of two labour federations.

Asked why organised labour has shifted attention towards the informal sector in general, and domestic work in particular the OTM responds:

In Mozambique the unions have had a strong interest in the informal sector for a while. When the factories closed many former OTM members had no recourse but to turn to the informal sector. OTM recognised this and pushed for the formalisation of these sectors. OTM was already fielding calls for help from domestic workers. The inclusion of domestic workers in the labour law was OTM's idea. (Interview with COMUTRA coordinator, 23 June 2011)

However, the secretary general of AMUEDO contends that OTM was reluctant to organise domestic workers because of the dispersed and private nature of the workplace. Isolated behind closed doors, domestic workers are invisible to the outside world, inaccessible to labour inspectors or organisers, and outnumbered in the household. This makes them prone to abuse and difficult to organise. Live-in workers are particularly vulnerable as they rely on their employers for a place to live.

When we had regional seminars, the issue always came up. "It would have been easier if it were three or four companies," they said. "But imagine organising domestic workers flat-by-flat in all these buildings in Maputo." (Interview with AMUEDO general secretary, 1 July 2011)

By 2007 OTM had joined forces with AMUEDO and lawyers at the Ministry of Labour to draft *Decree 40/2008*, extending labour protections to domestic workers for the first time since independence. Domestic workers now have the right to a written contract, set schedule, daily break, weekly and annual leave, and social protection. Why did OTM change its mind?

Reasons for Reorientation

The shift began almost two decades earlier. Hit hard by Mozambique's economic restructuring at the end of the 1980s, OTM's membership dropped from 300000 to 90000 between the 1980s and 2003. The 1990 constitutional reforms that democratised the labour movement and delinked OTM from the state further weakened the federation. As the federation faced rising pressure from its membership to take action against the repressive activities of newly privatised companies, it found itself without the capacity to respond. This compromised OTM's position among its membership, sowing the

seeds for a divided labour movement. In 1992, three unions split to form the independent federation known today as the *Confederação Nacional dos Sindicatos Independentes e Livres de Moçambique* (CONSILMO). It was in this context that the informal sector became a strategic growth area for OTM.

However, the real push came when leaders from its own ranks began to independently organise domestic workers into an association. Maputo's first association of domestic workers was AMUEDO, formalised in 2006 by a former OTM leader. When OTM discovered she was recruiting domestic workers to the association, she was suspended. Once expelled, she affiliated AMUEDO with rival federation CONSILMO. In response, OTM founded its own domestic workers' association, AEDOMO.

While AMUEDO maintains that the creation of AEDOMO was an attempt by OTM to undermine their work, AEDOMO argues that this was a natural process for OTM. Shortly after, a third worker organisation, SINED, was formed and affiliated with OTM. SINED began informally in 2006 and was formalised in 2008.

In 2008 when the International Labour Organisation placed "Decent Work for Domestic Workers" on the ILC agenda for 2010 and 2011. The campaign to adopt and now ratify Convention 189 galvanized domestic worker organising in Maputo, providing a space for collaboration, a focus for mobilization, and an opportunity to educate funders on the issue. Foreign donors and international trade unions have incentivized the reorientation towards paid domestic work. As one OTM official disclosed: "Each donor has its own philosophy, its own program that it will fund, so we generally try to be flexible, to gear our program to what is being funded."

Shifting Strategies and Tactics

Workers' organisations have played a critical role in advancing domestic workers' rights. They have increased the visibility of this sector and sought to change how employers perceive domestic workers. Organising models have also shifted in response to the peculiarities of domestic work. Taxi ranks, parks and street corners have been transformed into centres of recruitment, mobilisation and political education. Domestic workers are trained to engage in dialogue with their employers. Workers' organisations emphasise the dialogue and conciliation, as a strategy to preserve the employment relationship in a context of asymmetrical power relations:

No one wins if a domestic worker is dismissed. If it comes to mediation, we speak in a soft tone; we try to understand employers' point of view; we try to remind both parties of the long history they've had together. (Interview with SINED secretary for international relations, 30 July 2011)

One domestic worker explains her strategy:

Pick a day when you see that your employer is calm and explain your problem... if he tries to justify his actions, to elevate himself, you need to bow down to him because he can't accept that you're equals. You'll have your time to talk to him, but you shouldn't get into a heated discussion. (Interview with Josina, 16 June 2012)

Though conditions are negotiated one-on-one between worker and employer, guided by common goals, they take on a collective character.

Looking Forward

It is too early to predict the impact of this new wave of organising. Despite optimism, domestic worker organising has become a battleground for autonomy, power, and resources, with potentially detrimental effects. Despite almost identical demands, strategies, and tactics, AEDOMO, AMUEDO and SINED, do not communicate, let alone collaborate. Deeply entrenched competition and distrust between workers' organisations has further fuelled domestic workers' scepticism of unions, making recruitment challenging. Asked why she refuses to collaborate with the other organisation, AMUEDO secretary general responds:

I started first. SINED and AEDOMO don't know anything. OTM has set them up to demoralise and weaken AMUEDO. (Interview with AMUEDO General Secretary, 1 July 2011)

Unions are also challenged by lack of funding, and often lose organisers when they are recruited to other sectors.

Union statistics put unionised domestic workers at 10000. Despite constraint, domestic workers' associations have the potential to profoundly affect working conditions in this sector.

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