

“OME SA OME” AND “MWALA SA MWALA”¹: GENDER VIOLENCE IN THE EXPERIENCES OF SANTOMESE WOMEN

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Introduction

This paper is part of a research on gender violence experienced by women in São Tomé and Príncipe. The country has a very recent experience of democratic republic: it had its political independence in 1975 and became a multi-party democratic republic in the 1990s. It has been colonized by Portugal since the end of the 15th century and carries in its post-independence process the economic and social effects of a society that has only very recently been constituted autonomously.

The data on Sao Tome inform that the country is strongly marked by poverty, dependence on external resources and a remarkable gender inequality. Gender violence is a present reality in Sao Tomean society and initiatives to confront and promote gender equality are also recent.

In discussing gender-based violence experienced by women in the African context, we adopted some assumptions for the construction of the analysis:

¹ “Man is man” and “woman is woman” in Creole forro, a language spoken in São Tomé and Príncipe. Fragment of the testimony of one of the interviewees in the survey.

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- a) the consideration that the term "African" comprises a broad and heterogeneous set of cultural and historical experiences, and that it is important to locate which specific African context is spoken of and which particularities are identified in it, avoiding universalisms that tend to homogenize social experiences;
- b) Although the repertoire constituted to address gender violence has an international dimension, through treaties, conventions, institutions and policies thought according to the guidelines that guide discussions on the subject, it is important not to lose sight of how the phenomenon of violence is concretely characterized in the aforementioned context and what other constituent factors of social reality are relevant to the understanding of situations of violence, which can go hand in hand with other forms of inequality. In the case of countries that have experienced processes of colonization⁴, it is important to observe how the phenomenon of violence is a constituent of the social formation considered and how it constitutes an expression of gender oppression today. It also means to observe that the transposition of a previous repertoire on violence, done without the proper mediations, can make the complexity of local experiences invisible, in what are configured as violence, losing sight of their concrete configurations. Beyond the definitions, there is the relevance of the subjects who go through the experiences;
- c) to think about the category "women" as a result of the production of historical relationships, among which those that have produced gender as manifested in the context. In this sense, following the feminist criticism of Oyewùmí (2017), we are not interested in taking gender simply as the cultural element inscribed in a biological dimorphism, which could incur in an analysis that would treat gender as a universal category, according to the assumptions of the Western way of producing knowledge. Thus, when dealing with women's experiences, we think about how social relations have produced the generation of practices and meanings of being a woman in the context of São Tomé and Príncipe.

⁴ In the case of Sao Tome and Principe, the territory was uninhabited until the beginning of colonization in the late fifteenth century.

In order to think about the experiences of Santomean women who experience situations of gender violence, it is necessary to begin the presentation by discussing the epistemological assumptions that guide the gender issues analyzed in the text. Next, we discuss aspects related to the social formation of São Tomé and Príncipe, especially regarding the colonization process, considering that this society was founded from the occupation of the territory according to the interests of the colonizers. We will deal with the socio-historical context of São Tomé and Príncipe in order to then think about how the Santomean institutions have been seeking to promote gender equity and confront gender-based violence. In the last section of the article, we analyzed the experiences of the Santomean women interviewed in the survey.

African and Decolonial Epistemologies: other ways to think about gender

In this section, we address the epistemological and theoretical references that guide the analysis of situations of violence from a gender perspective. The analysis is based on the contributions of the decolonial feminism of María Lugones and Ochy Curiel, and the feminist epistemology of Oyeronké Oyewùmí. Thinking from the authors' understanding, we conceive gender not simply as a descriptive category, as a data situated from the binary distinction of bodies. We consider the experiences generated from the processes of colonization, which produced hierarchies and racialization of the colonized, according to the interests of the European colonizers. Violence was an instrument used in a systematic way in the colonization processes, producing various physical and symbolic impacts on the colonized peoples.

Decolonial feminist María Lugones (2019) proposes the term *coloniality of gender* to think about the processes that constitute modernity and the colonization projects linked to it. These processes produced the human/non-human hierarchies, which the author considers central to modernity, as well as the other categories that expressed modern colonial power relations. Part of the colonial enterprise was the presence of the Catholic Church, responsible for the “civilizing mission” of conversion of the colonized peoples. “The colonial ‘civilizing mission’ was the euphemistic mask of brutal access to people’s bodies by unimaginable exploitation, violent sexual violation, control of reproduction and systematic horror [...]” (Lugones 2019, 360).

Lugones’ critical proposal allows us to perceive violence as a constituent element of colonial modernity. Gender relations in colonial contexts, in

turn, are historically asymmetrical and focus on the male figure of the colonizer as the power pole par excellence. In this sense, when we speak of the generalized experiences in colonial contexts, it is fundamental to observe how gender is constituted as a category in social experiences. The male/female dichotomy, also a mark of modern Western hierarchies, was configured in different ways from the colonial encounter.

In dealing with gender considering the hierarchies produced from modernity, decolonial feminism produces the critique of universal categories and contributes to a glimpse of the "consubstantiality of oppressions" (Lugones apud Curiel 2020, 132). Regarding the specificities of decolonial feminism, Curiel (2020, 121) states:

If the interpretation of this reality involves understanding how the matrix of oppression acts in our own lives, how we are affected by oppressions such as racism, heterosexuality, colonialism and classism, with their structural expressions, ideologies and interpersonal aspects, then this work is not about analytical categories, but about lived realities that need a deep understanding of how they were produced. So it is not necessary to say that we are black, poor, women, it is about understanding why we are racialized, impoverished and sexualized. That is what interests us, as decolonial feminists, because in this way we can show that these conditions were produced by coloniality (Curiel 2020, 132).

In addition to the critical contributions of Latin American decolonial feminists, we consider the notes of Oyewùmí (2017) in "The invention of women", a fundamental work to think about the production of gender studies in African contexts. The author proposes an epistemology that questions the assumptions of Western modernity as universal models to classify and interpret social experiences. In her studies of pre-British Yoruba society, Oyewùmí identifies that several categories were introduced in social relations after colonization. According to the author, the sex/gender system, which has served as a universal assumption in gender studies, was non-existent in the Yoruba social organization in that context. Thus, she questions the assumption of gender as a universal category. "[...] gender is above all a socio-cultural construction. As a starting point of the investigation, we cannot consider as given what we really need to investigate" (Oyewùmí 2020, 87).

Oyewùmí's proposal draws attention to the historicity of the social relations studied and suggests new lenses that consider the narratives of the societies in question, especially considering the Western hegemony in the production of knowledge in recent centuries. Synthesizing some elements

of his epistemological critique, we highlight: a) “Analyses and interpretations about Africa must begin in Africa. They need to reflect and be based on specific cultural and local contexts, not on imported ideas and concepts, usually colonial (Oyewùmí 2020, 95); b) gender being a cultural construction, one cannot theorize without disregarding the particularities of contexts. In this sense, it is important to consider the contexts in which concepts are produced and which realities they are able to express through their statements; c) although gender is conceived as cultural and historical, biological dimorphism has remained a presupposition of Western culture when it comes to gender classifications. Thus, the author questions how cultural gender has been conceived, whether body biological difference serves as an assumption for gender differences⁵; d) hegemonically, gender has been formulated from Western experiences of white women, yet presenting itself as a category of universal experience. One example, according to the author, is the notion of the nuclear family, which is the basis of many feminist studies, but which is conceived along the lines of a given model of social experience, presented as universal; e) by assuming that gender organizes experiences universally, one of the consequences has been to observe gender differences from the observation of tasks socially distributed to bodies according to “their sexes”. The author considers, however, that this assumption, in itself, is a Western conception, which she calls “bio-logic,” as much as it expresses the foundation of the social, it presumes biological determinism as the founding element of classifications - and, consequently, of hierarchies; f) from this perspective, a universal condition of “being a woman” is not conceived; g) since gender is thought to be radically cultural, it is more important to observe the impact of colonization on its gender dimension, than just to see which group has been most exploited, whether men or women (Oyewùmí 2017); h) if gender has been produced historically, it means that it is relevant to investigate how it was “created” as a category of classification of experiences.

Considering the proposals of the authors mentioned, it is necessary to observe several issues in the Santomean context. The first of them concerns the identity classifications produced from the colonization of the territory. Throughout the centuries of colonial rule, most individuals are deprived of citizenship and humanity. Not by chance, one of the first local identities produced in the territory is that of *liner*, which expressed the condition of a

5 In “*Gender Issues*,” Judith Butler makes statements that come close to Oyewùmí’s understanding of the cultural construction of gender and sex. However, the theoretical dialogues undertaken and the empirical situations analyzed by Butler are situated in the Western context. Thus, her formulations are not sufficient to think about the coloniality of gender and African experiences.

free person and participant in local administrative life. Resistance to inhumane conditions will appear in various forms in the history of Sao Tome and Principe, many of them present in local languages that remain as living memories of the populations that constituted the territory.

Another important milestone in the production of identities in the Santomese context comes from the processes of resistance in the archipelago, which have occurred mainly since the 20th century. The refusal to submit to colonial domains produces the ruptures in the *status* of subordination, which trigger the affirmation of legal equality of all citizens/sans, from 1975 onwards. To mention such periodizations means to remember that the affirmation of universal free citizenship dates back 45 years in São Tomé and Príncipe, a very short time when compared to 500 years of colonization.

When we look at the current Santomean context, which expresses the inequality in various sectors, experienced mainly by women, it is important to consider the social formation that constituted the country and the expressions of violence as an instrument of domination, used until very recently in colonial history. In this sense, when dealing with gender violence experienced by women in São Tomé and Príncipe, we consider this complex set of historical situations, which produce gender and its inequalities in that context. Thus, we can understand the statistics that indicate that being a woman in the São Tomé context still means dealing with all the burdens of a social formation based on exploitation, violence, and denial of the humanity of the peoples who lived there. To be a woman is more than being born in a certain body: it is to be part of the social relations that produced inequalities and transferred to the bodies the *locus* of exercise of power. To affirm women's rights, in this sense, involves facing the coloniality of gender that still permeates relationships and has in violence one of its recurring instruments.

The context of São Tomé and Príncipe

São Tomé and Príncipe is an island territory, consisting of two main islands, located in the Gulf of Guinea, about 300 km from the African coast. Currently, it has a population of just over 200,000 inhabitants, of which 50.5% are women. The territory was colonized by the Portuguese at the end of the 15th century (Seibert 2014). The country has a particular characteristic in its formation process, which is the lack of a pre-colonial native population, because besides the Europeans who took possession of the territory, the other inhabitants were all from other regions of Africa, conducted for the purpose

of slave labor, so that the official narrative about the Santomean society begins from colonial relations.

The climatic conditions of São Tomé were not always considered attractive to the colonizers and the deaths or tropical diseases that plagued the Europeans in the region were frequent. Thus, since the 16th century, the colonizers adopted strategies of alliances with local half-breeds, or freed some slave workers to administer the colony in the service of Portugal. “[...] The high mortality rate of whites was one of the reasons why, at the beginning of colonization, the Portuguese Crown facilitated unions between white men and African slaves in São Tomé and, for the same reason, in 1515 and 1517, the collective freedom of African slaves was decreed” (Seibert 2014, 56).

The Santomean society was formed from colonization and founded on slave labor. The majority population of the territory was formed from the various ethnic groups to which the workers who were enslaved belonged. As a legacy of the presence of ethnic groups from different parts of Africa, the following local languages emerged: “on the island of São Tomé, the lungwa santome or forro, the majority Creole, and the angolan (ngola) and, in Príncipe, the lung’ye” (Seibert 2014).

Due to the domination strategies of the colonizers, São Tomé historically had a black presence in the local colonial administration and also in the slave labor force. The part of the freedmen who had access to the administrative, political and economic life of São Tomé constituted the social segment of the “forros”, a group that historically distinguished itself from the other inhabitants of the islands.

The colonial interests of the Portuguese for the territory of São Tomé have varied over the centuries, so the country has gone through different processes of colonization and relations of the Portuguese with the local population. When the territory was re-colonized in the 19th century, the Portuguese began to downgrade the social position of half-breeds, liners, and black people free from the territory.

According to Seibert (2015), during the recolonization period, when slavery was abolished in 1875, the Portuguese introduced the form of servant labor, absorbing and exploiting the labor force of Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique, in addition to deepening the marginalization of the linings. In 1953, the “Batepá Massacre” took place, a historical episode known for the resistance of the Santomean people against the violence and persecution of the colonizers.

In 1975, the country gained its political independence and established itself as the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe. In 1990, it

established a multiparty system. The country's experience of political independence is quite recent, as is the structuring of political and administrative institutions⁶ in the country, among them those that seek to promote gender equity.

It is common in historiography about São Tomé and Príncipe to find the information that places the economic and political landmarks of colonization, which maps the peoples who inhabited the region over the centuries, but the observation of how the territory was constituted from a gender perspective is still something to be deepened in the investigations. In Santos (2015) we found an approach on the protagonism of women in São Tomé and Príncipe, especially from the struggles for political independence. In her research, information is gathered in an attempt to identify the presence of women in the colonial period between the 15th and 18th centuries, that the author recognizes are still scarce. Despite the gap, her research is an important historical source on gender issues in São Tomé and Príncipe.

In addition to contemporary data that inform us about the inequalities that exist in the country, we follow the trails of what the experiences of Santomean women tell us, as well as the cultural elements present in representations of local literature, especially the ones produced by women, following the example of Conceição Lima (Silva 2019), who produces her "affective memories" through poetry and presents a universe of cultural signs of experiences in the context of the country. The very expression of women's voices in the production of different fields of knowledge in São Tomé is quite recent. In this sense, it is still necessary to produce a historiography that expresses the places of the different subjects who composed the social formation of São Tomé, especially those who were relegated to marginality or disregarded in their humanity. A history from a decolonial perspective is still a task to be done, by many hands that can put the narratives back in other terms.

In São Tomé and Príncipe, gender inequality is present in all social segments: in schooling, access to income and work, political representation, among others. According to Oliveira and Azevedo (2016), Santomean women make up 71% of the unskilled workers and 59% of the unemployed population. According to the "*National Human Development Report*" of 2014, women were in more precarious work situations compared to men and, in terms

⁶ One of the expressions of this process is the difficulty in obtaining systematized data about the country, which are available on the official platforms of Santomean institutions. Although there are notable efforts, the publication of data is still a challenge for STP. The collection of official information becomes a mining activity, which makes it difficult to provide a more precise characterization of the social reality of the country.

of level of education, a comparison of the year 2012 indicated that, among family heads, 72% of women and 28% of men had no level of education; while at the professional/technical level, the proportion was 80% men and 20% women. At the higher education level, 78% of men and 22% of women.

Regarding family composition and arrangements, the “*IV General Census of Population and Housing*”, held in 2012, presents a profile of the country: 66% of homes in urban areas and 44% in rural areas, the average national number of family members is 4 people, with the nuclear model prevailing (31.7%), followed by “others” (23.8%), which includes the models of single-parent and extended single-parent families. The majority of families (59%) are responsible for one man, and women are responsible for 41% of households. The census identified that women are more represented in single-parent (87.3%) and extended single-parent (88.1%) families, while men are responsible for 80.2% of marital type families.

Still according to the population census, marriage is not a hegemonic practice among Santomeans, so that 90.3% of the people responsible for the families have the status of singles and 89.1% live in a de facto union. The document records that monogamous marriage corresponds to 8% of conjugal arrangements and de facto unions prevail, in which men relate to different women. This configuration explains the existence of many homes in which the woman is responsible for the family, children and/or other relatives. Although she is the main responsible, she experiences more strongly the indicators of inequality in the country, passing through the material and also affective dimensions. According to the report:

Marriage is therefore not a very recurrent practice of the San Tomean family leaders. As a rule, they unite and form a family without getting married. The marital experience (*vivencha*) or the culturally consensual de facto union is the most frequent type of union mainly among the most disadvantaged social strata. [...] The analysis by nature of the union confers that of the family leaders who live together, 89.1% live in a de facto union, i.e. only 10.9% are married (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2014, 20).

The presence of “polygamy in fact, but not in law” is an important element to be observed in Santomean society. The practice of polygamy is present in some African cultures prior to colonization, as can be observed in countries such as Cape Verde (Monteiro 2016) and Mozambique (Teixeira 2018), for example. However, since the colonial meeting, a *sui generis* product is the combination of European and African models. In this sense,

the practice of polygamy currently exercised in São Tomé and Príncipe is a result of historical processes, which ends up establishing hierarchies that are generis, in order to produce privileges of masculinity. According to Semedo (2016, 960):

In terms of family modes of existence, São Tomé's society is characterized by the archetypal Western families - the nuclear/marital, the reconstructed, the single-parent (exclusively headed by women) and the extended, many of which are crossed by polygamous male relationships. These polygamous relationships are independent of the educational, generational, and purchasing power of the female collective, and usually translate into the maintenance of two or more families, or two or more wives, each residing in their own home and in different neighborhoods.

The author also mentions the hierarchies produced in polygamous relationships, whether considering men or women, as to the relationships between women, depending on the place occupied in the conjugal relationship: "Categories such as 'inside woman', 'outside woman', 'molaste' and 'samua' - the latter two in crioulo forro - qualify the conjugal cartographies, to a certain extent a superiority of the 'inside woman' over the 'outside woman' [...]" (Semedo 2016, 968).

When we observe the family arrangements in Santomean society, we see how they operate together with other social conditioning, reinforcing inequalities and combining situations of oppression and exploitation. The inequalities that women experience in other dimensions of social life are also manifested in the domestic environment. Along with situations of social inequality, gender violence is a phenomenon present in women's daily lives. The mechanisms of confrontation, in turn, are quite recent and still far from promoting equity, autonomy and security for women.

Confronting gender-based violence in São Tomé and Príncipe

As previously mentioned, since 1975 the country has been affirming equality in terms of rights and promoting policies aimed at reducing the historically produced inequalities. It is also in this year that the São Tomé and Príncipe Women's Organization (OMSTEP) was created, an important initiative to affirm women's rights. These were incorporated into documents and resolutions after independence, and the confrontation of gender-based violence was later included in the country's political agenda.

With regard to gender violence, it is important to highlight some institutional frameworks (Pires dos Santos 2015; Sousa and Vera-Cruz 2019): a) the first study on Domestic Violence in São Tomé and Príncipe, in 2002, through the initiative of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); b) the creation of the Counseling Center Against Domestic Violence (CACVD), in 2006, to prevent, counsel, and support victims of domestic violence; c) the adoption of the first National Strategy for Gender Equality and Equity (ENIEG), with technical and financial support from the United Nations Population Fund; d) creation of law no. 11/2008, which establishes mechanisms to prevent and punish domestic and family violence, in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); e) creation of law no. 12/2008, which establishes a system of prevention and support for victims of domestic and family violence; f) creation of law no. 6/2012, which typified the crime of domestic violence in the Santomean penal code.

Laws 11/2008 and 12/2008 are fundamental elements in the institutionalization of the confrontation of violence in the Santomean context. According to law 11/2008, in its article 5, domestic and family violence against women is any action or omission based on gender, which causes death, injury, physical, sexual, psychological, moral, property or deprivation of liberty. Law 11/2008 provides punishment to those who commit these crimes and addresses measures of awareness, as well as creating protective measures for women in situations of domestic violence.

Article 49 of Law 11/2008 states that, once reported, domestic violence assumes the nature of a public crime. The statement is very relevant, considering that there are situations in which women denounce and are coerced by the aggressor or other people to decline the accusation, which can aggravate their vulnerability. Although the creation of the law was an important step, there was still a gap: domestic violence was not yet part of the list of crimes of the Penal Code of São Tomé and Príncipe. The gap was filled in 2012, when domestic violence was included in the Penal Code of São Tomé and Príncipe, through the approval of law no. 6/2012, referring to article 152, with the epigraph "mistreatment or overload of minors and subordinates and domestic violence". The insertion of this type of crime was fundamental to prevent situations of violence and abuse occurring within the domestic environment, involving spouses and dependents, especially children.

The production of data on gender-based violence in Sao Tome and Principe still has many gaps. The information available on the reality of vio-

lence in the country was published in 2010 in the "*Demographic and Health Survey*" (2008-2009), when there was a national survey on the subject, with male and female respondents. The document brings us closer to the reality of Santomeanism through the data obtained; however, it is important to point out that a) new surveys are needed, given that in the course of a decade some dynamics may have been produced in the country, so as to alter to some extent the percentages obtained at the time the document was produced; b) the data in the report were obtained from the population's responses, expressing their perception on the issue of gender-based violence, but there is no nationwide database available to measure the number of complaints and reception services, an indispensable element to observe the San Tomean state's performance in confronting violence. In this sense, there is the production of repertoires on gender-based violence in São Tomé and Príncipe, but there is still a need for articulation between the data and institutional mechanisms of confrontation.

In the Demographic Survey, the population was consulted about domestic violence in order to observe the degree of acceptance and possible justifications for the practices of violence. According to the document, one in five women (20%) agreed with at least one of the justifications for men to beat women. This conception was more widespread among women who worked and were not paid in cash (36%), among the uneducated (28%) and those living in a poorer household (24%). Among male respondents, the percentages indicated that 32% of men living in poorer households agreed with justifications for violence against women. Among men with primary schooling, the percentage was 26% and 16% among those with secondary schooling. Among the justifications presented by men, according to the document:

Men cited, in order of importance, the fact of neglecting children (14% against 12% for women), the fact of leaving without informing the husband (12% against 10% for women), the fact of contradicting the husband (10% against 7% for women), the fact of refusing to have sexual relations (5% against 6% for women) and the fact of burning food (7% against 6% for women) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística; Ministério da Saúde de São Tomé 2010, 260).

The Demographic Survey also sought to verify the population's perception of women's refusal to have sexual relations in the context of affective relationships and identified that 74% of men considered it justifiable if the woman knew that her spouse had some sexually transmitted disease; 71% agreed with women's refusal if they were tired or unwilling; the percentage drops to 48% of acceptance in situations where the woman refuses to have

sexual relations when she discovers that her spouse has another affective relationship, a number that indicates the legitimacy of polygamy as a privilege of masculinity in the Santomean culture.

Regarding the experience of domestic violence, the report indicated that the presence was lower among women who had financial autonomy and a higher level of education. There was a higher frequency among divorced and separated women. 36% of married or unmarried women indicated that they had been victims of violence since the age of 15. The document also states that violence perpetrated by men decreases the higher their level of schooling and draws attention to the importance of an education focused on the discussion of gender (Instituto Nacional de Estatística; Ministério da Saúde de São Tomé 2010).

The way violence is present in daily relations in São Tomé and Príncipe indicates its use as a systematic instrument of gender hierarchy, control of female bodies, and still has much legitimacy in discourses and practices. In this sense, beyond the legal instruments that aim to restrain such practices, it is fundamental that the most profound changes manifest themselves in the culture, in the way genders are produced, in order to subvert hierarchies and oppressions.

In the “National Implementation Report of the Beijing Declaration and Program of Action + 25”, in which the state evaluates its performance in confronting violence, there is an indication that there are still many challenges for the production of statistics regarding violence against women in the country, so that it is possible to improve the mechanisms for confronting the phenomenon and ensure social justice. According to the report (2019, 44), when noting the existing obstacles in confronting violence:

Constraints:

Weak operationalization of the database on GBV; Insistence of national data on domestic violence and sexual abuse of minors; Lack of data on violence against the elderly; Total dependence on financial resources of development partners for the implementation of the action plan of the GBV Strategy.

Challenges:

Make the 24h hotline available, in partnership with the National Police; Disseminate the laws 11/2008 and 12/2008 and the Penal Code at the national level; Reinforce the National Strategy of VBG; **Improve the process of production of VBG statistics (our emphasis).**

⁷ We believe there was a spelling error and the term would be non-existent.

Initiatives to promote gender equality go hand in hand with a culture that still privileges masculinity and legitimizes the various forms of violence against women. The creation of instruments to curb violence in this sense becomes fundamental for the promotion of the rights of Santomean women. In addition to institutional initiatives, we consider the narratives of Santomean women, which express the place of violence in daily life and the challenges for the promotion of gender equity in the context of the country.

Other “gravana stories”⁸: The experiences of Santomean women

Listening to the stories of Santomean women is a fundamental aspect of understanding the phenomenon of gender violence. To approach experiences from a decolonial perspective also means to think about how women relate their experiences, perceive themselves as women and build their trajectories, which are also of resistance, in a context very adverse to them. It also means considering them beyond the terms that universalize experiences, whether thinking about the term women or in the condition of citizens.

In addressing violence considering the coloniality of gender, we consider the “destructive reach of colonial enforcement” (Lugones 2020, 55). The first forms of violence experienced by women in São Tomé were those promoted by colonization, which were updated according to the projects of the colonizers, reaching different generations. We cannot lose sight of how the reality of violence and inequality has been configured historically and manifested in the present. In this sense, in agreement with Curiel (2020), a perspective of emancipation needs to face coloniality.

Through women’s talk, we approach the contexts of violence and the other social markers that constitute their lives. For this article, we will address some of the experiences among the 18 women interviewed in the research, in 2019, in the capital city of São Tomé. By transcribing the lines, we seek to preserve, with the maximum fidelity, the richness of oral expressions, which combine Portuguese with Creole forro, reminding us of the historical processes that produced the Santomean people and constitute the reality experienced by women.

8 “Histórias da Gravana” refers to the literary work of the saintly writer Olinda Beja, in which she presents short stories telling the experiences of women from São Tomé in Príncipe, including daily situations of oppression.

Among the women who participated in the semi-structured interviews, we identified the following profile: a) age bracket ranging from 19 to 47 years, with the group prevailing from 20 to 29 years (55.5%); b) in relation to schooling, primary level prevailed (61%), followed by high school (33%) and only 1 in higher education; c) among professions, there was a prevalence of housewives and maids (61%), in addition to mentions of other professional activities; c) the verification of the income range identified that more than half had no source of income (55.5%) and, among the others, 6 received the value of up to 1 minimum wage (about 1100 Sao Tomean Dobra)⁹ and only 2 had incomes above the minimum wage (average of 3,000 Sao Tomean Dobra); d) only 2 interviewees did not have children and the majority declared themselves single; however, there is a notable presence of consensual unions, which means the establishment of an affective relationship with home life, although not formally recognized.

Regarding information on violence, the interviews identified that all women had already suffered some form of violence, in addition to having knowledge of other women who had also suffered violence, with frequent mention of physical aggression. Most of them said they were aware of the existence of the law to confront domestic violence, from the Counseling Center, but did not know details about the content of the law. It is important to point out that several of them became aware of the legislation or other information about violence through state campaigns and the media, which indicates the functioning of these strategies as a way of disseminating the content of confronting violence and promoting cultural changes that may influence the reduction of occurrences.

In order to understand how the phenomenon of violence manifests itself in the daily lives of women, it is necessary to identify the various dimensions that constitute it, such as gender conceptions, the way violence presents itself in affective and domestic relationships, in the existing models of conjugal arrangements, in addition to other expressions of the inequalities that also make up the aforementioned social scenario.

From the interviews, we found that being a woman meant being responsible for domestic chores, having fewer opportunities for schooling, work, income, and freedom when compared to defining the social place of men. In all the statements¹⁰, there was the observation of inequalities, expressed in the situations reported. In situations involving economic dependence, violence often worsened.

9 Equivalent to about \$ 50 U.S. dollars or \$ 269,89 Brazilian reais.

10 We use codenames, as a way to preserve their identities.

Usually, men don't do domestic work, because many times when men do domestic work, society talks: this man there is dumb, goofy, *bob-oyoko*¹¹. He is washing dishes for his wife. Woman already *katxôu*¹² him. That's why many don't help. Domestic work is a job done for women. (Jessica, 24, package seller, 2 daughters, elementary school)

He worked, made money, but the money he received was only spent with other women. He took other women to where I live, to his mother's house. I was just watching, a lot of suffering! When I complained to his mother, his mother said that he is a man [his mother supports him]: 'and a man with money in his pocket gets any woman he wants. [...] He would just go home to take a shower, change clothes. He wouldn't give money to buy soap to wash his clothes or the children's. (Nina, 37 years old, maid, 4 children, elementary school)

One aspect observed in the interviews is the access to education as a factor of social mobility and greater autonomy in women's lives. The interviewee Kilomba's speech expressed, at various moments, the reflectivity on the feminine condition and the refusal to reproduce certain social places. In that society, violence appears as a systematic instrument of gender production, especially in women's experiences. Kilomba was 23 years old, had no children, was single, had a professional activity, and had an average income of 4,000 *dobras*¹³. In describing the reality of women in the Santomesese context, she said:

Santomean women are destined to take care of their husbands. So much so that you are 23 and have no children? *Kyê!*¹⁴ This is a scandal! What do you mean? It's already time to give birth! What are you getting at? You want to study, study alone? You have to give birth, have a child, have a husband, have a home, take care of the house.

Another aspect manifested in the interviews is the presence of polygamy as a privilege of masculinity. As it is socially configured, it deepens gender inequalities and gives men greater autonomy and power over women's lives. In most interviews, there were reports of *de facto* unions in which men also related to other women. Something that aggravates situations of

¹¹ Fool.

¹² The expression means to suggest that the woman has bewitched him.

¹³ Equivalent to about \$185.59 U.S. dollars or \$ 948 Brazilian reais.

¹⁴ Interjection that denotes amazement, an indignation.

violence is the construction of hierarchies among women, made by men who related to them, reinforcing the oppression of some and producing conflicts between them in the dispute for men. The following extracts from the interviews express how violence is combined with polygamy in the context of Santomeanism:

Men nowadays will want two, three women, but women who are home, they mistreat like a slave. In the beginning it gets good, love gets strong, very good¹⁵. As a woman gets pregnant, they get another. A woman who is at home, when she complains about their absence, they beat her up. When a man gets a woman, he doesn't sleep at home; they sleep around, because they already have another new woman. When they get home the next day, when the woman asks, they get angry¹⁶ and beat up. (Chanquena, 19 years old, student, 1 daughter, high school)

He does many things wrong. He has many women, not for home. He always goes out, but he never goes out with me. When I ask him to go out together, he never wants to. I just go out with my sisters-in-law. I ask him. He lets me. I go. I have time to get home. But midnight is the time he stays on the street. (Katia, 28 years old, maid, 3 daughters, elementary school)

Cheating is a type of psychological violence. But violence in São Tomé is so naturalized that nobody cares. In other words, it's the most normal thing in the world. However, cheating is only directed at men; when one speaks of cheating, one cannot mention the female gender. Because women in Sao Tome cannot cheat. So much so that a man catches a woman cheating, most of the time they end up dead. They kill. Because in Sao Tome women cannot cheat on their husbands. When they don't kill, they beat them, leave them disfigured or dismembered. (Kilomba, 23 years old, lawyer, no children, higher education)

The above reports express the result of combining polygamous models from Africa with values and marital arrangements from the colonizing West and Christian. This combination has given men the freedom to experience simultaneous relationships, while at the same time hierarchizing and seeking control over women's bodies, feelings and sexuality.

¹⁵ Very silly.

¹⁶ They speak up, they utter offenses.

The modality of psychological violence was experienced by all the women interviewed. But, reports of physical violence were also frequent in the speeches. The testimonies showed the place of violence in women's experiences and how it is present in daily life, marking bodies and subjectivities. Women of different age groups told of situations of physical violence practiced by the men they lived with, which could have occurred in death, such is the aggressiveness employed.

When I was pregnant, a lot of beatings. I went to hospital. I thought I would lose my own baby. He gave me a butt on the floor¹⁷ with a baby in my belly. Since he did that to me, I went to hospital with pain. The doctors gave me medication, the pain passed. The next day, he still comes home drunk, expressing me¹⁸. When I was pregnant, he came in the morning all drunk, went inside the house, talking: I'm going to kick¹⁹ this *pykena's* ass. He went inside the house, took a pick to hit me with the pick. I ran and tried to hide in my friend's house. Boy was going into the yard telling me he's going to kick my ass. [...] He came out with a pick to put on my back. If that pick entered me, I would die. [...] The pick went in and out of the zinc gate. If it was in my head? (Chaquena, 19 years old, student, high school, 1 daughter)

He didn't like it when I take care of myself, he likes to see me *jam ga podji*²⁰. So he's the only one who likes me [laughter]. He doesn't trust me. [...] I started to feel a lot of pain, that's one of the main reasons that made me end the relationship. You want it or not, he's solving your problem²¹. Sometimes I lamented the pain I felt, he saw me crying and said that I am pretending, that I don't want to have sex. *Kye!* he had sex with me against my will. He said I don't want to, because I already have someone else, I'm thinking of someone else. Every day he will want to sleep with me²². [...] I looked like a sex slave. I felt so much pain, I couldn't even work. (Nina, 37 years old, housekeeper, 4 children)

One day, he beat me so bad, I got all wet on my body, even my skirt got dirty with blood. He was beating me like this, to kill me even,

17 She fell on the floor after being assaulted.

18 "Expressing myself" means that the man was uttering offenses against her.

19 *Pykena* means girl. In the sentence, she expresses that he said he was going to assault her.

20 Untidy.

21 Forced sexual intercourse.

22 Having sex with her.

with child on my back. Kicking me with a punch, puffed, here several times. All this with child on my back. He hit me, still hitting the child on the back. He was all drunk. He had to take a bath in other people's houses. He was disfigured. I had to get out of there immediately. (Kini, 43, housewife, 5 children, elementary school)

The testimonies of the women interviewed indicate the situations of all forms of violence in daily experiences: psychological, physical, material, moral and sexual. In the interviewees' reports, living violent situations becomes part of the female condition in the context. The other markers of social inequality end up deepening the situation of women's vulnerability, which demonstrates the need for a multisectoral institutional confrontation that reaches various social dimensions in order to promote the guarantees of a safe and autonomous citizenship for women. The reports also reveal how much violence is still rooted in the Santomean culture, socially legitimized, and this is also an important challenge to be faced so that violence is not perpetuated as a fate for women's lives.

Confronting violence considering the coloniality of gender also means thinking about the processes that constituted violent masculinities in São Tomé, which are expressed in the authority given to men, who still have power to command and control over the lives of many women, a recurring aspect of a colonial heritage still very much alive in the experiences. More than identifying the asymmetries between the genders in the reality of São Tomé, we are interested in considering the deep roots that have produced such inequalities and are also manifested in gender relations. To resist, in this sense, means repeatedly facing the coloniality of gender.

Conclusion

The coloniality of gender is constituted with a mark present in the societies that were colonized, even after the independence processes. Violence is the common element of colonization and coloniality, acting as a systematic instrument of domination. In view of the asymmetries produced in this type of social relationship, gender has been configured as an expression of inequality and concentration of power. In this sense, the social construction of being a woman in such contexts ends up meaning to experience oppressions and, in some cases, more deeply. In approaching gender violence from a decolonial perspective, our intention was to think about the processes that constituted

gender as it manifests itself in the context of Santomeanism, observing the echoes of a colonization that existed until recently in the country.

In considering women's accounts, we approach the complexity of women's experiences and observe the concrete effects of processes of inequality and oppression, which end up building gender identities in that context. Above all, we consider that women's experiences are an important key to the development of policies to confront violence and reduce inequalities. The elements that constitute women's experiences observed in the research signal the need for an expansion of gender studies in São Tomé and Príncipe, which may deepen certain clippings and produce an accumulation of contributions to policies to promote women's rights in the country.

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses gender-based violence from the experiences of women in São Tomé and Príncipe. The approach is constructed from the perspective of African feminist and decolonial epistemologies. Thus, gender relations are thought of considering the particularities of the colonization process that occurred in the country, as well as the post-independence socioeconomic configurations, which are marked by social inequalities, mainly experienced by women.

KEYWORDS

Gender Violence; Sao Tome and Principe; Decolonial Epistemologies.

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