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# Gendered Work in Former Portuguese Colonial Africa: Mass Labor and Public Works

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**Abstract**

References to the existence of women in Portuguese Colonial Public Works can be found on payrolls since the turn of the nineteenth century. Their work was subordinated to men's work and they consistently earned lower wages. After World War II, their presence in quarries, or dealing with small pavement repairs, would endure in economically precarious geographies. One of these locations was Cape Verde, where positions for carpenters, bricklayers, and construction helpers were left vacant after the emigration of men. This situation was not very different from that in rural Portugal, where women, mostly illiterate, also constituted a cheap workforce. Examining gendered labor in colonial Cape Verde, this article analyzes the complex coexistence of subalternity, race, and extreme poverty in an understudied context. Women workers were generally associated with unskilled labor and high demands on a large scale. In light of their apparent invisibility in colonial records, this paper considers whether and how the characteristics of this group impacted design projects. It also explores whether working in Public Works meant the emancipation of women who were heads of single-parent families or only represented the perpetuation of inequality.

**Keywords:** Colonial Public Works, labor, women, Cape Verde, construction, building site

## Introduction

Research on the interplay between labor and colonialism has struggled to challenge Madhavi Jha's statement that "the history of labor on public works construction is usually presented as a masculine experience."[1] Following prevalent narratives, the recent research on Portuguese colonialism and unskilled labor has taken the same direction.[2] In particular, the research about hierarchies established by and on the construction site is still scarce,[3] and an even larger gap is found when the subject of analysis is women. There are no narratives that frame them in the colonial public works (CPW) in former African territories under Portuguese rule. But these women did exist, as is evidenced by some inspection reports, and could even occupy jobs left vacant by men. This was more likely to happen in places where male emigration was recurrent.

Investigating the role of women on the building site reveals the know-how they could hold. Further research into vernacular building sites, where women were (more) visible, can provide cross-references between craftsmanship, vernacular knowledge, and more industrial settings and may pave the way for fruitful conversations between previous scholarship on these different areas. In present-day Guinea-Bissau, for example, colonial ethnographical studies revealed that women of the Brame ethnic group in charge of compacting the earth that made up the floor "inside the hut" were known as *napagetes*.[4] However, these colonial narratives have not pondered on their impact on construction at the time. Contemporary historiography continues to neglect the influence of these women in design.[5] Awareness of the craft skills of Guinean women preceded some studies on construction in the colonial period, as mentioned in the 1930s by the Portuguese ethnographer Landerset Simões, concerning mural paintings inside the houses of the Bijagós islands.[6] The so-called "native" people appeared to have unique skills that made them capable of tackling multiple tasks, including artistic and construction ones, which belong to the universe of crafts. The American historian Glenn Adamson has shown that this ability or "omnicompetence" tended to be underestimated by the European settlers who saw standard knowledge as reflecting a hierarchical chain of transmission. Adamson concluded: "It is a dynamic that runs throughout the history of American craft – a declared preference, among the cultural elite, for *knowing that* over *knowing how*."[7] This attitude overlooked skills in the crafts of actors such as "Blacks, the working class, women, immigrants,"[8] some highly significant in understanding colonial building sites. Adamson also argued that the marginalization of the crafts was ideal for practicing "sexism and racism."[9]

Aiming to grasp the interplay between gender and race, this paper starts from a little-explored reality lived by groups of Cape Verdean women who, until a late period of Portuguese colonialism, worked in civil construction teams, mainly in undertakings promoted by the CPW. It examines a set of images from a report signed by the inspector António de Almeida (Figure 1), which illustrated this situation in the Cape Verde archipelago, a former Portuguese colony in West Africa. Having arrived in Cape Verde on May 26, 1948, where he remained for twelve

**Fig 1** António de Almeida, colonial inspector and author of the report *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

months, Almeida, son of a former employee of the local CPW and an experienced colonial civil servant, collected a series of data about that region. The information was compiled in a report published the following year. The women workers Almeida recorded throughout his journey stare directly at the camera, facing the inspector-photographer with forthrightness and self-control. Other narratives carried out in other colonial geographies, such as those by Swiss writer and journalist Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908–1942), in former Belgian Congo, would corroborate how colonial prejudice was often challenged by photographic recording. In the case of Almeida, like Schwarzenbach, "words and photography [showed] different aspects of the African experience" in the eyes of those who wrote reports and took photographs of everyday life in these contexts,[10] highlighting the significance of images from the European perspective in understanding the complexity of the colonial reality. Almeida's account will be used to address the labor reality of these women based on their gender, seen and described through the eyes of a white man, who exercised his condition as a privileged observer.

To theoretically frame this path-breaking approach to gendered work in the

Portuguese case, two bibliographical sources are highlighted. The first, "Thinking otherwise: theorizing the colonial modern gender system in Africa" by Boris Bertolt, discusses the persistence of modes of coloniality in the treatment of gender. For Bertolt, "the oppression of women in Africa has its roots in the European imperial project inspired by heterosexual patriarchy."[11] The top-bottom imposition of a Westernized family structure had direct effects on the colonial division of labor. As the other side of the same coin, the European man—here represented by Almeida—would consider female labor in the CPW as a disruption of or alienation from the "biological" condition of mother/wife.[12] The second source provides key insights into the role of women on colonial building sites. In "Men Diggers and Women Carriers: Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India", Madhavi Jha reveals that being a carrier was a significant gendered task within the context of unskilled work, providing a crucial framework to question Cape Verde's realities.[13]

This article aims to break new historiographical ground by using the few data found in the Portuguese and Cape Verdean colonial archives, namely in the Portuguese Overseas Historical Archive (AHU), in Lisbon, and the Instituto do Arquivo Nacional de Cabo Verde (IANCV), Praia. The documentation includes legislation and administrative papers related to indigenous affairs. Future oral history testimonies are needed to support more complex readings. Jha's observation that women's work is poorly represented across written sources applies to the CPW reports for the Portuguese case.[14] It is not only the historiography of colonial labor that is based on male experience; the colonial archive itself is grounded on this same perspective. Undoubtedly, many of the few references to female presence come from payrolls, as noted by Jha.[15]

Although the Portuguese government did not make use of a Famine Commission to address situations of extreme need by promoting direct contracting, this article (freely) borrows the British imperial idea of "famine public works"[16] to describe the situation of Cape Verdean women laborers, since their subsistence equally depended directly on employment provided by the CPWs. It will establish specific comparisons with similar situations in the Portuguese context (the so-called "Metrópole"), considering the different expectations facing European and African women.

The article has a three-part structure. First, it explores the role of female laborers in the context of Cape Verde's poverty and insularity, through the lens of a colonial report. In the second part, it examines the strategies employed by the Portuguese colonial administration to address the issue of female workers. Finally, it considers the connections and similarities between colonial and Western building sites. The article aims to unpack an understudied reality of the late Portuguese colonial period, recalling the maxim written by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."[17] It will look for the transversal nature of this condition in metropolitan and colonial societies. If these contingents of women were associated with rural life in Portugal—where poverty and illiteracy were common among women—in colonial Africa groups of female workers involved complex migrations, in both rural and peri-urban areas. The condition experienced by African

women entailed two levels of subordination, which were deeply intertwined: it was a racial question, dictated by a colonial division of labor; and a gender question, which relegated them to the bottom of the pyramid on construction sites. Focusing on Cape Verdean women in construction paves the way for intersectional studies. This provides a better understanding of how their dual gender and race status, combined with poverty, exacerbated the discrimination they experienced. Although women on construction sites were essentially seen as part of a gender-defined group rather than a task-defined one, this perspective has gradually been challenged by new research, as discussed in this article.

## A Female Laborer in a "Thirsty and Hungry" Archipelago

Being well acquainted with the Portuguese colonial reality in post-war Africa, António de Almeida opened his report by describing the Cape Verdean women as "hard working" and literate, "like never (seen) others," in contrast with the Portuguese women with the same socio-economic condition.[18] A set of 36 images would best clarify his vision about women's participation in unskilled jobs. Among the photos, eleven depicted women working in typically male roles: carrying stones, paving roads, acting as dockworkers or transporting construction materials. Others illustrated everyday situations, namely old ladies sitting on doorsteps, or young girls in domestic activities (which Bertolt classifies as evidence of the patriarchal system of valuation).[19] There were also more controversial images, like the ones of young prostitutes next to newly opened roads. Remarkably, these pictures were put together with works representing infrastructure development programs promoted by the colonial government (Figure 2).

Almeida's description of Cape Verde as "the archipelago of thirst and hunger" could not be more appropriate. In 1947, the year before his stay, 13,517 deaths were counted due to successive bad agricultural years.[20] The figures contrasted with 5,136 deaths in 1946.[21] These years were ripe for male emigration not only to other colonial territories but also to North America, Brazil and Argentina. Without its *contratados* [hired workers], as these emigrants were known, Cape Verde was a territory mostly populated by children, women, and old people, joined by a few civil servants (Europeans and "Creoles") who ran the administration across the nine inhabited islands.[22]

Cape Verdean women were consigned to a specific subchapter towards the end of Almeida's report.[23] Almeida stated that photographs would speak louder than the "nib of his pen."[24] Tasks in construction were predominant compared to scarce descriptions of domestic work or agriculture. Among the criticisms was the poor supervision by the colonial authorities, who were said to be complicit with the exploitation carried out by most foremen.[25] Women were forced to perform actions Almeida believed were contrary to their feminine condition, such as carrying stones and transporting sand, "overloading them with work that fatigues, wastes and kills."[26] Women were photographed, alone or in groups (probably in family affinities), on the island of Fogo, "carrying stones for the water catchment on Praia do Ladrão" (Figure 3), or in Santiago on the mountain of Malagueta, "carrying stone for the construction of punches", all paid three *escudos* " … or less" (Figure 4).[27] These amounts were half of those recommended in

**Fig 2** "Ilha de Santiago. Two hungry women pictured on the Praia-Tarrafal road. Their appearance does not deceive anyone." António de Almeida, *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

the official payrolls that fixed the minimum wage of a "woman *worker*" at 6$00 daily, contrasting with the 10$00 paid to male colleagues.[28] These numbers demonstrate not only the inequality between women and men, but also the generalized misery in the archipelago.[29] There is no indication that wages were set according to dietary costs, as Jha describes for the British India Famine Commission.[30] But similar calculations might have served as a basis for the Cape Verdean colonial administration.

Despite the colonial government's attempt to establish control over the wages of less qualified workers, deregulation was prevalent. Disparities between legislation and everyday practice were routine, as José Pedro Monteiro states about forced labor in the Portuguese colonies.[31] While visiting the central area of the archipelago's main island, Santiago, on June 7, 1948, during the construction and repair of roads and walls near Achadinha de João Teves, Almeida came across payments to women that were two-

**Fig 3** "Ilha do Fogo. Girl carrying boulders to the water abstraction at Praia do Ladrão beach. Salary: 3$00 daily." António de Almeida, *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

thirds lower than those of men. With the money they received, the workers had to pay for the only meal of the day.[32]

Following his remarks on wage inequalities, the author commented on the technical obsolescence of some of Cape Verde's PW, attributing it to deficiencies in conception and design, and clearing the construction workers of any responsibility. This observation referred directly to the significance of Cape Verde in the Portuguese colonial framework. Located on the periphery of the Portuguese empire, it was one of the colonial regions with lower public and private investment in infrastructure.[33] An acute shortage of technical staff jeopardized the construction sector, where technological innovation would be rare. Even architectural design reflected this shortage of expert staff. For this reason, in the mid-1950s, many of Cape Verde's public buildings continued to follow a previous Art Deco lineage, rather than displaying more

**Fig 4** "Santiago. Malagueta Mountain. Girls carrying stone for the construction of walls. Salary: 3$00 or less." António de Almeida, *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

modern designs.[34] The achievements were mainly promoted by the Technical Brigade for Hydraulic Studies and Works, and included water tanks, dykes and *levadas* (water supply channels). The Brigade was not only responsible for the layout and design, but also for managing construction sites, since local contractors were unable to source materials and machinery, raise funds, or hire and supervise enough workers to complete the necessary public works. The works photographed and described by Almeida thus constituted facilities of practical and immediate utility. There were no public buildings on a larger scale, representative of colonial power, in contrast with those in Angola and Mozambique.[35]

The construction systems used in the archipelago continued to follow the artisanal path, very much based on vernacular methods. A few years later, when planning the Gil Eanes Secondary School in Mindelo, São Vicente Island, more modern techniques such as reinforced concrete were passed over in favor of traditional stone masonry methods, since the "local workforce was used to this type of construction process, having little training … in the execution of structural formwork and reinforcements."[36] The absence of machinery also made the building site a place of labor-intensive work. The insistence on unskilled tasks paved the way for the employment of women at CPW, since their knowledge was dictated by a spirit of survival; in other words, women carried "omnicompetences" and were eligible for less qualified jobs. As caregivers and providers, women traditionally played key roles in organizing domestic and agricultural work and in building their own homes. The colonial apparatus also recognized the usefulness of this practical know-how in developing infrastructure. The transportation of stones and water, as described in Almeida's report, exemplifies the skills of Cape Verdean women and their valuable contribution to the CPW.

Due to the roughness of the natural and built environment in Cape Verde, Almeida's photographs differed from the images of women employed in canonical works of the twentieth century, namely in the construction of Corbusian buildings in Chandigarh.[37] But neither were Cape Verdean women perched on scaffolding with baskets of gravel on their heads, nor were the works they helped to create monuments of international modern architecture. In Cape Verde, if women were not quarrying or carrying, they paved urban streets flanked by everyday single-store buildings or were part of teams with men on roads built against the rugged geography of islands such as Santo Antão (Figure 5). Thus, the impact of their work could be considered


**Fig 5** "Road works in Santo Antão." António de Almeida, *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

more substantial and diverse, given the variety of tasks performed at different building sites.

Women portrayed in Almeida's images also inspired personal narratives. A few captions were arguably designed to guide

potential readers, mostly colonial officials based in Lisbon. The first image showed a young Cape Verdean woman from the island of Fogo "schmoozing," despite the "excruciating poverty" surrounding her.[38] Such words aimed to contrast the precariousness of the archipelago's environment with the perceived moral superiority of its inhabitants, especially women. Images of girls also served to illustrate the belief in the benevolence of Portuguese racism, pointing to the peaceful coexistence of "white and black" children raised together.[39] The large set of images revealed Almeida's chief commitment to prove that female characters deserved greater appreciation than male ones. The man was represented as a "big-bully (*matulão*)" while the woman sacrificed herself (Figure 6).[40] These images were beyond the ethnographic interest highlighted by other bureaucrats in the service of the Portuguese colonial state to be included in the category of "portraits of people with histories," some of them even with "social connections to the photographer,"[41] as Almeida revealed regarding the elderly ladies portrayed on the island of Fogo who had known him as a child.[42] Therefore, one could borrow the perspective used by anthropologist Roy Dilley in analyzing the collection of photographs by Franco-German photographer Henri Gaden (1867–1939) in West Africa. Dilley notes that, despite the apparent intimacy that some of the images may suggest, "one should not lose sight of the broader context of colonial violence and coercion in which the encounters between the officers and the local population took place."[43] The historian emphasized what remained unphotographed or unarchived as a void in the fixation of a (truthful) reality. Almeida went further, photographing one event whose consequences were never

**Fig 6** "Santiago. Women working to repair a street in Praia, next to two bullies … " António de Almeida, *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

unveiled: the deaths resulting from the "catastrophe" in the "Public Assistance Centre in Praia." He dedicated four images to this disaster, but the topic remained almost silent in the body of the report.[44] The already mentioned photographs of prostitutes along the new roads had similar contours. With these two records, Almeida exposed the ineptitude of the colonial government and the harsh reality of the colonized communities. While the use of female labor in PW seemed reprehensible to him, these women were portraited as the opposite of vulnerable protagonists.

## Women and Famine Relief Labor

Almeida's images showed empowered female figures, but his written record put their presence on the building sites as a double form of survival. The effect of the absence of men reinforced how the colonial economy had made women dependent on them, reproducing a Western division of labor.[45] These

women had gone from being domestic caretakers to becoming providers, with an income and "nothing to offer but their labor power," to rephrase Frederick Cooper.[46] For Almeida, it also meant "honest" work away from prostitution. This female economic activity related to Jha's description of the "famine relief works;" that is, labor "assigned by the state on the construction of roads, railways, tanks, and canals in return for a subsistence wage during famines and scarcities."[47] Jha's analysis raises a key question for the Cape Verde context: did the presence of these women destabilize the gender and racial hierarchies surrounding manual labor in construction?

The colonial administration's first move was to consider women working at building sites as a labor group defined by their own gender.[48] As Jha states, the gender division of labor consigned women to unskilled tasks, explaining their susceptibility to unemployment and low wages.[49] In colonial India, women had been laborers in mines and plantations since the nineteenth century. However, it was the creation of the "famine relief works" focusing on PW that created a legal framework for women. In the Portuguese case, there is limited evidence to draw up a possible framework for the journey of African women within the CPW. Was the unskilled labor performed by women distinct from that of men? Jha confirms the existence of the specific role of "carriers" for Indian women in these "famine public works," differentiating them from the men "diggers." In former Portuguese colonial Africa, women would have a range of options between carriers of materials and supporters of the teams as food providers. Jha shows construction sites where both genders coexisted, a common occurrence in the nineteenth century, whether in colonial territories or European countries. In certain parts of colonial India, women were 16 to 25 per cent of the workforce. The more unskilled the task, the more employable these women were.[50] Once again, there are no figures for Portugal or Cape Verde that can confirm how many women were employed in the CPW. However, as mentioned above, the description of these tasks, which mostly concern the transportation of materials and minor repairs, suggests that the authorities viewed them as unskilled labor.

As far as research can tell, the first references to women in Portuguese colonial building sites date back to reports from the late nineteenth century. A report on Angola, from 1877 to 1881, discussing the "Problem of labor in this province," saw African women as living under "perfect slavery" to men, "always idle."[51] These comments denounced the colonial prejudice that led the administration to devise measures to "protect" African women from their own countrymen, resulting from labor legislation that supported the "civilizing effort."[52] As described above, Almeida would share the same opinion six decades later. Spivak explained this "syndrome" in the allegory "white men saving brown women from brown men," deeply embedded in European colonialism.[53]

In the same nineteenth-century document, a table was used to propose wage values, with ten categories of wage earners. The table included managerial roles (timekeeper, foreman, watchmen), specialized workers (carpenters, master masons, bricklayers), men who undertook unskilled work, "women servants" and "minor servants."[54] There was a sharp hierarchy on the building site that consigned women to the bottom of the unskilled labor pool; not only did they receive

sixty to eighty per cent of men's wages, but they were also treated as minors and received the same amounts (Figure 7).[55] This was an enduring transcolonial reality. Forty years later, in Mozambique, the labor legislation still had traces of these imbalances, fixing the wages of "women accompanying their husbands, as well as minors aged 14 to 18 years" at "half the wages fixed for men."[56] This regulation recognized that rural families continued to follow men in regional migrations caused by work.

The condition of the African woman was also a consequence of race inequality in the colonial building sites, which were divided between "white Europeans" and "black Africans." In 1901, a report by the Angolan Directorate of PW mentioned that "any work other than that of the carpenter, mason, blacksmith and even so (also) for these" always demanded indispensable orientation of a "white worker."[57] This left the most qualified building jobs in the hands of European "convicts" from Luanda's prisons. This report displayed a wage table noticing the presence of women in CPW in the region of Moçamedes, now Namibe. The list of tasks was more detailed, with a clear boundary between skilled and unskilled work.

Women were also absent from recruitment concerns, at least in the legislation consulted (so far) for the first years of the twentieth century. Portuguese historiography has been concerned with the question of "indigenous" labor, highlighting the persistence of its coercive dimension.[58] Forms of compulsory conscription were indeed largely implicit in many of the administrative reports. Yet, the few reports of abuses that did reach the inspectors were often not followed up.[59]

The issuing of "recruitment licenses" served not only for the colonial government to supervise workers' engagement, but also to control clandestine emigration to neighboring territories. These represented a system of "quotas" based on the official perception of the needs of the different colonies.[60] As women were not included in these calculations, their presence was increasingly marginal, making them even more invisible in the colonial archive. The prevalent recruitment strategies headed toward the "hired man," as shown by the issuing of the "Indigenous carnet," a compulsory register of identity and work for men over 18 years.[61] Women and minors appeared in the legislation as members of the "family unit" that accompanied men.[62] But in Cape Verde, women workers, as breadwinners or providers, were (apparently) on their own, although we have not yet found the

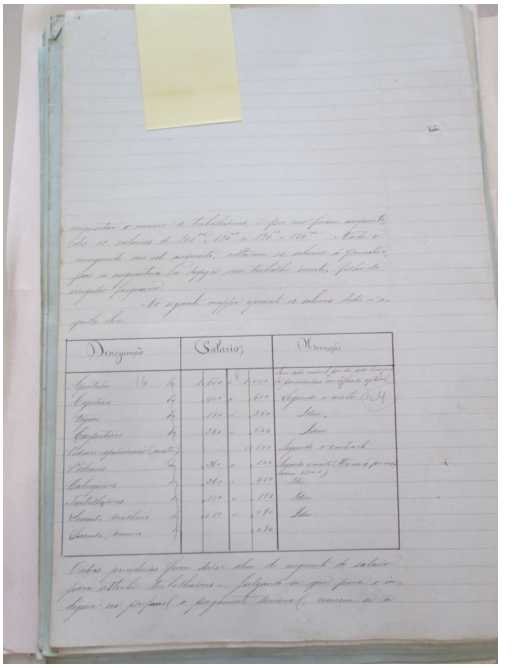

**Fig 7** Payrolls of the Public Works, Angola, 1877–1881. Report by Henrique dos Santos Rosa. AHU, OP13914.

contractual regime that linked them to CPW. In the 1950s there was a proposal to revise the "Labor Code for Indigenous People in the Portuguese colonies in Africa" of 1928.[63] Concerns with physical integrity were expanded, suggesting that female workers could perform tasks that were not physically demanding, except for work inside mines which became forbidden.[64] The judgement of these women's capacities was based on a Western evaluation.

Western concepts of femininity would also limit the ability of women builders to ascend socially through professional qualifications. The male worker was given the possibility (from the perspective of colonial society) to emancipate himself *via* training in the CPW. When higher positions were achieved, as often happened with Cape Verdean male workers, their recognized technical skills would lead them to emigrate. As a consequence, the presence of Cape Verdean women on building sites was considered by the state apparatus as a lesser evil, allowing them to escape prostitution.

## Expectations at the Building Site

Always "unskilled," women in the CPW represented the lowest level of a hierarchical structure dictated by upward movements towards "professional" expertise. Pamela O. Long has explored building sites as favorable environments for communication in an earlier period, constituting "trading zones."[65] Long's analysis suggests reciprocity in the transmission process. Her arguments, however, are mainly related to "skilled practices"—a competence that was hardly recognized for women recruited for construction activities, whether in the metropolitan or colonial regions. Valérie Nègre has emphasized construction yards as critical settings for solving practical problems arising from daily work. In her research into eighteenth-century architecture, the French historian found no evidence of the symbiosis effect proposed by Long. According to Négre's research, the architects were probably the agents who benefited from the solutions trialed by the craftsmen, leading her to conclude that the idea of a "trading zone" was inapplicable to some specific cases.[66] This reasoning could represent a step forward in research into women laborers, if their roles and functions on building sites can be pinpointed. This article argues that the position of the craftsman and his/her contribution to the production of space will be crucial to uncovering the working dimensions of women in twentieth-century Cape Verde.

In Portugal, women "builders" appeared in the images recorded by architects in their search for vernacular metropolitan architecture in the second half of the 1950s.[67] These women were part of rural or fishing communities and had expertise in ancestral techniques. But they were mainly portrayed as field helpers, transporting earth for mud construction, or in less technically demanding tasks, such as the whitewashing of houses (Figure 8). They did not compete with men, who were considered to be the authentic bearers of knowledge (by the architects, in a bottom-up skills transfer process).

The transfer of this non-erudite "culture" among architects would only impact professionals designing for the colonies in the following decade, when "learning" from local communities meant surveying and consciously reproducing functionalities, techniques and forms.[68]

Images of the construction of the Ofir tourist resort, designed by the Portuguese

**Fig 8** Sindicato Nacional dos Arquitectos, *Arquitectura Popular em Portugal*, 1961.

architect Alfredo de Magalhães (1870–1957) from 1946 onwards, emphasized the presence of female workers in vernacular construction sites. A photograph of the building yard shows groups of women from the surrounding villages who performed tasks considered unskilled. The migratory nature of unskilled labor fitted the profile of these women (Figure 9).[69]

In contexts shaped by the family and subsistence economies, certain construction tasks were undoubtedly seen as feminine. In postwar Portugal, almost simultaneously with the collection of images by Almeida, the double fatality of being a woman and being poor was captured by a woman journalist, Maria Lamas (1893–1983). In 1948, Lamas began producing *As Mulheres do meu País* [The Women of My Country], a ground-breaking record of a woman photographing "her gender companions" without the aesthetic gaze of male photographers who would look at them as "models."[70] Lamas recorded Portuguese women in construction-related jobs, such as a "countrywoman (*mulher minhota*) breaking large blocks of stone in the building of a new

**Fig 9** Women on the construction site of the Ofir tourist resort, designed by the Portuguese architect Alfredo de Magalhães, Portugal, 1946. Courtesy of Tiago Bragança.

track in Alto Minho."[71] The portrayed woman could be compared to the Cape Verdean laborers praised by Almeida. The loading of stone elements (slates) to frame the vines was identified by Lamas as exclusively feminine (Figure 10).[72] Similar images of female builders were taken in Cape Verde during the construction of Praia's airfield less than ten years later, showing mixed-gender teams working together (Figure 11).

Despite the "modern nature of the programed work," in both metropolitan and colonial examples, the building sites were places where "the vernacular processes coexisted with the new."[73] This interaction was desired by both architects and workers.

Christoph Rauhut has drawn attention to the coexistence on construction sites of a

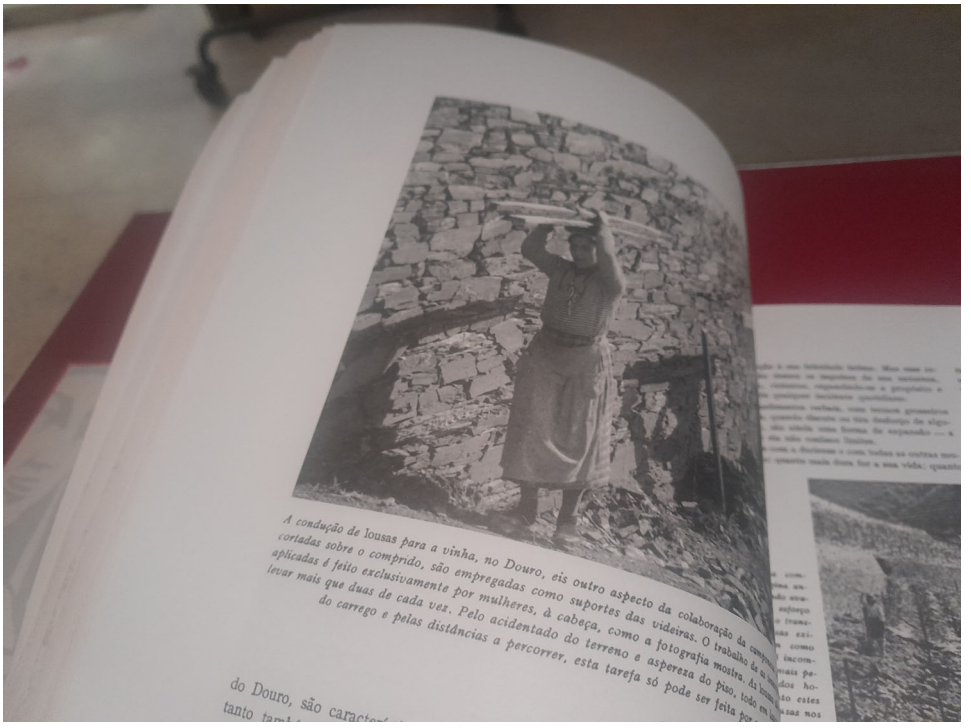


**Fig 10** "*As Mulheres do meu País* [The Women of my Country]: Driving slates to the vineyard in the Douro." Maria Lamas, circa 1948. Photo: Author.

**Fig 11** Appearance of the concrete floor, Praia's airfield hangar, Santiago, Cape Verde, 1956–57. Instituto do Arquivo Nacional de Cabo Verde.

multitude of agents with different tasks and systems.[74] The countless actors involved with the building site experienced overlaps and intersections between "old practical" technologies and technological innovations.[75] Rauhut has sought a better understanding of women's role as active agents in the building process by applying the concept of "Non-Simultaneity," borrowed from Ernst Bloch (1880–1959), to the construction site.[76] In Cape Verde's context, women had a leading role in society due to the mass migration of male workers, which gave them a higher prominence in construction sites, as shown by Almeida's photographs. In this regard, they were likely to have a greater impact on design and were able to perform their previous or acquired skills. At odds with their Cape Verdean colleagues, the women of Ofir stood out because they maintained a diffuse professional profile, defined by the near-clandestinity of their presence. Even though they belonged to the same cycle of poverty, they probably faced different expectations, since they were not colonized.

## Epilogue

Two decades after António de Almeida's report, amid the colonial/liberation wars for Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique from the 1960s until 1975, African

communities were called upon to build an anachronistically perpetuated colonial society under the Community Development rule. African women making adobe bricks were pictured as evidence—and agents—of the "progressive" agenda of the colonial project in the middle of the Planalto Central of Angola (Figure 12). Houses, schools and health posts, fountains and other equipment would come out of the hands of these "new Africans" who had more "civilization" than the settlers of Portuguese origin, as argued by the author of another later report.[77]

In the north of Angola, women became "key agents defining the household layouts and materiality, since the company often had to accommodate their agendas and labor requests,"[78] as Beatriz Serrazina explains concerning the performance of Diamang's mining project in the early 1960s. Outside the building site, these women developed programs and technical solutions which had an impact on the design itself, thus challenging the last refuge of designer expertise. Such women left the offices of CPW departments and municipal councils to accompany the populations *in situ*. Yet the ancestral knowledge of women remained mostly overlooked by the colonial authorities who would encourage the African woman to "relearn" domestic functions, while the man was "instructed on how best to cultivate the land, build his house and improve the village."[79] The extent to which these approaches were applied is still unknown today. More archival and oral history research is still needed. Women's resistance is almost likely, primarily through the subordinate condition that allowed them to subvert the dominant system on the building site. This article highlights how, over the last 100 years of Portuguese colonial rule in Africa, the contributions of women in

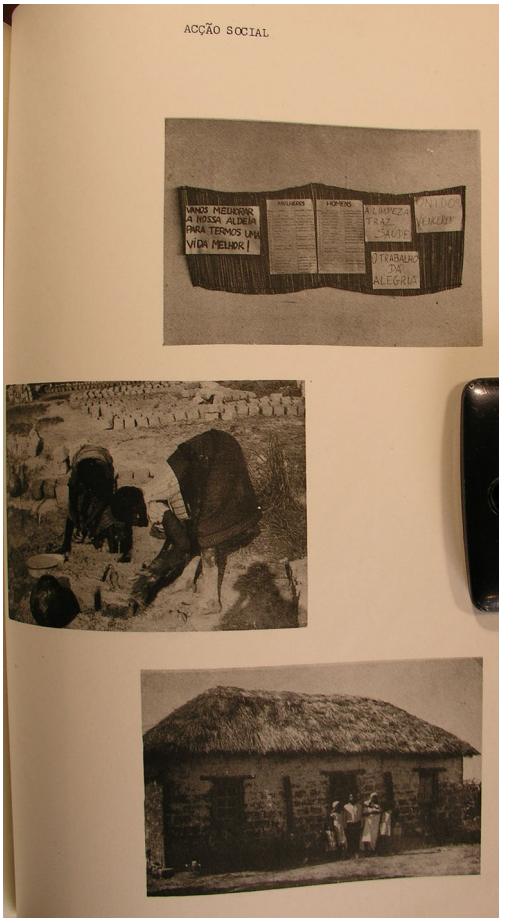


**Fig 12** Women making bricks at *Regedoria do Tengue*, Colonato da Cela. "Relatório da Inspecção Ordinária à Administração e Postos do Concelho de Santa Comba" (1967): 117. AHU, ISAU A2.49.002/38.00241.

construction became increasingly invisible, both in archival records and in legislation. This effectively removed women from the spotlight, enabling them to operate outside the system. However, late colonialism and its developmental narratives have brought women to the fore, as Serrazina emphasizes. In some contexts, female laborers became interlocutors in decisions concerning the

(perceived) well-being of communities, evidenced by their involvement in the construction of local infrastructure, including their own houses and basic facilities. Recognizing this ambivalence—from being overlooked to performing significant roles—remains essential for a better understanding of the impact of women on Mass Labor and Public Works.

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## Notes

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11 Boris Bertolt, "Thinking otherwise: theorizing the colonial modern gender system in Africa," *African Sociological Review* 22, no.1 (2018): 11.

12 Bertolt, "Thinking otherwise," 11. According to Bertolt, "theorists on decolonial feminism argued that in pre-colonial societies, gender differences were more complex and not simply based on biology."

13 Jha, "Men Diggers."

14 Ibid., 73.

15 Ibid., 78.

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17 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Macmillan Education: Basingstoke, 1988), 83.

18 António de Almeida, *No Arquipélago da Sede e da Fome* (1948). AHU, A2.01.02.009/00045.

19 Bertolt, "Thinking otherwise."

**20** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*, 25; *Relação do número de óbitos ocorridos nos concelhos desta colónia, durante o ano de 1947*, Serviços de Administração Civil da Colónia de Cabo Verde, Repartição central [document 17, annexes of Almeida's report].
**21** Almeida, *No Arquipélago. Relação …* [document 16, annexes of Almeida's report].
**22** Katherine Carter and Judy Aulette, "Creole in Cape Verde: Language, identity and power," *Ethnography* 10, no. 2 (June 2009): 213–236, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24047951.
**23** Almeida, "The Situation of Cape Verdean Women," *No Arquipélago*, 100–104.
**24** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*, 101.
**25** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*.
**26** Ibid.
**27** *Escudo* was the Portuguese currency used in Cape Verde at the time.
**28** Amount in *escudos*.
**29** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*, 56. The wages of the indigenous workers were usually calculated by "Indigenous tax". Cf. José Pedro Monteiro, *Portugal e a questão do trabalho forçado: um império sob escrutínio (1944–1962)* (Lisbon; Edições 70, 2018), 64.
**30** Jha, "Men Diggers," 86–91.
**31** Monteiro, *Portugal,* 225.
**32** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*, 42.
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**34** Vaz Milheiro, "Cabo Verde," 276.
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**37** Kiran Joshi, *Documenting Chandigarh* (Mapin Publications, 1999).
**38** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*, 5 verso.
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**43** Dilley, "Recovering," 19.
**44** Almeida, *No Arquipélago*, 99 verso, 103 verso.
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**46** Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society. The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 13.
**47** Jha, "Men Diggers," 73–74.
**48** António V. Pinto Coelho Coelho, 1948, *Aproveitamento Hidro-eléctrico das Mabubas. Fiscalizac¸ão das Obras. Relatórios do Engenheiro Chefe, António V. Pinto Coelho, 1948*. AHU, OP3010.
**49** Jha, "Men Diggers," 76.
**50** Cf. the proportion of women employed in railway construction during British colonial rule in India. Dhiraj Kumar Nite, in Gunnel Cederlof, *The Imperial Underbelly. Workers, Contractors and Entrepreneurs in Colonial India and Scandinavia* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 104.
**51** Public Works, Angola, 1877–1881. *Report by Henrique dos Santos Rosa.* AHU, OP13914.
**52** Cf. Santos Rosa, *Report*, 142 ff.
**53** Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 93.
**54** It should be noted that the document predates the first Portuguese regulation on women's work, which only occurred in 1890. Decree of April 14, 1891, and Regulation of March 16, 1893. Cf. Conceição Andrade Martins, "Trabalho e condições de vida em Portugal (1830–1913)," *Análise Social* 32 (1997), 483–535, footnote 58, 498.
**55** Santos Rosa, *Report,* 93, verso.
**56** Portaria no.1:180, Article no.180 of the "Regulamento to Trabalho dos Indígenas na Colónia de Moçambique," Supplement of the

*Boletim Oficial do Governo do Território da Companhia de Moçambique* 20 (October, 1930), 355. AHU, AMU 543.9 (3).

**57** José Joaquim Peres, *Report of the Directorate of Public Works of Angola*, 1900–1901, 44–45. AHU, OP16600. General legislation referred to the *Labor Code of the indigenous workers in the Portuguese colonies in Africa*, Decree-Law 16.199, December 6, 1928.

**58** José Pedro Monteiro, *Portugal,* 13–24. The relationship between Portugal and the International Labor Organization (ILO), which was organized to supervise situations of compulsory labor, is largely discussed here. Cf. also Cooper, *Decolonization,* 28.

**59** Santos Rosa, *Report,* 144. In his report, Santos Rosa stated that "black people did not dare to complain" because they were "unaware of the law."

**60** Angola, Repartição Geral dos Negócios Indigenas, 1942's Report, "O problema da mão de obra," 262. AHU, AMU 10434.

**61** Monteiro, *Portugal,* 300.

**62** Ministry of Colonies, *Labor Code of the indigenous workers in the Portuguese colonies in Africa*, Decree-Law 16.199 (1928), Article 99, paragraph 2: "Women may only contract for service outside the place of their habitual residence when accompanied by their husband, father, uncles or older brothers."

**63** *Labor Code.*

**64** *Labor Code* (draft, c. 1950), Chapter 2: "Women's work," article no. 104, 37. AHU, AMU 3897.10, doc. 2: "Women are not allowed to engage in underground work."

**65** Pamela O. Long, "Bricolaging Practitioners and the Fluid Culture of Skilled Work in late Sixteenth-Century Rome," *Ferrum* 91 (2019).

**66** The case study was the dome of the Hale au Blé (Paris, France, 1782–1783). Valérie Nègre, "Production and Circulation of Technical Knowledge on Building Sites at the End of the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of History of Science and Technology* 15, no. 2 (Dec. 2021), 17–33.

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**68** Several missions would analyze this knowledge. Among the most prominent were the "Study Mission of the Native Habitat of Guinea," which led to the mapping of traditional Guinean architecture in the transition from 1959 to 1960, and the "Study Mission of the Native Habitat of Timor," in 1959. See Lúcio Sousa, "Cinatti, Ruy; Almeida, Leopoldo de; Mendes, Sousa (1987), Arquitectura timorense," *e-cadernos CES* [Online], 33 https://journals.openedition.org/eces/510.

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**70** Manuel Villaverde Cabral, "Text and photographic image in the first counter-discourse during the 'Estado Novo' (New State): 'Women of my country' by Maria Lamas," *Comunicação Pública* 12, no. 23 (2017).

**71** "As Mulheres de Maria Lamas [The Women of Maria Lamas]," exhibition curated by Jorge Calado, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, January 26–May 28, 2024.

**72** "As Mulheres de Maria Lamas".

**73** Nègre, "Production," 18.

**74** Eike-Christian Heine and Christoph Rauhut, *Producing Non-Simultaneity: Construction Sites as Places of Progressiveness and Continuity* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21ff.

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**76** Heine and Rauhut, *Producing Non-Simultaneity*, 21ff.

**77** Daniel Alves de Araújo, "Relatório da Inspecção Ordinária à Administração e Postos do Concelho de Santa Comba" (1967): 117. AHU, ISAU A2.49.002/38.00241. "The promotion of the African man has been attempted and quite neglected that of the European colonists … More should be done for them.".

**78** Beatriz Serrazina, "Colonial Enterprises and Urban Design: Transnational Knowledge, Local Agency and the Diamond Company of Angola (1917–1975)," in *Architectures of Colonialism*, ed. Vera Egbers et al. (Basle: Verlag/de Gruyter, 2024): 127–144.

**79** Araújo, "Relatório," 116.