

Feature

# IN GUINEA-BISSAU

Interview with Carmen Pereira, by Chantal Sarrazin

*Carmen Pereira is a leading member of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC), which defeated the Portuguese colonialists (and their NATO allies) after ten years of protracted guerrilla struggle. LSM's Chantal Sarrazin conducted the following interview with her in Bissau in June of this year.*

## **CARMEN: WOMAN REVOLUTIONARY**

*LSM:* Comrade Pereira, can you briefly tell us how and why you joined the PAIGC?

*PEREIRA:* I come from a family which was well-off by African standards and much respected in the city of Bissau. My father was one of the few African lawyers. But I saw what the Portuguese did in my country: wealth for a few, with extreme poverty for the great majority. I saw them putting my Guinean brothers and sisters in prison for the smallest protest, and I realized that this life was not a good one.

I first heard of PAIGC in 1961. Then, one day I discovered Party documents my husband was hiding; I told him he should have talked to me about the struggle. In 1962 the repression in the towns really escalated. My husband was in danger and decided to slip out of the country to join the Party abroad. I was on my own but soon began making my own plans to go and work for the Party. Later that year I managed to get out of Bissau with my two children and baby. On the way we passed by a concentration camp in Tite and saw prisoners being treated very badly by the Portuguese. Some had been so badly tortured they were bloody and lying on the ground, unable to get up. This confirmed my decision to go and join the Party.

In Senegal I met Amilcar Cabral, who encouraged me. But I had myself and the children to support, so I went to Zinguinchor on the border of Guinea-Bissau where I worked as a seamstress. From my wages I was able to feed my children and 30 Party comrades at the same time. I was 25 years old and my political understanding was just starting to develop.

*LSM:* What responsibilities have you had since then?

*PEREIRA:* At the end of 1963 I was sent for political and nursing training in the Soviet Union. After 11 months abroad I returned to carry on the function I had at the border. The armed struggle had been launched and soon the Party gave me another responsibility: finding safe places for treating our casualties, and then teaching nursing to a group of young women. Later, I was sent to the South Front as a health *responsivel* (cadre) and opened the first Party hospital in our country. At first it was difficult to convince the population to come to the hospital for treatment. Under the colonialists one had to pay to receive treatment, so the people were not accustomed to doctors and nurses. The Party organized health brigades to give medicines to the population and to teach them modern hygiene and the importance of seeing a doctor.

At the end of 1967, the Party appointed me political commissar of all the South Front. At that time many people thought a woman couldn't carry out a responsibility like that. My work required a lot of travelling, and walking was the only way. Many ambushes were set up by the colonialists. I was responsible for the political mobilization of all people - men and women - in that region. I put my children in Party schools and committed myself completely to the political work.

In 1969 I was appointed member of the Executive Committee of the Struggle. That same

year I was given responsibility for the national reconstruction of the South Front. It was hard work. One had to oversee the operation of all sanitary posts and other facilities. In 1973 we had our first session of the National Assembly. The enemy tried desperately to prevent it: they sent planes to drop bombs and massacre the population, hoping to stop the deputies from meeting. Despite this we had our Assembly; it was a great accomplishment. I was elected as deputy for Bissau, Vice-President for the National Assembly and member of the State Council. After this Assembly - at which we made our formal declaration of independence - I returned to the South Front. I told the population how we'd managed to hold the Assembly and what decisions were taken. I explained everything to them because they were the ones who fought to make the National Assembly possible.

After the fall of colonialism, I came here to Bissau. I am now working for the Secretariat-General as a member of the Party's Executive Committee of Struggle and the Commission of Organization at the national level.

*LSM:* As a woman revolutionary, what problems have you had and how have you been able to deal with them?

*PEREIRA:* Before I joined the struggle I was very timid and didn't speak much. I couldn't be among people too long because I was shy. And I was very afraid when seeing people with guns. Now, I don't hesitate to talk and have learned to use a gun myself. This change is due in large part to the advice of our great comrade Amilcar Cabral. His writings, the seminars he gave us and the many conversations we had with him were a tremendous inspiration and gave me the confidence to struggle.

I have learned that the first thing one must have is political determination. To win the people's respect and confidence it is necessary to be disciplined and serious about one's responsibilities. It is especially important to follow every directive and line of the Party. With the people's respect and confidence one can work without too many difficulties.

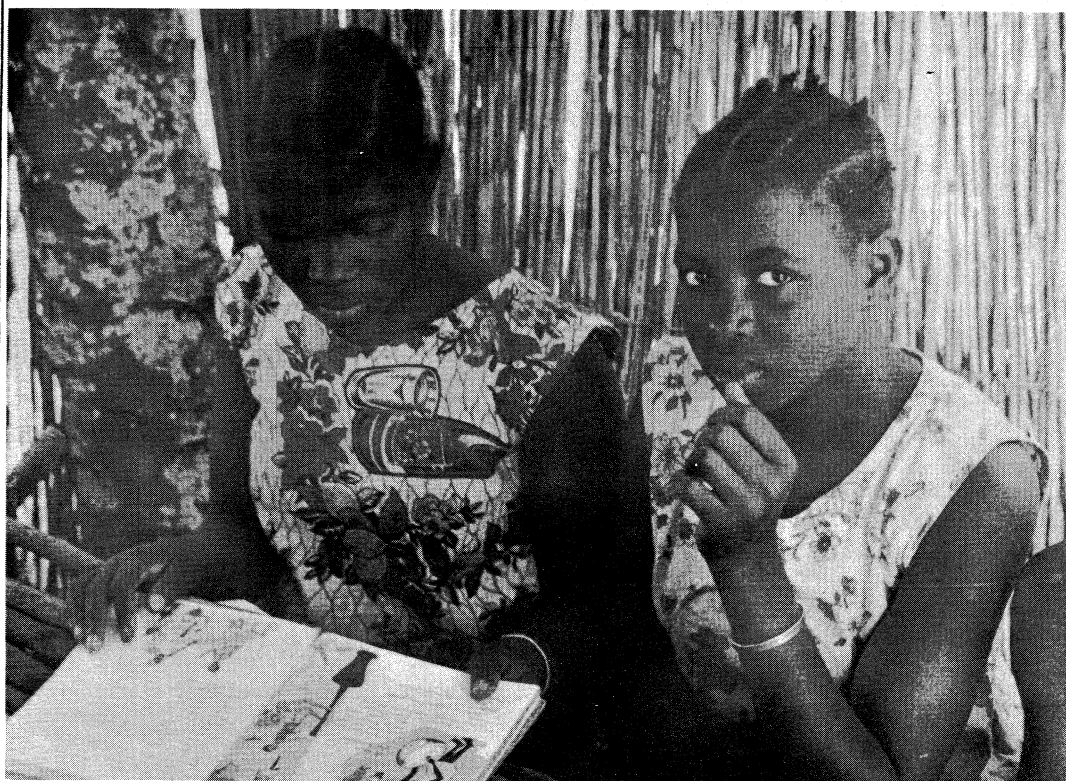
**L***SM:* What was the woman's position in the traditional system of Guinea-Bissau?

*PEREIRA:* There are many tribes and each one has its own customs. Among the Muslim tribes the position of women was very backward. To greet her husband, for example, a woman would have to kneel and put her forehead on the floor. She went to work and the husband stayed home. She worked till sundown, came home, greeted her husband, prepared the meal, got some water for him to wash with, brought him food and knelt before giving it to him. The Party has struggled against such negative traditions and done away with most of that. Now men work with the women in the fields.

In the past a Muslim man never wanted a woman to go to a meeting. There were many meetings during the struggle and women were very interested to hear what was going on. The men would refuse to let them go for three or four times, but the women would keep insisting. Finally, the men were obliged to accept. Now, women are on the village committees and are sometimes elected president. Men now accept women leading meetings because it is a Party directive and they see why it is correct.

But there is still work to be done. After our coming to Bissau, the President of the State Committee in Gabu had many problems with the Fula tribesmen. They could accept anything except having women on their village committee. So we did some political work. To inaugurate a house just built in Gabu, President Lay-Seck invited me. He called a meeting for the population and I led it. At first, men were upset to see a woman leading, but afterwards they were satisfied. Ever since that day, they have let women participate in meetings and committees.

There are still, of course, problems with backward traditions. The Party's approach is to struggle against what goes counter to our principles and particular goals at each stage of the struggle. We can't change these traditions overnight. Only the evolution of the struggle will overcome all the negative aspects of tradition.



*Education in Guinea-Bissau*

*LSM:* What is the situation regarding polygamy? What is the Party doing to overcome it?

*PEREIRA:* Polygamy, in a country which has been backward for so long, is very difficult to combat. In the countryside it is still common because of the traditional economic structure. Polygamy is not illegal yet and the Party has not taken any severe measures against it. But we are doing much political work to show that it is no longer necessary, especially in the cities. In meetings we talk about the negative aspects of polygamy; Party militants can only have monogamous marriages; women can now get divorces; and our youth are growing up believing in monogamy because of the new education. Little by little we will overcome polygamy.

*LSM:* How did women participate in the armed struggle?

*PEREIRA:* From the beginning women played an active and essential part in gaining the independence of our country. Throughout the struggle we did vital clandestine work. Men, having to carry identification cards, couldn't do this work as well. We brought food to the guerrillas. Also, the Local Armed Forces (FAL) included women, some of whom became commanders. Many women became nurses, trained by the Party either abroad or inside the

country. And all nurses received military training at popular military centers. They had to be military people as well as nurses so they could defend their patients and themselves if attacked by the enemy. Other women, in addition to their regular functions, became political commissars. In all areas of the struggle women's participation was vital to our success.

*LSM:* In 1972 Amílcar Cabral mentioned that some nurses trained by the Party left their responsibilities after they got married and had some children. How did you deal with that problem? Does it still exist?

*PEREIRA:* Yes, during the armed struggle we did have some problems like that. Everyone has his or her own problems in life, and some individuals put these ahead of the interests of the Party. Some nurses returned from abroad and wanted to spend their time just treating their sick parents; others abandoned their posts and went to where their husbands were. We had to struggle a lot with this problem, to educate these militants about the necessity of carrying out one's responsibility and serving the whole people. Generally, this education work was quite effective.

*LSM:* National reconstruction, like the armed struggle, demands certain sacrifices - for example, the separation of couples. Some nurses I met accepted this by saying: "I do what the Party wants." Considering women's traditional role of subordination, do you think there is a danger of their accepting directives without understanding why?

*PEREIRA:* We are in a crucial stage in Guinea-Bissau: we need to defend our independence, and begin improving the material conditions of the people. For example, there are still traitors and enemies in the country; our army needs to be ready in both the towns and countryside. And health conditions are very bad in the countryside; we need to send our nurses to sanitation clinics throughout the country. Sometimes this means that couples need to be separated so as to carry out responsibilities in different geographic areas. The Party and State are doing much to bring couples together, but sometimes separation is still necessary.

Our people understand that there is a great difference between the Party's authority and the old Portuguese colonialist authority. The Portuguese colonialists didn't give us time to see and learn and think; they were only interested in exploiting us. Now, under the Party, we have the chance of learning and developing. We are free. The nurses are free to say what they think; if there is some problem with their work they can discuss it with a responsible person in the Party.

The Party taught us the rights of women in our country. The Party led the liberation war, built the National Assembly, gave us the correct political orientation...the Party did everything. This is why young people respect what the Party says, and why the young nurses you talked with accept being separated from their husbands.

*LSM:* In some meetings I have noticed a timidity among the women to express their thoughts. How do you deal with this problem?

*PEREIRA:* One thing we must do is reinforce the political brigades doing education work with such women, to continue to help them become politically stronger. Each work area, such as a hospital or production center, has regular meetings of all the people working there to discuss problems, raise criticisms, and so forth. At these political meetings sometimes the women don't dare get up and say what they are thinking. We are explaining to them why it is necessary for them to express their feelings, to speak out. Some of the women, mainly those who never lived in the liberated regions, are not used to meetings and so they are naturally timid. But the Party is going to keep reminding them to express themselves and, little by little, they will overcome this problem.

*LSM:* During the second session of the National Assembly this year, some people proposed that women pay taxes, as the men do. What is your opinion on this question?

*PEREIRA:* These discussions were quite important. Some people thought that the women would get more autonomy by having to pay independent taxes. My opinion is that we need to distinguish between women in the towns and cities and women in the countryside. In the countryside, a woman works with her husband and the product of their labor is for both, or for all if it is polygamous. It would be very difficult for the peasant women to have to divide up their produce, figure out their taxes, and so forth. At this stage, it would only create more problems for them.

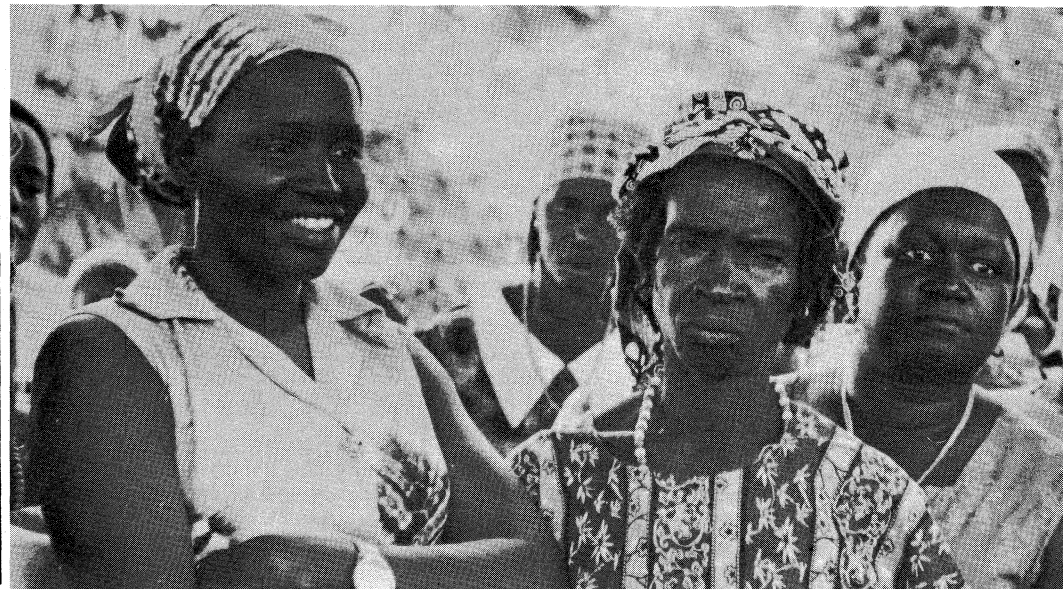
It is different in the towns and cities. Here, the women receive their own salary and can pay taxes. For example, at the end of the month I get a salary and I pay taxes; the same for my husband. Once we have developed the countryside - improved the social and economic conditions, acquired machinery, established factories, etc. - then women there will be able to pay taxes too.

*LSM:* During the struggle the Party decided not to form a special organization for women as other liberation movements did. Why? And what is the position regarding a women's organization now?

*PEREIRA:* At the beginning of the struggle the Party created the "Democratic Union of Women of Guinea," but we lacked cadre for this. All the experienced women were at the front - participating in the armed struggle, doing political work, etc. - so they could not take part in the organization.

Now that the war is over the Party has created a committee composed of ten leaders, cadres and militants of the Party. The committee is now preparing to organize the women of the Party. Last month we had a meeting and made a proposal to the Party about the type of women's organization we wish to have. As I am a member of the Executive Committee of the Party, this will pass through my hands. Soon we will be establishing our women's organization.

In the liberated zones the women know what a women's organization is and they are very interested in it. But in the zones formerly occupied by the enemy the women do not fully understand. So we will be doing more work to convince them of the importance of a women's organization. Political education...always.



*Women at a political discussion in Guinea-Bissau*