Social Stratification and Mobility in the Angolan Context and the Challenges of Social Inequality

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ABSTRACT

As societies evolved, the significance of power, influence, and domination dynamics came to shape daily life, making the understanding of social divisions a classic theme in the social sciences and humanities and in sociology in particular. This article, titled "Social Stratification and Mobility in the Angolan Context and the Challenges of Social Inequality," addresses concepts and theories regarding stratification and presents the dynamics of social mobility. It aims to provide insight into the phenomenon of social inequality in Angola through a deductive approach based on document analysis. Social stratification is thus understood as the division of society into hierarchical levels, while social mobility refers to the capacity of individuals to move between these strata, a process that results in social inequalities.

Keywords: social stratification; social mobility; social inequality; Angola.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals and groups within a society differ from one another due to various factors, forming a hierarchy of groups, positions, strata, or layers that are more or less enduring. This real-world fact, observed in all societies, reflects the reality that individuals and groups within them do not hold the same status or enjoy the same privileges, differing from one another across various dimensions.

In fact, there are no purely egalitarian societies, and this differentiation of individuals and groups into hierarchically overlapping layers is commonly referred to as stratification. It is essential to understand social stratification in order to grasp how inequalities are structured within societies, as well as how they directly influence people's life opportunities, given that such stratification can be based on various factors, including social class, race, gender and educational attainment, amongst others [1]. Furthermore, the issue of social mobility is linked to social stratification and is essential for promoting equal opportunities and strengthening social cohesion.

Finally, the main objective of this article is to take a differentiated approach to social stratification and social mobility in the Angolan context, identifying their main challenges and implications, in order to understand how social inequalities are structured and how they affect access to opportunities in Angola. Indeed, this article sets out to conduct an interdisciplinary literature review using deductive reasoning. To this end, the author has drawn upon the works of classical authors – namely Karl Marx, Max Weber, Pitrim Sorokin, Pierre Bourdieu and Erik Olin Wright – as well as the few works by Angolan sociologists – Paulo de Carvalho – and reports from official institutions, namely the World Bank and the National Institute of Statistics of Angola (INE), in order to adapt the theories to the context under analysis.

Theoretical framework

The term 'social stratification' refers, first and foremost, to the act of dividing society into layers – that is, arranging people or groups hierarchically according to various criteria, including their financial circumstances, relationships of power and influence, or even their professional responsibilities within society. Social stratification thus aims to classify individuals within a society into groups on the basis of common criteria.

One of the first authors to address the issue of social stratification was Karl Marx, in close connection with the concept of social class, in a context in which Marx regarded the economic factor as the determining factor in social stratification. However, in the current context, the theory of classes formulated by Marx, based on economic determinismo [2], is no longer sufficient to explain the reality of modern societies, as the economic factor is not the sole determinant of class and social mobility [3].

Contrary to Marx's position, Max Weber drew a distinction between the three dimensions of society: the economic order, represented by class; the social order, by status or 'position'; and the political order, by party affiliation. Each of these three dimensions has its own stratification. However, under capitalism, economic interest emerges as the fundamental element of stratification, insofar as social classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods [4]. More recently, the sociologist Anthony Giddens argued that social stratification can be defined as the structured inequalities between different groups of people, insofar as it enables us to understand the institutional mechanisms through which social inequalities are generated [5].

In this regard, in the Angolan context, historical factors have had a major influence on the model of social stratification, particularly with regard to power relations and access to the means of production; the many years of colonialism [6], followed by decades of one-party rule (socialism), combined with the prolonged period of armed conflict, resulted in a hierarchy that prioritised the political order (party affiliation) at the expense of other dimensions, as Max Weber pointed out [7].Consequently, in the current framework, political affiliations influence economic or production relations, defining to some extent the system of differentiated positions within the social structure, to which equally differentiated functions are linked; as such, they determine both the social division of labour, that is, the social distribution of roles, tasks and responsibilities, and the means of accessing key social resources, such as education, employment and housing, amongst others. As Erik Olin Wright pointed out when discussing the importance of economic capital in the hierarchisation and formation of social classes [8], it is understood that, in the Angolan context, the economic structure of families exerts structurally limiting effects on the development of individuals, fuelling cycles of multidimensional poverty within communities [9].

In turn, social mobility, as a sociological concept, refers to the change in the position of individuals or social groups within a given hierarchical structure, or, in other words, the movement of individuals between hierarchical positions within a society. Social mobility thus emerges as an indispensable condition of the social structure under capitalism, for it is precisely the possibility for individuals or groups of individuals to rise through the socio-professional categories that underpins the legitimacy of the principles asserted in the bourgeois revolution. Social mobility can be understood as movement within the social structure and may take various forms, including intra-class and inter-class mobility [10].

Now, some authors argue that in modern industrial societies there are increasing rates of social mobility, accompanied by the breakdown of certain long-standing solidarity-based groups, which suggests a gradual blurring of the rigid boundaries between social classes. Similarly, other authors point out that, in some societies, although a higher rate of social mobility – particularly intragenerational mobility – is observed, the assessment of and expectations surrounding this have been perceived differently by social actors, mainly due to the positive social effects that such social mobility often fails to deliver, giving rise to the idea of an apparent or illusory social ascent [11]. It is thus apparent that, despite the illusion of a narrowing of the gap amongst certain social strata, the social distance between individuals remains the same, since in some societies, such as Angolan society, it is common to find individuals who are part of the same social group (family, friends, schoolmates or work colleagues) but who belong to different social classes.

Furthermore, given that social classes act as a mediating factor between the broader social structures and the range of socially relevant practices – and bearing in mind that, in the Angolan context, due to issues linked to the historical model of social organisation, we understand that the structuring of social mobility processes has developed in an atypical manner as a consequence of social practices inherited or crystallised over the years – This leads us to the need to introduce the concept of habitus associated with the concept of dual affiliation or class belonging, particularly because assessments of social opportunities and trajectories of social mobility

emerge as an ideological component of a local social construction, insofar as the same individual may often experience and undergo processes that do not fit into a single social stratum [12].

Pierre Bourdieu emerges as one of the leading pioneers of the concept of habitus, understood as a system of enduring and transferable dispositions which, by integrating all past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, judgements and actions; in other words, it serves as a theoretical tool for understanding how social structures are internalised by individuals and subsequently reproduced in everyday life [13]. Indeed, these dispositions are acquired through primary and secondary socialisation and operate unconsciously, shaping how individuals interact with the world around them and influencing their choices and expectations. Consequently, members of the same social class who have internalised and crystallised certain Habitus are more likely to think and act in similar ways amongst themselves than they are in relation to members of different classes.

Linked to the concept of habitus is the concept of dual class belonging, or indeed multiple class belonging, a concept that originated in the field of theology and later in the sociology of religion [14]; it describes the phenomenon whereby an individual or group identifies with or is part of two different frameworks (religious/cultural), simultaneously, without one invalidating the other [15]. In the field of sociology, the concept was extensively addressed by Erik Olin Wright [16], who termed it 'contradictory class positions', insofar as it describes the context in which the individual encounters the phenomenon of a divided habitus, since the individual or group does not fit entirely into a single social class, and therefore shares characteristics, interests or identities of two different social classes simultaneously. This situation often gives rise to a duality of perspectives, tensions surrounding identity or a divided position within the social structure; it is very common in modern societies, such as Angolan society, primarily due to the characteristics of the labour market, patterns of social mobility, multi-class households and the complexity of the labour market, amongst other factors.

In short, the concept of dual class membership reflects the complexity of the social structure and the way in which individuals identify with different class realities in some modern societies; it emerges as a factor in conflict, competition and the transformation of perceptions of class, suggesting that classes are not as rigidly defined as classical theories describe them. This is justified because class positions do in fact crystallise specific relational practices by affecting their occupants differently in terms of their past experiences and current interests; for instance, whilst class is determined by the economic dimension, this does not preclude the decisive importance of other dimensions —such as educational attainment—in the construction of class assessments or expectations of mobility between classes, which Nico Poulantzas termed the 'structural determination of class' [17].

Social Stratification and Social Mobility as sociological phenomena

One of the approaches used by social scientists to address inequalities is the study of theories and systems of social stratification, as these provide a framework for describing the way in which resources are concentrated amongst different social groups or classes. According to Sorokin, the specific forms of stratification are interdependent and, for this reason, can be reduced to three fundamental types: economic, political and occupational [18].

As a result, throughout history, social stratification has taken various forms, namely: castes, estates and social classes. Some authors suggest the possibility of a fourth form of stratification, namely slave-owning societies. In caste-based stratification, common to traditional Hindu society, social strata are linked to specific roles within society, and social mobility is more limited, as membership of a caste is determined by an individual's origins. Pitrim Sorokin [19] defines a social stratum as a group which, in relation to the strata above it, is more or less organised, and, in relation to the strata below it, constitutes a semi-organised or unorganised collective. It is a partially hereditary model, though it is more open than the caste system. Sorokin regards the social class as 'quantitatively and qualitatively a diluted caste', since, whilst many characteristics of the caste system are absent from the social class, others – such as a closed nature, endogamous and consanguineous unions, and the hereditary transmission of status – are present, albeit with less rigidity. Social classes originally emerged in capitalist society through two major groups: on the one hand, there were the owners of the means of production

– people who owned factories, businesses, land and other resources, and who exercised control over the production of goods and services – the bourgeoisie. Consequently, throughout the 20th century, there was a

significant shift in the structure of social classes, particularly with the emergence of an intermediate stratum: the middle class. Thus arose the classic division into three clearly defined social classes, namely the upper class, the middle class and the lower class. Angolan society fits into this model, being a class-based society.

As regards social mobility, there are two main types, namely: horizontal social mobility and vertical social mobility [20]. The latter type of social mobility can be further divided into upward and downward social mobility. Horizontal social mobility is where a person or group achieves a certain degree of social mobility without, however, changing their social stratum. Vertical social mobility is where the social change is sufficient to move the individual or group of people to another social stratum. These classifications can be examined from two perspectives: intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. Intergenerational mobility examines the trajectories of individuals across different generations, whilst intragenerational mobility examines the movement of individuals within the social hierarchy within the same generation.

The Situation in Angola and the Challenges of Social Inequality

In his work, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men", Jean-Jacques Rousseau addresses the issue of social inequalities, drawing a distinction between the concepts of natural inequalities and social inequalities; he asserts that there is a distinction between the two, that is to say, between inequalities produced by nature and those produced by the complex web of economic, spiritual and political relations that constitute human civilisation [21].

The debate on social inequalities in modern societies is a subject of the utmost importance, both for understanding the major challenges facing communities in terms of access to resources and opportunities, and for identifying the key local dynamics surrounding social stratification and mobility amongst individuals and groups. In the case of Angola, social inequalities can be understood as the result of the unequal distribution of socially relevant resources, namely education, monetary income, property, prestige and political power.

One of the best-known indicators for measuring inequality in terms of resources is the Gini index or Gini coefficient, a variable that quantifies inequality in the distribution of income or wealth within a population, indicating the gap between the richest and the poorest. It is a value that ranges from 0 to 1 (or 0 to 100), where 0 represents total equality (everyone has the same income) and 1/100 represents total inequality (one person has all the income). Accordingly, based on the most recent data presented by the World Bank on its platform on poverty and social inequality – the Gini Index – Angola's Gini coefficient stands at 0.513[1] (2018 data), reflecting a society characterised by marked inequalities. Furthermore, according to the data presented by the World Bank, social inequalities have increased in recent years compared with the 2008 figures, which put the coefficient at 0.427.

In the opposite direction, the Multiple Indicators and Health Survey (IIMS), published by INE in 2025, indicates that the national Gini coefficient for the period 2023-2024 was 0.37, which means there is a moderate degree of income or wealth inequality, with this inequality being lower in urban areas (0.22) than in rural areas (0.33) [22]. However, the reality on the ground contrasts somewhat with the figures, in that income inequality has been seen as a key factor in the social breakdown faced by Angolan families, with a direct impact on social inequalities and consequences for the country's social and economic development [23].

Consequently, social inequalities and low social mobility are persistent challenges in Angola, affecting various areas such as access to education, the labour market and other basic needs and opportunities. The concentration of income and disparities in access to essential services continue to perpetuate these inequalities, limiting the social advancement of many Angolans [24]. Indeed, the data released by the 2024 Census[2] indicate that 59.3 per cent of households do not have access to safe drinking water, 40.5 per cent do not have access to sanitation facilities, and only 48.6 per cent of households use electricity from the public grid, which highlights the

[1] See. <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SI.POV.GINI?locations=A9>
[2] See. <https://censo2024.ine.gov.ao/>

vulnerability of many families and the resulting social inequality. With regard to ownership of essential household goods, it appears that almost half of households own a television (46.2 per cent), and only one in four households owns at least one fridge or freezer (26.4 per cent) [25].

One of the critical factors that has had the greatest impact on Angolan families is the high rate of unemployment, particularly amongst young people and women; according to the "Survey on Employment in Angola, Second Quarter of 2026 – Employment and Unemployment Indicators', the unemployment rate is highest amongst young people aged 15-24, standing at 40.5 per cent, and those aged 25-34, at 21.1 per cent [26]. In general, these social inequalities are the result of the inefficiency of inclusive public policies and certain management failings that continue to persist in the administration of public affairs.

Thus, although in recent years the Angolan State has systematically promoted a number of programmes providing direct support to families and the most vulnerable groups, with a focus on the empowerment and social mobility of these groups, many of these programmes have not been effective, meaning that over several years the results have not been particularly satisfactory. By way of example, it is worth highlighting certain programmes devised within the framework of social welfare, specifically in the area of housing, involving the construction of housing estates and housing developments. In recent years, the Angolan government has built more than 30 housing developments and social housing projects, thereby regulating the conventional housing market and enabling more households to gain access to their first home[3].

With regard to programmes to promote entrepreneurship, such as the Informal Economy Transition Programme (PREI), according to figures published by the local press, these have enabled 253,048 economic agents to be formalised, 48,305 to receive training, and 339,648 economic agents to sign up to the Mobile Money service[4]. Finally, direct cash transfer programmes for vulnerable families, such as Kwenda [27], which aims to lift people out of extreme poverty by integrating them into income-generating activities, were presented as a success story at a United Nations[5] summit and have already reached hundreds of thousands of families.

However, given the scale of the challenges, these initiatives are still insufficient; it is becoming increasingly necessary to implement public policies that promote social mobility and reduce regional inequalities and disparities, such as affirmative action policies. Furthermore, it is essential to reduce inequality in access to income and to guarantee access to basic services for all, particularly education, healthcare, housing and the labour market.

In the current context, access to quality education and barriers in the labour market continue to prevent education from having a positive impact, constituting a major obstacle to the social mobility of the most vulnerable groups. However, it is important to emphasise that, historically, education has been one of the main drivers of social mobility for Angolans; over the years, access to education – whether through conventional channels or via scholarships – has enabled many lower-income families to increase their income. Consequently, political party affiliation has also emerged as a factor in power and social advancement, increasingly intensifying the clashes between politics and the market, given that in many cases political party alignment is prioritised over individuals' educational capital and merit.

Consequently, this atypical domestic landscape makes it difficult to operationalise the stratification of Angolan society; in many cases, Angolans live in a context of dual class affiliation, in that many individuals identify with two different social classes, or live in a context that brings them into contact with different class realities. Consequently, in Angolan society, this context of dual class affiliation is very common amongst individuals from various social strata, with many individuals being part of families that belong to different classes, where some members have greater access to resources and others do not (multi-class marriages) [28]. Furthermore, individuals with formal and, in theory, stable employment continue to face difficulties in meeting their basic needs and may be considered to belong to a lower class, despite belonging to the middle or upper class in terms

[3] See. <https://jornaldeangola.ao/noticias/1/pol%C3%ADtica/649562/mais-de-30-centralidades-constru%C3%ADdas-no-pa%C3%ADs>
[4] See. <https://forbesafricalusofona.com/primeira-fase-do-prei-custou-6-mil-milhoes-kz-ao-governo-angolano/>
[5] See. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2025/05/22/breaking-the-cycle-of-poverty-in-angola-through-cash-transfers-afe>

of occupation. Finally, there are individuals who identify with one social group but also feel connected to others due to different aspects of their lives, such as education, profession or social circle (borderline professions and positions) [29].

Social mobility is thus seen as a very slow process in the Angolan context, where opportunities are perceived as unequal, resulting in a society characterised by high levels of social inequality. Furthermore, studies based on the theory of social representations show that young Angolans, particularly in Luanda, argue that social inclusion and mobility depend on access to quality education and social networks [30]. According to António Julião [31], the Angolan education system is not yet fully aligned with social needs, which hinders young people's entry into the labour market and their social mobility. In this regard, according to data from the latest population census (2024), although the average literacy rate for citizens aged 15 and over is around 71 per cent, only 5 per cent of Angolan citizens aged 18 and over have completed higher education[6].

For this reason, in some social contexts, social support networks – such as family, friendships, romantic relationships and communities – play an important role in the social mobility of Angolans, offering emotional, material and social support, and creating networks of contacts, which sometimes emerge as key factors in social advancement. In short, as in all contexts, social classes in Angola cannot be understood in isolation, but only when examined in their entirety, in terms of their multiple interrelationships and determinants.

CONCLUSION

The concept of social stratification goes hand in hand with that of social classes, as it is understood that classes emerge as one of the main models of social stratification, insofar as social stratification reflects the inequalities that exist in society, based on criteria such as wealth, power, education and occupation.

Just as Marx argued that the infrastructure (means of production) determines the superstructure – although it is not the sole factor in social stratification within modern capitalist societies – in Angolan society, the social relations of production continue to influence the way in which society is organised, dividing individuals into classes or groups, and largely determining how they gain access to opportunities and essential services. Thus, over recent years, access to education has emerged as the main means of social mobility for the most vulnerable groups, as many individuals from the lower classes, by gaining access to quality education, are able to acquire professional qualifications and, as a result, gain access to the formal labour market, thereby enabling their social advancement. On the other hand, the political landscape, which in the past was strongly characterised by a one-party regime, has left its mark on state structures, in the sense that many areas of economic and professional activity still grant preferential treatment to people with political affiliations to a particular political party.

Finally, in the case of Angola, it is essential that the government continues to invest in quality education and policies promoting educational inclusion, as tools for fostering social mobility, particularly amongst those from the lowest social strata. This is because education is one of the main instruments of social mobility, as it not only fosters the acquisition of technical knowledge but also provides access to networks of contacts, which are essential for an individual's development.

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[6] See. <https://censo2024.ine.gov.ao/>

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