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Gender and War:
Zimbabwean Women and the Liberation Struggle

Focusing on the role of women fighters in Zimbabwe, this article argues that in revolutionary struggles, women encounter conflict in different ways to men. As armed conflicts affect the revolutionary cadres and non-participatory civilians, the coping strategies adopted under the pressure differ by, and to a large degree, are determined by gender. For women, vulnerability caused by their physical stature and their position in society increases the burdens placed on them making gender an important element in the

the African tradition such as gift marriage, widow inheritance, forced childhood marriage, polygamy, bride-

vanguard, arguing that women's oppression was a consequence of the class-based and colonial exploitation against which such movements would struggle.[12] Zimbabwean guerrilla movements, in embracing this ideology, were implying that women's rights would be a self-evident part of a future democratic society. Urdang argues, indeed, that Marxist ideologies which preach equality helped women to see themselves as advancing into traditionally male-controlled spheres such as those of decision-making.[13] We find that, among the other crucial objectives that women hoped to achieve through the struggle, gaining equal rights for themselves was among the most important. Yet ironically, among accounts analysing the reasons why women join revolutionary struggles, many highlight the official reasons at the expense of more private and personal motives. A feminist critique of women and war will show, however, that we cannot overlook the fact that women also participate in war for personal reasons. The Zimbabwean war offered a way out both for the suppressed groups of people and for individuals, including women. The inclusion of women in a guerrilla war, therefore, is not just a way to increase the number of soldiers in general and to have them serve in roles exclusive to women as male leaders might see it, but joining the liberation war is also for women an act of seeking their own emancipation. Thus, when on the eve of independence the post-colonial government downplayed the promises of freedom and liberty that engaging in war had held for women, Zimbabwean women fighters felt betrayed.

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women as it did to young men. The revolutionary struggle offered both access to a different status such as an opportunity to equal terms of achievements, equality before the law, and the right to choose.

Nhamo, in an interview with Tanya Lyons in 2002, recalled that her reasons were more personal.[15] She joined the war to uplift herself. After completing three years of school, she joined the nationalist forces in 1974. One of her girl friends from the Mount Darwin area had heard that some people were being educated by the nationalist forces in their camps overseas and across the borders in Zambia and Mozambique. She suggested to Nhamo that they should both go to join the nationalist freedom fighters to receive this education.

In another interview Nyathi, an ex-combatant also seeking equality at a personal level concurs, telling Bhebe and Ranger, "Yes, putting on that camouflage uniforf8n8fd

in the Zimbabwean revolutionary movement, women fighters were to make sure that supplies reached the guerrillas by providing the supply line: a very important role, but one often unrecognised, or at least treated as secondary.[19]

Nhamo, in her interview with Lyons, recalled:

> One of the important roles that was played by female combatants, was in the transportation of ammunition between Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Carrying ammunition was dangerous but necessary, and women often faced ambushes and attacks from Rhodesian soldiers. Our job was mainly to carry weapons to the border. [20]

Yet, Maria, another ZANU ex-combatant in an interview with Lyons said, "I think we were just like men!" and Sekai maintained, "Women carried more than men to the front, we all suffered equally in the camps. When there was not enough food to go around, it was divided equally among the recruits."[21]

By 1970, a good number of women had been fully incorporated into the war while at the front acclamations pointed to the crucial role of women in the camps, yet ironically research shows that up to the year 1973, females were not considered candidates for military training. Male cadres were reluctant to train women for the frontline duties because they believed that their job was to serve men. These were reactions shaped by a traditional perception of women, and as a consequence, many women and children in the camps were killed because women in camps had no combat skills, no guns and no ammunition.[22]

Thus Nhamo remembered,

> I went running because I had not been trained, then I had no tactics I knew, I [had] no practice with a gun shooting. And the shock of it and everything. As you are running you would actually feel the bullets

> They have trained themselves; they are prepared for a new Zimbabwe.[26]

In short, Ngwenya boasted of the domestic capabilities of women rather than their combat abilities, thus even a female member of the leadership was framing ZAPU women fighters' involvement in the struggle firmly in terms of the traditional female roles rather than advancing their claim to be fitted to meet the demands of warfare.

Margaret Dongo, a well-known Zimbabwean female ex-combatant activist in an interview with Bhebe and Ranger, while talking of the failed role of women, could not help but draw attention to the shortcomings of the Nationalists' attitudes:

military and political training that females had received. This obviously denied women the opportunity to distinguish themselves in terms of male designations of heroism.

War feminist critics Irene Tinker and Mama Amina have pointed out that because Zimbabwe's revolutionary struggle was rooted in nationalist and Marxist ideologies that are basically patriarchal in nature, it did not necessarily embrace gender principles.[29] It was difficult, therefore, to have women assume leadership roles in a structure that had no design for allowing such an operation. These feminist critics thus argue that while Marxist and nationalist theories identify oppression based on class and race, they fail to recognise that class-based capitalist oppression is not synonymous with the oppression of women. As a result, nationalist leaders tend to lack gender analysis. This lack of analysis rendered women in war powerless, resulting in the further oppression of female combatants.

The failure by nationalists to take up the gender issues during the time of the revolutionary struggle, however, diluted the claims made by nationalist movements that they were training women to liberate society. The revolution's standpoint in the war zone simply expanded upon pre-war domestic duties that designated women as mothers and servers of the nation. Perceived as natural teachers and nurturers, women were expected to rally support among the war population; nursing the injured. Thus generally, with the exception of a limited number of women fighters who were connected to powerful men, relatively few women were engaged in the real battles compared to men.[30] Reflectively, it can been argued that while the liberation struggle in theory paved the way for the increased social and political involvement of women, the actual participation that would have achieved female emancipation was tightly constrained. Thus despite the need for

female participation, nationalist leaders and male cadres did not acknowledge women as their equals. Psychologically, men still expected women to stay at home and perform chores which were customarily prescribed as the domestic domain.

A female combatant, Catherine Nyamandwe, remembered being advised by guerrillas to "return home because if girls left for Mozambique, no one would cook for male freedom fighters."[31] ZANLA and ZIPRA nationalist leaders, far from transforming colonial or traditional gender roles during the war actually enmeshed male dominance into the revolutionary ethos, by continually allocating women to perform tasks long-associated with their feminine roles. And at the end of the war, these tasks were merely seen to have been merely women's patriotic duty and not in any way equal to actual engagement in the struggle, thus making it very difficult for women to receive compensation since only those who had fought in real combat were being recognised.

Sexuality in the Camps

Another major frustration that came up among female combatants was that of sexuality and morality. A large number of young women had by 1976 joined the ZAPU and ZANU camps which were traditionally male-

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while, on the other hand, men's behaviour was condoned; their actions seen as normal (for males).

In the end, sexual relationships among cadres became a moral issue for female commanders, and a political and military problem for the High Commanders. To female leaders such as Teurai Ropa Nhongo, the main problem was that by being sexually assertive, young women were "misbehaving," and this was bad for the revolution. In response to such complaints by women leaders, the ZANU Defence Secretariat held a rally in July 1978, to discuss the "problems of women." It concluded that not only was such activity by women "misbehaviour," but it was to be blamed for a rise in pregnancies and venereal diseases. Women were now perceived as wild, sexually weak, or diseased, and therefore a threat to the established order. This conforms to a pattern of patriarchal behaviour, as identified by Anne McClintock: the victimisation of women and the destruction of the female sense of selfhood. Patriarchy, she argues, essentially diminishes opportunity for identity formation in its subjects. The impact of this exertion of patriarchal power, albeit by female as well as male leaders, was that Zimbabwean female combatants were now being pulled from all sides, confronted with conflicting loyalties, and being objectified in terms of their sexuality. As a result, they began to feel diminished, since they were now either characterised as morally debauched, or as sexually predisposed to give pleasure, and in either category, made to feel guilty for it or to feel that they were traitors to the liberation cause.[33]

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the liberation of women. Naomi Nhiwatiwa had given reports to the international world on how ZANU P.F. was abolishing *lobola* ("bride-price" or "bride-wealth"), since such acts were abusive to women.[33] Yet at the same time, ZANU officials were continuing to keep records of marriages so that bride-wealth could be claimed by the women's parents at independence. ZANU High Commanders claimed with some fanfare to their international audience that they were taking the liberation line, but simultaneously they were at pains to point out in more domestic forums that ZANU P.F. would not go against African customary practices: they were anxious not to lose the support of Zimbabwean villagers.[34] The rhetoric of gender emancipation did not

As if to frustrate women cadres further, women fighters who became pregnant were sent to the women and children's camp in Mozambique where they were made to take up feminine occupations such as knitting and sewing. Yet a critical analysis of events in the camps shows that women's projects which emphasised sewing and cookery were basically rooted in the British colonialist p 2 37.8 Tm (47)TJ 0 -2.3 c 0 Tomthe6474ee647 ca -2.u-2.t t -2. tre64i p 2 bJ 0 -(ci)-1(om

> I have never talked to anybody about this. [It] is very difficult for me to relate because [the war] was very difficult. [41]

Researchers on sexual violence during the struggle show that there is much reluctance from female ex-combatants to discuss sexual abuse during the war. Most feel that it is humiliating to talk about it, while others simply do not want to deal with those issues psychologically. Others, however, like Freedom Nyambuya and Margaret Dongo, have pointed out in their interviews with Lyons and Bhebe, that it would be better if the truth was told. Dongo said, "Women ex-combatants were raped and it is time that Zimbabwe accepted the truth and let what really happened during the war be known."[42]

Women fighters return to peacetime society

At the end of the war, post-colonial governments made it their practice to hide the truth away from the Zimbabwean nation. Instead of letting the truth be told, we see that soon after the war, large posters appeared with the striking image of a woman warrior carrying an AK47 in her hands and a baby on her back. The symbol depicted men and women as equal and it has become a rallying symbol and an icon that has been adopted worldwide. In addition, highlighting the notion of the revolutionary war as a liberating process, the women's movement in Zimbabwe often used female guerrilla's experiences of fighting side by side with their men as the basis for demanding women's rights. The female as revolutionary symbol came to be used as a weapon to advocate for gender equality in legislation, and to help the Zimbabwe liberation movements gain popularity. Yet as much as the women's party wing was making gains, not much was seen in terms of gains for women ex-fighters. First, the movement was led by nationalist women leaders who were more middle class than the proletariat; hence it specifically ignored the issue of women ex-combatants who were mainly members of the peasantry. None of the issues that

case of Zimbabwe has observed, up to 1988 Section 15 of the prior Deeds Registry Act still continued to limit the ability of women to control land.[46] The Act required that a married woman have her deed attested by a registrar or a legal practitioner and state the name of her husband to establish that she was indeed married. The husband was to assist her in executing any deed or document required or permitted to be registered in the deeds registry, unless proof is produced to satisfy the registrar that she had the legal capacity to execute it without the assistance of her husband. Yet while laws involving the peasantry took forever to change, those concerning the distribution of salaries at professional levels, which was the concern for middle class women, were quickly changed and women started getting salaries equal to those of men. As a result, while middle-class women gained momentum, peasant women were not integrated directly into the cash economy, and resettlement permits are still most often granted to male heads of households, effectively defining women as agricultural labourers, rather than farmers in their own right.[47] Former combatant Rudo pointed out in 1995, "[As a female ex combatant,] you can't be proud. …we don't want to be identified because we are living in poverty."[48]

While there may have been attempts at the time of independence to provide women's political representation in decision-making institutions, there were several barriers. Firstly, because very few women ex-combatants were in influential positions, women former freedom fighters had little input into designing gender equity policies that stipulated who they became after the war and what gains they received. There was in general a fundamental mismatch between the needs of women ex-fighters and those of the elite civil societies, yet since it was middle-class women who were elected into power, it was middle-class values which were used to dictate what actually came to be drafted into the constitution. Second, because women

freedom fighters were not represented as a specific group, with specific needs, those needs were not fully articulated. Where an attempt was made, lack of finance, lack of gender awareness, or lack of political all prevented progress.[49]

The political rhetoric claimed that women in Zimbabwe because of their involvement in the war had raised themselves to the level of men, yet real-life accounts of these women reveal that upon their return to civil society, women former fighters were not only denied the feeling of living up to the image of a "superwoman" that the posters depicted, they suffered disadvantages. For example, although most female ex-fighters were not really engaged in front-line battles as research has shown, on their return to civil society they were indiscriminately labelled "killers"—

unique to Zimbabweans, but is characteristic of the situation of female soldiers all over the world.[52]

Many ex-combatants experience a sense of lost time. Besides the feelings of being marginalised, female ex-fighters unlike their male counterparts, who can do whatever they may wish to make up for this sense of lost time, women former fighters have less scope to do anything about their own "lost time." Elise Fredrikke Barth argues, therefore, that the pain of war lingers on as time fails to heal the violence.[53] In addition, Koen has noted that the attainment of justice and the healing of pain in post-conflict situations are hard to establish if women and girls

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put into the rebuilding of social services occupations generally considered an extension of women's traditional domestic duties, which pay very low salaries. Thus women's increased participation in the formal employment sector has not, by any degree, challenged the gender conservatism that characterised the colonial period.

Today, for example, for Zimbabweans, every feminist request for policy change which might ensure the advance of women is regarded as anti-African and anti-tradition, while gains in female emancipation made at independence have slowly dwindled away.[58] Thus feminist critics Alexander and Mohanty have noted that resistance cann

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[8] Mildred T. Mushunje, "Women's Land Rights in Zimbabwe," www.wisc.edu/ltc/live/bassaf0106a.pdf (accessed 27th August 2004).
[9] Nakanyike Musisi, "Colonial and Missionary Education: Women and Domesticity in Uganda, 1900-1945" in Karen Tranberg Hansen, ed., *African Encounters with Domesticity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 172.
[10] Ibid., 173.
[11] Gwendolyn Mikell, *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival* (London: Routledge, 1997), 26.
[12] Jill M. Bystydzienski and Joti Sekhon, eds., *Democratization and Women's Grassroots Movements* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana State University Press, 1999), 6-7.
[13] Urdang, *And Still They Dance*, 228
[14] Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger, **"**Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War" (*Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 31.1, 1997), 171.
[15] Tanya Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 39.
[16] Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger, eds., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995), 32.
[17] Eva Beth Egensteiner, "The Dream Becomes a Reality: Nation Building and the Continued Struggle of the Women of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front." Master's thesis presented to the faculty of the graduate school, University of Southern California, 1995.
[18] Robert Mugabe, "First Zimbabwe Women's Seminar," in *Our War of Liberation: Speeches, Articles, Interviews, 1976-1979* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1983), 75.
[19] Stefanie Krug, "Former TPLF Women Fighters in Ethiopia: Concepts of Equality within the Context of Guerrilla War." Paper presented at the University of Hanover workshop on "Living in War Times—Living in Post-War Times," Melsungen, Germany, 1999.