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Gender and War: Zimbabwean Women and the Liberation Struggle

In revolutionary war situations there is often no defined front line and both women and children can come directly under attack: thus the stereotyped image of men going off to war, and women staying at home away from the conflict, has to be radically revised.¹ In such revolutionary conflicts, women are not merely victims but also actively work side-by-side with men in support of the war effort. The position of women in liberation struggles shows that wars have to be judged not just from the position of men, but also from the position of women who incessantly struggle to sustain the force of the revolution. This paper argues, therefore, that the story of a liberation struggle cannot be complete without an analysis of the role women play in guerrilla warfare revolutions.

Using an African feminist approach to women and war, this paper explores the involvement and the terms of women's participation in the guerrilla war in Zimbabwe. The discussion analyses the suffering caused to Zimbabwe women former freedom fighters not only by the imposition of war, but also by the male centred demands of the nationalist movement, the Zimbabwean male fighters, and the Zimbabwean society as a whole during and after Zimbabwe's war of liberation.

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 determination of coping strategies. Yet despite these problems, progressive gender role changes and fluidity also occur in these contexts. As feminist critic on women and the revolution, Stephanie Urdang, points out, “conflict accentuates resourcefulness in the adoption of coping and survival strategies.”²

The paper draws the bulk of its evidence from oral testimonies captured and recorded during 1980-2001 by researchers on women’s involvement in the struggle. Through their voices and collective life stories, the paper shows the extent and nature of the suffering endured by female combatants. The discussion adds to the importance of understanding the dynamics of socio-cultural historical realities in which a war is fought, and furthermore serves as an attempt to acknowledge the level of human suffering and the trauma that occurs during a revolution. The paper reveals, however, that beyond all this, Zimbabwean female cadres, like women in any revolution, have resilience and courage, even in harsh unyielding environments.

Zimbabwean Women and the Liberation Struggle

The involvement of Zimbabwean women in the revolution dated back before the 1960s to the 1890s, when six years after the occupation of what was then Southern Rhodesia by

the British South Africa Company, the Shona and Ndebele people rose up against the foreign invaders. When this happened, women were involved in significant numbers and roles in the struggle that came to be known as the First Liberation War (*Chimurenga I*, 1896-1897). Nehanda Nyasikana, a woman, purposefully took up arms and through the spirit that possessed her is said to have divinated military advice to the Shona people. She was eventually arrested for the killing of Native Commissioner Pollard and was sentenced to be hanged, but at her death, she stated that her bones would rise again in the fight against colonialism. Eighty years later, in 1976, the spirit of Nehanda inspired guerrilla fighters during the Second *Chimurenga*, through possessed spirit mediums.³

There were a number of stimuli for Zimbabwe's second liberation war. Among the most serious was the scarcity of land among Africans, unfair labour relations, lack of employment, and burdensome tax obligations. By 1960, Africans in Southern Rhodesia started making radical demands, which resulted in the formation of nationalist political parties. The National Democratic Party (NDP) was formed in early 1960, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) in 1962 and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in 1963, splitting off from ZAPU. In 1960, women in the NDP organized a demonstration against the Rhodesian government which had ruled that only fifteen out of sixty-five-parliamentary seats be allocated to Africans. Women, seeing this as the cementing of white domination, joined men in the protests against white rule and took to the streets.⁴ Immediately after, in 1961, NDP was banned and according to Ngwabi Bhebe, the women's actions had been the catalyst that had shifted the struggle to a more militant level.⁵ After the women's strike, leading nationalists began to recognize the potential role of women in the organizational structure of the struggle. When Ian Smith,

then Prime Minister, took more drastic measures and declared the independence of Rhodesia from Britain in the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965, it worsened the living conditions of the Africans both in rural and urban areas. Much of the pressure of this fell on women, resulting in their support of the armed struggle for African majority rule. Samora Machel, then president of neighbouring Mozambique, admitted the ultimate need to involve women in the revolutionary struggle. “The liberation of women,” he said “is a fundamental necessity for the revolution, the guarantee of its continuity and the precondition for its victory.”⁶ In addition, Robert Mugabe, the post-revolutionary President of Zimbabwe pointed out that “Without women’s full participation, the struggle for a social, political, economic and cultural independence of a country may not be achieved.”⁷ Yet despite recognition of the role of women during the war of liberation, feminist critics have noted that after the struggle Zimbabwean women ex-combatants felt, and still feel, betrayed by the post-colonial government. This paper seeks to analyse what went wrong.

Zimbabwean women under pre-colonial and colonial patriarchy

The link between the revolution and the involvement of women in liberation struggles can be easily understood. Women in colonial Zimbabwe under traditional and colonial patriarchal rule had no control over the economy; their powerlessness was grounded in traditional African cultures as well as in Colonial/Victorian/Christian concepts of “woman.” First, pre-colonial customary law practices such as marriage and motherhood put women at a disadvantage. Traditional practices largely dictated what became culturally accepted rights and duties of spouses. Because of various marriage rituals in

the African tradition such as gift marriage, widow inheritance, forced childhood marriage, polygamy, bride-wealth and inheritance all favoured men, women were first and foremost regarded as wives and mothers, then as individuals. For example, women were required to have a male representative (brother, father, husband) in a public transaction and this rendered them perpetual minors before the law. And because women were seen as subservient, abuse against them in the form of rape, economic subservience, forced dependence of children and relatives, domestic abuse, and murder by husbands was rampant.⁸

The arrival of colonialism encouraged the movement of African men to towns as workers, but controlled the migration of women, thus shifting the distribution of power and economy in favour of men. Not only were women kept away from the cash flow, but as African men entered settler employment in towns, the women left behind had to fill in as *de facto* heads of households. This resulted in increased workloads for women but little remuneration. Women worked up to sixteen hours a day, carrying out their customary tasks as well as those tasks traditionally allocated to their now absent spouses. Nakanyike Musisi, an African feminist scholar argues, therefore, that during the pre-colonial and colonial period, African women “become an extension of African male bodies,” living in circumstances that were different, if not worse, than those of their male counterparts, with women’s lack of participation in the cash economy shifting their traditionally circumscribed power to positions in which autonomy was almost impossible.⁹

In addition to the perception of what was “womanly” in the traditional culture, the “cult of domesticity,” a hypothesis introduced by Victorian Christian colonisers, further

entrenched what became perceived as the woman's role. The "cult of domesticity" envisioned women as docile, modest creatures, good mothers and wives: the gender that was supportive of its mate. An idle wife, confined to the home, was seen as a mark of "gentility," and of a man's ability to support his family. Thus African men and women, aspiring to be at the level of their colonial masters, began to encourage women's docility as a mark of civilisation. The concept of "leisured" wife as proof of "gentility" explains, for example, why most wives of African leaders did not compete to ascend the social and political ladder at the same time as their husbands.¹⁰

It is against this backdrop that at the inception of the revolutionary struggle, Zimbabwean women, like their counterparts in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, joined the armed struggle. Their hope was that with the revolution, gender equality would be certain. Women who could not conform to tradition saw the revolution as an opportunity to escape difficult situations. Yet feminist critics argue that at the end of the struggle, women's status actually fell as nationalist leaders and nationalist-oriented societies, in the quest of preserving tradition, expected women to be guardians of culture and respectability, or mistresses of the emerging ruling elites, or wives and mothers, recruiters for political parties, and labourers for the new market economy, while men were engaged in competition for political power in the state and the accumulation of wealth.¹¹

The Zimbabwean War and Gender Equality

Zimbabwe's liberation struggle was based among other ideologies on Marxism, and contemporary Marxism encouraged the participation of women in the revolutionary

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.

Some women former fighters in Zimbabwe interviewed by Bhebe and Ranger agreed that they joined the liberation movement in order to improve conditions for themselves and for their families.¹⁴ The ideology of equality simply appealed to young

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 uniform and having a gun feels macho, especially for a woman, you feel a man in that attire.”¹⁶ Thus from a feminist perspective, it is evident that for most women, joining the war was a way to assert their equality as human beings. Many feminist critics will agree that women’s role in combat was responsible for the beginning of forced acceptance of women as equals in male-dominated arenas; even though much still has to change. As Eva Beth Egensteiner, who has done extensive research on women and war, argues, “on joining the war, females fighters are ready to put on new gender roles; those considered traditionally belonging to men.”¹⁷ The assumption is that the new roles will bring about gender equality. Zimbabwe’s narratives of the revolutionary struggle show that the concept of women becoming equal to men was a major concern among female fighters. The idea that women who were fighting like men were now equal to men was equally voiced.

Robert Mugabe, then leader of the ZANU Popular Front army wing, affirmed the fact that women had risen to the status of men:

Our women fighters have demonstrated beyond all doubt that they are as capable as men and deserve equal treatment, both in regard to training and appointments. It is because of their proven performance that we have agreed to constitute a Women's Detachment with its own commander who should become a member of the High Command. It is also necessary that we should promote more women to the High Command.¹⁸

Given this understanding, female fighters often pushed themselves to demonstrate their capability, and because the perception of their roles was influenced by the demands of the system they operated in, female fighters became victims of heated pressure to live up to the standards of men. Understandably, because war reflected traditionally male values, there was therefore a strong drive for women's dedication to be measured against their equality to men. Instinctively, women fighters were pushed to take on male roles; this was essential to their assertiveness.

But feminist critics on war and women have argued that the question of equality between women and men in the training camps is problematic when we consider the differences between what most women were actually engaged in during the war, and the expected criteria that are used to indicate whether women had actually been men's equals, or whether they had been successful soldiers. Research on women and war, from Africa and elsewhere, has shown that only a few women are given the privilege, in war situations, to operate formally in traditionally male domains. The majority of the women's work tends to consist in helping the men to be the soldiers they want to be. Thus women in war situations simply help men achieve their goals. Accordingly, most women are forced to fill all kinds of auxiliary functions so that the war can go on. Thus,

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

“whoosh,” and you’d see the other guy in front of you falling, you’d see the whole head coming off....²³

It was not until 1976, when human rights activist groups mounted pressure on ZANU and ZAPU that eventually women were allowed into combat training. This was reluctantly done because according to Bhebe and Lyons, even after receiving military training, many women were still not dispatched to the front to fight.²⁴ It seemed most likely that women’s training was mainly to give them survival skills and to remove the pressure mounting on the liberation movements from activist groups to train women, and did not have much to do with valuing women’s contribution.

Monica was distressed by this action and in an interview with Lyons she pointed out:

I was appointed, “to [guard a camp], as much as I wanted to go to the front, since I had come to fight the enemy. They always wanted people who would look after the camps. We were given our rifles to go and guard the women in this camp, Osibisa. All our camps had guards.”²⁵

Feminist critics have further argued, therefore, that while the system measured women’s achievements in terms of their success in engaging in traditionally male activities, nationalist leaders encouraged women to participate in more traditional female roles. Jane Ngwenya, ZAPU’s National Secretary for Women’s Affairs admitted that women in the ZAPU camp were fighting differently than men. Her argument was that women were being groomed to remain as traditional as possible, despite the demands of their situation and despite what women themselves valued as important to them.

So we are fighting side by side with our men; we are not left behind. While our men are holding guns and deployed outside to fight, women are fighting in another wing of the struggle, because they try to help themselves through self-help schemes.

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:

Real battles were fought by men. Our role as women was that we were carriers of ammunition, which was actually heavier than instituting the war itself. There was a tendency to say the women's specialty is in the kitchen. [Yet] Women and men received the same military or political training. It is only [when it came to] power sharing, or making decisions, that women could not participate.²⁷

Thus Judith Stiehm, who has done extensive research on women in the US armed forces, argues that female soldiers challenge deeply anchored preconceptions of gender identity. Cross-culturally and historically, combat has been reserved for men as an arena in which they can test, prove, and be rewarded for their virility. The presence of women alters the military when service can no longer be seen as a way of demonstrating manhood. To allow women into a male bastion threatens it as an arena for demonstrating masculinity and, among other things, achieving the prestige of belonging to such an organisation.²⁸

It seems clear that nationalist leaders, both male and female, were thus having problems with allowing women to participate in spheres that traditionally belonged to men; hence, women's contributions were largely confined to being carriers of ammunition and caretakers of children, the sick, and the aged in spite of the rigorous

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 be 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-led and male zones. The problem that arose was that even though they enlisted women, nationalist leaders expected women fighters to remain docile and passive. But with the sense of liberation brought by the act of joining the movement, women became more open to their own sexual needs. Yet the thinking among the nationalists was that women should not behave in ways identified traditionally with males. Affairs in military camps were seen as disrupting productivity and the blame was squarely laid on women. They were characterised as luring men from their duties

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.³²

To punish women and to control their "immoral" behaviour, contraceptives were made unavailable to them, and marriages between couples enforced. The traditional practice of bride-wealth was introduced, though earlier some leaders of ZANU High Command and the Department of Women's Affairs had called for the abolition of bride-wealth in order to promote

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 reflect much commitment from nationalist leaders. Feminist critics have argued, therefore, that the persistent support for bride-wealth claims by nationalist leaders during and after the liberation war reveals the nationalists’ unwillingness radically to change the social and economic position of women.

In addition to enforcing bride-price, sexual liaisons between men and women were condemned and contraceptives banned. The reasons given were that contraceptives were immoral and that they encouraged promiscuity. Yet as African feminists have pointed out, family planning was common even among traditionalists.³⁵ A close analysis reveals that the actions of the leaders did not have much to do with the preservation of good military order and discipline, but were more concerned with the concept of “decency and morality,” that the nationalists felt were being undermined. We see that women revolutionaries, who enrolled to be fighters, were exhorted by their own leadership to marry and be the mothers of the next generation of soldiers even though motherhood meant exclusion from active duty. It is not surprising that many women engaged in the struggle found themselves becoming frustrated.

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 policy that set out to train boys to be assistant clerks for the white administrators while training girls to be good homemakers. The "cult of domesticity" had informed the views of most elite nationalists before the war and provided the rationale and the justification for the marginalisation of women from active engagement in the war and from allowing them the visibility they needed. In general, nationalist leaders both male and female, introduced laws and regulations in the military camps that protected their middle-class interests. These laws however, re-defined and reconstructed gender roles and gender relations to the traditional/colonial private/public dichotomy just as in the constructs of colonial times, because this best suited and reinforced their superiority.

We further see that while women had to undergo restrictions, men's sexuality was never challenged even though some female cadres demanded that men too be punished for immoral behaviour. Thus, as feminist critic Karin Koen notes, these notions of masculinity and femininity among leaders eventually permeate the attitudes of entire cultures and societies in such a way that male aggression is sometimes seen as natural and inevitable. Sadly, such notions of masculinity and femininity are also reflected in the ways governments and politics are conceptualized and structured; thus Zimbabwean society failed at the end of the war to question the wrongs that had been done to women.³⁶

According to Tanya Lyons, another issue of concern during wartime is that of sexual abuse not only of women civilians, but even of women fighters. In contrast to the official rhetoric that exhorted women in military camps to be “decent women and not use contraceptives,” an examination of internal ZANU documents and interviews with female ex-combatants reveal that sexual abuse of women fighters by male guerrillas was rampant with perpetrators ranging from the lowest ranks to the highest leadership. Reports indicate that senior officers in the camps forced themselves upon young female combatants, black and white soldiers on their female victims, while guerrillas demanded sexual gratification from their female counterparts.³⁷

Rudo, an ex-combatant, on being asked by Bhebe about sexual violence against women in war times lamented;

When there is a rape or somebody has been raped, there was no mother to tell that somebody had abused you. There was no law, there was no justice where you could report to—there was no court of law. If you fell pregnant no one assisted you.³⁸

Thus as Koen argues, “In the absence of normal social structures, men impose their will on women of their choice.”³⁹ Patriarchal attitudes by male nationalists exposed female women cadres to sexual violence by allowing male cadres to claim control over female fighters. Moreover, as Nhongo-Simbanegavi argues, just as the male cadres had exploited the female fighters who had given their lives to serve the country, male cadres at the front similarly exploited the civilian population. One of the *chimbwidos* (young girls that helped freedom fighters in the war) pointed out that many freedom fighters used *pungwes* (night-long meetings in which guerrillas politicised villagers) as opportunities to sexually assault women and girls.⁴⁰ The editors of the collection *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-Combatants*, argue that the girls had to contend with different men every week, every month. Monica, in an interview in that volume, speaks of this aspect of the plight of women fighters during the liberation struggle;

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

affected these women as an individual or as a group were tackled as such. It was as if women ex-combatants never existed as a separate group of fighters. Thus as Amina Mama has argued, it is because of class differences that bourgeois women did not press for gender equity for peasant former freedom fighters.⁴³ Most of the integrationist attempts put forward were, in fact, largely designed to benefit the bourgeoisie, the elite—both male and female. The result is that today some elite female members of the bourgeoisie have made even more gains and have moved up the political power ladder ahead of some men. And that is as far as women's power gains go. The poor were completely left out while women who became politically powerful and successful such as Joyce Mujuru, the current Zimbabwean vice-president, Tenjiwe Lesabe, Sally Mugabe, the late wife of President Mugabe, Florence Chitauro, Ruth Chinamano, Jane Mutasa, Oppah Muchinguri, and Edna Madzongwe, all had ties to ruling-class males.

Tanya Lyons has thus pointed out that;

At the National Heroes' Acre in Harare there is only one woman buried: Sally Mugabe, late wife of the President. There has been some public debate as a result. But most discussion of "what it means to be a hero in Zimbabwe" has focused on whether soccer heroes should also be buried there. While there are quite a few empty plots left, there has not been any talk of whether women ex-combatants should receive burial at Heroes' Acre.⁴⁴

As Gwendolyn Mikell has argued, this is perhaps the reason why feminism cannot attribute the condition of all women to a universal experience.⁴⁵ For Zimbabwean women ex-fighters, their experiences are that the disadvantaged poor women's conditions are mediated by class status, and status in the hierarchy. For example, despite the Legal Age Majority Act (LAMA) passed at independence, by 1988 some legal institutions, such as the Deeds Registry Office, still operated as if women were minors under the law, especially since the elite classes are not governed by common laws. As Chimedza on the

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 will 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”—a concept with strong negative connotations within traditional Zimbabwean societies. No-one in the government sought to educate the populace not to pull former fighters down to the level of murderers. Zimbabwean society in general looked down upon female involvement during the war, thus one female ex-fighter cited in Lyons felt disgruntled when she found out that, “As far as most of the men are concerned, when you [a female combatant] come back, you are out; they hardly want you to come near their children.”⁵⁰

Zimbabweans saw these women ex-fighters as unfit to be wives and mothers, despite the significant roles they had played in liberating the nation. Women ex-fighters hence experienced a lot of tension in their lives as they found themselves considered somewhere between heroines and “unclean women.” It is clear that this was a serious attack on their self-esteem, so when feminist researchers have encouraged these women to tell their story or to express their plight, most of them have attempted to hide their past, or to change their stories, because acknowledging their defeat would be to admit the dashing of their hopes and the futility of their efforts and sacrifices. Acknowledging their

pain would be accepting defeat. Most have decided therefore that they did not want to be seen as failures, or losers, and as a result chose to go on with their lives in silence without making noise, willing their pain to go away. Yet this disillusionment has caused a lot of bitterness and resentment among women ex-combatants. Rudo, one of the former fighters interviewed by Bhebe and Ranger, thus asked, “How could I have been called a ‘terrorist,’ and yet today I can’t be called a hero?”⁵¹

Despite having been part of a revolutionary insurgency, under harsh conditions, Zimbabwean women combatants, upon returning to civil society, were expected to fit smoothly into civilian life as if nothing had happened. Most were expected to pick up their role as uneducated peasant women and forget all the education and the experience they had acquired. How were they to explain the rape, the sleepless nights with no food and no water, the threats to their lives? How would they gain recognition that their struggles were worthwhile?

At the eve of Zimbabwe’s independence, governments were being constantly challenged by the United Nations and other organisations to push towards gender equality but because, for most Zimbabweans, this ran counter to existing social norms regarding gender roles, husbands, local authorities and other male members felt threatened. For example, in one public address, Robert Mugabe, the president, in response to the passage of progressive legislation by Zimbabwe’s parliament, warned women against Western influences such as feminism. He defined emancipation for women as the ability to return to pre-colonial African traditions, and urged women to remain patriotic to the state and to nationalism. Yet as Cynthia Enloe has noted, it is impossible for female former fighters to return to previous modes of behaviour when their social values have been deeply affected by their experiences—and this internal conflict is not just

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 are not granted the benefit of institutional justice.⁵⁴ In the case of Zimbabwean women former fighters, however, we see that the pain of women ex-fighters is further aggravated by the fact that there was no justice given. Rape has remained a national male privilege denying women closure to their nightmare. And because rape committed against women during the war went unchallenged, it normalised negative attitudes about women and rape.

In addition to their social plight, a major predicament faced by women in most guerrilla movements is that women have difficulties in actually verifying their actions.⁵⁵ In Zimbabwe, compensation for war veterans was conditional on proof of having been engaged in active fighting, and roles other than that of direct involvement in battle were considered secondary to the war effort. Women fighters thus became dependant on men in order to confirm their veteran status. Watteville found that men became the ones responsible for establishing the women’s rank, and their contribution as soldiers.⁵⁶ This obviously placed women in vulnerable situations as sexual abuse took place with men using this to get sexual favours. Thus in 1998, when over fifty thousand ex-combatants in Zimbabwe were awarded Z\$50,000 plus Z\$2000 a month as war veterans’ compensation, it has been very difficult to find out how many women, if any, benefited

from this scheme. Research shows, however, that by the year 2000, twenty years after independence, many women had not formally had their rank confirmed.

Thus as Lyons asserts:

Today, most [combatants] ... are busy surviving, making business deals, growing maize or ground nuts, or selling vegetables on street corners. Demobilization payments are long spent and they wait patiently for compensation from the government but - even if compensation were available - many couldn't afford the bus fare to town centers to register for such compensation. The "symbolic payment" - parades, memorials - is also long past due.⁵⁷

The irony, as Barth, Enloe, and Lyons have pointed out, is that Zimbabwe female ex-combatants cannot protest their predicament torn between betraying the very revolution they fought so hard for and claiming their rights. Women who attempt to establish their own participation by articulating their own agenda are quickly seen as undermining the revolution and thus being unpatriotic.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that while women's resilience in revolutionary wars is beyond doubt, for Zimbabwean women however, the resilience did not translate into gender equality, in the military camps and in post-revolutionary society. The post-war status of women ex-fighters in Zimbabwe is unfortunately determined by individual women's positions in that society. This factor is crucial in defining the women's roles in the economy, in politics, and in decision making processes towards their emancipation.

Women ex-combatants in Zimbabwe have to fight harder for resources that some of their male counterparts take for granted. For example, women who fought in the war find access to employment often limited, since most women female fighters employed by the government are

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 cannot be determined by formal political programmes and military struggles, but by the practices of everyday life as people attempt to resist and alter power relations that inhibit gender equal participation.⁵⁹

For most revolutions, when the war for liberation is over, the rights of women become secondary to many other priorities.⁶⁰ In Zimbabwe, structural adjustment programmes by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank introduced in 1985, and the Anglo-American sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe in 2000, compounded the problem for women former freedom fighters. Scarce resources have had to be spent in countering forces that are threatening the existence of the government. At first the government created new laws in order to overcome the inequality of women, but later, considering other issues more vital, abandoned their promises concerning women's issues. This made it more difficult for most of the women fighters to realise their dreams.

While there is no doubt that female freedom fighters have met with unjust treatment, the war has had deep-seated significance on their lives. Women who were politically active before the war became even more militant during the war. Those who were not equally radical became involved in politics in ways they would never have had in the absence of their war experiences.

As Koen maintains, consequently, there were many cases among these women of commitments to socialist or revolutionary beliefs carrying well over after the war.⁶¹ Today, some of these women stand out as compelling examples of strength in the face of hardship and despair. They still see the post-war era as the right time to move society to grant the equal participation of all of its citizens.

For most feminist critics of war, how women ex-freedom fighters motivate themselves and others around them, and how they continue their struggle after the war that betrayed them is over, will always be a wonder. Yet, while the war years for women were stressful, exhausting, and oftentimes frightful, many feminist critics at the same time feel that a sense of excitement and courage was developed in women fighters in a way that shaped their new and independent roles. Barth found that most women ex-fighters never lost sight of the fact that during the war; they took part in the struggle for freedom to an equal degree to men.⁶² This, as feminist writers of war maintain, has had empowering effects in the way women, Zimbabwe women ex-fighters included, have come to demand their rights against men and against governments in post-colonial states.

Notes

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⁶ Samora Machel, *Mozambique: Sowing the Seeds of Revolution* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981), 25.

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- ²² Ibid., 12.
- ²³ Ibid., 29.
- ²⁴ Bhebe and Ranger, eds. *Soldiers in Zimbabwe*, 626; Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls*, 120.
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