

'Are there any people here?' Violence against women in the Zimbabwean conflict

**Everjoice Win, Agenda 59 2004 17*

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Your men are simply horny. That's really the problem. It has nothing to do with any socalled crisis in Zimbabwe. Horny men will rape women. It's that simple. It has nothing to do with politics. Stop exaggerating things.

These are words of wisdom from my esteemed male colleague in this 'rights-based development organisation' that I work in. I desperately look for a sign that shows he is not serious. That it's all a bad joke. But it is not. The man is serious. Angry in fact that I, a seemingly clear black Zimbabwean woman, am on the side of the British imperialists. He castigates me for not seeing the 'bigger picture'. Not appreciating the finer points about land redistribution, the reassertion of Zimbabwe's sovereignty, and other such lofty goals I have heard so many times before from our own Minister of Information. I try to respond. But the words can't come out of my mouth. I am shocked. I am angry. I can't breathe. I have to get out of the room.

'The bigger picture'? Like many Zimbabweans, I am still trying to find it. I have asked several people I know in the ruling party what the end game is going to be. When the curtain is going to come down on this 'play'? I guess it is encapsulated in that silly jingle we are subjected to every 30 minutes on all our four radio stations. 'If it rains this year we shall fill our granaries...', says one line from this jingle. Unfortunately, it has not rained this year. Neither did it last year. We have been told it is because the Rhodesians have been dispersing the clouds using the science learnt from cloud-seeding technology.

I wonder who it is that was going to fill their granaries, since most women do not own land. It is befitting that the singer is a man. They are the ones who own and control land. This has been the case since time immemorial. Land is given to the male head of household. Women can only access it through their husbands, sons or other male relatives. In very few and odd cases do they get land in their own capacities - single, divorced, or widowed. It's a relational thing that only applies if you can sufficiently demonstrate that you really do not have a male in your life. Not because you are a citizen and a person, who simply should get a resource in your own right. In 1994, Robert Mugabe clearly articulated his opinion on women's access to land: If women want land in their own capacities then they should never get married, he declared during a 'meet the people public forum'¹. Presidential personal opinion became policy. That is the normal way of doing politics in this country. Parliament means nothing. The wishes of the majority - women - who constitute over 51 percent of the population, don't matter.

Chimurenga

We have been told that the third *Chimurenga* (revolution) is about land. We have been promised that the poor shall get land. Many of us celebrated. Independence had finally come. Land to the people. But we forgot that women are not people. We got too excited to remember that in many of our languages, women are not defined as human beings. 'Pane vanhu pano?' ('Are there any people here?'), a visitor would always ask, looking straight at my granny and me. '*Havapo. Mouya mangwana. Vainda kutown*', my granny would respond with a smile ('the people are not here. Come back tomorrow. They have gone to town'). A silly woman once asked an interviewee on radio: 'So what happens when a young woman starts her own home?' The old man was scandalised:

*My dear, how can you even ask? When we say people we mean **people**. Real people. Sitsho abantu-bantu. Haikona abesintwana!*

¹ President Mugabe made this statement in 1994 during a 'Meet the People' forum at the Harare Sheraton. This has since translated into policy, with women denied land in their individual capacities as citizens. Only in exceptional circumstances do women access and control land.

Abesintwana, loosely translated, means 'those who are like children' in Ndebele. Policies are for people, not non-persons.

How dare we even want a piece of the pie? The people have given one another chunks of the land, acres and acres. Mr Moyo has replaced Mr Botha, Mr Shumba kicked out Mr Swanepoel. Miss Choto, Mrs Shamhu and Ms Sibanda can forget about this land², the so-called poorest of the poor didn't get it. Exploited by the Bothas, they have been shafted off commercial farms. Left on the side of the road. Stateless, homeless, jobless, the wretched of the earth³.

But it is these women who have paid the highest price for this land. The young woman Nehanda⁴ was hanged for leading the first *Chimurenga*. Thousands of young and old women cooked for, washed and fed the guerrillas in the second *Chimurenga*. Hundreds lost their lives at the hands of the Rhodesian forces. The toll continues to mount in this third *Chimurenga*. But this time the pain, the torture and the deaths we die are qualitatively different. HIV is the new scourge. One in every three Zimbabweans is infected. A rape in Zimbabwe now is a death sentence. Amongst us we know the stories of women: schoolteachers beaten up, robbed and raped, accused of supporting the opposition. Many are now unemployed. The government won't relocate them to safer zones. They are guilty of nurturing the enemy. Nurses hounded out of their rural clinics by the sheer magnitude of the violence. They too are guilty of bringing opposition newspapers to happy ruling party supporting villagers. Women as young as 12 turned into concubines for the marauding armies of so-called war vets and youth militia. Older women raped and tortured for the sins of their sons and daughters.

The violence has many faces: from physical to sexual, economic and social. At the heart of it all is the political. The stories are similar to those elsewhere. Angola, Rwanda, Bosnia, El Salvador, Kashmir, Vietnam. But two factors compound the problem for Zimbabwean women. Our conflict is not an internationally recognised conflict like the others. It is just a power struggle. Some argue that it can simply be resolved by talks and elections. Regional denial and silence compound our pain. From the quiet diplomacy of President Mbeki of South Africa, to the African Union election observer team declaring the most violent Presidential election in our region, 'largely free and fair'. When visitors come to Harare or Bulawayo, they remark how clean the streets look; how 'normal' everything is. They are very impressed with the construction of houses in our high-density suburbs. This cannot possibly be a country in conflict. The late South African Minister, Steve Tshwete, speaking from the comfort and safety of our 7 star Meikles Hotel, wondered loudly where exactly this crisis we spoke about was (*The Herald*, March 2002). Obviously it was all an exaggeration by the Northern biased press and the settlers. We whisper our stories to one another in our safe spaces. Silenced by fear. Silenced by the denial all around us. Even amongst our own. We cross our legs tighter, afraid to be the next target.

At the other end of the social spectrum, we too are not spared from the violations, albeit of a different dimension. Every 30 minutes, we are forced to listen to propagandist jingles about the land we are yet to receive. Music from other parts of the world is now a rarity - even African

² To date no accurate figures are available as to how much land was given to women. Statistics are not sex-disaggregated and reference is made only to 'families'.

³ Research done by Dr Llyod Sachikonye of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Zimbabwe shows that over 60 percent of women farm workers lost their jobs. The research also estimates that on aggregate, women got less than 20 percent of the total land redistributed, and only five percent of farm workers got any land at all. This, despite the fact that women farm workers constitute the most needy, most exploited and marginalised group historically (Sachikonye, L (2003) 'The Situation of Commercial Farm Workers after Land Reform in Zimbabwe', a report prepared for the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe).

⁴ Nehanda, a young black woman, together with Kaguvi (a man), led the Shona people of Zimbabwe in the first 'rebellion' against the colonial British South Africa Company. This 'rebellion' as it was called, was the first armed struggle by the indigenous people and is now referred to as the first Chimurenga - meaning 'uprising'.

music. So much for African unity. Vain attempts at state-induced patriotism. As the Neville Brothers say in their song 'Sons and Daughters':

They show us the faces of hatred over and over. A new one every week. It could be Manuel Noriega, it could be the Ayatollah, and any old scapegoat will do.

Our government tells us that the problems we are going through are because of the British, the Americans and their local puppets. Ask any woman and they will tell you a different story. Each one of us knows who our enemies are; it is the local chairperson of ZANU PF next door; or the very young 'war vet', who burnt the huts. It is the police, who are supposed to maintain law and order, causing disorder. It is the army who are meant to protect us but who now ram AK 47s into young girls' vaginas. It is the Minister of Information who specialises in disinformation, or the Minister of Gender - our very own ministry for women, which trains the violent youth militia. Tony Blair is too far from the scenes of the crime - our vaginas, our bodies and our homes.

The middle classes have become substitutes for the state. Carrying the can of HIV/AIDS, the displaced, those who have lost their jobs, and those in search of emotional support. We run 24-hour soup kitchens by another name in our homes. School fees for a cousin's grandson, medical check ups for an aunt's husband. We spend half our working time in queues for this, that or the other. Many have become dishonest dealers and petty crooks - just to get by. But this kind of violation of our rights does not have international definition. That is why some of our neighbours ask what the fuss regarding Zimbabwe's 'alleged crisis' is about. To them it is just poverty. But we know what a better Zimbabwe is and could be like. We have lived it before. We know we can have it. What seems to be a minor inconvenience to some is a major assault on our liberties, which we know we are entitled to⁵.

No way out

Unlike what my colleague from Malawi thinks, the violence in Zimbabwe is not of the garden-variety type. It is deliberately perpetrated and state-sponsored violence: a government turning against its own people - a regime losing support, using brutal force to suppress dissent. To whom does a woman report that the youth militia raped her? How does she tell the war vet 'manning' the police station that his comrade beat her up? Does she tell them she is an NGO worker and risk another beating - accused of being a British agent?

Where does she find the courage to speak out when she is 'Tsvangirai's prostitute, sponsored by imperialists'?⁶ Where is the safe space in regional civil society which is celebrating Mugabe as the greatest anti-imperialist of our time? A 13-year-old girl's HIV present given courtesy of the seven ZANU PF militia who raped her, is a small sacrifice to pay for getting our land back, is it not? Surely a mere black woman's forced homelessness, her newly acquired illegal alien status on the streets of Johannesburg is an insignificant anecdote. It pales into oblivion, put against the struggle for national sovereignty and African unity. We can't tell our stories even in seemingly safe civic spaces. Maybe we are simply collateral damage.

There are no accurate statistics. Just nameless, faceless females. Consigned to footnotes once again. Spoken of, and spoken for. Appendages of those who matter politically: 'Opposition MP's wife raped. Female supporters feared raped by Green Bombers'. Opinion is sought from the MP himself, or the one who was supported. The survivors vanish between the lines. We don't know what happened to the MP's wife. But we certainly are told the condition of the MP. His physical scars splashed on the front pages. Women's scars can't be put on the front page. We also know

⁵ At the time of writing, Zimbabwe's inflation stood at over 500 percent, a record-breaking statistic!

⁶ Dozens of women who have been raped or beaten by ZANU PF militia indicate that their violators consistently accused them of supporting the opposition, the whites and the British. This is particularly so in rape cases where the rapists keep saying this in the process of raping the women.

the names, feelings, and history of the white farmers. Their stories matter in the bigger scheme of things. Poor black women don't. They are not people⁷.

The violence has many faces. 'The crisis in Zimbabwe is multi-layered', we often say. Said this way, it feels like the pain is bearable. Twelve million people can share the layers. Each carrying a small layer? The reality is vastly different. The multiple layers are borne by a particular group of individuals, not all of us. It is the poor, excluded black women whose heads are being crushed by several layers - violence, repression, exclusion, poverty, HIV/AIDS, displacement, more violence. It is not uncommon to find a Nomsa in Bulawayo, raped by a soldier, beaten up by a policeman for daring to report, infected with HIV, kicked out by her landlord, chased off her market stall by other vendors, (afraid of being seen as her friends and by extension an enemy of the state), her child dying from a curable disease. The picture sounds horribly stereotyped and exaggerated. How can so much happen to one individual, we ask? The depth and breath of the violations are too much to comprehend.

The crisis in Zimbabwe is largely political, as we have said thousands of times. That is partly why women's stories don't count. Politics you see is not a woman's game. It is for and about men. That is why there are no female political analysts⁸. And that is why the women must be taught a key lesson - stay out of politics. It is not your space. It is only for those with muscle, violent, physical muscle, and otherwise. The lesson is loud and clear if ever it was needed. From the steady climb of the '90s, the numbers of women in active politics are coming down dramatically⁹. The SADC target of 30 percent by 2005 looks less attainable now than it ever was.

Table 1: Women in Parliament in Zimbabwe since 1980

Session of Parliament	Session of Parliament	# of Women in Parliament	# of Women in the Senate
First	1980 – 1985	9	2
Second	1986 – 1990	12	4
Third	1991 – 1995	19	-
Fourth	1996 – 2000	21	-
Fifth	2000 – 2005	16	-

Source: Women in Politics Support Unit – Zimbabwe

There is now talk about talks and negotiations between the major political parties. There is excited expectation, as well as fear and apprehension among women. We have seen it before. The gentlemen will shake hands. Accommodate one another in a new dispensation. They did that in 1979 at Lancaster, they did it again in 1987¹⁰. Women still carry their scars deep in their hearts and under their layers of clothing. The dead keep turning in their graves. Nobody is held accountable. The cycle of impunity has continued. Women have every reason to be apprehensive

⁷ A casual glance at media reports on the Zimbabwean crisis will show that very rarely are women's experiences ever reported.

⁸ From January 2003 to January 2004, I was the official spokesperson for the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, the largest civic body in the country. On only six occasions was my comment or opinion sought by the Zimbabwean or foreign media. Most preferred to speak to my male colleagues - the Chairperson or the Coordinator.

⁹ An illustration of this is from the 2003 urban council elections, which saw the numbers of women go down from 21 MPs in the Fourth Parliament to 16.

¹⁰ The 1979 Lancaster House Agreement ended the war of liberation. At no point was the issue of women's rights on the agenda. Similarly, the 1987 Unity Accord between ZANU and ZAPU, which ended the genocide in the Midlands and Matebeleland Provinces, did not provide for accountability for human rights violations perpetrated on the people.

of any new 'political deal'. Adding another layer of clothing to cover their scars, yet another layer of masking tape on their mouths. We have seen the picture before. The 'brothers' will shake hands; make a toast, slap each other on the back. Declare the past dead and gone. Vow to move on and rebuild Zimbabwe. The women will be left to pick up the pieces of their broken lives. Try to wash away the violation of their bodies with lots of disinfectant. But it won't go away.

What do women want? A Zimbabwe that confronts its various pasts and names the violations its peoples have suffered; a space to look at the militia in the eye and say, 'you violated me'; a chance to talk back at the commercial farmer, for all those years of exploitation and abuse. Perhaps just five minutes to point a finger at the Minister and the war vet and ask: 'Why?' Even better, just a few more minutes for each woman to define the Zimbabwe she wants to live in. Is that not what democracy is about? A chance to be listened to. And be heard. An acknowledgement of the pain I have endured? A piece of land to call one's own would go a long way. Space to be a citizen. Speaking on our own behalf. *Ukuba ngumuntu - muntu*. To become people. Our personhood restored.

*Everjoice J Win is a Zimbabwean feminist. She is currently the Gender Coordinator for Action Aid International. She has previously served as Programme Officer with the Women in Law and Development in Africa, (WiLDAF) and a Commonwealth Adviser to the South African Commission on Gender Equality (CGE). Everjoice is a political activist in her country - she is a founder member of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and was spokesperson for the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition. She is also a women's rights activist and is involved with various women's rights organisations in Zimbabwe, Africa and beyond. E-mail: everjoicew@yahoo.com