



Women as perpetrators of political violence in Zimbabwe

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*"A crime is a crime: there should be no special treatment for women perpetrators."*¹

On Saturday 23rd July 2011, journalist Levi Mukarati, from the Financial Gazette, was head-butted by a female mobster, while covering the public hearings of Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on the Human Rights Commission Bill, before he sought police protection². He was among a group of journalists, members of Parliament, and the general public who were assaulted by a mob, while the police stood by and watched. The irony of the events of the 23rd July is that all this violence was unleashed to disrupt public hearings for the Human Rights Commission Bill.

Political violence is nothing new in Zimbabwe and despite calls by political leaders to end it³, it persists, and women are not always on the receiving end.

The use of violence in contemporary Zimbabwean politics is part of the machismo political culture inherited from settler colonialists, which successive political systems are failing to dismantle.⁴ During the liberation war women got involved because they saw this as an opportunity for their emancipation, but they found that it was national liberation first and emancipation later. This emancipation was achieved in part on paper⁵, but not in reality⁶, and the same rhetoric is being espoused by opposition politicians today⁷.

Gender based violence has been used as a political tool both intraparty⁸ and inter-party⁹. In both cases Zimbabwean women have generally been portrayed as victims in the political crisis particularly in the last

¹ RAU (2010) *When the going gets tough the man gets going: Zimbabwe women's views on Politics, Governance, Political Violence and Transitional Justice*, page 40.

² www.dailynews.co.zw accessed on 25 July 2011

³ Both Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai have preached political tolerance since the signing of the Global Political Agreement in September 2008 but this has largely been ignored by their supporters

⁴ See Kwinjeh, G (2007) *Feminist Reflections on gender violence, political power and women's emancipation*

⁵ The enactment of laws such as the Legal Age of Majority Act in the early 1980s

⁶ Discrimination based on sex is still allowed by the Constitution; section 23

⁷ See again Kwinjeh, G (2007) *Feminist Reflections on gender violence, political power and women's emancipation*

⁸ In November 2007 violence within the MDC over the unresolved issue of the Women's Chair

⁹ RAU(2010) *No Hiding Place: Politically Motivated Rape against Women in Zimbabwe*

ten years. Women are said not able to run away and protect themselves during periods of violence because of their gender roles and domestic responsibilities as well as their weaker physical status. However, increasingly there are more and more reports of women involved in violence as perpetrators to the extent that organisations are disaggregating their data to show the different roles women are playing in political violence. Interestingly, as women's participation in political violence is being documented to show that women want to claim their space in the political arena, there appears to be a downturn in their involvement in the broader women's movement, and the tackling of the issue of patriarchy¹⁰ which is the basis of discrimination and inequality between the sexes.

Women Victims and Perpetrators¹¹

	Victims	Perpetrators
January	23%	10%
February	27%	10%
March	27%	15%
April	26%	9%
May	27%	9%

That women have become involved in political violence seems clear. The Zimbabwe Peace Project data, shown above in Table 1, supports a study by Centre for the Study on Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) which indicated that female supporters of Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) were said to be 40 times more likely to have been reported as a perpetrator than female supporters of Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T).¹² The figures are significant enough to warrant an investigation into the matter.

Zimbabwean women are not only involved in intimidatory tactics such as singing and dancing, using obscene language and gestures at political rallies, or at bases where people are being tortured¹³, but are also involved in physically assaulting opponents. Women play the role of 'cheerleaders' during periods of violence, encouraging and inciting the actual perpetrators to commit crimes. *"Women acted as informers and snitched on others...They also assaulted opposition party members...They also incited violence by*

¹⁰Mushonga N. (2011) Democracy in the Eyes of Women http://www.zimdiaspora.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6193:dem... accessed on 11 August 2011.

¹¹ Zimbabwe Peace Project Monthly Reports 2011. These figures are not disaggregated according to political affiliation.

¹² CSV (2009) *Subliminal Terror? Human rights violations and torture in Zimbabwe during 2008*. page

¹³ This is a role women's political wings play; Zanu PF Women's League are well known for their singing and dancing at political rallies the same can be said in Malawi, particularly during the late President Hastings Banda's rule.

*singing and dancing at rallies.*¹⁴ These women are not only involved in altercations with other women but men as well. Not only are the lower female cadres of political parties involved in violence but senior officials and also wives of senior army officials and politicians have been reported as perpetrators.¹⁵

For a woman to engage in violent activities for the sake of politics, like the events of the 23rd July, one would like to believe that she has strong convictions about the cause, as she not only hurt the journalist but possibly herself in the process. Or could this just be mob behavior coupled with the knowledge that she would not be brought to account for her actions? There are many other reasons that can be given for women's involvement in political violence; participation in the violence due to duress or fear of victimization; or loyalty to the party (one woman stated that she engaged in violence to show her loyalty to her political party as this was the way other members behaved¹⁶). Others believe that their actions are justified as political opponents are trying the reverse the gains of independence, and, if violence is the only way to maintain these gains, then it must be used.

These stories are not uncommon as the culture of violence that has prevailed in Zimbabwe over the years has led some women to believe this is the way politics should be conducted. In a survey undertaken at the end of 2009, where over 2000 women were interviewed, 9% stated that violence during elections is acceptable.¹⁷ For the sake of the next generation, this needs to change, impunity has to end, and the rule of law restored. All politically motivated crimes have to be investigated, and the perpetrators brought to justice¹⁸, regardless of political affiliation, ethnicity, race and sex.

Examples of women perpetrators are not difficult to find in Zimbabwe¹⁹, or in other parts of the world²⁰; these examples completely defy the myth of female passivity during war and conflict periods²¹, a myth that has been perpetuated by literature that focuses only on women's victimhood. Feminist scholars in international relations are encouraged to take up initiatives to understand the phenomenon of female perpetrators²². Women have been calling for equality and non discrimination; let this reflect in all spheres. If a woman has been found guilty of violence, let the law take its course. Women, like men, have to take responsibility for the crimes they commit. Otherwise, feminism simultaneously demands

¹⁴ RAU (2010) *When the going gets tough the man gets going: Zimbabwe women's views on Politics, Governance, Political Violence and Transitional Justice*, page 40.

¹⁵ Jocelyn Chiwenga (married to the Army General) and Anna Matonga (married to Bright Matonga, a senior politician in ZANU PF) are examples that come quickly to mind.

¹⁶ <http://womenmakenews.com/content/story/women-perpetrators-crimes-against-humanity> accessed on 4th August 2011

¹⁷ RAU(2010) *Women, Politics and the Zimbabwe Crisis*, page 10

¹⁸ Global Political Agreement (GPA) article 18(e)

¹⁹ <http://www.ziminttransition.com/news/gender-issues/women-too-were-perpetrators-post-election-violence-0> accessed on 4 August 2011

²⁰ During the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the Minister for Women's Affairs encouraged her own son to rape Tutsi women and further afield in Indian women's role in the Hindu nationalist movement.

²¹ Moser, C and Clark F (eds.) (2001) *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*

²² See Alison M (2009), *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*

equality and undermines it by suggesting that women are less capable than men of morality and good judgment²³.

²³ <http://womenmakenews.com/content/story/women-perpetrators-crimes-against-humanity> accessed on 4th August 2011