

‘Defending Women – Defending the Rights of a Nation’



A Preliminary Report on Political Violence Against Members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise [WOZA]

September 2007

Background

Over the past seven years, Zimbabweans have experienced the virtual total transformation of their economic and social world. The formal economy has collapsed, producing intense social dislocation, emigration and extreme forms of poverty. This disintegration of the underpinnings of an entire society has been brought about by the abuse of power by a political party and government, which have seemingly deliberately brought misery to the lives of millions of Zimbabweans. When political opposition grew and civil society organisations mounted protests, the government responded with draconian legislation as well as extra-legal actions, which have silenced all but the bravest of government critics.

One civic organisation which has refused to be silenced is a grassroots women's social justice movement, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA). It has continued to protest in the streets, claiming the right to freedom of expression. These protests have resulted in frequent arrests and extreme brutality perpetrated against the members by law enforcement agents.

Violations against members occur with regularity in spite of the obligations of the Zimbabwean government under both domestic and international law. The Bill of Rights in the Zimbabwean constitution protects freedoms of assembly and of expression. Zimbabwe is also party to numerous international instruments which commit the government to guarantee freedoms of speech, assembly, and freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Among these are the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

This interim report reflects some of the initial findings of a research study of the violence experienced by WOZA members at the hands of state agents. The full report documenting the extent and nature of the violations perpetrated against members of WOZA will be released in due course. This report is issued before the study is completed in order to draw attention to the risks faced by women activists in view of the fact that Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states have recently stated that free and fair elections can be held in Zimbabwe early next year.

WOZA

WOZA, an acronym for *Women of Zimbabwe Arise*, is an Ndebele word meaning 'come forward'. The movement has a countrywide membership of over 55,000 women and some men. It was formed in 2003 as a women's civic movement to:

- Provide women from all walks of life with a united voice to speak out on issues affecting their day-to-day lives.
- Empower female leadership that will lead community involvement in pressing for solutions to the current crisis.
- Encourage women to stand up for their rights and freedoms.
- Lobby and advocate on those issues affecting women and their families.

The majority of WOZA members are low-income earners from urban high-density suburbs. They are mostly vendors, or cross border traders or looked after by spouses and/or children. Since unemployment in Zimbabwe is about 84% of the active population, the majority of the nation has had to find alternative means of making a living, and these women are no exception. Before *Operation Murambatsvina*,¹ the informal sector was the sole source of income for a significant number of families, and it was estimated that, as of 2004, it accounted for 40% of all forms of economic activity². Many WOZA members lost their means of livelihood during that operation two years ago and have been struggling to keep their families alive ever since.

¹ This operation resulted in the destruction of homes and the informal sector in the urban areas across the country and left thousands of urban dwellers displaced. An estimated 700,000 people were directly affected. See the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Chaos out of Order or Order out of Chaos? A preliminary report on Operation Murambatsvina*, June 2005, and *The Aftermath of a Disastrous Venture: A Follow Up Report on Operation Murambatsvina*, August 2005, www.hrforumzim.com/frames/inside_frame_special.htm. Also United Nations, *Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe*, www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/1664_96507_ZimbabweReport.pdf and International Crisis Group, *Zimbabwe's Operation Murambatsvina: The Tipping Point?*, Africa Report No: 97, 17 August 2005, www.crisisgroup.org.

² UN, op cit., p.24.

Basing their activities on the principles of strategic nonviolence, WOZA creates space to allow Zimbabweans to articulate issues they may be too fearful to raise alone. WOZA actions are always peaceful; their trademark demonstration is the handing out of roses each year on Valentine's Day as a symbol of love³ to counteract the government's hate-filled propaganda⁴. WOZA has conducted over 100 protests on various issues of civil rights and social justice in its five-year existence and up to 3,000 women have spent time in police custody. Many have been detained more than once, most for 48 hours or more and 112 members once spent five days in police cells. These women, front-line human rights defenders, are willing to suffer beatings and unbearable conditions in custody to exercise their constitutional rights and fundamental freedoms. They continue to suffer torture and other forms of cruel, humiliating and degrading treatment.

As this report was being finalised six women and a one and a half year old child were abducted by Law and Order police officers from their homes in Bulawayo during the early hours of the morning. They were taken to a mountain overlooking a river and told to tell the 'truth' about the whereabouts of their leaders (Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu). They were shown ropes and rocks and told they would be thrown into Khami Dam if they did not divulge information required by police officers. It was only the casual appearance of tourists, presumed to be journalists, which alarmed the officers who decided to return them to their homes, threatening that if they exposed their ordeal they would be killed⁵.

Another recent incident was the arrest of 19 members, both male and female, from a sports stadium in Masvingo where they were playing netball and soccer⁶. They spent 48 hours in custody and then had to 'buy' their freedom by paying admission of guilt fines. Another two members who went to the police station to bring them food were arrested and spent 48 hours in custody before having to also 'buy' their freedom.

Whilst Zimbabwe is not in a state of war, it is nonetheless in a state of conflict. Government's mismanagement and venality have created inflation officially quoted at near 8,000%⁷ but in reality probably double that. An angry and increasingly desperate population is consistently prevented from voicing their complaints. All Zimbabweans are victims of the economic and social collapse but those that dare to protest are targeted for police brutality.

The Research

The purpose of this research is to get a clearer picture of the experiences of women defenders of human rights and social justice. It consists of a quantitative survey of the political violence experienced by the members of WOZA during the period 2000 to 2007. It will be noted that 2000 predates the formation of WOZA but marks the year that many accept to be the start of the current crisis in Zimbabwe. The study also seeks to track the total experience of these women human rights defenders through other turbulent periods in Zimbabwe's history, namely the pre-independence era, the early 1980s, and the 1990s. However this interim report does not cover the pre-2000 years, nor does it deal with the trauma experienced as a result of the violations. A more comprehensive report on the survey data will refer to all of these experiences.

Methodology

A questionnaire for interview was developed through focus discussion groups, was then pilot tested and refined. The final questionnaire covered the following areas that were seen as relevant to an understanding of gross human rights violations against women: arrests; violations since 2000; perpetrators; legal actions; loss of property; medical treatment and trauma after 2000. A separate section sought information on violations before 2000.

³ WOZA claim the streets of Harare and Bulawayo in fifth Valentine's campaign, www.wozazimbabwe.org, 13 February 2007 and Zimbabwe: Torture/ill-treatment/fear of excessive use of force, 22 September 2006. UA 247/06, AFR 46/017/2006, 14 September 2006, www.amnesty.org.

⁴ Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2007), *Their words condemn them: The language of violence, intolerance and despotism in Zimbabwe*, May 2007, www.hrforumzim.com/frames/inside_frame_special.htm.

⁵ 6 members and baby taken from homes in Bulawayo into bush for questioning, www.wozazimbabwe.org, 25 August 2007.

⁶ 19 WOZA & MOZA activists arrested while playing sport in Masvingo, www.zimbabwesituation.com, 8 August 2007.

⁷ Zimbabwe inflation hits record as Mugabe tightens grip, www.zimbabwesituation.com, 22 August 2007.

Following the finalising of the questionnaire, a series of training workshops was held for the interviewers who were chosen from amongst WOZA members. The final interviewing team was then deployed into the community. This resulted in nearly 2,200 interviews taking place. The interviews were conducted in various high-density suburbs of Bulawayo, Chitungwiza, Harare, Mutare and Masvingo and in rural Matabeleland, in particular Insiza. The interviewees were all female members of WOZA. This preliminary report looks at a random 15% [397] sample of those from Harare, Bulawayo and Chitungwiza interviewed in May-June 2007.

Results

Demographics

WOZA's mission appeals to a wide variety of women, so there is no specific age group that takes part in activities. The membership ranges across the age spectrum from as young as 16 years old to the elderly, with the oldest interviewee being 73. The average age of the women interviewed is 38.

50% of the women interviewed are married, 21% are single, 20% widowed, 4% divorced, and 2% are separated. 2% did not indicate their marital status. It was made clear that married referred not only to registered marriages but customary unions, as well cohabiting. Separated meant not living together as husband and wife, but not divorced. It was necessary to clarify that this did not include couples separated by distance, i.e. those with spouses in the Diaspora.

Table 1: Marital status, age of women & number of children.

	Single	Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
Number [%]	84 [21%]	200 [50%]	9 [2%]	15 [4%]	81 [20%]
Average age	30.9	37	25.8	40.2	50.2
Average no. of children under 18	2	2.9	1.8	2.1	3.1

As can be seen from Table 1, there is a trend towards older women being responsible for the care of more children. The survey asked the women how many children under 18 years they are looking after in their households. It was made clear that we were looking at how many children each woman was looking after who are under 18 years, these children do not necessarily have to be her own but they must be living in her household.

Table 2: Level of education completed.

Level of Education	Numbers	Percentages
None	32	8%
Primary	191	48.1%
Secondary	149	37.5%
A level	8	2%
Not stated	17	4.2%

As can be seen from Table 2, the women are not highly educated, with very few having gone beyond O' Levels. The questionnaire asked the respondents to indicate which level of education they had completed. So in fact many may have spent more years in school than suggested, for example "none" means that the respondent never completed primary education and not necessarily that they are totally illiterate. Additionally, the older the women are the less likely they are to have had any form of education. Women from Harare appear to have higher levels of education than the Bulawayo group; those with primary education account for 59% in Bulawayo as opposed to 36% in Harare, and Bulawayo had 32% with secondary education as opposed to 50% in Harare.

Violations against Women

In this section, the violations experienced by women and the kinds of perpetrators of such violence are described.

Violations

As can be seen from Table 3 below, the sample reported a high occurrence of the various violations recorded. Political threats, insults by police officers, unlawful detention, and humiliating and degrading treatment were all reported with extremely high frequency, but assaults, psychological torture and physical torture were also very high. The women endured various forms of torture, including beatings with a variety of instruments, e.g. baton sticks, booted feet, wooden planks, being slapped, and *falanga* (beatings on the bottom of the feet). Some violations occurred in the street during arrest, whilst others took place in police vehicles and/or in police custody.

The forced removal of underwear when in custody is recorded separately as it implies threatened sexual violence. Other forms of degrading and humiliating treatment the women suffered included being forced to kneel or crouch for prolonged periods and being insulted and threatened by the police. Examples of insults include being called whores, or telling married women that they should stay at home and look after their husbands and that their husbands are not 'real men' as they leave their women to run amok in the city. Threats included death threats.

The table below shows the number of women who suffered each type of violation. The respondents were not asked to indicate how many times they were either assaulted or tortured, but some women participated in many civic actions and experienced violence or ill treatment more than once. In total, the 397 women reported 615 arrests; 291 women [73%] were arrested at least once. On average each woman was arrested 1.5 times. The maximum number of arrests for those in the sample was eight but other members have recorded over 25 arrests. It is important to state here that not all women who participate in WOZA actions are arrested and/or suffer human rights violations. It is to be noted that the violations included in Table 3 also reflect incidents experienced before the formation of WOZA.

Table 3 - Violations reported by women [n=397]

Offence	Number	Percentage
Abduction or kidnapping [self or family]	51	13%
Assault	188	47%
Forced to attend political meetings	245	62%
Held against your will	102	26%
Humiliating or degrading treatment	289	73%
Insults by police officers	315	79%
Murder of family member or friend	71	18%
Political threats	279	70%
Rape	4	1%
Psychological torture	209	53%
Physical torture	159	40%
Unlawful detention [longer than 48 hrs]	197	50%
Forced removal of underwear in custody	86	22%

It is important to note that some of the violations, i.e. abduction or kidnapping of self or family and murder of family member or friend and rape are likely to have occurred before the formation of WOZA, as WOZA itself does not have such high records of these incidents in their books. As was seen above in Table 3, 50% reported spending longer than the statutory 48 hours in custody. From the sample, 7% reported being able to see a lawyer whilst in custody, but it is important to note that while few consulted with a lawyer on a one to one basis, on most occasions a lawyer was actually working on their behalf.

Babies in Custody

In some instances the women do not have caregivers with whom to leave their breast-feeding children when they go on demonstrations or attend meetings. They then end up being arrested with their children. For example in Harare in April 2007, 56 members and 10 babies were arrested⁸. At times the police treat these women differently and consider them for early release; this however is not the standard treatment, as mothers with babies have been known to spend days in custody. According to the statistics, 105

⁸ 56 WOZA members and 10 babies arrested in Harare today, www.wozazimbabwe.org, 23 April 2007.

children have each, on average, spent six hours in custody. Some of the women are subjected to cruel and inhuman and degrading treatment together with their children, as the police do not separate the mothers and their children when they suffer this treatment.

Perpetrators

Under the Constitution of Zimbabwe the police force is given the function of preserving the internal security and maintaining law and order in Zimbabwe,⁹ however, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) were the most common perpetrators mentioned, with all branches of the ZRP mentioned by 52% [205 cases] of the sample. The Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) was not significant in the reports, accounting for only 0.7% of the total, as they are not normally deployed to deal with WOZA's protests.

To better gain a picture of how the ZRP as a whole are party to violations, one must understand the manner in which WOZA women interact with police. Most violations occur during or after peaceful street protests. The riot squad are usually the first to arrive at the scene, although Law and Order officers are often also in the vicinity. WOZA's policy is to sit down and not resist when the police appear, but some women inevitably run. Assaults by the riot squad generally take place when they chase members who run, but they also beat those who sit down peacefully. It is WOZA's experience that on most occasions the riot squad assault members on instruction from their superiors and it is often not random violence perpetrated by individual officers. Once arrests have been made, plain clothed officers coordinate transportation or walk those arrested to a police station, where Police Internal Security and Intelligence (PISI) officers take down their details. Those arrested are then handed over to the Law and Order branch who decide if they are to be detained. Uniformed officers supervise the detention of arrested members and coordinate affidavits from the arresting officers. Many of the insults and incidences of degrading and inhuman treatment are perpetrated by uniformed officers in the course of performing their duties of supervising detentions. Law and Order then begin the process of interrogation and preparation of a docket for court. Members are finger printed, photographed and made to sign warned and cautioned statements. It is the responsibility of Law and Order to ensure members are taken to court within the statutory 48 hours period for bail or remand hearing, although on many occasions members are held longer than this legal limit. It is also Law and Order that can make the decision to release mothers with babies, the sick, injured or juveniles, but this does not often happen. Law and Order are responsible for many of the assaults, and the mental and physical torture, in their attempts to try to secure information and/or to demobilise activists.

Table 4 refers to the frequency with which sections of the ZRP were mentioned as perpetrators. It must be understood however that occasions of arrest often result in multiple violations with multiple perpetrators. Plain clothed officers in the table below include PISI and the Law and Order branch as those interviewed could not necessarily differentiate between the two as officers do not normally introduce themselves or identify which unit they come from.

Table 4: Frequency with which ZRP were mentioned [n=205 mentions]

Branch of the ZRP	Number [%]
Plain clothed	120 [58%]
Riot Squad/Support Unit	136 [66%]
Uniformed Branch	128 [62%]

The women were asked if, during the periods of their detention, they saw any police officers being intimidated by their superiors for failing to ill-treat the women. This was reported by 34 women [8.5%], and 7% of the women reported police being transferred from their stations as punishment for failing to mistreat the women. Here the sample was reporting their assumptions, and it cannot be independently verified that what they observed resulted from failure to mistreat them.¹⁰

⁹ Constitution of Zimbabwe Act 1980, Section 93

¹⁰ Similar findings, however, were reported in a study of violations against commercial farmers, who reported that in 40% of cases they saw helpful policemen intimidated, and in 62% of cases sympathetic policemen were transferred. Here see Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2007), *Adding insult to injury. A Preliminary Report on Human Rights Violations on Commercial Farms, 2000 to 2005*. Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Justice for Agriculture Trust [JAG] in Zimbabwe, June 2007, www.hrforumzim.com/frames/inside_frame_special.htm

Thirteen per cent [13%] of the sample stated that they had their property destroyed during the violence, with the destruction taking different forms - arson, being physically destroyed, and being stolen. The property destroyed varied from houses being burnt to items of personal property such as radios, television sets, clothes, crockery, and money being taken for personal use by the perpetrators. In some instances property has been lost or destroyed as a result of political violence, but most of these incidents indicate violations before WOZA was formed.

Law and Order Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID)

The Law and Order Branch of the CID is a section that was specially created in the 1960s to deal with offences under the Law and Order Maintenance Act; in other words, those deemed to be 'political' by the regime when nationalist parties were banned. Their function has hardly changed as it still deals with activities deemed to be 'political' by a Zanu PF led government. The Law and Order Branch has been mentioned in many human rights reports, and was mentioned by the respondents as being frequently involved in the perpetration of violations.

Geographical Differences

The geographical distribution of the sample is shown in Table 4. For the purposes of these analyses Chitungwiza data was added to Harare's data due to the small number of cases from Chitungwiza.

Table 5: Breakdown of sample according to geographic site.

Province	Number	%
Bulawayo	198	50%
Harare	196	49%

A number of differences emerged when the data was sorted according to province. Some of the differences have been mentioned earlier. The Bulawayo group was significantly older, on average, than the Harare group, whilst the Harare group apparently had higher levels of education than the Bulawayo group, but this may be a result of the younger ages of the Harare women. There is one [1%] percent that did not state which province they lived in.

Table 6: Contrast in violations reported: Bulawayo versus Harare.

	Bulawayo <i>[n=198]</i>	Harare <i>[n=196]</i>
Death Threats	58 [29%]	126 [64%]
Forced to attend political meetings	67 [34%]	177 [90%]
Held against your will	74 [37%]	26 [13%]
Insults by police officers	144 [73%]	169 [87%]
Assaults	86 [43%]	100 [51%]
Degrading Treatment	142 [72%]	144 [74%]
Physical Torture	75 [38%]	82 [42%]
Political threats	103 [52%]	175 [89%]
Psychological torture	75 [38%]	132 [67%]
Unlawful detention [more than 48 hrs]	80 [40%]	117 [60%]
Allowed to see doctor	30 [15%]	2 [1%]
Forced to remove underwear	19 [10%]	66 [34%]

As can be seen from Table 6, there were significant differences in the frequency of violations reported between the two groups, with the Harare women reporting greater frequency of nearly all violations. Differences between the two groups was also found for the specific branches of the police, with the Bulawayo group reporting higher frequency of violations from the Riot Squad or Support Unit of the ZRP, whilst in Harare, it was the Uniformed Branch that carried out most violations against the women.

Injuries and Medical Treatment

The women suffered various injuries resulting from the assaults, e.g. broken bones, suppurating abscesses, swellings and deep-tissue bruising from the beatings, as well as re-occurring aches and pains. Of the women that were assaulted and subjected to torture, 105 [26%] of the sample reported that they had sought medical treatment. Twenty of these were admitted to hospital for the beatings they received from

state agents. From the total sample of 397 women whose rights have been violated, only 29 [7%] have received any form of counselling. This figure is very low considering the fact that 53% of the sample has reported psychological torture and 40% have experienced physical torture. This should be noted in the light of the well-known finding that psychological distress and disorder is the most common consequence of torture.

Conclusions

Clearly in the course of defending their rights and demanding social justice WOZA members have suffered extreme abuse perpetrated by state actors. The findings presented in this interim report give an indication of the extent and nature of these abuses, and strongly corroborate the findings of a recent Amnesty International report on Zimbabwe¹¹, as well as earlier reports from other human rights groups¹².

Of the women interviewed in the sample, approximately 75% experienced insults and humiliating and degrading treatment. Approximately half have suffered assaults and psychological torture. Forty per cent have suffered physical torture and 50% were detained longer than the statutory limit of 48 hours without being brought to court. Twenty-six per cent were injured badly enough to receive medical treatment.

While all sections of the police force are guilty, members of the Law and Order Branch stand out for the prevalence of abuses. The African Commission for Human and People's Rights recommended its disbanding in 2002¹³; this recommendation has not been heeded by the Zimbabwe government. WOZA strongly support the African Commission's position. A special unit to deal with 'political' offences is not necessary when the CID should handle any behaviour deemed criminal.

All of these abuses are prohibited by Zimbabwean law and by international treaties and conventions to which Zimbabwe is a party. The government is therefore in violation of its obligations to respect the rights of all its citizens equally. WOZA members do not have the protection of the law, and peaceful protest is met with brutal force. This is a government that deliberately seeks to punish those who dare to claim their entitlements. WOZA women bear the scars of this state-sponsored violence.

In the current climate there is no redress for the victims within Zimbabwe and state agents continue to act with impunity. We therefore appeal to the international community to recognize the contribution of WOZA women as human rights defenders, to assist us to document violations against us and make them known so that justice may be served in the future. We further call on the international community to resist the Zimbabwe government's attempts to mislead the world about the situation in the country and the nature of our peaceful activities, and to find ways of bringing pressure to bear on the Zimbabwe government to stop this violence.

The recent SADC Summit in August 2007 was briefed of the attempts to conclude the crisis in Zimbabwe. It welcomed the progress and encouraged all parties involved to expedite the process of negotiations and conclude work as soon as possible so that the next elections are held in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity allowing the people of Zimbabwe to elect the leaders of their choice¹⁴. Some leaders have already stated that they expect the coming elections to be free and fair. We urge the SADC leaders to take note of the contents of this and other reports on political violence in Zimbabwe and consider seriously the steps required before that can happen. A prerequisite to any such election is the absence of violence, the presence of peace and the respect for the civil rights of all.

¹¹ Amnesty International, *Between a rock and a hard place – women human rights defenders at risk*, 25 July 2007

¹² Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2006), *A woman's place is in the home? Gender Based Violence and Opposition Politics in Zimbabwe*, December 2006, www.hrforumzim.com/frames/inside_frame_special.htm, and ZTVP (2006), *Women on the run: Women survivors of torture amongst refugees in South Africa*. Report produced for CSVR & Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, JOHANNESBURG: CSVR.

¹³ Report of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (African Commission) Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe, 24th to 28th June 2002.

¹⁴ Communiqué. Southern African Development Community (SADC) Summit, 17 August 2007.

Endorsements for WOZA

Arnold Tsunga, Executive Director, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights: "WOZA has been a source of hope and inspiration to human rights defenders in Zimbabwe. They have adequately dispelled the myth that women in Zimbabwe are aloof and indifferent to misgovernance and the catastrophic consequences that this country has had to experience as a result of misrule by Robert Mugabe's regime. They have shown tremendous amounts of courage and leadership at a time when the country is in total despair. We are extremely proud of our association with them and know that they will play an important and continuous role and integral part in the resolution of the national crisis."



WOZA members are met with tear gas outside Parliament, Harare, Valentine's Day 2007



WOZA members under arrest in Bulawayo, 29 November 2006. Moments after this photo was taken hundreds of women, babies and men were brutally beaten, resulting in many injuries.



Police officers often beat WOZA members. This member was beaten on the street and in Bulawayo Central Police Station with baton sticks and kicked with booted feet after an arrest in June 2007. Members had been demonstrating for the voices of ordinary Zimbabweans to be included in the SADC-mediated talks. Along with 7 others, she was held in custody for 48 hours and refused medical treatment. Her breasts developed abscesses and she required daily medical attention for several weeks following her ordeal.