

## Women response to civil strife: Lived experiences of women during the fast track land reform in Zimbabwe

Nyevero Maruzani<sup>1</sup>, Barbra Mapuranga<sup>2\*</sup> and Evangelister Mugweni<sup>3</sup>

1. Great Zimbabwe University, School of Gender and Policy Studies

2 and 3. Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland East Region

### Abstract

This paper explores the road walked by women since chaotic land reforms beginning 2000 in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that women have been actively involved in the civil strife in the country. They are active agents who make choices, possess critical perspectives of their own and organise in response to the civil strife situation. To set the stage for the discussion the terms civil strife and women as active agents are defined first followed by the role of women in civil strife or war situations elsewhere before tracing the path travelled in Zimbabwe since the year 2000.

**Key words:** civil strife, women, conflict, fast track, land reform

### 1. Definitions of terms

**Civil strife** is synonymous with the terms civil unrest and civil disorder. These terms are used to describe situations where people protest against major socio-political problems such as economic stagnation, severe inflation, devaluation of currency, disasters (be they man-made or natural), severe unemployment, oppression, political scandal, and so on. Civil strife manifests itself in form of illegal parades, sit-ins, riots and sabotages (Ibrahim and Nicholas, 2000 in Ogbonna-Nwaougu, 2008). In Zimbabwe such was the order of the day especially after the year 2000 (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

**Women as active agents** in war and civil strife refers to a situation where women and girls are not only seen as victims of conflict and instability but also as combatants, part of organized civil society, human rights defenders, members of resistance movements and as active agents in both formal and informal peace building and recovery processes (United Nations, 2014).

### 2. Women in civil strife and war situations elsewhere

Women have been participating in wars all over the world and in all historical times (Musingafi, Tom, Hlatywayo, Mazorodze, Guzura, and Muranda, 2014). During the two world wars (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) thousands of men joined the fighting forces. As a result, women by necessity had to take up jobs previously reserved for men. In 1941 the British government introduced a call up facility for women to join the army and in the same year the British National Service Act was passed (Barrow 2011). There was an increasing demand for more active participation of women in the war. Women worked in factories or in the land army where at times they largely chose voluntary work in support of war time realities (Musingafi et al, 2014). The British Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the Women's Royal Naval Services (WRNS) engaged in extremely important war tasks like code breaking and the operation of radar equipment (Barrow, 2014). The women's land army and the women's timber corps also worked in the women's auxiliary service as volunteer nurses with the voluntary aid detachment. They also served as spies with the Special Operations Executive (SOE) <http://www.mylearning.org/women-at-war-the-role-of-women-during-wwii/p-3973/>.

In the Second World War 950 000 British women worked in ammunition factories making weapons like shells and bullets. These women handled toxic chemicals. They were into ship and aeroplane building. They also drove fire engines, trains and trams (Barrow, 2011). This is how women were actively involved as active agents of war in that their support to men was not at the battle front but it was in the form of a backup wartime support team. In the United States of America some 350 000 women served in the U.S. Armed Forces, both at home and abroad (Bryant, 2015). They included the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) and these were the first women to fly American military aircraft and their duties included ferrying planes from factories to bases, transporting cargo and participating in target missions, accumulating more than 60 million miles in flight distances and freeing thousands of male U.S. pilots for active duty (Bryant, 2015). Between 1940 and 1945, the female percentage of the U.S. workforce increased from 27 percent to nearly 37 percent, and by 1945 nearly one out of every four married women worked outside the home. The war enabled American women to gain strength and mobility as opposed to the traditional view which located women in particular spaces in society (Bryant, 2015). In general the world wars though short lived helped American women to become more independent, a trait which they gained from their participation in the defence of their nations in both war and peace time. Women made choices to join the war especially as volunteers and they acted accordingly to the demands of the war situation.

In Africa women were major contributors to resistance to colonial rule and the promotion of nationalism. Governments such as those of Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa sought to restrict women's movement and even

banned them from urban areas (Kinyanjui, 2013). In South Africa the women's struggles became more militant in the 1950s. Thousands of Black, Coloured and Indian women took part in the Defiance Campaign in 1952, which involved the deliberate contravention of petty apartheid laws. In 1954, the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW or FDSA) was established, which brought together women from the ANC, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), trade unions and self-help groups for the first time (Afropolitan, 2014). Here women made choices to ignore racial barriers and organised themselves as one force to fight against apartheid. They drew up a women's charter which pledged to bring an end to discriminatory laws (Aning, 1998). On 9 August 1956, FEDSAW organized some 20 000 women to march to the seat of government, the Union Buildings in Pretoria to present a petition against the carrying of passes by women to the Prime Minister, J G Strijdom. This was the famous Women's March celebrated as Women's Day on 9 August each year. The women's anti-pass campaign, the Women's Charter and their famous march to Pretoria became benchmarks in the struggle and continued to inspire decades of women struggles until democracy was finally realized in 1994 (Aning, 1998).

In Kenya, Zimbabwe, Algeria and other areas that experienced armed struggle women as well as men, carried messages, spied, and prepared meals for the fighters. Women in Kenya participated in the secret Mau Mau organisation that emerged after 1940 (Wiki-gender, 2015). When they participated in the Mau Mau some traditional gender roles reserved for males were now open to women. For example participating in taking an oath of loyalty used to be a male preserve but in the war situation women did it as well. Women also adopted leadership and combat roles thereby breaking traditional gender roles. Rebecca Njeri Kari was a prominent female leader and Wambui Waiyaki (Otieno) even developed and organised a network of spies who gathered data on British installations and operations (Ogbonna-Nwaougu, 2008). During the Kenyan rebellion women were also arrested and detained. Prominent leaders like Kari, Waiyaki and Wambui Wangarama spent years in prison for their political beliefs (Aning, 1998). The British held Mau Mau women in prisons where they were exposed to various acts of abuse but the Kenyan women soldiered on. Despite the British government introducing the villagisation programme (in an attempt to stop Mau Mau support from the villagers) those women who were out of the prisons organised themselves into a network that smuggled food and arms to the rebel camps in the forested areas of the Kikuyu district (Wiki-gender, 2015).

In Liberia the Women's movement greatly contributed to the ending of two civil wars (Aning, 2008). The Liberian association of Female Liberian Lawyers (AFELL) organised legal aid clinic at Monrovia to help women who had been victims of rape and other gender based violence in the civil war. Aiming for the same objective the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MRWOPNET) spearheaded the resolution of the conflict between Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (Aning, 1998). It was through the deliberate effort of these women that persuaded president Conte to sit next to Charles Taylor for peace negotiations which then culminated into the Accra Peace Summit. Though women did not attend the peace talks they continued to organise more demonstrations for peace. In 2003 a peace agreement was signed and WIPNET started to work on peace building initiatives. Women were not involved in the fighting themselves but they worked as agents to convince fighters to abandon their weapons (Aning, 1998). It all ended with the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president of Liberia. Women in Liberia organised in response to the war situation and provided the primary infrastructure of resistance (Aning, 1998).

The efforts of civil society and women's groups within the sub-region cannot be ignored (Anaan, 2011). Throughout the various violent conflicts and civil strife that West Africa has experienced, women groups have played a pivotal role in building lasting peace within communities and states. The initiatives of groups such as WANEP, West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), Mano River Union Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), and Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), among others, have brokered peace and ended violent conflicts in West Africa. For example, to end the Liberian war WIPNET, through its advocacy campaign, 'We want peace, No More War' forced Charles Taylor and the warlords of the LURD to attend the peace talks in 2003 resulting in the signing of the Agreement on Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities on 17 June 2003 (Annan, 2014).

In the precolonial period, queen Nzinga of Angola organised her government around women. She had her sisters play dominant roles as war leaders and in the council of advisors together with many other women (Afropolitan, 2015). Princess Grace Kifunji and Mukumbu, the later Queen Barbara, and other women were called to serve in her army. Nzinga organized a powerful guerrilla army, conquered some of her enemies and developed alliances to control the slave routes. She even allied with the Dutch to help her stop the Portuguese advancement (Afropolitan, 2015). After a series of decisive setbacks, the situation forced Nzinga to negotiate a peace treaty with the Portuguese, but still refused to pay tribute to the Portuguese king (Afropolitan, 2015).

In Nigeria in the 1930s Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti's feminism and democratic socialism led to the creation of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) and later Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), organisations and movements that aided Kuti to promote women's rights to education, employment and to political participation. When king Alake Ademola of Egbaland wanted to impose taxes on women, Kuti and the AWU clan protested (Afropolitan, 2015). She organised a strong opposition to the paying of taxes until the injustices were rectified.

Having looked at women's experiences and active roles in civil strife elsewhere in this section, we turn to Zimbabwe since 2000 in the following section.

### 3. Women and the Zimbabwean Situation since 2000

In the 2000 Zimbabwean constitutional referendum the government draft constitution was rejected by the people (Derman and Kaarhus, 2013). The ruling party blamed this fall from grace on white farmers and civil society. The June 2000 parliamentary elections were characterised by violence and White Farm invasions. White farmers and their black farm workers were evicted from their farms. Members of the opposition party suffered violence in their rural and urban homes. More than one million people were left homeless by the Fast Track Land Reform (FTLR). The Zimbabwean Women and the Land Lobby Group criticised government for allocating only 20% of the confiscated land to women. There were also situations where women were asked for sexual favours for them to be on the land distribution list. At times they were raped and exposed to gender based violence to no recourse as the perpetrators (war veterans and ZANU PF youth militias) were immune to the law (Zimbabwe, 2002).

Operation *Murambatsvina* was a brutal, ill managed campaign of the Zimbabwean government against its own citizens which intensified the country's political polarisation and five-year human rights, governance and economic crisis (Crisis Group Africa Report, 2005). The government argued that this operation's intention was to arrest disorderly and chaotic urbanisation, to stop illegal market transactions and to reverse environmental damage caused by inappropriate urban agricultural practises (Tibaijuka, 2005 as captured in Derman and Kaarhus, 2013). Other reports indicate that the government aimed at pushing urban residents to rural areas. The operation caused massive suffering among Zimbabwean urban dwellers and it increased their impoverishment. This resulted in a lot of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who were left vulnerable to diseases and harsh weather conditions. Even though, women did not remain passive, they were seen demonstrating and engaging in other activities like cross-border trading for survival.

The outcome of the 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections lead to extreme violence in the country as ZANU PF refused to concede defeat by the Movement for Democratic Change. In the wake of all this mayhem, Oppah Muchinguri declared:

If anyone tries to remove President Robert Mugabe from power, we will march in the streets and we are prepared to remove our clothes in support of his candidature in next year's election (Crisis Group Africa Report, 2005. p53)

Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (1999) joined the civil society in the constitutional reform process. The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) was led by a taskforce of which 30% of them were women from women's organisations. From August 1991 to November 2001 Thoko Matshe led the NCA. In 2009 Zimbabwe was in the midst of an all-encompassing humanitarian crisis that has seen almost total collapse in the delivery of government basic sanitation health and welfare services (Human Rights Watch, 2009). There was gross violation of basic rights of people to food health and clean water. The cholera outbreak of 2009 also left over 39000 Zimbabweans infected and 2000 dead. Food insecurity in 2008 saw people living on one meal a day or resorting to wild fruits for survival. There was severe malnutrition for children under the age of five. Inflation of over 230 million and availability of food on the black market was sporadic and beyond the reach of many. Only 6% of the Zimbabwean people were in the formal sector and teachers earned 4 dollars a month. State sanctioned post-election violence perpetrated by ZANU PF sponsored youth militia and war veterans (Human Rights Watch, 2009). It was in the looming crisis that on 15 September 2009 ZANU PF and MDC signed the Global Political Agreement under the mediation of former South African President Thabo Mbeki. Meanwhile, in this chaotic situation the Women Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) Netsai Mushonga coordinator other 41 women were arrested for participating in a demonstration that demanded the conclusion of the talks the political parties (WOZA, 2008). Despite the arrests, women went on to list their grievances and forwarded them to the leadership of ZANU PF, MDC, the UN and African Union offices. On continued lobbying for the equal presentation of women in the GPA, Theresa Makone (MDC) and Oppah Muchinguri (ZANU PF) were seconded as observers in the process. Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga was the only woman on the negotiating team. This was far short of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 stipulation on the involvement of women in conflict resolution. Article 1 of the UNSCR 1325 urges the member states to ensure an increased representation of women at all decision making levels in national, regional and international institutions for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. Despite these limited numbers and their different political affiliations women actively took part in the peace negotiations with the aim of bringing in women's contributions to the crisis situation. The coalition also organised women to analyse closely the negotiation processes and to develop key positions for advocacy and strategies to ensure the attainment of peace objectives. They held two key national consultative meetings for gender analysis of the GPA in preparation for the Constitutional Reform

Process. The workshops included the Zimbabwe Women in Transition National Workshop and the Women in Constitution Making Process. After a critical analysis of the situation the coalitions realised the need for other strategies like mobilisation and sensitisation campaigns so that various perspectives from women were harnessed in the building of a critical mass in support of women's key advocacy issues. In line with that, strategic partnerships with influential policy makers at various levels including the women's parliamentary caucus, women's leagues of political parties and other relevant government departments were formed. Resultantly a woman's charter was produced. The charter set out women's demands and expectations in the new constitution. WCoZ has also been involved in national healing and peace initiatives and it is also part of the Church and Civil Society Forum (CCSF).

On the other hand WOZA (Women of Zimbabwe Arise) is a women's group that is popularly known for its emphasis on social justice and human rights for the citizens of Zimbabwe. In 2006 it carried a consultation on social justice across the country in 284 meetings with about 10 000 rural and urban people. From these meetings they formed a people's charter. WOZA leaders Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu are on record of being in and out of prison (fifty times) for staging demonstrations that have a bearing on women's issues. WOZA uses the symbolism of Valentine's day to draw attention to issues affecting the lives of Zimbabweans, demonstrating the power of love is greater than the love of power. Since 2003, thousands of WOZA and MOZA activists have taken to the streets to demand their rights. These peaceful protests involve hundreds of participants, singing and dancing while distributing information to the public, often in front of government buildings. Frequently, however, riot police respond with violence; beating and arresting members merely for expressing their constitutional and international rights (WOZA, 2008). Some of those held in police custody were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment and denied access to medical care, food and lawyers. Prison conditions in Zimbabwe are horrific, leading to serious deteriorations in health after each incarceration. Despite opposition and serious threats from government the nation of Zimbabwe celebrate the coming in of a highly gender sensitive constitution (2013 -2017) and various reforms done on gender retrogressive laws. It can be given as a result of women who in moments of civil strife chose to be active agents using critical perspectives of their situations and organising in response to those situations.

#### 4. Conclusion

Despite the UNSCR 1235 recommendation on the inclusion of women in conflict resolution and peace building, the Zimbabwean situation poses a very unique situation where deep seated patriarchal attitudes operate in a very autocratic and authoritarian government making it very difficult for women to express themselves. The experience of the Zimbabwean woman is that of a directed course of action in favour of government or else suffer the negative consequences of acting otherwise in the form of rape, gender based violence or even death. Despite these extreme realities the nation still celebrates the fruits of women as active agents who made choices, poses critical perspectives of their own situations and organise in response to those situations.

#### References

- Annan, N. ( 2011 ) *Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa: Causes, Challenges and Prospects* [online ] In *Stability Journal of Security and Development* Available from:<http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.da/>[Accessed on 12 August 2015]
- Aning, E.K. (1998) *Women and Civil Conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone*. *African Journal of International Affairs* 1(3). Pp1-8
- Afropolitan (2014) *7 African Female Icons that Shaped History* [Online] Available from: <http://www.msafropolitan.com/2010/12/7-african-female-icons-that-shaped-history.html>[Accessed on 12 August 2015].
- Brayant (2015 ) *How War Changed the Role of Women in the United States* <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2002/3/02.03.09.x.html>
- Chitemba, B. (2012 ) *Women ex Fighters: The forgotten Heroes*. Independent Newspaper [online ]Available from<http://www.theindependent.co.zw/2012/08/10/women-ex-fighters-the-forgotten-heroes>[Accessed on 16 August 2015 ]
- Human Rights Watch (2009) *Crisis Without Limits Human Rights and Humanitarian Consequences of Political Repression in Zimbabwe*.
- Mau Mau Rebellion, Women in the (combatants/Military Personnel (2015 ) <http://what-when-how.com/women-and-war/mau-mau-rebellion-women-in-the-combatantsmilitary-personnel/>
- Nationalism in Africa-African Nationalism After World War II* ( 2015 ) Available from :<http://science.jrank.org/pages/10398/Nationalism-in-Africa-African-Nationalism-after-World-War-II.html>.
- Ogbonna –Nwaogu (2008) *Civil Wars in Africa : A Gendered Perspectives of the Cost on Women*. In *Journal of Social* 16 (3).

- Robinson, K. (2013) International: Women in peace and gendered reinforcements in Gender links News Service
- Sheldon, K (2015) Women In Military Service For America Memorial Foundation,  
<http://www.womensmemorial.org/Education/BBH1998.html#2>.
- UN (2014) Women Peace and Security  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/PeaceAndSecurity.aspx>.
- Wiki-Gender (2015 ) The role of women in ending Liberias civil Wars  
[[http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/The\\_Role\\_of\\_Women\\_in\\_Ending\\_Liberia's\\_Civil\\_Waronline](http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/The_Role_of_Women_in_Ending_Liberia's_Civil_Waronline)].
- Woldemikael, O. ( 2014 ) Perceptions of Heroism: A Comparison of Women's Roles within the National Liberation Struggles of Eritrea and Zimbabwe [Online] Available at  
<http://eritrea.asmarino.com/articles/2031-perceptions-of-heroism-a-comparison-of-womens-roles-within-the-national-liberation-struggles-of-eritrea-and-zimbabwe> [Accessed on 13 Augst 2015 ]
- Zimbabwe's operation Murambatsvina (2005). The tipping point? Africa Report 97 (17). August 2005.