

Warriors or Workers?
Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation War

Jennifer Lorimer

6181759

Joke Smitplein 17, 3581PZ

j.m.l.lorimer@students.uu.nl

15 ECT BA Thesis (GE3V18003)

6th April 2021

Dr Frank Gerits

Number of words: 10,400 Words

Number of pages: 47 Pages

Warriors or Workers?

Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation War

Abstract

Though a wide body of interviews that began to emerge in the 1990s show that women were involved at almost every level in the struggle, women still remain largely absent from the existing historiography on the Zimbabwe liberation war. What is missing from the previous accounts is a specific focus on how women were involved in the war in three key areas, as teachers, providers, and combatants. A re-examination of the sources, namely a comparative examination of autobiographies and edited interviews yields a new interpretation of the involvement of Zimbabwean women in the civil war: that black Zimbabwean women were used by the almost exclusively male nationalist leadership and military high command as cheap labour during the war in order to achieve a version of liberation “on the cheap” whilst maintaining the patriarchal status quo. Despite the fact that the rhetoric surrounding women’s involvement in the war promised them equal opportunities and parity with their male counterparts, Zimbabwean women were not offered genuine opportunities for advancement. Notwithstanding the attainment of independence, many women continued to feel exploited and that their sacrifices had been in vain. They painted the new black nationalist leadership with the same brush that they had painted their colonial oppressors. Using an intersectionality and gender studies approach, this thesis investigates a range of edited interviews and

autobiographies, in order to unpack women's experiences of Zimbabwe's liberation war.

How were women involved in the liberation struggle? How did they perceive themselves and how did men perceive them? It is argued that women did at times have some agency as teachers, providers and combatants. However, the mass involvement of women in the guerrilla forces from 1972 onwards was more likely an attempt by the high command to exploit the ambitions of women in order to gain a strategic advantage over the Rhodesian forces than a progressive policy of women's emancipation.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Introduction</i>	5
<i>Chapter 1: Anticolonial Misogyny</i>	19
<i>Chapter 2: Teaching or Toiling?</i>	25
<i>Chapter 3: Women as Mothers and Providers in the War</i>	30
<i>Chapter 4: Women as Combatants</i>	35
<i>Conclusion</i>	41
<i>Bibliography</i>	45

Introduction

Following the Lancaster House constitutional settlement in 1979, thousands of Zimbabwean women who had been involved in the country's brutal civil war fighting for their independence were sent to assembly points to await demobilization and compensation for their services in the war. Whilst some ex-combatants were paid a meagre stipend, an overwhelming number were left destitute when the funds ran out. Women were worst affected by this, as in addition to the physical and psychological trauma sustained during the war, they were also marginalized in society and cast aside as marriage prospects, as traditional parents deemed them "too rough" and assertive as a result of their experiences in the war.¹ Having been enticed to join the struggle by grand promises of gender equality, access to land, education, and healthcare, countless interviews with female ex-combatants show that in the years following the end of the war, they have found themselves disillusioned and having benefitted from none of the promises made to them. As one former guerilla Gertrude Moyo laments, "we ex-combatants are the ones who are suffering. We are the ones found selling vegetables in the streets."²

The key players in this story were the nationalist leaders, such as Robert Mugabe, Ndabaningi Sithole, and Josiah Tongogara, the guerrilla commanders, the most prominent being Joshua Nkomo, the two liberation armies, the predominantly Shona Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), and the antagonistic Rhodesian Security Forces. Different types of women also featured: elitist women who were wives of senior commanders and politicians, such as Joice

¹ *Women of Resilience: the voices of women ex-combatants*, (Harare: Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000), 12.

² *Women of Resilience*, 42.

Mujuru and Sally Mugabe, as well as rural women who were fighters, teachers, *chimbwidos* and provided supplies to the guerrillas.

This thesis will investigate how women were involved in the independence war in Zimbabwe (formerly known as Rhodesia). How did they perceive themselves and how did men perceive them? Taken together, these questions inform us about the place of women in liberationist and anticolonial theory.

Though resistance to colonialism has always existed, the anti-colonial philosophy that led to mass decolonization in Africa in the mid-twentieth century began to emerge most strongly in the interwar years between the First and Second World Wars. During the First and Second World Wars colonial troops were deployed *en masse* to fight on behalf of the imperial powers Britain and France. The great sacrifices made by these servicemen were underwritten by an expectation of reciprocation by the colonial powers.³ These calls were punctuated by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points presented at the Treaty of Versailles with its provision of self-determination for all. During the interwar years, the metropolitan centers of London and Paris became "contact zones for African anti-colonialism", as exiled intellectuals, activists, and ex-servicemen from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean converged in these cities.⁴ In contrast to the repressive environment of the colonies, the liberal atmosphere in these cities facilitated the assembly and circulation of ideas, and experiences. Thus the melting pots of these metropolitan centers breathed life into a "general anti-colonial ideology"⁵ that would take shape in the coming years.

³ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001), 254.

⁴ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 225.

⁵ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 256.

Central to the anti-colonial ideology that took shape in the years after the First World War is the political and cultural movement of Pan-Africanism. W. E. B. Du Bois defined Pan-Africanism as “the idea of one Africa uniting the thoughts and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent”.⁶ Whilst the early Pan-African Congresses of 1900 and 1919 declared the equal rights of Africans and people of African descent, the Fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945 gave impetus to the decolonization movement, vocalizing the “demand for independence and self-determination for Africa within the terms of an African nationalist and socialist agenda.”⁷ This event, according to Kwame Nkrumah, “brought about the awakening of African political consciousness” and the movement towards “Africa for the Africans.”⁸ It was also here that Pan-Africanism was aligned with African Socialism.⁹

African Socialism was conceived by Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore as a ‘third way’ alternative to communism and capitalism.¹⁰ It involved an economic, social and political agenda promoting fundamental human rights, and wellbeing through the creation of a welfare state, communal ownership of the means of production, and economic-self-sufficiency.¹¹ Moreover, African socialism was characterized by a commitment to achieving independence through non-violent means, and emphasized Pan-African solidarity above individual nationalisms.¹²

However, from the 1960s onwards these non-violent doctrines of Pan-Africanism and African Socialism were ultimately engulfed by the intransigence of the white settler states in

⁶ Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 372.

⁷ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 238.

⁸ Kwame Nkrumah, *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1957), 44.

⁹ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 238.

¹⁰ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 239.

¹¹ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 242.

¹² Young, *Postcolonialism*, 240.

Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe.¹³ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961, Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist from Martinique and member of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) in Algeria argued that “decolonization is always a violent event” because colonization itself is violent.¹⁴ This became a guiding principle for decolonization in the remaining colonies where armed struggle was deemed necessary to upend the deeply entrenched settler colonial regimes and restore the dignity of the colonized peoples.¹⁵

In 1966, in his “The Weapon of Theory” speech, Amilcar Cabral the Marxist leader of the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau added to liberationist philosophy a distinction between independence and liberation.¹⁶ He identified liberation as a two stage process, the first of which required the unification of the nation to overthrow foreign domination.¹⁷ The second stage involved eliminating neo-colonialism through internal revolution which emphasized returning to and embracing African culture in order to restructure the fabric of society.¹⁸

What is poignantly missing from these accounts of anti-colonial liberationist strategies is the role that women played in decolonization and the anti-colonial movement. Because women were often uneducated and were relegated to performing domestic tasks in the private sphere, such as child rearing and subsistence farming, they were largely excluded from national politics and the media, resulting in their multifarious contributions to liberation being blurred into the background of the overwhelmingly male nationalist narrative.¹⁹ Moreover, as women

¹³ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 251.

¹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philox. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 1.

¹⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 9.

¹⁶ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 287.

¹⁷ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 287.

¹⁸ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 288.

¹⁹ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 361.

were simultaneously affected by colonialism and traditional patriarchal society, Robert Young asserts that the focus of women's movements has often emphasized the "practical social and political issues affecting women" more strongly than the cause of liberation as these issues often affected women more immediately in their day-to-day lives than colonialism.²⁰ Although the movement for women's liberation emerged in the 1960s alongside the decolonization movements, the benefits of this movement were experienced largely by the elite but did not extend much to marginalized women.²¹

Leaders all had different ideas about what full liberation meant in the postcolonial setting. Cabral, for example, envisaged full liberation as the overthrow of foreign domination and neo-colonialism alongside a return to African cultures and values in order to restructure society. In Zimbabwe nationalist leaders emphasized the need for independence from colonial rule, equal rights, an end to racialism, access to land and economic resources and amenities, such as education and healthcare. Women, however, had other ideas that were influenced by different socio-economic factors such as class and education. Though they were affected by many of the same issues, women in the Zimbabwean liberation war did not constitute a unified entity.²² They had different ideas and desires, different circumstances and experiences of the war, and different experiences of the postwar reality.

Nevertheless, these rather disparate and at times disunited groups were united in their desire to achieve majority rule in Zimbabwe and redress the balance of deep settler colonialism that had been in place since the arrival of the British mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes in the late nineteenth century. Comprising a minute proportion of the population, the white minority

²⁰ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 361.

²¹ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 372.

²² Eleanor O'Gorman, *The Frontline Runs Through Every Woman: Women & Local Resistance in the Zimbabwean Liberation War* (Harare: Weaver Press), 2011.

had a monopoly on the nation's economic resources and amenities. For example, one third amounting to 12 million hectares of Zimbabwe's arable farming land was held by 5,000 white commercial farmers.²³ Similarly, whilst education was compulsory for white, Asian, and coloured children, only 12% of black students found places in secondary schools.²⁴ These disparities were also reflected in the national healthcare budget which was allocated almost exclusively for the benefit of the white community, as demonstrated by the fact that in 1979 according to David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, "the rural doctor-patient ratio was put at one to 100,000."²⁵

Despite the British Government having indicated its support for decolonisation, epitomised in Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's "Wind of Change" speech in 1960, as a result of the favourable lifestyle enjoyed by settler colonialists in Rhodesia, the white supremacist government of Ian Smith declared Rhodesia independent of Britain in the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in November 1965. This complicated the process of independence and led to a violent civil war which lasted for over a decade.

Zimbabwe became independent on the 18th of April 1980 after a protracted armed struggle. Though a huge number of interviews and a growing body of scholarship has illustrated that women were inextricably involved at almost all levels of the struggle, the research that emerged prior to independence and in the decade following it has obfuscated the contribution and sacrifices of Zimbabwean women. Early writing on anticolonial movements is dominated by exclusively male narratives of the first nationalist leaders who were typically missionary

²³ Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 89.

²⁴ Norma J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48.

²⁵ David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 63.

educated and came to take-up leadership roles in the first governments of their newly independent countries. Women are generally not mentioned in these accounts, except in roles that support men, namely as wives, cooks, and secretaries.

The Marxist interpretation that prevailed in the 1970s saw the issue from an economic perspective. Women's secondary status in society was seen as being an inherent part of the capitalist system. In an *International Socialist Review* article, Sharon Smith argues that as biological "reproducers", peasant women had an obligation to reproduce future generations to work the land. Added to this was the fact that the capitalist class benefited from the unpaid domestic work performed primarily by women. Smith postulates that women's emancipation was dependent upon an end to this system of unpaid domestic labour which, in turn, required "a socialist transformation of society, which cannot be achieved gradually but only through a process of social revolution, in a decisive battle between classes".²⁶

Writing in 1981, David Martin and Phyllis Johnson's *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* offers a chronological history of powerful men in leadership positions, from Rhodesian Prime Minister's to guerrilla commanders in ZAPU, but omits the role of women altogether.²⁷ In the *Feminist Studies Journal* in 1984, four years after Zimbabwe's independence, the sociologist Gay Seidman argued that "three distinct legacies affected the lives of black Zimbabwean women" in the lead up to independence. These were precolonial society, colonial society, and the conditions surrounding the liberation war.²⁸ Whilst precolonial and colonial society were both associated with gender ideologies that

²⁶ Sharon Smith, "Women's Liberation: The Marxist Tradition," *International Socialist Review* 93 (2014).

²⁷ Martin and Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*.

²⁸ Gay W. Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe: Postindependence Struggles," *Feminist Studies* 10, no. 3 (1984): 421.

disadvantaged women, these were compounded by the decade long bloody civil war which deeply affected the “practical conditions” that many Zimbabwean women lived under in their day-to-day lives.²⁹ Women were galvanized to join the liberation struggle in order to liberate themselves from these intertwining oppressions. Seidman argues that “ZANU (the Zimbabwe African National Union) relied heavily on women’s participation in the liberation struggle, giving them at least a limited voice in decision making.”³⁰ However, after the war instead of elevating their status in society, the new nationalist government simply implemented measures to streamline their domestic roles and make them more effective housewives.³¹

In *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* written in 1985, Terrence Ranger argues that in response to being driven off their land by white commercial farmers, there already existed a unified, radicalised peasant consciousness “which was highly conducive to mobilization for guerrilla war”³² This was bolstered by support from the spirit mediums who were inextricably tied to the land.³³ Ranger asserts that through the close relationship of young girls to the guerrillas in their capacity as *chimbwidos* (aides), they challenged the traditional gender dynamics in their society as they “were able to exercise a good deal of power” for the first time.³⁴ However, beyond asserting their unorthodox role as *chimbwidos*, in Ranger’s account women do not stand out but blend into their expected roles in peasant society.

²⁹ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 421.

³⁰ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 420.

³¹ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 431.

³² Terrence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, (London: James Currey, 1985), 25.

³³ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 189.

³⁴ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 207.

In *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, also written in 1985, David Lan gives an account of the reciprocal relationship established between the guerrillas and the spirit mediums during the civil war in the 1970s, in which the spirit mediums gave the guerrillas legitimacy and used their power in villages to help with recruitment for the struggle.³⁵ In exchange the guerrillas undertook to restore the land to the peasantry whom the spirit mediums oversaw.³⁶ In his account, Lan presents women as threatening to the immortality of the *mhondoro* (royal ancestral spirits), asserting that the guerrillas paid tribute to the spirit of the *mhondoro* by “keeping themselves free of the polluting power of female sexuality.”³⁷

In 1992 in *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* Norma Kriger poses a challenge to the unified peasant consciousness and cultural nationalism espoused by Ranger and Lan. Using the testimonies of war committees (networks of villagers set up to ensure a reliable supply chain of provisions to the guerrillas), Kriger offers a more heterogeneous view of the peasantry, with her inquiries finding that the peasantry were fragmented by “generational, and other structural inequities within villages”.³⁸ According to Kriger, “peasants had their own ideas and agendas” and manipulated the revolutionary environment to achieve their own objectives, “even when they clashed with guerrilla goals.”³⁹ Moreover, in highlighting the independent aims of the peasantry and the extent of coercion employed by the guerrillas, Kriger upends the idea of the organic relationship between the guerrillas and the peasantry put forth by Ranger and Lan. Kriger makes another important contribution to the discussion of the war through her assertion of the varying motivations that women had for participating

³⁵ David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985), 147.

³⁶ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, 148.

³⁷ Lan, *Guns and Rain*, 162.

³⁸ Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, 20.

³⁹ Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, 20.

in the conflict. She gives credence to their individual agency, maintaining that, “women protested as individuals rather than in an organized way.”⁴⁰

Based on an examination of the extensive ZANLA archives, Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi argues in her seminal work, *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle* which was published in 2000, that despite the rhetoric of gender equality espoused by the ZANLA high command, women were discriminated against in ZANLA on the basis of their perceived fragility. Moreover, despite, Zimbabwean women’s active participation in the war, in the transition from colonial to postcolonial their position in society did not improve.⁴¹ This work was followed in 2006 by Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, who, writing in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* asserted that the “growing presence of women combatants” led the liberation armies, ZANU and ZANLA to acknowledge gender issues.⁴² However, she asserted in a later work that commitments made by the nationalist leadership towards gender equality made during the war were “more situationally based than ideologically driven”, which is to say that they were inspired more by the conditions of the war than by a genuine intention to reorder the gender balance.⁴³

In *The Frontline Runs Through Every Woman: Local Resistance in the Zimbabwean Liberation War*, published in 2011, Eleanor O’Gorman contends that though central to the guerrilla war, the preoccupation with “peasant consciousness and revolutionary participation” championed in the debates of her predecessors, Ranger, Lan and Kriger minimize “the

⁴⁰ Kriger, *Zimbabwe’s Guerrilla War*, 196.

⁴¹ Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2000).

⁴² Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, “Gender Politics and the Pendulum of Political and Social Transformation in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006): 53.

⁴³ Ranchod-Nilsson, “Gender Politics and Gender Backlash in Zimbabwe,” 644.

representation of women's lives in revolution."⁴⁴ Whilst O'Gorman acknowledges Norma Kriger's contribution to the Zimbabwe liberation war historiography by opening the field to include the concerns of "rural women in the history of the war"⁴⁵, she critiques the underlying assumption in Kriger's work of women constituting a homogenous category.⁴⁶ Moreover, O'Gorman argues that in reflecting on why revolutions have failed women, early feminist analysts such as Seidman have overlooked the extent of "rural women's political awareness and participation in revolutions."⁴⁷ By investigating the women's day-to-day experiences in the protected villages in the Chiweshe area, O'Gorman seeks to contribute an understanding of the complex position that women found themselves in during the war.

Though a wide body of interviews that began to emerge in the 1990s show that women were involved at almost every level in the struggle, women still remain largely absent from the existing historiography on the Zimbabwe liberation war. What is missing from the previous accounts is a specific focus on how women were involved in the war in three key areas, as teachers, providers, and combatants. A reexamination of the sources, namely a comparative examination of autobiographies and edited interviews yields a new interpretation of the involvement of Zimbabwean women in the civil war: that black Zimbabwean women were used by the almost exclusively male nationalist leadership and military high command as cheap labour during the war in order to achieve a version of liberation on the cheap whilst maintaining the patriarchal status quo. Despite the fact that the rhetoric surrounding women's involvement in the war promised them equal opportunities and parity with their male counterparts, Zimbabwean women were not offered genuine opportunities for advancement.

⁴⁴ O'Gorman, *The Frontline*, 24.

⁴⁵ O'Gorman, *The Frontline*, 35.

⁴⁶ O'Gorman, *The Frontline*, 35.

⁴⁷ O'Gorman, *The Frontline*, 16.

Notwithstanding the attainment of independence, many women continued to feel exploited and that their sacrifices had been in vain. They painted the new black nationalist leadership with the same brush that they had painted their colonial oppressors.

These are very damning allegations, as Africa has historically had a very explicit relationship to cheap labour. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, ten to twelve million enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean to work on plantations in the Americas.⁴⁸ In Rhodesia, the exploitation of African laborer's who were paid appallingly low wages was a crucial motivating factor for many to join the armed struggle. According to Alan Cousins, in 1973 "over half of those in wage employment received wages below the Poverty Datum Line".⁴⁹ Meanwhile white laborers were paid "three times as much as Africans doing exactly the same job."⁵⁰

Using an intersectionality and gender studies approach, this thesis will investigate a range of edited interviews and autobiographies, in order to unpack women's experiences of Zimbabwe's liberation war. The idea of intersectionality was developed by the American legal scholar and activist, Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality is a framework which explains how personal identities are constructed through multiple dimensions such as race, class, and gender, and how women of colour are affected by "overlapping systems of subordination", namely racism and patriarchy.⁵¹ Many of the women who participated in Zimbabwe's liberation war were uneducated and came from a peasant background.

⁴⁸ Britannica, "Transatlantic slave trade." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/slave-trade>, accessed on 30th March, 2021.

⁴⁹ Alan Cousins, "State, Ideology, and Power in Rhodesia, 1958-1972," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24, no. 1 (1991), 56.

⁵⁰ Martin and Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*, 60.

⁵¹ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (New York: Routledge, 1994), 104.

However, some had at least four years of secondary education, and generally speaking, the sources show that they fared much better than those who lacked education as they were selected for further training opportunities, for example as radio operators.

Using interviews and autobiographies provides an opportunity to reinterpret and unearth new perspectives on topics. However, these materials should also be handled with care and discernment. Interviews engage directly with women's lived experiences. However, interviews have certain limitations. Interviews give the interviewee the possibility of crafting a nationalist perspective which may not have been widely felt at the time. The questions and answers may be based on the current state of political discussion or social climate and may not reflect a mood that was pervasive at the time. Moreover, interviews are selective and what makes it into the final version is at the discretion of the editors. Questions can be guided in order to elicit certain answers which fit the worldview of the interviewer. Nevertheless, interviews provide a wealth of experience which can be excavated in order to glean new perspectives on topics. A further limitation of the interview material is that the majority of the interviews were carried out in Shona or Ndebele.⁵² Whilst the editors give assurance that they were painstakingly translated and with a sensitivity to what the interviewee was trying to convey, it is always possible that important details and emotions could be lost in translation, or that the editor has inadvertently, or otherwise, framed the material in a way that the interviewee did not intend.

Similarly, whilst autobiographies offer valuable insight into the self-perception of the subject, their worldview, and their perceived contribution, they should be treated with care as they are

⁵² Irene Staunton, "Introduction," In *Mothers of the Revolution*, ed. Irene Staunton (Harare: Weaver Press, 2020 [1990]), xix.

always written for posterity. The accounts may present a self-aggrandizing view of history, and the subject may the role that they played in certain events. Furthermore, autobiographies can be an attempt by the author to recast their public image. Nevertheless, they enable an elaboration of the zeitgeist which is usually absent in documents and archives.

Chapter 1: Anticolonial Misogyny

At the first ZANU Women's Seminar which took place in Mozambique in 1979, Robert Mugabe signalled his commitment to women's advancement, stating that, the war was "as much a process towards the liberation of the nation as toward the emancipation of women."⁵³ Despite this and other such affirmations of women's equality, male nationalist leaders maintained a contradictory and often misogynistic view of women which prioritised their domestic roles above all else. Although many women received training and by 1978 some women were armed and fighting the enemy, the majority of women in the liberation armies were recruited to perform supporting roles for men, which included being cooks, nurses, and porters.⁵⁴ This chapter will investigate how men viewed women, the roots of anticolonial misogyny, and how this affected the ways that women were able to participate in the anticolonial struggle.

In 1984, writing in the *Feminist Studies Journal*, Gay Seidman asserted that the nationalist leadership made commitments to improving the station of women in order to encourage their participation in the war. However she claims that the leadership did so "without challenging the existing gender hierarchy". Consequently, within four years of independence the improvements that had been made for women were being swallowed up by stronger conservative voices.⁵⁵ This suggests that the male leadership were attached to the status quo which privileged the enjoyments of men. This is corroborated by Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi who in *For Better or For Worse?* argued that although there were some female

⁵³ ZANU, Documents from the ZANU Women's Seminar, May 1979, in Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse?*

⁵⁴ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, xx.

⁵⁵ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe," 421.

armed combatants, and rhetoric of women's equality abounded, the fact that women were primarily employed to perform auxiliary tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and carrying "makes it abundantly clear that ZANU had hardly laid any foundation for a significant transformation of gender relations during the struggle" and that "gender reforms were never on the movement's practical agenda."⁵⁶ In 2008, Sita Ranchod-Nilsson asserted that "commitments to gender equality were more situationally based than ideologically driven."⁵⁷ This suggests that the male nationalist leadership was never truly committed to redressing the gender balance, and that appeals to feminist sensibilities were driven by practical concerns such as enhancing recruitment for the struggle rather than an altruistic or ideological desire to realign the gender balance.

How did anticolonial misogyny come to be? Gay Seidman asserts that anticolonial misogyny was shaped by the combination of two separate legacies, those of traditional and colonial society. In precolonial Zimbabwe, women were viewed above all as mothers and providers, responsible for maintaining the family through their activities as subsistence farmers.⁵⁸ Whilst communal access to land gave women equal rights, Seidman contends that women were nevertheless subject to "noneconomic forms of male domination."⁵⁹ Until the passing of the Legal Age of Majority Act in 1982, women lacked autonomy and were considered to be minors under the control of their fathers and husbands.⁶⁰ Moreover, in Shona and Ndebele society, women were commodified by the institution of the bride-price, known as *lobola*, in which the family of the groom makes a payment to the bride's parents of cash or cattle before the wedding. This further disenfranchised women, as it gave their husbands legal control over

⁵⁶ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse?* xxi.

⁵⁷ Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, "Gender Politics and Gender Backlash in Zimbabwe," *Politics & Gender* 4, no. 4 (2008): 644.

⁵⁸ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe," 422.

⁵⁹ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe," 421.

⁶⁰ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe," 421.

them and their children. Similarly, the payment of *lobola* trapped women in marriages, where infertility was blamed exclusively on women and domestic abuse was overlooked because as Oppah Muchinguri tells us, once parents had “accepted that huge *lobola* and they used the money [they] could not return the money.” Consequently, they counselled their daughters to stay and that “the situation will change.” However, for women this led to great suffering and oftentimes resulted in them being battered.⁶¹ Because women were encouraged to remain in these situations, male abuse of women continued to be the norm. In addition, polygamy was commonplace. As women carried out the majority of agricultural labour, there were economic incentives and prestige associated with having multiple wives.⁶²

The arrival of white settlers in the late nineteenth century further complicated the position of black women in society and added a new dimension of male misogyny. According to Seidman, colonial society “brought its own gender ideology” inspired by nineteenth-century British society which considered women’s proper place to be in the home.⁶³ This had an impact on policies implemented by the colonial administrators in Rhodesia. For example, Seidman maintains that black women who were able to complete their education were channeled into teaching and nursing, “fields traditionally reserved for women in the West.”⁶⁴ The result of measures such as these was that the idea that women’s place being in the home and women as primarily suited to caretaker roles percolated and became entrenched in the traditional view of women.

⁶¹ Interview with Oppah Muchinguri, Harare, 13 April 1989, in Ranchod-Nilsson, “Gender Politics and the Pendulum of Political and Social Transformation,” 53.

⁶² Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 422.

⁶³ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 421.

⁶⁴ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 423.

However it is arguable that anticolonial misogyny was further formed by the influence of missionary education. As a means of maintaining the white supremacist status quo, the colonial government in Southern Rhodesia implemented extremely restrictive education policies for Africans in order to deprive the black majority of the knowledge and expertise necessary to seize control.⁶⁵ For example, whilst “education was made compulsory for white children” in 1930, this was only extended to Africans at independence in April 1980.⁶⁶ Consequently, the majority of African education was provided by missionaries. Missionary education had a two-pronged effect. Firstly, it was an extension of the civilizing mission of European colonialism, designed to create receptive subjects and a compliant native elite. The second effect was the inculcation and internalization of European norms and values. Among these was the European gender ideology which considered the proper place of women to be in the private sphere. This was compounded by the paternalistic idea inherent in Christian teaching that women are subordinate and are to be governed by men, as demonstrated in biblical verses such as “Wives, be subject to your husbands”⁶⁷ and that it is their responsibility to bear and raise children: “women will be saved through childbearing”.⁶⁸

Because of the Rhodesian government’s restrictive education policies, the majority of the early generation of nationalist leaders were educated at mission schools. These included Robert Mugabe, and “most cabinet ministers in the first independence government”.⁶⁹ It is arguable that the influence of these paternalistic Christian teachings during the formative years of their education imbued in many of these nationalist leaders a chauvinistic attitude towards women. A poignant example of this can be seen in the autobiographical works of the

⁶⁵ Martin and Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*, 56.

⁶⁶ Martin and Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*, 56.

⁶⁷ Ephesians 5:22.

⁶⁸ 1 Timothy 2:15.

⁶⁹ Martin and Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*, 56.

revered anti-apartheid activist, Nelson Mandela. Throughout the majority of Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he only mentions women in relation to their domestic roles or in their connection to male political figures. For example, Mandela states that, "I often visited the home of Amina Pahad for lunch, and then, suddenly, this charming woman put aside her apron and went to jail for her beliefs."⁷⁰ Moreover, in describing the revolutionary anti-apartheid activist, Albertina Sisulu, Mandela states that, "Walter's wife, was a wise and wonderful presence, and a strong supporter of Walter's political work."⁷¹ In referring to these revolutionary political activists who were instrumental in bringing about South Africa's liberation exclusively through these throw-away comments, Mandela de-centers their importance and contribution to the struggle and constructs them as auxiliary to the roles of men. This phenomenon is corroborated by Muriel Tillinghast and Patricia McFadden who contend that in nationalist ideology women are "seen as either holding the fort for men... or simply being mothers and wives and extensions of leaders."⁷² This was the case in neighbouring South Africa and it is arguable that the same was true in Zimbabwe.

It is true, as Seidman argues that these co-existing "gender ideologies were mingled together in ways that consistently worked to women's disadvantage."⁷³ Nevertheless, a re-examination of Fay Chung's autobiography suggests that the patriarchal perception of women inherent in the Rhodesian gender ideology also created opportunities for women's participation in the war. Chung maintains that, whilst "every able-bodied black man would be routinely arrested and questioned", women had free reign because of the Rhodesian "macho mores" and the

⁷⁰ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, 1995 [1994]), 119.

⁷¹ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 115.

⁷² Muriel Tillinghast and Patricia McFadden, "Women And National Liberation Movements," *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation* 2 no. 1 (1991): 4.

⁷³ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe," 423.

perception that women were unable to fight a war.⁷⁴ Consequently, women began to be recruited into the guerrilla forces *en masse*. Moreover, because of the chauvinism inherent in traditional society, the influx of women into the guerrilla forces motivated men of all ages to join the struggle, because men were reluctant to “follow behind women.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it is arguable that the mass involvement of women in the liberation army’s also created avenues for their further exploitation.

⁷⁴ Fay Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe* (Stockholm: Elanders Gotab, 2006), 81.

⁷⁵ Interview with Fay Chung, Harare, 21 November, 1988, in Ranchod-Nilsson, “Gender Politics and the Pendulum of Political and Social Transformation,” 53.

Chapter 2: Teaching or Toiling?

Education was an important undercurrent that flowed through discourses surrounding the Zimbabwe liberation war. Many thousands of people were motivated to join the struggle by their thirst for education and the systematic denial of basic amenities such as education which characterized the colonial system. For example, although almost all white students in Rhodesia completed their secondary education, John Pape highlights that in contrast, approximately three out of every 1,000 black children finished their “A” (Advanced) level exams.⁷⁶ Whilst teaching was a respectable vocation in European society it was even more revered in an African context as it denoted social mobility and access to book knowledge which was restricted by the colonial authorities. Moreover, many African leaders such as Robert Mugabe, Nelson Mandela, and Kwame Nkrumah fashioned themselves as teachers. Thus, from a masculine viewpoint, teaching implied leading. However, it had different connotations in a female context. This chapter will explore how women were engaged as teachers in the Zimbabwe liberation war and will argue that on one hand, female teachers weaponized their positions to contribute to the struggle, while on the other hand female teachers in the refugee camps in Mozambique redefined the idea of teaching as a caregiving role, imbuing it with deeper significance.

Previous scholars have explored how women were engaged as mother, providers, fighters and victims in the war. However, beyond highlighting their role as political commissars and disseminators of postcolonial ideology, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways that women were involved in Zimbabwe’s liberation war as teachers. It is arguable that because few women had degrees or formal teaching qualifications their role as teachers may have

⁷⁶ John Pape, “Changing Education for Majority Rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa,” *Comparative Education Review* 42 no. 3 (1998): 254.

been downplayed and overshadowed by their male counterparts who were often better educated, and were consequently seen as leaders and role-models. In addition, it is conceivable that throughout the 1970s when the liberation struggle occurred there was a pervasive misogynistic view of women - what do women know about the weighty affairs of the world? How can they be taken seriously as educators? With the emergence of feminist writing on the Zimbabwe liberation war with authors such as Gay Seidman in the mid-1980s, their work focused on more macro issues, such as the position of women in society generally and how this was affected by the civil war. This may explain why so little has been written specifically about the contribution of women as teachers.

In “Masculinities and Feminities in Zimbabwean Autobiographies”, Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi suggests that during the Zimbabwe Liberation War “detachment commanders are virtually [all] male, while women appear as teachers in camp schools, refugees and at times providers of sexual relief.”⁷⁷ This analysis implies that whereas men were considered to be authoritative and making a decisive contribution to the war, women played a subordinate role in that they were primarily obliged to provide services to others. The implication is that men were on the frontline while women were playing a lesser role sitting in the refugee camps. Conversely, in her autobiography Fay Chung suggests that rather than being vulnerable in their positions as teachers, women weaponized their teaching roles in order to tangibly contribute to the struggle. For example, she describes how her visibility as a teacher enabled her to transport guerrillas in her car through Zambia to the borders with Mozambique and Tanzania, and how even when she passed through roadblocks “the Zambian soldiers were unsuspecting” of her as she often travelled the same road with her students. Consequently,

⁷⁷ Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi, “Masculinities and Feminities in Zimbabwean Autobiographies of Political Struggle: The Case of Edgar Tekere and Fay Chung,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 29 no. 3 (2013): 125.

she states that “they allowed me to pass without question, assuming that I had students in my car.”⁷⁸ This disrupts Ngoshi’s presentation of teachers as being subordinate to the fighters.

Gay Seidman suggests that women were assigned teaching roles in the Zimbabwe liberation war because of the incorporation of European gender ideology into colonial education policies. Seidman maintains that in European society the proper place of women was considered to be in the home raising children. With the arrival of white settlers in the nineteenth century this gender ideology was superimposed on African society and was reflected in colonial policies. For example, she maintains that “girls who managed to complete their education” were predominantly fed into nursing and teaching. She asserts that these vocations were “traditionally reserved for women in the West” as they bore a strong correlation to the caregiving roles expected of women in the private sphere.⁷⁹ Seidman maintains that during, and in the years after the liberation war women continued to be “channeled into fields traditionally reserved for women in Zimbabwe” by the liberation armies.⁸⁰ This is reaffirmed by a former combatant, Joyce Sithabile Ndlovu who states that “We were all trained to be on the ready to defend the camps where we were and to return fire. But most girls were drafted in as teachers or sent to do other training.”⁸¹

In her autobiography Fay Chung highlights the valuable contribution of teachers to the war effort. A reappraisal of her autobiography gives new meaning to the idea of teacher as caregiver in the context of the Zimbabwe liberation struggle. Chung describes how upon discovering a small, malnourished boy named Arnold who was on a self-imposed hunger strike as a result of the trauma of being separated from his mother who had been deployed,

⁷⁸ Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 100.

⁷⁹ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 423.

⁸⁰ Seidman, “Women in Zimbabwe,” 433.

⁸¹ *Women of Resilience*, 181.

the teachers at the refugee camp established a system whereby young preschool children whose mothers were absent were placed with female teachers at night to ensure that they received sufficient care and emotional support, as opposed to having to stay in the large dormitories.⁸² Thus it is arguable that women in the Zimbabwe liberation war used their positions as teachers to provide indispensable care, as opposed to simply instructing.

Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi treats the issue of women running schools set up by ZANLA with scepticism. She suggests that ZANLA propaganda presented an image of women running schools as “evidence of ZANLA’s commitment to giving women the opportunity to liberate themselves.”⁸³ However, she contends that this was rather an attempt to prove the progressive nature of ZANLA to the world in order to acquire donor support from the international community.⁸⁴ This assessment appears less convincing however, when Fay Chung’s autobiography is taken into account. Chung was a member of the ZANLA Education Department and she suggests that rather than being set up by ZANLA as a means of propaganda, schools were set up by women and grew out of practical necessity in the camps. For example, she describes how at Ossibissa, the camp in Mozambique for pregnant women and mothers, children were dying every day from malnutrition because of the poor diet and lack of basic amenities. Uneducated women shunned the traditional diet of “maize meal porridge and peanut butter” and instead fed their young children on “tea, sugar, and biscuits” to indicate their social mobility as members of the guerrilla ranks.⁸⁵ To address this problem, women set up nutrition lessons in the camp in order to alleviate the dismal infant mortality. Furthermore, Chung asserts that clothes were desperately scarce in the camps, with many children and recruits wearing exposing, threadbare garments. In order to combat this

⁸² Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 224.

⁸³ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 53.

⁸⁴ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 53.

⁸⁵ Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 193.

issue vocational courses such as sewing were introduced and endorsed by teachers such as Sally Mugabe, in which each student was able to make themselves a shirt and a pair of trousers.⁸⁶ Thus it is arguable that the schools were not only for propaganda purposes but also to address a critical need.

Overall, this illustrates that the role of women as teachers was more important than some have acknowledged. While men in teaching positions were usually revered as leaders, the contribution of women as teachers during the liberation struggle has been viewed by many commentators as being ancillary to the main war action. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that women as teachers still made a significant, if barely recognized, contribution to the war effort for which they received little reward in the post-war era.

⁸⁶ Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 216.

Chapter 3: Women as Mothers and Providers in the War

“We who suffered, killed our chickens and goats, had children who died; we, mothers, who carried food on our heads to the guerrillas while other hid in safety, now we see that they are the ones who are getting paid and we are getting nothing. It is most unfair.”⁸⁷

- Meggi Zingani

In addition to being deployed as disseminators of political ideology and establishing classes to provide for the needs of children in the refugee camps and to empower other women with vital skills and knowledge, women also served a crucial and multifaceted role as providers during the years of the civil war. The roles that women fulfilled range from female combatants who provided nursing and medical services and transported materials to the frontlines, to rural women who supplied food and information and did domestic tasks for the guerrillas, to teenage girls known as *chimbwidos* who brought food and bathwater to the combatants and were often made to sleep with them. Moreover, as providers, women existed in an uncomfortable paradigm in which their sexuality was glorified and demonized in turns.

Contrary to existing scholarship presented by authors such as Ranger and O’Gorman who argue that women were empowered by their connection to the guerrillas and the domestic tasks that they performed for them, this chapter will argue that in fact women were used by the predominantly male leadership of the guerrilla forces as cheap labour to sustain the struggle. This is evidenced by copious interviews which began to emerge after the war which show that women have been largely excluded from the benefits for which they labored and

⁸⁷ "Meggi Zingani: Zinhanga Village, Buhera." In *Mothers of the Revolution*, ed. Irene Staunton (Harare: Weaver Press, 2020), 144.

sacrificed during the war years. Moreover, it is arguable that many women are poorer for their contributions to the guerrilla struggle.

Historically, rural women in Zimbabwe have been ascribed crucial importance as providers for their families because they were heavily involved in subsistence farming.⁸⁸ This was exacerbated by the migrant labour system which saw large numbers of men in the twenties and thirties moving to towns to take up positions as wage labourers.⁸⁹ In Eleanor O’Gorman’s analysis of women’s local resistance in *The Frontline Runs Through Every Woman*, she argues that during the war “women’s ‘domestic’ work assumed political importance because of the centrality of local food supply networks to the effective conduct of guerrilla warfare.”⁹⁰ This is to say that doing domestic chores for the guerrillas endowed women with a sense of empowerment as they were considered to be a central in sustaining the guerrilla struggle.

However, this assessment appears less convincing when interviews with women who were involved in feeding and taking care of the guerrillas are revisited. It is arguable that contrary to O’Gorman’s interpretation, the role of providers that was foisted on rural women served more to disempower than to empower them as the work of preparing and delivering food to the comrades was extremely taxing and put women in a catch-22 situation between the guerrilla forces and the Rhodesian soldiers. This is illustrated by Margaret Viki who maintains that “we were scared of both sides, afraid of the soldiers who would kill us if they found out, and afraid of the freedom fighters, because if we refused to feed them that would also mean we would die.”⁹¹ Moreover, providing for the guerrillas inevitably led to these women’s cumulative impoverishment, as they were forced to slaughter their livestock and make frequent contributions of money and non-perishable goods. This is illustrated by Loice

⁸⁸ Seidman, 424.

⁸⁹ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe," 429.

⁹⁰ O’Gorman, *The Frontline*, 17.

⁹¹ “Margaret Viki: Mtshogwe.” In *Mothers of the Revolution*, ed. Irene Staunton (Harare: Weaver Press, 2020) 159.

Mushore who tells us that “we were required to donate a bucket of mealie-meal every week plus two dollars.”⁹²

Moreover, in *For Better or Worse?* Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi highlights how slogans such as “Forward with the cooking stick!” became common currency in ZANLA.⁹³ By portraying cooking utensils as offensive weapons, she maintains that the role of mothers was glorified and given new importance, as without their contributions of food “there would be no nationalist fighters and, by extension, there would be no nation.”⁹⁴ However, a re-examination of interviews with mothers shows that the way they were expected to contribute to the struggle was anything but glorious, and was at times torturous and degrading. This is illustrated by Thema Khumalo who describes how women would tie up food bowls in their headscarves and on their backs like babies in order to transport them to the guerrillas hideouts. She describes how, “sometimes the bowls had holes in them and the soup would leak out and burn us... but you could not cry out.”⁹⁵ Nonetheless, despite the discomfort the women were resolute in ensuring that they reached their destinations “so that freedom fighters had something to eat.”⁹⁶

Another way that women provided services during the war was as *chimbwidos*. These were adolescent girls who were liaisons between the guerrillas and the community. They brought food and supplies to the guerrilla’s, summoned the community to *pungwes* (overnight political meetings), and gave them information about the whereabouts of the Rhodesian soldiers. Terrence Ranger maintains that young women gained prestige through the close

⁹² “Loice Mushore.” In *Mothers of the Revolution*, 99.

⁹³ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 19.

⁹⁴ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 19.

⁹⁵ “Thema Khumalo,” In *Mothers of the Revolution*, 82.

⁹⁶ “Thema Khumalo,” In *Mothers of the Revolution*, 82.

relationship that they had to the guerrillas in their capacity as *chimbwidos*, and asserts that for the first time young girls “were able to exercise a good deal of power” in their communities.⁹⁷

However, a re-examination of interviews with women who were *chimbwidos* and with mothers of *chimbwidos* calls into question the favorable image that Ranger paints of the role that these young women played as providers and liaisons to the guerrillas. Although some women relished their close relationship with the guerrillas and even had favorite men, for most young women it is arguable that they stood to lose more than they could gain. For example, because of the duty to provide sexual services to the guerrillas, young women were often accused of being prostitutes and had their reputations tarnished. This is evidenced by Juliet Makande a former *chimbwido* who laments that when forced to sleep with the comrades, “you couldn’t even tell a friend about it because it might be said you were a prostitute.”⁹⁸ Moreover, girls often fell pregnant and this disrupted the dynamics in traditional society. During the war, combatants were expected to take up a *nom de guerre*. However, because of this it was often impossible to know who had fathered the child, so women were unable to rely on support from the father in raising the child. According to Juliet Makande, a knock-on effect of this was that because the girls did not know the real names of the fathers, they also did not know their totems.⁹⁹ In Zimbabwean culture totems are very important as they are linked to the clan and ancestral spirits and play an important role in matters such as birth, death, marriage, and illness.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 207.

⁹⁸ “Juliet Makande,” In *Mothers of the Revolution*, 54.

⁹⁹ “Juliet Makande,” In *Mothers of the Revolution*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ The Zimbabwean, “Totems: do they control our lives?” [2012], last modified 26 Feb., 2021, <https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2012/08/totems-do-they-control-our/>, accessed on 24 March, 2021.

Furthermore, as a result of the sexual abuse that the girls experienced at the hands of the guerrillas, many women developed dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and relationships with sex after the war. This is illustrated by a former *chimbwido*, Maureen Moyo who states that she no longer sees “sex as a way of pleasure, but as a form of punishment.”¹⁰¹ Thus it is arguable that whilst the role of *chimbwidos* was glorified as integral to the struggle, it was in reality simply abuse of young women, especially considering that *chimbwidos* were frequently aged between ten and fourteen years old. On top of this, after the war, former *chimbwidos* were marginalized in society and as marriage prospects because in traditional Zimbabwean society which values “feminine chastity”, the girls were considered dirty for having lived with the guerrillas.¹⁰²

Overall, the sources suggest that the guerrillas exploited female labour and production in order to achieve liberation on the cheap. Moreover, they sexually abused women leading to lasting trauma and issues in their private lives. Whilst male combatants were compensated, many women were left high and dry and were not compensated or thanked for the extreme sacrifices that they made. This speaks to how women were viewed in society and an assumption that no matter the circumstances it is a woman’s duty to provide for her extended family.

¹⁰¹ *Women of Resilience*, 181.

¹⁰² Ranchod-Nilsson, "Gender Politics and Gender Backlash in Zimbabwe," 646.

Chapter 4: Women as Combatants

In February 1974, Joice Mujuru who later became vice president of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, is said to have shot down a Rhodesian helicopter with a machine gun.¹⁰³ Though the credibility of this account has often been called into question, with detractors arguing that Joice was just a *chimbwido* and that it was in fact a male commander, Comrade Joseph Chipembere with whom she was having an affair, who shot down the helicopter, this episode nevertheless constitutes an interesting starting point for an examination of the roles of women as combatants in Zimbabwe's liberation war, and the myths and rhetoric that surrounded their participation.¹⁰⁴ ZANU sermonizing in favour of equal opportunities and women's advancement encouraged many women to join the struggle. This was epitomized in 1979 when Robert Mugabe publicly proclaimed his commitment to women's emancipation.¹⁰⁵ This chapter will explore how women experienced the Zimbabwe liberation war as combatants, how men viewed them, and how the experience of rank and file women on the ground compared with the rhetoric about women's liberation that was being espoused by the party leadership.

Writing in 1984, Gay Seidman asserted that although for the first few years of the war women were primarily enlisted to perform ancillary roles, such as "growing food, cooking, and carrying supplies", in 1974, ZANU decided to train them as soldiers, such that by the time the war ended "entire squads of women were fighting inside the country."¹⁰⁶ Moreover, Seidman relays an account that by 1978 "there was no sexual division in the camps. Men and

¹⁰³ Norimitsu Onishi, "Zimbabwean Pushed From Mugabe's Inner Circle Now Challenges It." 1 June, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/02/world/africa/zimbabwe-joyce-mujuru.html>, accessed on 25 Feb., 2021.

¹⁰⁴ The Sunday Mail, "Dr Joice Mujuru unmasked." 21 Aug. 2016, <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/dr-joyce-mujuru-unmasked>, accessed on 25 Feb., 2021.

¹⁰⁵ ZANU, Documents from the ZANU Women's Seminar, May 1979.

¹⁰⁶ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe", 426.

women shared all tasks in common, whether these were of an agricultural, domestic or defensive nature.”¹⁰⁷

However, it is arguable that Seidman’s findings with regard to the egalitarianism in the camps and the opportunities for women’s advancement seem to be blurred by her limited primary source base. In reaching her conclusions Seidman predominantly relied on accounts derived from the state sponsored daily newspaper *The Herald*, and from a limited pool of interviewees, such as Joice Mujuru and Dr. Naomi Nhiwatiwa. Besides their wartime experiences these women are notable for acquiring some of the token ministerial positions awarded to women in the new government. At the time that this article was written in 1984, Zimbabwe was a newly emergent nation and likely trying to garner favour on the world stage. Thus, it would be in the interest of the leaders to portray an image of a progressive and equal nation in order to gain international support and entice donors. It is arguable that in basing her analysis off accounts that toed the line for the new Zimbabwean government Seidman’s analysis obscures the reality of the majority of Zimbabwean women’s wartime experiences.

In her seminal investigation of the involvement of women in the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), which was the military wing of ZANU, Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi argues that despite overtures of gender equality the war was a very gendered experience. Women remained in “feminized spaces”, (areas deemed to have been brought under control by male comrades in order to be safely occupied by female detachments) and performed auxiliary functions such as transporting weapons, because of a perception by the male hierarchy that women were weak and needed protecting, and because of the myth that

¹⁰⁷ Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe", 426.

war required “real men”.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Nhongo- Simbanegavi maintains that despite receiving the same training as men, women were only allowed to “fire guns in self-defense” and were prevented from engaging the enemy in the same ways as men.¹⁰⁹

Based on a re-evaluation of interviews with female ex-combatants, and Fay Chung’s autobiography *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, this chapter will argue that women did at times have some agency; however, they continued to be used by male comrades and channelled into auxiliary roles whilst men fulfilled the perceivably more gratifying wartime functions.

Whilst authors such as Gay Seidman and Enna Gudhlanga have argued that the mass recruitment and training of women in the early 1970s was evidence of the nationalist leaders “commitment to changing gender relations”,¹¹⁰ a close review of Fay Chung’s autobiography suggests that rather than trying to instate a more equal gender balance in the guerrilla forces, the influx of women was a calculated military and political strategy by the high command in order to gain a tactical edge over the Rhodesians. According to Chung, Rhodesian chauvinism was such that they believed that war was a male preserve and was beyond the capabilities of women. Chung maintains that, “At a time when every able-bodied black man would be routinely arrested and questioned under torture, women were able to move about freely.”¹¹¹ Consequently, ZANLA began to train women *en masse* in order to evade the Rhodesian security forces because “they were completely unprepared to fight against women.”¹¹² It is arguable that rather than being a progressive and altruistic policy, the mass involvement of women in ZANLA from 1972 onwards was an attempt by the high command

¹⁰⁸ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 97.

¹⁰⁹ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 97.

¹¹⁰ Enna Gudhlanga, "Shutting them out: opportunities and challenges of women's participation in Zimbabwean politics - a historical perspective," *Journal of Third World Studies* 30 no. 1 (2013): 156.

¹¹¹ Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 80-81.

¹¹² Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 81.

to exploit the military ambitions of women in order to gain a strategic advantage over the Rhodesian forces.

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of success in guerilla warfare depends on winning the hearts and minds of the masses. Although the women who joined the struggle voluntarily did so because they wanted to fight,¹¹³ Fay Chung asserts that they were eagerly received into the insurgent ranks in order to be deployed as political commissars rather than the fighters that they had hoped to be. This is because women were considered to be “better suited for doing political work among other women” and could more easily blend in amongst villagers.¹¹⁴ This has been a successful tactic in other anticolonial contexts, such as in Mali where the midwife Auoa Kéita used her maternity ward and rapport with the community to deliver political education to women who were ordinarily marginalized from the political sphere.¹¹⁵ Whilst the work of politicizing the masses is essential, it is conceivable that the male high command and male rank and file were happy for women to fulfill this task so that they could involve themselves with “what they considered the more crucial roles.”¹¹⁶

Despite the fact that women were generally held back from offensive missions in contested zones because the pervasive gender ideologies held by the liberation army’s male leadership believed that women were weak and needed protecting, Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi has shown that women’s auxiliary duties which included transporting weapons and supplies to the frontlines were actually more dangerous than the male tasks of engaging the enemy.

Women’s loads were heavier which “slowed their movements and they spent more time in

¹¹³ *Women of Resilience*, 5.

¹¹⁴ Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga*, 80.

¹¹⁵ Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 146.

¹¹⁶ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 87.

hostile terrain than did the men's units."¹¹⁷ This extreme toil and lifestyle of deprivation had detrimental and long lasting effects on their health. For example, many women stopped menstruating and after the war were unable to conceive because the extreme exertion and malnutrition that they endured had caused "permanent damage to their reproductive systems."¹¹⁸

Paradoxically, interviews with some female ex-combatants show that at the time many female guerrillas in fact felt pleased by the disappearance of their periods because they thought that it made them more manly. One ex-combatant, Nancy Saungweme told an interviewer that "we thought it was macho."¹¹⁹ In addition to endeavouring physically to be like men, Saungweme reports that female combatants also sought to emulate personality characteristics that they thought were manly. She states that during her training, she and three friends were subjected to beatings by female commanders that were "worse than the bombing".¹²⁰ She argues that "maybe they so much wanted to be like men, to be tough and cruel like them."¹²¹ It is possible that in striving to emulate men in both physical strength and emotional disposition, and in trying to forego their femininity, that female combatants were trying to demonstrate that they were worthy of and deserved the same rights as men.

Women had different motivations for joining the struggle. Whilst Gay Seidman argues that women joined the war to liberate themselves from male oppression and colonial oppression, a lot of women were taken from school and forced to join the struggle. From interviews with female ex-combatants, it appears that some joined the war for some sort of catharsis or

¹¹⁷ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 85.

¹¹⁸ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 86.

¹¹⁹ *Women of Resilience*, 51.

¹²⁰ *Women of Resilience*, 52.

¹²¹ *Women of Resilience*, 52.

revenge. For example, Prudence Uriri an ex-combatant whose father was arrested in connection with nationalist politics explains that “my main motivation was that I wanted to go and get trained, [then] come back and shoot the prison” in order to release her father.¹²² At times women did have the opportunity and capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices, as outlined by Fay Chung in her autobiography. Although it is of note that as an educated woman with direct connections to the leadership, Chung’s involvement is not representative of the wartime experience of many rural Zimbabwean women and combatants. Whether or not Joice Mujuru was indeed the one who pulled the trigger, it is likely that she and others like her were motivated by the machismo of the war and, on some level, sought the power that this lifestyle offered. Nonetheless, for the vast majority, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate that the dream of empowerment through combat proved to be illusory as women remained constrained by the myriad factors influencing their position in society.

¹²² *Women of Resilience*, 61.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst thousands of Zimbabwean women were motivated to join the liberation war by reasons including the rhetoric of gender equality espoused by the nationalist leadership, promises that the war would allow them access to amenities such as land and healthcare, and a desire to loosen themselves from the stranglehold of traditional patriarchal society and colonialism, it is postulated that for most women their contributions and sacrifices in the struggle amounted to nought. Though the situation for many rural women was precarious before the war, their direct involvement in the conflict often made their post-war realities worse. For example, in the years following the end of the war, many female ex-combatants have found themselves disillusioned and having benefitted from none of the promises made to them by the nationalist leadership. In addition to the physical and psychological trauma sustained during the war, they were also marginalized in society and cast aside as marriage prospects, as traditional parents deemed them too rough and assertive as a result of their experiences in the war.¹²³ This is very damaging in a society that ascribes huge importance to the traditional family model. Despite the fact that some women such as *chimbwidos* gained temporary prestige and influence in their communities through their connections with the guerrillas, this prestige was short-lived. Moreover, many of these women have been deeply affected in their personal lives and have experienced dysfunctional marriages and interpersonal relationships as a result of the exploitation and abuse that they were subjected to by male guerrillas during the war.

Although from the mid-1970s large numbers of women were recruited and many received the same training as men, it is arguable that the male dominated leadership coopted women's

¹²³ *Women of Resilience*, 12.

enthusiasm and ideological zeal as a military strategy. As extreme chauvinism was a common characteristic of the Rhodesian mentality, they believed that war was a male affair and that women belonged in the private sphere of the home, and consequently the Rhodesians were unprepared to fight women. This suggests that the integration of women was a military strategy by the male leadership to gain an edge on the Rhodesians rather than an act of female empowerment. Thus it is evident that in integrating women, the military high command were using women rather than empowering them.

Moreover, throughout the latter stages of the war despite many women having received equivalent training to men they were consistently held back from the contested zones on the battlefield due to a perception by the male leadership that women were weak and needed protecting. Instead women were charged with duties such as cooking, cleaning, nursing and transporting supplies to the frontlines. As opposed to the commonly peddled narrative that women were kept in “feminized spaces” for their protection,¹²⁴ it is plausible that in fact women were rather employed as cheap labour during the struggle so that men could conduct the perceivably more glorious task of fighting the enemy. Furthermore, it is arguable that even after independence Zimbabwean women continued to be “commodified” and used as cheap labour by black men as the promises made for women’s advancement did not materialize.

Lastly, it is notable that women were, almost without exception, disappointed by the outcomes of the liberation war. It appears that women who had received more education before the war fared better during and after the war, as some were offered opportunities for further training and more diverse positions; for instance as radio operators. For some, the

¹²⁴ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 97.

training that they received during the war functioned as a gateway into respectable careers afterwards. Meanwhile, peasant women who had little or no education before the war found themselves abandoned at assembly points, destitute, and in want of the benefits that the government had promised them and that had motivated them to join the struggle.

Consequently, it is submitted that whilst women across the board had endured oppression due to their gender and colonialism, and faced extraordinary physical and psychological trauma and hardship during the war, the situation was worst for peasant women who, due to their class, were deprived of opportunities for promotion both during the war and after independence.

Although legal reforms were enacted to improve the position of women in society, such as the Legal Age of Majority Act (1982), the Matrimonial Causes Act (1985) and the Customary Law and Primary Courts Act (1981), which guaranteed “financial support for deserted and divorced wives and their children under customary law,” women remain suppressed by cultural norms and have not really been able to advance in society.¹²⁵ The evidence shows that overall, the war did not make women’s lives better. Many women were traumatized by their experiences and many of the ex-combatants said that they would not go to war again because the oppression has continued, but with a new face; such that the hardship and sacrifice that women endured was not worth it.

Double standards were at play in the way that the male elite dealt with women’s empowerment and independence in the war and the years that followed immediately after it. The way that men viewed women, especially independent women in society, was epitomized by the “clean-up” campaigns carried out in 1983, 1985, 1987, and 1988, in which “women

¹²⁵ Ranchod-Nilsson, “Gender Politics and Gender Backlash,” 645.

who were not accompanied by men” were accused of being prostitutes and vagrants and were arrested for sullyng the social space.¹²⁶ Consequently it is arguable that the male leadership manipulated women by claiming to empower them during the war and encouraging them to contribute to the fight for independence, and then punishing them for that independence after the war. There is a sense that men exploited the cause of women’s empowerment for their own benefit.

This analysis has set the ball in motion for more in-depth research into whether the Zimbabwean case typifies the experiences of women in liberation struggles elsewhere in Africa, or whether there are examples where the outcome has been more favorable for the women involved. It also poses the question of whether this analytical framework is the most effective way of studying women’s involvement in the Zimbabwe liberation war and in liberation wars further afield, or whether there are more effective ways of doing so; for example, from a Marxist perspective. There is room for further research on the impact of class on women’s experiences in liberation struggles.

¹²⁶ Ranchod-Nilsson, “Gender Politics and Gender Backlash,” 646.

Bibliography

- Britannica, "Transatlantic slave trade." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/slave-trade> (accessed on 30th March, 2021).
- Chung, Fay. *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe*. Stockholm: Elanders Gotab, 2006.
- Cousins, Alan. "State, Ideology, and Power in Rhodesia, 1958-1972." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24, no. 1 (1991): 35-64.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." In *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk, 93-118. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963.
- Gudhlanga, Enna. "Shutting them out: opportunities and challenges of women's participation in Zimbabwean politics - a historical perspective." *Journal of Third World Studies* 30 no. 1 (2013): 151-170.
- Joseph-Gabriel, Annette K. *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*. Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020.
- Kedourie, Elie. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971.
- Kruger, Norma J. *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Lan, David. *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. London: James Currey, 1985.
- Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. London: Abacus, 1995 [1994].
- Martin, David and Phyllis Johnson. *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.
- McClintock, Anne. "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism.'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98.
- Ngoshi, Hazel Tafadzwa. "Masculinities and Femininities in Zimbabwean Autobiographies of Political Struggle: The Case of Edgar Tekere and Fay Chung." *Journal of Literary Studies* 29 no. 3 (2013): 119-139.

- Nhongo-Simbanegavi, Josephine. *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle*. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*. Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1957.
- O'Gorman, Eleanor. *The Frontline Runs Through Every Woman: Women & Local Resistance in the Zimbabwean Liberation War*. Harare: Weaver Press, 2011.
- Onishi, Norimitsu. "Zimbabwean Pushed From Mugabe's Inner Circle Now Challenges It." *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/02/world/africa/zimbabwe-joyce-mujuru.html> (accessed on 25 Feb., 2021).
- Pape, John. "Changing Education for Majority Rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa." *Comparative Education Review* 42 no. 3 (1998): 253-66.
- Ranchod-Nilsson, Sita. "Gender Politics and the Pendulum of Political and Social Transformation in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006): 49-67.
- Ranchod-Nilsson, Sita. "Gender Politics and Gender Backlash in Zimbabwe." *Politics & Gender* 4, no. 4 (2008): 642-52.
- Ranger, Terrence. *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*. London: James Currey, 1985.
- Seidman, Gay W. "Women in Zimbabwe: Postindependence Struggles." *Feminist Studies* 10, no. 3 (1984): 419-40.
- Smith, Sharon. "Women's Liberation: The Marxist Tradition." *International Socialist Review* 93 (2014).
- Staunton, Irene. *Mothers of the Revolution*, ed. Irene Staunton. Harare: Weaver Press, 2020 [1990].
- The Sunday Mail. "Dr Joice Mujuru unmasked," (2016) <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/dr-joyce-mujuru-unmasked>, (accessed on 25 Feb., 2021).
- The Zimbabwean, "Totems: do they control our lives?" (2021) <https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2012/08/totems-do-they-control-our/> (accessed on 24 March, 2021).
- Tillinghast, Muriel and Patricia McFadden. "Women And National Liberation Movements." *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation* 2 no. 1 (1991): 1-7.

Women of Resilience: the voices of women ex-combatants. Harare: Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000.

Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction.* Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2001.