

Book Review

For Better Or Worse? Women And ZANLA In Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle

Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000
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Traditional scholarship about Zimbabwe's liberation struggle tended to be gender neutral and highly romanticised. The liberation fighters were presented as fair, brave and disciplined whilst the opposite applied to the forces of the colonial state. Recent historiography is now showing that all the protagonists in the war perpetrated injustices against the unarmed civilians and within their ranks. It is in this vein of challenging, reconstructing and deconstructing dominant notions and paradigms that Nhongo-Simbanegavi's book, *For Better or Worse? Women And ZANLA In Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle*, emerges. The book deserves the commendation of all those interested in the history of African liberation movements. It is probably the most cogent refutation of the claims of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) to the establishment of gender equity during the war of liberation. It shows the resilience of patriarchal hegemony in the

various contexts that punctuated Zimbabwe's history, such as the colonial and post-colonial periods, and the times of war and peace. The book is well researched and weaves a rich tapestry of women's, mostly combatants', experiences during the war and in the post-colonial dispensation. Besides oral interviews and data from secondary sources, the book relies heavily on the rich but largely inaccessible ZANLA archives at the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) headquarters in Harare.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter looks at how myths of gender equality developed during the liberation war. ZANU's media organs such as the *Zimbabwe News* were awash with stories depicting the transformation of gender relations during the liberation process. Women with guns strapped on their back and wearing trousers and T-shirts were shown as symbols of women power and the equality they had attained since the masculine and feminine gender divide had been erased by the revolutionary process. Subsequently writers and researchers uncritically relied on this official propaganda and accepted the view that women emerged from the war significantly emancipated from the grip of patriarchy.

The ensuing five chapters span the period from mass mobilisation and recruitment for fighting, largely between 1972 and 1976, to the transition to independence and gender dynamics in the post-colonial phase. Basically, it is these chapters that, through a systematic presentation of empirical evidence, dispel the fallacious view of the establishment of gender equality during the war. Women played what were largely perceived as auxiliary roles during the war. Initially ZANLA did not tolerate women's presence on the battlefield. The operational field was regarded as masculine terrain. Women were confined to the rear bases in Mozambique, such as Chibawawa, Osibisisa and Nyadzonya, where they took part in activities such as nursing, teaching, and secretarial duties. Starting from 1978, ZANLA's attitude changed, and women cadres began to go into the field, but their main task was the transportation of war materials. The female cadres also nursed the sick and the injured, and they mobilised support for the war. The author observes that:

Although some were, by then (1979), fighting as armed guerrillas, they never constituted more than a small component of the total ZANLA forces. Mostly they were deployed in 'liberated' or 'semi-liberated' zones as porters and nurses and political commissars. Their presence in operation zones merely served to extend the frontiers of their 'auxiliary' operations rather than represent a change in their roles.

Essentially the duties of women on the front did not differ from what they had been doing in the camps at the rear in Mozambique. Female cadres as well as ordinary women were often sexually abused and accused of witchcraft during the war. This shows that the revolutionaries were still bound by traditional patriarchal proclivities of associating witchcraft with women more than men, and of taking women largely as sexual play toys. In the villages at the front women were never co-opted into the base committees that co-ordinated the procurement of provisions for the guerrillas, such as food, clothes and batteries for their radios. Cooking and laundry were their main wartime duties. Basically, the war perpetuated the peripheralisation and domestication of women. They were never co-opted into the decision-making process. Nhongo-Simbanegavi notes that by 1979 Sheba Tavarwisa, the Deputy Secretary For Education, was the only woman in the High Command (HC). The HC was ZANLA's highest level of command and it had 28 members. Tavarwisa also sat in the Central Committee (CC) from 1977, together with Teurai Ropa Nhongo (now Joyce Mujuru), the Secretary For Women's Affairs. The CC had 33 posts in all. In the Women's Affairs Section of ZANU, the patriarchal streak of the party manifested itself as well, as top posts were occupied by those women connected to the male leadership of the party. The author notes that:

Teurai Ropa, the wife of the ZANLA Operational Commander, Rex Nhongo, was appointed the departmental head. Her deputy, Sally Mugabe, was the wife of Robert Mugabe, the President of ZANU. Julia Zvobgo, the wife of the Party's Publicity Secretary, became the department's secretary for administration...thus speculation about the husbands' influence regarding their appointment could not be ignored.

The gross under-representation of women in the liberation movement's decision-making organs was pathetic, especially when looked at against the background of its claims that by 1979 more than a third of its combatants were women.

With the coming of détente in 1979, ZANLA exploited society's attitude of associating warfare with men more than women to use its female cadres to campaign for it contrary to the cease-fire stipulations. Trained fighters were supposed to be at assembly points. Nhongo-Simbanegavi observes that:

The media focused on 'the boys from the bush' because ZANLA had deployed few women fighters inside Zimbabwe. In addition, the guerrilla leaders who came to help implement the ceasefire exercise

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were almost all men. By excluding women fighters from the limelight, ZANLA was able to cheat the monitoring system. During the ceasefire, ZANLA deployed its women fighters extensively, especially in areas where the men were under pressure to leave for Assembly Points (APs). The holding of elections in February 1980 and the consequent unravelling of the post-colonial dispensation did not usher in much for women. For example, 'out of the fifty-seven seats ZANU-PF secured in Parliament, women won five. These women out of a total of eighty candidates were the only women the Party had fielded in the elections'. Three of these female parliamentarians got cabinet posts. Teurai Ropa became Minister of Youth, Sport and Recreation, Victoria Chitepo became deputy minister in the Education and Culture Ministry, and Naomi Nhwatiwa became Deputy Minister of Posts and Telecommunications. The under-representation of women at governmental level after the war was inevitable, since ZANU had largely excluded women from its top administrative structures in the war.

The patronisation of women continued in the post-colonial era because women's participation was legitimate only through the ZANU-PF affiliated Women's League. The establishment castigated women who tried to operate outside the ambits of the Party. As some women began to create alternative platforms to address pertinent issues, they set themselves up in non-governmental organisations, creating organs like the Women's Action Group. ZANU-PF, however, was not happy with organisations operating out of the orbit of the League. Nhongo-Simbanegavi observes that:

Teurai Ropa directly castigated one newly formed group, the Women's Task Force, whose members she described as 'the elite group of women'. She accused the Task Force of two things: merely sitting around and doing nothing, or when they worked at all, of opposing the League. She vowed 'to act to stop all this confusion'. Such threats created an atmosphere of intimidation, thereby restricting and curtailing women's organisation outside the dictates of the party. The message was clear: unless people wanted to organise around charities, whose terms of reference excluded meddling in politics, there was no space for them.

The authorities at times took measures that curtailed the rights of women. In 1983 the police conducted an infamous 'clean-up operation'. They picked up some men for vagrancy, but they rounded up hundreds of women moving at night, alleging that they were prostitutes. The police decided that since the women obviously had nothing better to do, they should be taken to the Zambezi Valley to engage in agricultural production. They claimed 'this

would not only benefit the women, but also the people of that terribly under-developed part of the country'. This act by the police shows that the urban environment was considered legitimate only to male citizens at night and it also shows how society was determined to ensure the perpetual control of women by men. There was a paradoxical element of continuity between the Zimbabwean authorities' and their Rhodesian predecessors' attitude towards women. Rhodesian colonial authorities often raided men's hostels in the urban centres to flush out the women living there and return them to the rural areas.

However, though ZANU-PF- was largely unsympathetic to women, it passed laws that empowered women in line with its wartime assertions and the politically correct views it pronounced during the pre-election campaign. The most commendable of these was the Legal Age Of Majority Act of 1982. Before this, women were considered perpetual minors and could not enter into any transaction without the consent of male kin. Now with the passage of the Act, anyone above the age of 18 years, irrespective of sex, was competent at law to enter into any contract or relationship. The Labour Relations Act of 1985 also erased sex-based discrimination at work. Before this act, women could not earn more than three-quarters of a male counterpart of equal rank, experience, and educational qualifications. The Matrimonial Causes Act was also passed. It changed property distribution practices in the event of divorce. In the past, the bias 'towards tribal customs' had favoured men. The Act also removed blame as a factor in determining distribution of property after divorce.

Finally, the book clearly shows that in spite of ZANLA's posturing as a progressive movement, sensitive to gender equality, patriarchal tendencies held sway in the actions of the party both during the struggle and thereafter. Male interests took centre stage, often at the expense of women.