The Construction of a 'Liberation': Gender and the 'National Liberation Movement' in Zimbabwe

In his 'critical introduction' to the theories of nationalism Umut Őzkirimli observes that a 'common feature' of contemporary approaches is that they reproduce the dominant discourse: none of the main theories consider 'the experiences of the subordinated' (2000: 192). Whilst authors from the 'subaltern' collective have sought to address this issue (for example Chaterjee, 1993), there remains a virtual 'silence regarding the gendered dimension of [the] subject' (Eley and Suny, 1996: 259). Reflecting the poverty of the dominant theories, analyses of individual nationalist movements have also tended to neglect the issue of gender: sadly few of the popular studies intoZimbabwe's 1970s national liberation movement buck this trend (Robins: 1996: 80).

Working within a constructivist framework, this essay will show that the process of 'imagining communities' (Anderson, 1993) and 'inventing traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) had very different consequences for the men and women of Zimbabwe's national liberation movement. First, the hopes for gender equality which surrounded the movement will be explored, together with the steps that the 'Zimbabwe African National Union' (ZANU) took to empower women once the liberation struggle was finished. Second, the essay will analyse the factors behind the failure of the post-liberation women's movement. It will be argued that ZANU, together with feminist scholars, greatly exaggerated women's role within the conflict. Finally, the essay will assert that the Zimbabwean women's movement was never in a position to fight effectively for emancipation. Whilst many women made valuable contributions to the liberation struggle, their primary role was symbolic: gender was manipulated by both sides to legitimise the conflict. Men dominated positions of power throughout, and from these positions men defined the 'common history' designed to unite the newZimbabwe; unsurprisingly, this reinvigorated patriarchal authority. The essay will briefly conclude by highlighting the continuing importance of nationalism and gender in contemporaryZimbabwe: the liberation narrative has been constructed in a way that reproduces and reinforces patriarchal discourses. However, it will be suggested that this analysis may bring a ray of hope for the organisations of the current women's movement inZimbabwe.

Before I begin I must clarify my terms: I will draw on the work of Cynthia Enloe to define the nation as a 'collection of people who have come to believe that they have been shaped by a common past and are destined to share a common future. That belief is usually nurtured by a common language and a sense of otherness from groups around them' Nationalism is a political project aimed at 'fostering those beliefs and promoting policies which permit the nation to control its own destiny' (1990: 45). The contest for black majority rule in Zimbabwewill variously be termed a 'struggle', a 'conflict' and a 'war', whilst the 'liberation movement' is referred to as such in reflection of its stated aims rather than as a judgement of its actual achievements.

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Fighting Side by Side: Liberation for the Men and Women of Zimbabwe

It is crucial to recognise that 'women' are not a single group inZimbabwe: social cleavages such as class, age, ethnicity, clan membership and race (amongst others) heavily determined their experiences. Specifically, those who joined the guerrillas had a very different war to those who remained civilians. This leaves Bhebe and Ranger to conclude that 'the wartime experience of women was so varied and contradictory that no simple discontinuities or continuities can be discerned' (1996: 28). However, it remains useful to consider how the issue of gender has been conceived and manipulated during the lifespan of the national liberation struggle.

At the beginning of her 1979 publication, 'Women and Racial Discrimination in Rhodesia', Aquina Weinreich declares that she has come to see the gender situation 'in an ever-clearer light' (p.12). Her UNESCO study, compiled with the cooperation and approval of ZANU, paints a strikingly positive picture of women's prospects in a liberated state. Weinreich wrote that women have 'already shed their traditional passivity and have begun to insist on equality in quite concrete situations' (p.45). She concluded that the 'the prospects for full sexual equality in the new Zimbabwe are… promising' (p.90). This position reflected a broad consensus amongst academics that the emancipation of Zimbabwe's women was a process which had begun with the national liberation movement and which would be completed once the country gained 'true' independence.

For Ruth Weiss, it was 'hardly surprising' that women should be playing such an important and progressive role 'in the liberation wars', because it was their 'society that was raped, if not destroyed, by colonialism' (1986: 7). Women's activism could be seen at numerous levels. Gender politics appeared increasingly institutionalised within ZANU, allowing the party's Women's League to declare publicly that 'for the revolution to triumph in its totality there must be emancipation of women' (in Seidman, 1984: 419). Similarly, the *Zimbabwe News, a* monthly bulletin distributed by ZANU, 'left readers in no doubt as to the Party's commitment' to this cause: Nhongo-Simbanegavi reports that 'it carried pictures of formidable-looking women, often in situations defying traditional notions of femininity' (2000: 1). The emancipation of women was possible, Weiss argued, 'thanks to the social change that was set in motion by the armed revolution'; women were playing a 'dynamic role' in the national liberation movement (1986: 7; also Ranger, 1985: 95). The increased prominence which women held in society was probably most evident in their recruitment to the guerrilla armies.

Dr. Namoi Nhiwatiwa, who was to become ZANU's Deputy Minister for Women's affairs, reported in July 1979 that one-third of the 20,000 guerrillas in Zimbabwe were women (Kriger, 1992: 191). Feminist scholar Gay Seidman claims that as many as 7,500 women fought during the conflict, a fact which challenged the 'traditional' perception of women as vulnerable and fragile (1984: 426). Furthermore, it was a pattern that was being repeated in other spheres, as women were adopting typically 'masculine roles and characteristics, even in the Catholic Church' (Bhebe and Ranger, 1996: 27). Nhongo-Simbanegavi concludes that this 'undeniably improved women's perception of their worth in society' (2000: 35). Those who did not fight at the front were often called upon to act as 'cooks, informants and messengers'. Ranger asserts that, 'in these latter two roles' especially, young women were given significant agency for the first time (1985: 207). Seidman confirms that although 'originally chosen for their insignificance, these girls could gain great power in their communities through their links to the fighters' (1984: 427).

That men and women had been fighting side by side provided a compelling foundation for the post-liberation women's movement to call for gender equality. Lyons reports that to some extent 'this has been realised with the Age

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of Majority Act and changes to inheritance laws (1997: 12). The social upheaval experienced during the conflict also enabled women to challenge practices such as 'wife-beating' and the 'bridewealth' system which reinforced patriarchal authority (Kriger, 1992: 195;Weinrich, 1979: 92). Furthermore, thinkers including Lan (1985) and Ranger (1985) have argued that the increased profile that spirit mediums enjoyed during the war enabled them to oust traditional male leaders, allowing a new generation of nationalists to rise in their place. In this context, 'women's initiatives brought African men into conflict with the state and with each other' rather than 'becoming a unifying force within African patriarchal ranks' (Barnes, 1999: 86). It is commonly accepted that women were able to utilise this opportunity to challenge patriarchal oppression (Kriger, 1992: 196; Bhebe and Ranger, 1996: 27).

Lyons concludes that 'Zimbabwean women guerrilla fighters were heralded internationally [for rising] above traditionally subordinated gender positions in order to fight equally with men in the struggle for national independence' (2004: 41). Thus Seidman was articulating a popular interpretation when she wrote that 'the war experience mobilized women throughout the country and gave them a new vision of their role in society' (1984: 427). Zimbabwe's national liberation movement appeared destined to achieve its proclaimed aim of gender equality. However, as will be shown, for the majority of women a very different reality emerged in the years following the end of the liberation movement and the democratic elections of 1980.

The progressive role of African women in Zimbabwe's national liberation movement has been described as a 'legend' and a 'myth' propagated by ZANU 'in collaboration with feminist scholars' (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: xix). Numerous academics, having investigated the role of women in the guerrilla army, have questioned whether it truly provided a platform for emancipation. Kriger points out that if one distinguishes 'between women combatants in the army and women in the camps [where they] …were primarily engaged in agricultural work, education, or other tasks', then the actual number of female fighters is between fifteen hundred and two thousand (1992: 191). Miranda Davies asserts that most women who sought to join the guerrillas were asked to look after the children (in Kriger, 1992: 191) whilst Urdang has highlighted that those women who did become fighters were left to perform 'inglorious but necessary tasks' (in Lyons, 2004: 42). The teenage girls that Ranger and Seidman had attributed 'great power' to in their roles as messengers and informants, were left without a 'legitimate authority to reinforce or sustain their position' because 'their wartime 'power' depended on the collusion of 'misguided' young men with guns' (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 10). In a similar vein, Michael Bourdillon has noted that the spirit mediums, far from challenging patriarchal authority, actually 'derived at least as much status from the [male-dominated] guerrillas as the other way round' (in Robins, 1996: 83). Whilst, during the conflict, the mediums 'compromised on generational and kinship rules' they 'made no such compromise with pregnant and menstruating women', thereby marginalising their role (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 10).

Without denying the essential tasks that women carried out during the liberation movement, it appears that their 'militarisation and mobilisation did not [ultimately] bring changes in the gender division of labour, and in male-female power relations' (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 13). This leads Lyons to conclude that 'nationalist and feminist analyses—that women fought equally and heroically with men during the war but gained little compared with men afterwards—need to be challenged as a theoretical perspective' (2004: 42).

The Liberation 'Betrayed'?

Following liberation, little progress was made in the institutional sphere. In the ZANU party itself, Nhongo-Simbanegavi points out that the Department of Women's Affairs was effectively a 'club for the commanders' wives'

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(2000: 51) and whilst the post-liberation legal reforms were admirable on paper, the old 'bureaucracies… still wielded much of their previous power' (Alexander, 1993: 160). Even if institutions such as the courts had been responsive to gender issues, 'the vast majority of women [were] materially dependent upon fathers and husbands- and fearful of social ostracism' (Schmidt, 2001: 417). Schmidt summarises:

'Despite ZANU-PF's claim to be an emancipatory force for women, the movement's rhetoric was not matched by reality. In both military and civilian life, women continued to be subordinate to men… As "natural" teachers and nurturers, women rallied support among the local population and nursed the sick and injured. Relatively few women served as guerrilla fighters. With the exception of a limited number who were connected to powerful men, women were generally excluded from positions of power and authority' (2001: 416-417)

The independent Zimbabwean state also neglected to address, 'the specific needs of female ex-combatants'. Whilst 'many women felt that in the bush training camps they had – for the first time – been treated as equals to men, many had suffered unspeakable abuse' (Lyons, 1997: 12).

Yet despite the substantial revision in thinking that has occurred since the glowing early reports of women's impending emancipation under ZANU, there remains agreement that women did 'experience a different status' during the liberation movement (Lyons, 2004: 42). Thus when academics such as Bhebe and Ranger conclude that '…rural women have reverted to all the disadvantages and oppressions of colonial Rhodesia [and] so far as gender relations are concerned, the revolution has been betrayed' (1996: 28) many academics are left pondering a seemingly perplexing question: 'the question is, why do [women] lose [their] status after national liberation has been won?' (Lyons, 2004: 42).

An Unhappy Marriage: Nationalism and Women's Liberation

For Joycelyn Alexander, 'the re-emergence of the traditional leadership' was 'perhaps the most surprising development in rural politics after the war' in Zimbabwe. She concedes that this forces one to doubt 'the extent to which patriarchal power was undermined during the war' (1993: 160). Numerous academics have expressed similar sentiments. There is confusion as to why women 'were unable to sustain the enhanced status they had achieved' (Alexander, 1993: 160) and the women's movement is seen as 'betrayed' or even 'fraudulent' (Lyons, 2004: 43; Bhebe and Ranger, 2004: 42; Barnes, 1999: xviii).

Yet through an analysis of nationalism in Zimbabwe, one can see that the collapse of the post-'liberation' women's movement should not have been a surprise. Despite the exaggerated claims of the ZANU party and some uncritical feminist scholars, the movement was male-dominated from its inception and remains so today. From this position of dominance men defined the terms of the 'liberated' state: men 'imagined' and 'invented' the history and traditions deemed necessary to unite and legitimise the nation of Zimbabwe.

Kriger has observed that 'the concept of nationalism, with its focus on united action against an external enemy, fosters an orientation away from [internal] conflicts' (1992: 30). However, in Zimbabwe, gender-rooted tensions within the nationalist movement were evident as early as the late 1940s (Raftopoulos; 1999: 127; Osirim, 2003). An incident in September 1956 vividly illustrates 'some of the explosive undercurrents of urban gender relations' in the period (Barnes, 1999: 145). Emerging nationalist leaders of the City Youth League had organised a bus boycott in Salisbury (now Harare) in response to rising fares; 'workers were already spending between 18 and 30% of their wages on

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transport costs' (Raftopoulos, 1995: 88). Barnes reports that the action descended into violence and that over the course of one night as many as 16 women residents of a new hostel, named 'Carter House', were raped (1999: 144-145). The violence began 'when, in the first days of the boycott, some black women residents… decided to ignore the call to abandon public transportation and took a bus to town instead' (Osirim, 2003). The women already had a controversial status in the community: '…residence in an urban hostel had been linked in the minds of the African public with social impropriety and prostitution'. Barnes asserts:

'By being raped, the Carter House women were being punished for their perceived social and economic transgressions. In short, this particular episode of violence against women illustrated the community's distrust and dislike of independent African women as well as the antagonisms and tensions that had built up in urban African society by the initial years of the nationalist struggle' (1999: 148)

Numerous feminist scholars have observed the important symbolic space that women occupy during nationalist movements. Nagel asserts that they are the 'mothers of the nation… their purity must be impeccable, and so nationalists often have a special interest in the sexuality and sexual behaviour of their women'. Thus, 'while traditionalist men may be defenders of the family and the nation, women are thought by traditionalists to embody family and national honour; women's shame is the family's shame [and] the nation's shame' (1998: 256). Female 'decadents', such as the women of Carter House were perceived to be, are understood as 'unpatriotic, weakening the nation' (Mosse, 1985: 109). With reference to the Carter House incident, Scarnechia understatedly remarks:

'The conjuncture of Nationalist protests … with this overt act of violence against women by men did not [bode] well for the future relation between Nationalist strategies and the advancement of women's independence' (in Raftopoulos, 1995: 88)

The symbolisation of women as 'mothers of the nation' and 'beautiful souls' in need of protection both from themselves and the 'other', was evident throughout the liberation movement in Zimbabwe. Both sides mobilised 'fervent propaganda campaigns' around the defence of their women and children 'from the abuses of the other side'. The 'traditional perspectives of both the indigenous people and the European settlers' meant that women 'qualified as… recipients of male protection' on the basis of their purity and fragility (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2003: 13-14). As previously argued, the central symbolic role which women played in Zimbabwe was rarely matched by significant positions in either the political or military spheres. Women were used to legitimate the conflict but they had remained largely subjugated in 'traditional' gender-roles: 'they cooked, washed clothing, and performed sexual services for the male guerrillas… the fulfilment of these tasks was now trumpeted as their patriotic duty' (Schmidt, 2001: 417).

Yet what about those relatively few women who *did* manage to challenge 'traditional' gender hierarchies by fighting with the guerrillas? A fierce debate in the Zimbabwean press in 1981, which discussed whether former-combatants made good wives, certainly suggests that women's changed status was recognised in society (Seidman, 1984: 426). However, Lyons observes the outcome of the debate: men returned from the liberation struggle as 'heroes', women returned as 'murderers or prostitutes', considered 'too tough, too liberated and not good enough to be wives' (1997: 12). Whilst patriarchal hierarchies were challenged during the movement, they were never undermined. Rather, they were simultaneously reinforced by parallel narratives which mobilised 'the nation' around 'traditional' notions of protecting women and children.

Emancipation for women, it was argued, could be addressed when the liberation was secured: fighting a 'divided

struggle' was deemed impossible when everyone was exploited simply because of their colour (Weiss, 1986: 7). This is a pattern which is seen 'all too often' in nationalist movements according to McClintock. She asserts that 'to insist on silence about gender conflict when it already exists is to cover over, and thereby ratify, women's disempowerment' (1991: 122). Furthermore, 'as the lessons of international history portend' (and as the Zimbabwean nationalist movement demonstrates) 'women who are not empowered to organise during the struggle will not be empowered to organise after the struggle' (McClintock, 1991: 122).

Marie-Aimeé Hélie-Lucas has warned western feminists to remember that 'they belong to a country, a nation, which does not have to prove its existence'. This, she argues, 'allows for transcending the concept of nation, and criticising it' (in Enloe, 1990: 45). Zimbabwe, by contrast, had suffered decades of civil war and was anything but established as a united nation (Mubako, 1975). There existed a state of social upheaval, amid which, nationalists sought to secure cohesion by embracing 'tradition as a legitimating basis for nation-building and cultural renewal' (Nagel, 1998: 254). In an effort to achieve a sense of stability, Zimbabwean nationalists emphasised continuity with the past.

Kriger has documented the 'clash' between 'African custom and traditions' and the women's movement in Zimbabwe, arguing that it imposed serious 'limit[s] on the… goal of liberating women'. Even where they were able to make initial gains, 'the pleas of men' eventually prevailed as village elders and senior members of the community addressed their concerns to ZANU (1992: 192-193). The Zimbabwean nationalist movement appealed to history in an effort to forge a common future, yet 'the parties understanding of history was centuries of feudal patriarchy. It offered them no role models… no assistance other than 'tradition'' (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: xx). Thus, Enloe's much repeated assertion that 'nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope' appears as relevant in Zimbabwe as it has been in countless other 'liberation' movements where women's hopes have failed to materialise (1990: 45). The traditions embraced by nationalist movements, whether 'real or invented… point out the tenacious and entrenched nature of masculine privilege and the tight connection between masculinity and nationalism' (Nagel, 1998: 254).

In celebrating the Zimbabwean nationalist struggle, women's role has been manipulated or marginalised. Geiger argues that 'this historiography reflects a now familiar pattern: the accumulation of androcentric bias' (1997: 9). Thus, the 'symbolic payment' to women—including parades and memorials—has yet to occur. 'At the National Heroes' Acre there is only one woman buried: Sally Mugabe, late wife of the President' (Lyons, 1997: 12). Where women are represented more prominently, such as at the Statue of the Unknown Soldier (a national monument in Harare which commemorates those who died fighting for independence), the single female is depicted in a skirt. Lyons argues that this is an effort to re-domesticate women fighters, who wore trousers during the conflict—like the men alongside them (1997: 222).

Within this context, the 're-emergence of the traditional leadership' should not have come as a surprise to academics studying Zimbabwe. Despite the claims of ZANU and some uncritical feminist scholars, traditional notions of leadership were never really undermined. Whilst hoisting women onto a symbolic pedestal in an attempt to legitimise their struggle, men ensured that they continued to dominate positions of real power. From these positions, men defined the common history and traditions designed to unite the new Zimbabwe.

Contemporary Zimbabwe and the Construction of Liberation

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Today, nationalism remains 'the main organising principle… behind contemporary Zimbabwe'. 'This principle holds that the national spirit has been rescued, reinvented, revived, or refigured' following the 'successful antimetropolitan struggle'. Barnes continues:

'In the early 1980s in Zimbabwe, the canon of nationalism was both triumphant and triumphalist: one movement (and one movement only) had gradually and successfully gathered up the threads of discontent with and agitation against white settler society and its myriad injustices and fashioned them into a tow rope to freedom' (1999, xvii).

However, this is followed by a warning that 'if any particular thread were to be either subsumed in or discarded from the weave, the notion of a unidirectional road to liberation' would be 'incrementally discredited' (ibid). Thus, gender conflict in Zimbabwe not only represents a significant challenge to the notion of a successful liberation, but is also interpreted as a challenge to the entire post-liberation state. The legitimacy of the contemporary Zimbabwean state therefore rests on constructing a common history of a successful liberation.

As Comaroff has noted, theories of nationalism are not detached from the politics they analyse, rather the 'theories themselves belong to the ideological arsenal of contemporary identity politics' (Lentz, 1995: 307). The concept of a successful liberation in Zimbabwe has been constructed—through the creation of a 'common' past—in the interests of certain actors. Yet as McClintock argues, 'traditions are not sacrosanct', they are 'social inventions' which can be challenged and determined by women as well as men (1991: 122). Thus, organisations such as 'Women of Zimbabwe Arise' (WOZA), which are seeking to 'contest history' and reclaim nationalist successes as 'urban achievements' (Ranger, 2007; also Front Line, 2007), are presented with a ray of hope. If men have dominated Zimbabwe through the construction of a concept of liberation, then progress towards women's emancipation may well rest in its destruction and its reinvention.

Conclusion

The Zimbabwean Liberation movement has received a great deal of academic attention. However, the literature has largely neglected to address important interactions between gender and nationalism. This essay has sought to demonstrate that the process of constructing the nation had unique implications for the men and women of Zimbabwe.

First the initial high hopes for gender equality were explored. It was widely accepted that women were progressing towards emancipation through the liberation struggle: they were fighting alongside men at the forefront of the movement; they had greater agency as a result of the social upheaval associated with the conflict; and a platform had been established for their progress to be secured after the liberation.

The essay then went on however, to show that gender hierarchies were not substantively challenged during the struggle for liberation. Without denying that women preformed important (if unglamorous) tasks, it was argued that ZANU and a number of uncritical feminist scholars had greatly exaggerated their role in the movement. Furthermore, women faced a number of unique challenges during and after the conflict that were left unaddressed by the post-liberation ZANU government.

Accepting that women did, nonetheless, experience a different status during the conflict, the essay sought to answer the question of why they were not in a position to build on this upon its end. It was argued that women's

primary role had been symbolic: gender was manipulated by both sides to legitimise the struggle. Thus, men dominated positions of real power throughout, and from these positions men defined the 'common history' designed to unite the new Zimbabwe; unsurprisingly, this reinvigorated patriarchal authority.

Finally, the continuing relevance of gender and nationalism in contemporary Zimbabwe was highlighted, before it was suggested that the analysis represented a ray of hope for the current women's movement and its attempts to reclaim and redefine the history of the 'liberation'.

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