

Female Combatants and Shifting Gender Perceptions during Zimbabwe's Liberation War, 1966-79

Ireen Mudeka¹

Abstract

While mainstream history on the liberation struggle in Africa and Zimbabwe primarily focuses on male initiatives, from the 1990s, new scholarship marked a paradigm shift. Scholars both shifted attention to women's roles and adopted a gendered perspective of the liberation struggle. The resultant literature primarily argued that the war of liberation did not bring any changes in either oppressive gender relations or women's status. However, based on oral, autobiographical and archival sources including Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) documents and magazines, this paper argues that while male domination indeed continued, the war inevitably shifted perceptions of women. Their recruitment within ZANLA and in specific leadership roles marked this change in gender perceptions. Even 'traditionally feminine roles', normally taken for granted, gained new value in the cut-throat conditions of war. Nationalist leaders and other guerillas came to valorize such roles and the women who undertook them, as central to the war effort. War-time contingencies therefore spurred certain shifts in perceptions of women, at times radical but at others, seemingly imperceptible. This reevaluation of women's status spilled into the postcolonial era, albeit slowly, due to the centuries-old patriarchal culture that Zimbabweans could not suddenly dismantle.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Liberation struggle, gender perception, women, history

Introduction

In his critical introduction to the theories of nationalism, U. Özkirimli observes 'the common approach of contemporary literature of reproducing the dominant discourse and its failure to consider the experiences of the most subordinated'², who include women.

¹ PhD, Department of Development Studies, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Midlands State University, P. Bag 9055, Gweru, Zimbabwe, Email: mudekai@msu.ac.zw, Tel: 263-054-228315, Cell: 263-0776-433-631

²U. Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p1.

However, since the 1990s, gender historians have ushered in a new narrative of women's engagement in the liberation war in Zimbabwe. Such scholars raised questions about the implications of the liberation war on women's empowerment, stressing the perpetuation of gender oppression within the ranks of the revolutionary party, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its military wing, Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). Seminal works such as T. Lyons', L. L. Luekker and J. Nhongo-Simbanegavi's stress the continuity of gender relations rooted in patriarchal principles, defining women as perpetual minors and hence too inept to engage with serious matters.³

Guerilla men remained in control of women's lives, activities and sexuality. The subordination, abuse, and exploitation meted on guerilla girls by male counterparts marked the continuity of prewar gender relations.

While these scholars offer important insights into the complexities of the nationalist struggle riddled, as scholars such as N. Kriger note, by internal strife, this approach renders them blind to real shifts in gender perceptions. The blindness emanates from the aim to sustain a radical argument and from the view of oppression as a generalized party line experienced by all women. However, as Bhebe and Ranger aptly note, 'the wartime experiences of women [even combatants] were so varied and contradictory that no simple discontinuities or continuities can be discerned.'⁴ True, patriarchy did not encounter a sudden death or revolutionary end, yet the transformative war for African self-liberation could not leave African gender perceptions and relations among combatants completely unchanged. The shifts influenced, albeit slow, perhaps even unsatisfactory, but some earnest efforts to reevaluate women's position before and after 1979. The reality of women's recruitment into a ZANLA Female Detachment under female leaders meant that women had broken into the arena of war, "traditionally" designated male.

³ Josephine Nhongo- Simbanegavi, *For Better and for Worse: Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle*, (Harare, Weaver Press, 2000); L.L. Luekker, "Fighting for Human Rights: Women, War and Social Change in Zimbabwe", *Instram News*, No. 28, (1998); E. O'Gorman, *The Front Line Runs Through Every Woman: Women and Local Resistance in the Zimbabwean Liberation War*, (Zimbabwe, Weaver Press, 2011).

See also T. Lyons, 'The Forgotten Soldiers: women in Zimbabwe's Liberation War', *Southern Africa Report*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (February, 1997) and T. Lyons, *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle*, (Africa World Press, 2004).

⁴ T. Ranger and G. Bhebe, *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, (Heinemann, December 1996), p28.

In addition, the valorization of 'traditionally female roles' as an indispensable part of the social reproductive basis of the war effort marked a change, though less radical, in ZANU and ZANLA's gender perceptions.

To trace these changes, this chapter uses discourse analysis to draw information from oral interviews, questionnaires, newspapers and ZANLA archival records. Discourse analysis opens a window into both dominant and subaltern perceptions, representations, opinions and experiences. It is central to the analysis of the content of what people say or write concerning important actions in everyday life.⁵ It is thus employed to analyze texts of oral data, media sources and other records for ZANLA men and women's, and in general, post-colonial gender perceptions.

1. "To Liberate Our Country": Women's Decisions to Join the War

Dating back to the 1950s, women engaged in peasant and urban resistance alongside men, engaging in acts of sabotage against symbols of colonial hegemony. In exploring peasant resistance, a renowned nationalist scholar, Ranger stresses how men and women in Makoni District destroyed dip tanks, poisoned livestock or burnt crops and implements on settler farms.⁶ T. Barnes also traces women's part in urban nationalist consciousness in Harare. Women were among the hundreds who attended rallies of the Reformed Industrial Commercial Workers Union (RICU), a labor cum urban nationalist organization led by Patrick Pazarangu.⁷ Women such as Eleanor Solomon of Mbare led fellow women within RICU, making fired anti-colonial speeches on public fora.⁸ In this decade, Sally Mugabe and other female members of the African Women's League, formed in 1952, staged protests in Harare against the regime's arrest of male African nationalists.⁹

As part of this growing consciousness, many women joined ZANLA and fight for the liberation of the country. In gender specific ways, Africans felt the sting of colonial oppression and sought to break the shackles.

⁵ J. Gillen and A. Petersen, "Discourse Analysis", in Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin, (Eds), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, (London, Sage Publications, 2005), p147.

⁶ T. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerilla War in Zimbabwe*, (USA, University of Carlifonia Press, 1985)

⁷ Teresa Barnes, *We Women Worked so Hard: Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction*, (Harare, Baobab Books, 199), p121.

⁸ *The African Weekly*, September 1956. See also Barnes, "We Women", p146

⁹ Barnes, "We Women," p121

For instance, Zimbabwean women's duties have included the provision of daily food for their families. While they accessed land through patriarchal clan heads, women were the primary food producers. Especially impacting women, land alienation, formalized through the 1930s Land Apportionment Act (LAA) and finally the 1951 Land Husbandry Act (LHA), reduced each household's land holdings. African displacement to poorly endowed and overcrowded reserves, seriously affected the women as men migrated to work. Such pressure from the oppressive colonial regime, sharpened women's nationalist consciousness and the understanding that they had to fight for liberation. According to a former guerilla fighter Rwisai of Nyanga;

For me, I wanted to go and liberate our land. Smith's people had taken our goog land giving us the sandy area near Nyan'ombe.

So they stole our livelihood and we had to fight. You see, we too wanted liberation and wanted to fight... I went with many who crossed the Pungwe River to join the comrades in Mozambique...¹⁰

Indeed, women such as Rwisai and Taramba¹¹ made these life-transforming decisions amidst the hardships, which worsened with men's migration to mines, urban locations and settler farms. Here, the demands on women's labor escalated, especially since the regime tried to make up for its soil degrading land distribution policies by enforcing agrarian conservation laws under the LHA. Women reeled under the forced ridging/ *makandiwa/mitumbira* program, and faced the ban on the use of labor saving implements like sledges and a demand on the reduction of cattle per household. According to Liana Manjoro;

They just ordered us to dig contour ridges in the reserves... They wanted to arrest even women for not doing it, so women and children had to take time away from our maize, peanuts and round nuts to dig... So we were saying we were angry enough, let's join the struggle to stop all this...¹²

Indeed, such women shared the conviction that the Rhodesian regime, "...had no right to force us to dig contours, pay dog or cattle tax or even to kill or make us sell our cattle to them...we had to change things.

¹⁰ Interview with Rwisai Mabhunu, Nyanga, 11 August, 2012.

¹¹ Interview with M. Taramba, Nyanga, 18 August, 2012.

¹² Interview with Liana Manjoro, Nyanga, 11 August, 2012.

We all wanted this to stop.”¹³ Hence, economic coercion and deprivation were open testaments of oppression and peasant women and girls who desired the right to self-determination.

For others such as Freedom Nyamubaya, who joined ZANLA in the 1970s, manifestations of oppression such as the racially biased education system pushed them into the struggle. Nyamubaya reiterated the need to contribute to change, following her failure to complete her education due to the exorbitant fees for African but not for white children.¹⁴

Fay Chung, a Zimbabwean woman of Asian race, a former teacher of African students during the 1960s who joined the struggle in the 1970s, emphasized this racially stunted education policy whereby European children enjoyed free compulsory education, while Africans had very few schools and paid exorbitant fees of up to ten Rhodesian dollars a term.¹⁵ The biases in education thus pushed hundreds of girls to ZANLA camps, more so with the Rhodesian Security Forces’s (RSF) destruction of rural schools which rendered many children idle. She states;

I finished my form two in Mtoko but didn’t have sufficient school fees to continue... when I heard about the comrades, I wasn’t the same person. I wanted to do something to change things... there was a kind of fascination with the war because of this idea that you could actually change something...¹⁶

In any case, even if they obtained an education, as colonized black women, their chances of employment were scarce. Up to the 1950s, women occupied below 5 percent of the available non-farm jobs in the country.¹⁷ On the farms, they were worse off, receiving half of men’s already starvation wages; working from dawn to sunset even though they also did housework and cared children; and barred from better-paid African jobs as fore-men or compound inspectors.

¹³ Interview with Liana Manjoro.

¹⁴ The Zimbabwean, Monday, Interview with Freedom Nyamubaya, London, Britain, 1 March 2010.

¹⁵ Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle*, (Harare, Weaver Press, 2006), p44.

¹⁶ The Zimbabwean, Interview with Freedom Nyamubaya, London, Britain, 1 March 2010.

¹⁷ T. Barnes, “We Women”, p36.

As depicted in Hove's novel, *Bones*, the female character, Marita, represented the women whomade the conscious choicetoflee exploitation on farms and join the struggle.¹⁸

Many more had faced brutal reprisals against villagers by Rhodesian soldiers, especially from 1966, as soldiers murdered their parents, burnt villages and granaries. Theyleft slaughteredpeople, livestock and poultry festering in the open to instill fear among Africans. Some girls knew the plight that awaited them even in so-called protected villages where Rhodesian soldiers physically, sexually and emotionally abused them. Under these circumstances, many grabbed the chance to trek across the borders, braving the elements, predatory animals, encounters with the Rhodesian troops and other hazards, to both escape and fight against oppression.

In an exemplary case, Bayayi of Nyautare in Nyanga recalls how she joined the struggle thus;

The guerillas came to us and held a pungwe/night meeting. They said they set their lives down to liberate us. When they left, Rhodesian soldiers came. I think a spy told them... They set cattle pens, huts and granaries on fire, making us lie on our stomachs to beat us with sticks the size of that [pointing] pounding stick. Many,including my uncle died. So, I decided to fight for our freedom...¹⁹

In addition, as scholars such as Kriger and Ranger noted, fissures defying binary analytical oppositions of white oppressor versus black victim complicated the African experiences. Spies sold out village members, and women also had their internal divisions which testified to such intra-African fissures.²⁰ A. Grove aptly cautioned that, 'It is crucial to recognize that 'women' were not a single group. Social cleavages heavily determined their experiences.'²¹ Notwithstanding, some younger women joined the struggle not only against colonial oppression but also against African patriarchal oppression.

¹⁸ C. Hove, *Bones*, (Harare, Baobab Books, 1988)

¹⁹ Interview with Bayayimabhunu, Nyanga, 12 August, 2012.

²⁰ N. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices*, (Cambridge University Press, 1992); T. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, (James Currey, 1985)

²¹Adam Grove, "The Construction of a 'Liberation': Gender and the 'National Liberation Movement in Zimbabwe", *International Relations*, (December 2007).

In *Women in Struggle*, Mahamba captures this reality where the female character joins the liberation struggle in the Masvingo against both colonial oppression and forced marriage.²² Disgruntled with the patchwork of African and colonial patriarchal oppression where forced marriages a system, the preferences for boys in education, employment and mobility, many girls took the risk of joining the struggle. Of course, guerillas also dragooned hundreds into their ranks given manpower shortages. Especially from 1973, 'their [guerilla recruiters] position on recruitment was often non-negotiable because they felt that everyone had a duty to fight.'²³ Notwithstanding, from the early 1970s when ZANLA scored major victories against the Rhodesian Forces in eastern and western Zimbabwe, the news which included exploits of female combatants spread like a veld fire, fanning new perceptions and also attracting many girls to ZANLA.

2. ZANLA: Perceiving Women in a New Light

From 1966 to 1972, the ZANLA forces began their isolated attacks on institutions of the Rhodesian regime, based on an exclusive male guerilla force. The ZANLA leadership enlisted only men, including those exiled in Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania who engaged in acts of sabotage using light weapons such as petrol and motor bombs. The failure of this strategy to disrupt the socio-economic and political life of the regime necessitated the shift to full-scale war, pushing the ZANLA central command to rethink its recruitment policy. It now sought to win the hearts and minds of the people, and to include women who constituted the majority of the rural masses and food producers as men migrated. Women became increasingly important in the context of a full scale, long drawn out struggle planned in the 1970s. From a perception of women as perpetual minors requiring protection, and whose soft nature made them unsuitable for the harsh demands of war, ZANLA now perceived them as indispensable allies and soldiers.

While scholars have presented widely varying figures of female recruits, the formation of a female ZANLA Guerilla Detachment in 1972 marked this gendered shift in the recruitment drive.

²² I. Ropa Rinopfuka Mahamba, *Women in Struggle*, (Mambo Press, Gweru Zimbabwe, 1986).

²³ Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p27.

ZANLA forces generally numbered between 20 000²⁴ and 40 000.²⁵ Female recruits increased from a mere 100 in 1972/3 to between 7 500²⁶ and 10 000²⁷ of the total by the mid-1970s. Prior to this period, experience within the exclusive male ZANLA forces showed that they needed women to bring in and hide large quantities of weapons necessary for triumph. The party President, Tongogara, noted that ZANLA needed women to ensure a constant supply of war resources. He explained that,

You would go and get engaged for a week and then run out of all ammunition you are carrying on your backs... you run away because you have no weapons, whereas the enemy keeps on replenishing... when we started the struggle in the north eastern parts, we had to walk over 180 kilometers with no roads, no cars and tons and tons of material we pushed into the country to start the war were carried by women on their heads.²⁸

Women's experience with carrying heavy loads on their heads in the villages enabled them to ferry heavy ammunition, food and medicines. One former female combatant reiterated;

We carried bullets, grenades, A.K. 47 guns and other war material. We also carried deadly poisons to kill the enemy...No one thought we could be directly handling staff that would wipe out the enemy, so we were safe from surveillance... They thought, ha-a, just women...²⁹

The experiences of Fay Chung who joined the liberation struggle in Zambia in 1973 also proved that the Rhodesian Security Forces were less suspicious of women, whereas they suspected every man of being a guerilla. She recalls, 'They subjected every able-bodied black man to routine arrests and questioning under torture, but women moved freely.'³⁰

At this stage, the training of women cadres at various bases, the largest of which was Pungwe III, began in earnest. At this base located on the banks of the

²⁴ Adam Groves, "The Construction of a Liberation" *International Relations*, (December, 2007), p3.

²⁵ Adam Groves, "The Construction", p3; Nhongo-Simbambanegavi, *For Better*, p41.

²⁶ Groves, "The Construction", p3.

²⁷ Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p41.

²⁸ Zanu Archives (ZA), Harare, Manuscript of Interview with Magama Tongogara, 1978.

²⁹ Interview with Bayayimabhunu, Nyanga, 12 August, 2012.

³⁰ Chung, *Re-living*, p81.

Pungwe River in Mozambique, 40km from the Zimbabwe border, 'female comrades underwent rigorous training everyday. They had little time for anything else.'³¹ Even as they suffered the most severe food shortages and had to survive on one meal of a handful of boiled and salted dried maize per day, they expended more energy in training. ZANLA women such as Joyce Teurairopa Mujuru³² rose to commanding ranks. Although they also worked with men, they had authority over the conduct and assignments of their own female units. The Women's Detachment undertook assignments such as soliciting information and travelling long and highly dangerous journeys to bring weapons from the rear to the front. Though male comrades sometimes accompanied them, the success of the operation centered on their performance as they took center stage to defend their team en-route.

In 1975, one detachment headed for Eastern Zimbabwe defended itself against Rhodesian Scouts encountered along the Pungwe River. It aborted the mission in fear of infiltration by the enemy, yet the women defended themselves and their cargo successfully. Allegedly, 'those of us who had guns returned fire.

It took just ten minutes or so of gunfire. A few of ours were injured but we lost none and we had our cargo...'³³Female detachments guarded bases such as Pungwe I and Pungwe II, and Osibisa, a resting camp for female combatants.³⁴Hence, training women became an important way of strengthening the defense on camps and on munitions' ferrying expeditions to and from the front. Cases where women fought back Rhodesian forces' attacks on camps are not just associated with the female commander, Mujuru, but other women.³⁵ The significance of female contributions in the war can never be overemphasized and defied their patronizing depiction as infantile defenseless beings. Indeed, though patriarchy did not face a sudden and revolutionary death, some woman officers such as Sheba Tavarwisa received respectful treatment even from men.³⁶

³¹ Chung, *Re-living*, 192. Chung recalls that among the women at the various camps in which she lived in Mozambique who rose to commanding positions were also intelligent but illiterate women.

³² Chung, *Reliving*, p190.

³³ Interview with Rwisaimabhunu, Nyanga, 11 August, 2012.

³⁴ Interview with H. Muchaneta, Muda, Marondera, 20 September, 2012, Interview with T. Maradza, Nyanga, 12 August, 2012; Interview with Teedzai, Muda, Marondera, 20 September, 2012.

³⁵ Moto, No.94, 1990; Interview with Charigabhunu, Mbare, 6 September, 2012. Interview with C. Marasika, Marondera, 20 September, 2012 and also with N. Murwira, Muda, Marondera, 21 September, 2012 also T. Chikundi, Nyanga, 15 August 2012.

³⁶ Chung, *Reliving*, p192; Ruth Weiss, *The Women of Zimbabwe*, (Kesho Publishers Ltd, 1986), p90.

From 1975, the failure of détente and the escalation of the war necessitated the increased recruitment of women. Under détente, the warring sides were to enter negotiations not only bring majority rule but to promote the advent of a pro-West and anti-Soviet black government. Despite support from frontline states such as Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia and later Mozambique, the negotiations however collapsed. ZANLA represented by ZANU leaders, most of whom had been released from prison for the negotiations, rejected détente as a western attempt to rob it of its inevitable victory following the 1972/3 successes against the enemy. This was especially given the inclusion of window dressing African parties, such as Muzorewa's African National Council (ANC), in the African nationalist government conceived of by the incumbent Smith regime. The war therefore escalated, spreading into urban areas by 1975. Guerillas bombed shops, gasoline stations like BP-Shell, and other vestiges of European power. At this point ZANLA needed and recruited thousands of women some of whom occupied posts as commanders and political commissars. These women proved their mettle when the main center of ZANLA operations in Zambia came under a double siege from the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Office and the Kaunda government. The latter was disappointed at ZANU's rejection of peace-building efforts under détente since this placed Zambia in line of fire.

The Zambian government incarcerated nationalist leaders and more than a thousand trained guerillas at Mboroma, forcing ZANLA to relocate operations to recently freed Mozambique.³⁷

In this relocation, women, some of whom were former teachers such as Fay Chung, Sheba Tavarwisa, Sally Mugabe and others became central actors. They constituted part of the Ad Hoc Lusaka Committee dealing with these post détente contingencies. As part of Committee duties, Fay Chung worked closely with Tungamirai Mudzi to lead a dangerous expedition to the ZANU farm in Zambia to transport cadres and strategic documents from the house of the ZANLA Logistics Head, Justin Chauke.³⁸ The papers included details which would have been invaluable to the enemy, including the number and types of guns held by ZANLA and location of the catchments. Once Chung rescued the papers, she travelled by night to Mozambique on the highly monitored Great East Road.³⁹

³⁷ Chung, *Reliving*, p81.

³⁸ Chung, *Reliving*, p98.

³⁹ Chung, *Reliving*, p98.

This exceptionally brave woman represented others who transported targeted men across the Zambia-Mozambique border into Tete, in non-military vehicles.⁴⁰

The women also constituted the leadership of the Department of Women's Affairs, established in direct testimony to the recognition of women's crucial part as ZANLA strategists and combatants. From 1977, literate female cadres including Julia Zvobgo, Sally Mugabe, Sheba Tavarwisa and Terurairopa, the Secretary for Women's Affairs, worked in the Department. Indeed, one former cadre recalled that women like Sheba Tavarwisa, one of the first to join the struggle, 'were strong leaders'. Referring to Sheba, he explained;

She had not only undergone military training, but had been a pioneer with us in the early 1970s...She transported arms from Zambia to Mozambique and to Zimbabwe. Women like her supported the struggle with their lives, they fought alongside us...⁴¹

Such women trained and commanded a female battalion for combat and in the education sector, enlightening them about their own position as combatants.

Tavarwisa herself was Deputy Secretary for Education, working with Dzingai Mutumbuka, Fay Chung and other educators.

The expediency with which the women met their new challenges transformed their self-perceptions. From docile women requiring men's protection, they saw themselves as able, powerful and resilient. As Seidman reiterated, 'above 7,500 women fought during the conflict, a fact which challenged the 'traditional' perception of women as vulnerable and fragile.'⁴²Bhebhe and Ranger emphasized that, 'women adopted typically masculine roles and characteristics...'⁴³ Comrade Sarai Masango a former combatant from the Eastern Highlands in Nyanga agreed that, "It didn't matter that you were a woman. You had your AK, you protected the base and kept watch through the night...we were no longer the same with women in the *povo*/crowd."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Chung, reliving, p98.

⁴¹ Interview with Ephraim Chitofu, ex-combatant, Rugare, Harare, 2012.

⁴² G. Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe: Post independence Struggles", *Feminist Studies*, 10, 3 (Autumn, 1984) p. 426.

⁴³ Ranger and Bhebhe, *Society*, p27.

⁴⁴ Interview with Sarai Masango, Saunyama, Nyanga, 13 August 2012.

This is recaptured in ex-combatant, Freedom Nyamubaya's testimony that, 'I had survived with nothing and had undertaken risky tasks...All this made me different. I would say, I was liberated. I could question things and was not just this docile woman anymore...' ⁴⁵

While ZANLA also relied on and hence encouraged political consciousness among 'women in the *povo*', including refugees, it primarily paid attention to training female guerillas not only about combat. They held classes in various camps as well as at Wampoa, the central revolutionary college opened in 1975, later named Chitepo College. ⁴⁶ Here, ideological training included Marxist-Leninism and conscientizing women about their significance in the social reproduction of the military. By this I mean, their role in providing and preparing food, sewing clothing for female and male combatants, taking care of the sick and injured thereby sustaining the strength of the force. Lessons included the indispensability of guerilla women in and outside combat. Bayayi Mabhunu, a female guerilla who received her training at Pungwe in Mozambique explains;

Men thought they could do it all alone, but then saw that they could not fight without a woman by his side. We now came to the bases and trained to shoot, take cover, set traps or throw explosives at the enemy. Yes, we guarded the camps, cooked in rotation, sometimes it's my group and then another. Women fought with guns, food and care... ⁴⁷

It was from the 1970s when the failure of *détente* led to the intensification of the war that female recruits had to cover military duties as well as source and prepare food. Soldiering for both men and women was unsustainable without eating, medical attention and other survival necessities.

This reevaluation of so called feminine roles earnestly begun from 1972, just as the presence of women in the struggle became significant. In this period, Josiah Tongogara spoke for the ZANLA High Command when he stressed that, 'Now women go in the same fashion like men, or even more than men because they have to

⁴⁵ The Zimbabwean, Monday, 3rd September, 2012, Interview with Freedom Nyamubaya, London, Britain, 1 March 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview with J. Chigamba, Marondera, 2012, and also M. Dambura, Marondera, 2012, A. Hamundibayi, Nyanga, 17 August, 2012.

⁴⁷ Interview with Bayayimabhunu, Nyanga, 12 August, 2012.

do the fighting, both on the front and on the rear, to sustain our resistance.⁴⁸ With the war's climax between 1976 and 1979, ZANLA recruited thousands of women for combat; to sew and nurse and the women developed *chirenje* relations with peasants. *Chirenje* was a barter trade where female combatants exchanged with peasants the clothes they sewed or received from donors with food for the forces. Songs sung by guerillas during night meetings valorized women's *chirenje*:

Comrade chirenje, (Comrade it's that barter trade)

Kutakura gidi chirenje, (To carry this gun it's that barter trade)

Kurova bhunu chirenje, (To hit the white oppressor it's that barter trade)

Kutora Zimbabwe chirenje, (To retake Zimbabwe it's that barter trade)

Ukatamba nemugoti wechirenje (If you belittle the cooking stick of that barter trade)

Tinokutongera pakaoma, (we will punish you severely)

Ukatamba nanyakubika chirenje (If you belittle the cook of the food from barter trade)

Tinokurova nemboma (we will beat you up with a hippo hide Sjambok)

Chorus:

Chirenje amaiwe-e, (It's that barter trade, mother)

Chirenje amaiwe-e (It's that barter trade, mother)

Chirenje amaiwe-e (It's that barter trade, mother)⁴⁹

Women actively gathered food from peasants through *chirenje* in Nyadzonia, Chimoio, Xai Xai and Pungwe and encouraged food cultivation among themselves and refugees.⁵⁰ A popular slogan denoting the strategic role of women combatants was '*pamberi nehondo yerusununguko, pamberi nemugoti!*' This translated to, 'forward with the liberation war, forward with the cooking stick!' While to some, this slogan denotes confinement of women to 'traditional roles', one could alternatively see it as a concession to the indispensability of the "feminine" roles. A male ZANLA leader stressed the significance of women's social reproduction of the military thus;

⁴⁸ Z.A, Manuscript of an Interview with Josiah Magama Tongogara, 16 October 1978.

⁴⁹ Interview with BayayiMabhunu, Nyutare village, Nyanga sang this song while I recorded, on 12 August, 2012.

⁵⁰ Fay Chung also discusses this trade in *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, confirming the details in Bayayi's song.

Actual fighting does not mean only on the trigger... We know why we hold those who stock our food stores and feed us dear. Soldiers are soldiers because they eat, drink and are healthy, so that's why our women comrades hold both weapons, the gun and the cooking stick... We cannot isolate the woman now...⁵¹

This realization explains the multifaceted place of women as combatants, surveillance personnel and those who sew, knit and nursed; cooked and guarded food stores and 'kitchens' to prevent food poisoning by Rhodesian infiltrators. Food poisoning could kill hundreds of guerillas.

The multifaceted roles they occupied marked a shift in women's perceptions captured in a 1989 novel, *Harvest of Thorns* by S. Chinodya. In this book, the main character named Pasi Nemasellouts representing male guerillas wondered about the new women bred by the liberation war, who could be both mother and soldier. Through Masellouts, the author ruminates on whether this new female who could also fall pregnant would carry the baby 'in a strap together with her bazooka.'⁵² In this way, Chinodya also stresses men's changed perceptions of women.⁵³

This shift in perspective was captured by Robert Mugabe's, 1978 explanation that;

We have women like Teurai Ropa... in the High Command. Sheba Tavarwisa is also Deputy Secretary for Education and Culture in the Central Committee. In the general staff, there are now scores of women officers. In the army, thousands of female cadres gallantly serve...⁵⁴

Though this may be seen as propagandizing, it reflects a grand shift in gender perceptions with leading officials conceding that, '...for it to be victorious, the revolution must of necessity involve women'⁵⁵

⁵¹ Z.A. Manuscript of an interview with Josiah Magama Tongogara, 16 October 1978.

⁵² S. Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns*, (Oxford, Heinemann, 1989), p218.

⁵³ Women in commanding positions such as Sheba Tavarwisa and Joyce Mujuru, and many others who were very active in the war such as Fay Chung also had motherhood duties to their own biological children as to those of others in their respective camps but still undertook important missions as discussed in this chapter.

⁵⁴ Robert Mugabe in "Women's Liberation in the Zimbabwean Revolution: Materials from the ZANU Women's Seminar", Xai Xai, 21 May 1979, (San Francisco, 1979), p15.

⁵⁵ "Zimbabwe News", 10. 1, (Jan 1978), p21.

ZANLA even aligned female guerillas' exploits with those of the venerated woman warrior and priestess, Mbuya Nehanda, who led the 1896/7 Shona uprising against colonial oppression. The women were figuratively Nehanda's bones come to life as she prophesied before her executors.⁵⁶ Indeed, 'Zimbabwean women guerrilla fighters were heralded locally and internationally for rising above traditionally subordinated gender positions in order to fight equally with men in the struggle for national independence.'⁵⁷

This shift in ZANU's perception of women is further expostulated in the party's central mouth-piece, *The Zimbabwe News*. While its exposition may well have been for posterity or propaganda, this magazine trekked change in gender issues, capturing women's and other official gender perspectives. It represented women as patriotic beings carrying out tasks that challenged the traditional construct of femininity, who broke and reset the boundaries of the acceptable. The *Zimbabwe News* portrayed women in military training; working with mounted guns, operating AK 47s or receiving and giving military briefs in mixed gender arenas. It recorded official views similar to the following, "ZANLA fighters, both our men and women, are fighting together... Our Female Detachment does its best ...waging a people's war..."⁵⁸ Another caption reads; "Sons and daughters of the soil, united as one in the battle for our land...face the enemy with courage..."⁵⁹

True, women faced persistent patriarchal oppression and abuses, but even Tongogara, the male chauvinistic, womanizing ZANLA leader, accepted that, 'the ZANU Revolution has produced a new kind of woman: proud, confident and liberated through the armed struggle and ideological education.'⁶⁰ In 1978, ZANLA's Information Department profiled many brave female guerillas including Mujuru, stressing that, '...These women symbolize the level of ideological and revolutionary development that we want and that is taking place in the party's history.'⁶¹

⁵⁶ Zimbabwe News, 8, 7, (July 1974), p16.

⁵⁷ Tanya Lyons, *Guns and Guerilla Girls*, p41.

⁵⁸ Zimbabwe News, 3, 7, (July 1974), p10.

⁵⁹ Zimbabwe News, 4, 5, (May 1974), p6.

⁶⁰ Zimbabwe News, vol. 9, Nos. 6, June, 1977, p27.

⁶¹ Zimbabwe News, 10, 1, (January 1978), p21.

Female combatants that I spoke to also concur that, the official moral code protected women from abuse and defined them as serious liberation fighters.⁶² According to Comrade Bayai Mabhunu of Nyanga stationed at Pungwe III in the 1970s, 'Sexual exploitation was a problem. Yet, there was a clear code against that. Some men ignored it, but others respected female officers, even saluting them along with male leaders...'⁶³ Mujuru confirmed that;

Women comrades are represented at every level of our organization from National Executive through the Central Committee, High Command, General Staff down to every level of the ZANLA forces... We have won our rights, recognition and place in the Revolution not by anyone's pity, but through our determination, devotion and bravery...⁶⁴

Ruth Weiss also reiterated that, 'thanks to the social change set in motion by the armed revolution'.⁶⁵ Whilst some women suffered unspeakable abuse, 'many felt that in the bush training camps they had – for the first time – been treated as equals to men.'⁶⁶

3. The Fruits of Independence: An Appraisal

Independence generally fanned women's hopes for liberation alongside men, which would mean socio-economic and political opportunities for them. Though the Lancaster House agreement forced the government to operate within colonial structures that had infantilized African women in particular, the official line was to recognize women as capable adults.

As such, the government urged that women be involved in the political arena. In the first decade of Independence therefore, women constituted 16% of the cabinet, even amidst the long-standing patriarchy underpinning Zimbabwean society.

⁶²B. Chibaya, and K Muzira Harare, 10 September, 2012; J. Chigamba, Marondera, 2012, and also M. Dambura, Marondera, 2012, A. Hamundibayi, Nyanga, 17 August, 2012.

⁶³ Interview with Bayayimabhunu, Nyanga, 11 August, 2012.

⁶⁴ Zimbabwe News, Vol. 10, No. 2, May-June, 1978, p31.

⁶⁵ R.Weiss, *The Women of Zimbabwe*, p7. Terence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, (U.K. James Currey, 1985), P95.

⁶⁶ T. Lyons, 'The Forgotten Soldiers: women in Zimbabwe's Liberation War', *Southern Africa Report*, 12, 2, (February, 1997), p. 12.

Representing other women, Joyce Mujuru, who occupied the position of female wing commander in the struggle, became the Minister of Youth, Sport and Recreation in 1980. Between this decade and 2001, she also served as Minister of Community Development and Women's Affairs; Minister of Community Development, Cooperatives and Women's Affairs, Resident Minister and Governor of Mashonaland Central, Minister of Information, Post and Telecommunications; Minister of Rural Resources and Water Development and Acting Minister of Defence. In 2004, she became Vice President, as a meritorious successor to the late Vice President, Simon Muzenda. Vice President Mujuru also operated as Acting President in 2011. Similarly, Minister Opah Muchinguri served in various ministries while Fay Chung, who joined the struggle in the 1970s, was Minister of Education, Sports and Culture between the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1990s, women seemed to suffer a notable backlash as the electoral system shifted from a system where political parties nominated some of their parliamentary candidates to one whereby they were strictly elected by the masses. A strong reaffirmation of patriarchal politics occurred with the electorate leaning more towards male candidates. Here, as Chung stresses, 'Had Mugabe not retained and exercised his prerogative to nominate a number of women to parliament, we would have been totally eliminated.'⁶⁷

President Mugabe had led the country in signing various international and regional gender declarations, protocols and conventions including the important Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The government thus introduced the Sexual Discrimination Removal Act of 1980 to increase women's chances of holding public office on equal terms with men. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development, established from the 1980s decade was a way to ensure women's place in parliament and continued transformation from within. Gaidzanwa notes that, together with the ZANU Women's League, this ministry and its Women's Parliamentary Caucus has been important in the enactment of gender-sensitive legislation.⁶⁸ The government passed the Electoral Act of 1990, giving women the right to run even for presidential office. This recalled the liberal feminist argument that in patriarchal societies, change must inevitably be gradual and legislatively directed.

⁶⁷ Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, p287

⁶⁸Rudo Gaidzanwa, "Women and Electoral Politics", in *EISA*, Research Report No.8, (2004).

In the socio-economic arena, the government promulgated the 1980 Equal Wage Act, stressing equal pay for equal work between men and women, and the 1982 Legal Age of Majority Act, confirming women's shift from the colonial minority status to the enjoyment of equal legal rights with men. In 1984, the state promulgated the Labor Relations Act, providing three months maternity leave and illegalizing any form of gender discrimination. Hence, from a position where women constituted a mere 5% in colonial urban workforce, their rate of employment increased to 22% in senior civil service positions alone by 1990, reaching 36% by 2002.⁶⁹

In addition, many industries have opened doors to women, who generally constitute up to about 40% of the working class.⁷⁰ Now women even dominate sectors such as school teaching which had been male domains in the colonial era. In the informal or small-scale entrepreneurial sector, women constitute over 50% of beneficiaries of credit and technical assistance given by Small Enterprises Development Corporation (SEDCO).⁷¹

Managed by a female Director, Fortunate Sekeso, SEDCO cooperates with the Ministry of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises under a female Minister, Sithembiso Nyoni, to assist independent female and male entrepreneurs. Laws such as the 1991 Deeds Registry Amendment Act, clarifying women's rights to register immovable property, including businesses, with deeds in their own names, backed these efforts.

Even in the military, President Robert Mugabe noted the need, 'to be gender sensitive and it means we have to deal with people's attitudes towards women and also women's attitudes towards challenging posts in the military.'⁷²

⁶⁹ Barnes, "We Women" p36. R.B. Gaidzanwa, "The Experiences of Women in Post-Revolutionary Reconstruction: Women in Higher Education Administration", in Meena (ed.), *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues*, (Harare, SAPES Trust, 1992), pp114.

⁷⁰Report on women and Employment in Zimbabwe, *The Women's Watch* vol.12 Nos. 3/4; Vol. 13 No.1 September 1999.

⁷¹Innocent Chirisa and Smart Dumba, " Innovative, Adaptive and Survivalist Strategies by Small Business Enterprises in Zimbabwe (1990 – 2009): Implications for Policy and Planning" in *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 2, No.5, (May 2012), p115; M. Carr, "Women in small-scale industries: some lessons from Africa", *Small Enterprise Development* , vol. J, No 1, (March 1990), p 12.

⁷² The Herald Online, Thursday, 14th June 2012.

Though men dominated the Zimbabwe National Defense Forces (ZNDF), an amalgamation of ZANLA, ZIPRA and Rhodesian Forces, some female ex-combatants also joined the security system. Many like Gloria Mvududu joined the CIO and other government departments.⁷³ In the 1990s, Colonel Nyambuya led men and women of the police and army departments on a United Nations (UN) peace-keeping mission to East Africa. Thereafter, women constituted part of the forces deployed on UN missions to Somalia, Rwanda and Eritrea.⁷⁴

The government also genuinely attempted to open educational opportunities to women. This effort was a continuation from the 1970s recruitment of female and male guerillas to study at Wampoa College in Mozambique and in sympathetic countries such as the Soviet Union, Libya and Cuba in the 1970s. Gloria Mvududu exemplifies women who left babies at Osibisa camp to study in various countries.⁷⁵ At independence, the party encouraged female ex-combatants represented by Muchinguri, Mujuru and Mvududu to complete different levels of education. This was against the background of the colonial racial and gender biased education system which left millions illiterate, with 64% being women as at 1980.⁷⁶

By launching the Education for All policy, Adult Literacy Campaign in the 1980s and the 1990s Affirmative Action decree which runs into the 21st century, the government ensured that by 2002, women's illiteracy rates dropped to 11.75% and female lecturers in tertiary institutions increased from zero to 15% by 2002 and continue to increase.⁷⁷ Even if the patriarchal culture still permeates socio-economic and political life, the transformative role of women in the liberation war began this slow but real shift in gender perceptions.

⁷³ Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, p250-251.

⁷⁴ Chitiyo and Rupiya, "Tracking Zimbabwe's Political History: The Zimbabwe Defense Forces" in M.R. Rupiya, (ed), *Evolutions & revolutions: a contemporary history of militaries in Southern Africa*, (Zimbabwe, Institute for Security Studies, 2005), p366.

⁷⁵ Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, p251-253.

⁷⁶ R. Gordon, "Education Policy and Gender in Zimbabwe", in *Gender and Education*, 6, 2, (1994), p45-7; Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, pp270-290.

⁷⁷ National Statistical Office, Harare, *Zimbabwe Census Report*, 2002.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined women's engagement in the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. The paper particularly converses with the scholarship that stresses continued oppression of women before, during and after the war. Of course, to some extent, the war had complicated connotations for women combatants, some of whom faced persistent oppressive patriarchal relations in the military. However, this is different from arguing that the war did not bring any change in gender relations or women's status within ZANLA and beyond. Women's new roles reflected a shift in general perceptions about them, despite the continuity of vestiges of male domination. As I have argued, their contributions within ZANLA and its strategic positions marked the reordering of gender norms within the context of war demands. Their undervalued "traditionally feminine roles" became strategic in the social reproduction of the military as did the women who undertook them. Wartime contingencies therefore spurred shifts in perceptions of women, at times radical but at others, seemingly imperceptible.

This process marked the beginnings of protracted efforts at reevaluating women's socio-economic and political status, efforts which influenced postcolonial developments. Indeed, legislative pieces such as the Legal Age of Majority Act, gendered educational and employment policies, as well as women's presence, no matter how limited, in arenas conventionally designated as male, reflected processes starting with women breaking new ground as liberators of Zimbabwe alongside men. True, patriarchy did not die a sudden, revolutionary death, but change in gender perceptions began and will continue, even though gradually given the centuries-old patriarchal culture of Zimbabwe whose dismantling must, in itself, be a process rather than an event.

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