

Women and Perpetration of Intra- and Inter-gender Cultural Violence in Zimbabwe?

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Women appear in much of the literature on violence as victims because violence is generally understood in terms that limit it to its direct or physical form, which is predominantly associated with men. The main result of masculinization of violence and its limitation to physical attack in the study of gender and violence is the pathologization of women, which obscures their political agency. Although women's perpetration of direct violence is limited and largely unobtrusive relative to men in many conflict situations, women are conspicuous in perpetration of cultural violence, which Galtung (1990, 29) defines as "any aspect of culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or

structural form." Cultural violence takes numerous forms that include art, science, ideology and language. Although it appears to be harmless, cultural violence justifies and legitimizes direct violence (Galtung 1990), and the two forms of violence are mutually constitutive. Cultural violence renders the idea of direct violence a palatable and appropriate response to perceived enemies identified through political ideology articulated through relevant language in Zimbabwean politics. The political discourse in Zimbabwe constitutes an integral component of cultural violence whose distinctive characteristics are name-calling and hate speech, which are exemplified by the depiction of political adversaries as puppets, traitors, and enemies who are a threat to the country and need to be "crushed."

Historical and anthropological evidence portrays women actively participating in politics and

leadership positions in precolonial Africa (see Amadiume 2002; Anderson 2000; Bádéjo 1996; Hofffer 1972). The legendary Amazons, female warriors in Dahomey (now Benin), epitomize brave, ferocious, and efficient women fighting at the battlefield. However, the domestication of women, which ensued after colonization and Christianization, weakened traditional structures as well as the social and political organization in African societies. This correspondingly eroded women's power, which had accrued from their positions and roles in these structures. Ironically, women's marginalization from politics has been attributed to precolonial African cultures that have been indiscriminately depicted as oppressive to women. This crisis of attribution prevails in the gender narrative in both the media, civil society, and academia, which generally portray African women as victims of precolonial patriarchal cultures. In many African countries, debates on the fact that more men than women hold political office overlook the role women play

in placing men in office. Women's role in national politics is rendered invisible by their limited occupation of political office.

In Zimbabwe, both men and women engage in cultural violence, but women's role is usually overlooked because women are generally viewed as politically insignificant. Women are actively involved in political campaigns and other political party activities intended to ensure victory for their parties. Their roles are not exempt from instigating the physical violence that is typically witnessed in the country's politics. Obfuscation of women's role in political violence has fed into the assumption that more women in legislative bodies, such as parliament, translate into women's concerns gaining more attention at the national level. Amahazion (2015) points out that a higher percentage of women in legislative bodies does not predict enforcement of legislation intended to protect women's rights and interests. Zimbabwean politics suggests that

women politicians share more interests with men in their political parties than women in other political parties and in the country at large. As a result, they have been complicit in direct violence perpetrated by men in their political parties by downplaying, discounting, and directly abetting it. For instance, women have not come together across party lines to condemn political violence. Women politicians who fail to condemn violence or to take action against it are as complicit in direct violence perpetrated by their political parties and constituencies as those who engage in cultural violence through incendiary rhetoric.

Influential women politicians in Zimbabwe have failed to speak and to take action against the violence that is endemic in the country's politics, especially during election periods. Those who have spoken have mostly promoted both intra- and inter-gender cultural violence. Politically active women abet direct violence by engaging in cultural violence, which fuels and legitimizes direct violence predominantly perpetrated by

men. It is not uncommon to hear vocal women politicians use combative language that feeds into the hostility, polarization, and fear that prevail in the country. Women perpetrate cultural violence as supporters of male politicians or as politicians seeking to enter or retain political office. Their political rhetoric as a form of cultural violence targets both male and female adversaries, thus rendering questionable the idea of shared interest and solidarity among women. Gender appears to be less important than loyalty to political parties unless political capital can be garnered from condemning sexual- and gender-based violence. Where such condemnation has occurred, it has been haphazard, inconsistent, contradictory, and cloaked in self-interest and even more cultural violence.

In a case of intra-gender cultural violence, women such as former First Lady Grace Mugabe and the current Minister of Defence Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri were at the forefront of scathing attacks

on former Vice President Joice Mujuru. In particular, Grace Mugabe's rhetoric drew on culturally reprehensible metaphors such as equating ejection of Mujuru from the presidium and the party as "baby dumping." She also levelled witchcraft accusations at Mujuru and insinuated that she was sexually immoral because of her choice of dress. This kind of political rhetoric renders the target an undesirable element, not only in the political party but also in the wider social fabric where beliefs in witchcraft still prevail and vocal women in politics and other public spaces are habitually labelled as prostitutes.

Language as a form of cultural violence degrades or erodes the dignity of the targeted individual, which renders them vulnerable to more attacks of a similar nature from the wider society as demonstrated by ensuing comments in various Zimbabwean media that subjected Mujuru to more verbal abuse. Since the verbal attacks on

Mujuru were launched by women occupying high positions in the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), other women in the party either joined the strident and vicious campaign against Mujuru or remained silent, thus becoming complicit in this form of intra-gender cultural violence. The vice presidency from which Mujuru was dismissed was not given to another woman, who would have become the vice president in both the party and the government. Instead, President Mugabe (now late) appointed a male politician, Emmerson Mnangagwa, thus returning the presidium to an all-male structure much as Mujuru's appointment had been intended to "gender balance" it. Currently, Mnangagwa, who is now the president of Zimbabwe, heads a presidium that does not have a woman.

Women also engage in inter-gender cultural violence. The late Shuvai Mahofa, who was a member of the ruling party, ZANU PF, was

quoted in private media using inflammatory language, which instigated direct violence on male political opponents perpetrated by young men on her behalf in Masvingo Province. Inter-gender cultural violence was epitomized once again by Grace Mugabe and a vocal ZANU PF female politician, Mandi Chimene, whose vicious rhetorical campaign against Mnangagwa in a conflict pitting him against the late president Mugabe intensified the situation. Cultural violence is perpetrated through language that vilifies and demonizes its target such that the subsequent course of action taken against the target, which is often dismissal and expulsion from the party, becomes legitimate. It was not a surprise therefore when President Mugabe dismissed his deputy who went on to oust him through a military intervention in November 2017. Interestingly, another cycle of cultural violence followed, but this time it targeted the now former president Mugabe, his wife, and their vocal supporters, such as Mandi Chimene who

fled the country when Mugabe was forced to resign. It appears that while male politicians have benefited from both cultural and direct violence, its outcomes for many Zimbabwean women politicians have been unpredictable. Political careers of women who found their way into high offices through cultural violence often come to an abrupt end through the very cultural violence upon which they were built. Women's grip on political power in Zimbabwe tends to be tenuous as it easily succumbs to cultural violence. They stand a better chance in politics by promoting tolerance and peace and engendering a political environment free of cultural violence and the direct violence that it legitimizes.

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