

## Feature Article

### She-murenga: Challenges, Opportunities and Setbacks of the Women's Movement in Zimbabwe

Shereen Essof

#### Introduction and context

On 8 February 2001, representatives of the Zimbabwean women's movement gathered at the popular leftist venue, the Book Café, in Harare, to answer the question: "Does Zimbabwe have a women's movement?" As the meeting progressed, I became intrigued by the spectrum of views generated in the debate.

Some questioned whether the activities of Zimbabwean women's organisations indeed constituted a movement, and called for a stocktake to quantify its concrete achievements. Others suggested that the movement had been so ideologically weakened that it was reduced to perpetuating the patriarchal status quo. Muted voices recognised a movement, but described it as weak and disarrayed. One commentator later referred to the movement as "paralysed" (Win, 2004: 25).

This negated my experience of witnessing creative and assertive organising by women while working for the Zimbabwean Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN) during 1995–2000. I knew that the terrain of women's mobilising in Zimbabwe was both rich and deep (Barnes, 1991; Schmidt, 1992; Barnes, 1999), and that women's participation in the nationalist struggle for independence (Staunton, 1990) provided the impetus for post-independence demands that sought gender equity and disrupted pre-existing gender relations and cultural norms. Initially, tangible gains came in the form of legislative change, the most significant being the passing of the 1982 Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA). This granted women majority status at the age of 18, paving the way for their further political and economic empowerment.

However, the ensuing years saw patriarchy reassert itself. The political will to address gender inequality in Zimbabwe diminished rapidly, and was replaced by intensified regulation of women in both the private and public spheres. This was done through the powerful invocation of counter-revolutionary cultural-nationalist discourses, which portrayed women's organising as feminist, and feminism as anti-nationalist and pro-imperialist.

Operation Clean-Up [1] was perhaps the most blatant example of this. There were also repeated attempts to undermine LAMA, and to deny property and inheritance rights to women under customary law. These and other outrages were met with direct and concerted action by women from all walks of life. Operation Clean-Up was dramatic enough to provoke a change in Zimbabwean women's consciousness. As activists realised how little room state patronage allowed for the advancement of women's rights, a different kind of women's mobilising began to take shape. This "new" activism now took place outside the state (although still engaging with it), bringing together women from all sectors of Zimbabwe's still divided society around gender interests for the first time.

#### The growth of women's post-independence mobilisation

The Women's Action Group (WAG) was set up in 1983, in the wake of public meetings to discuss the abuses of Operation Clean-Up. A core group of forty to fifty Harare-based women engaged in advocacy work. Growing consciousness and a recognition of the continuing injustices faced by women meant that WAG was joined by a plethora of organisations over the next decade. These (at least initially) saw Zimbabwean women of all races working together to challenge the patriarchal precepts of a society that tolerated the

abuse of women by men, and the increasing invocation of tradition to validate discriminatory behaviour.

By 1995, there were over 25 registered women's organisations addressing various aspects of Zimbabwean women's lives in urban and rural areas, and spanning a range of practical and strategic gender interests. [2] They reflected a conceptual unevenness in understandings and articulations of gender as a political struggle, with some overtly feminist in orientation, and others more mainstream or conservative in their approach. Nevertheless, by the 1990s, they were all contributing towards redefining the private and public sphere, and demanding full citizens' rights for women. They invoked international instruments and channelled energy into both claiming and protecting women's rights with regard to land, marriage, sexual harassment and gender-based violence, property and inheritance, and full political and economic participation.

During the 1990s, these organisations came to constitute a loose network, each complementing the work of sister organisations in the struggle for gender justice. However, as Zimbabwe plunged into socio-economic and political upheaval in the latter part of the 1990s, conditions for women's activism became increasingly challenging. By now, the state's open hostility meant that women activists were targets of state-sponsored violence. Meanwhile, the deeply uncivil nature of civil society (Mama, 1999) with regard to gender meant that alliances formed to further women's rights had to be carefully negotiated and remained tenuous.

With this history in mind, the question for me at that February meeting was not whether or not Zimbabwe had a women's movement. Instead, I found myself asking: what kind of movement develops in this kind of context, under these pressures? What form and shape does it have to take in order to survive while seizing the opportunities to further the struggle for gender justice?

I argue that during the years 1995–1998, Zimbabwean women's organisations redefined traditional strategies for engaging the state and civil society action. Instead, theirs was a strategy that saw the organisational base, its rural networks and concerned individuals coming together in various issue-driven configurations and strategic coalitions, forming and disbanding and reforming again as needed. After years of organising with somewhat fragile gains, women activists turned to the Constitutional reform process as the ultimate forum for enshrining gender equality and entrenching Zimbabwean women's rights. It was during this process that the power of collective organising was recognised and strategically refined, as well as challenged, and it is this to which I turn my attention below.

### **The Constitutional reform process**

Zimbabwe in the latter half of the 1990s was a potent cocktail of dashed hopes around land reform, anger over the strangling effects of economic Structural Adjustment Programmes, and a sense of betrayal regarding the corruption and flouting of the rule of law seen in the ZANU-PF-led government. With Zimbabwe at its most politicised level in two decades, the moment was ripe for organised resistance. In 1996, this came from within the ranks of civil society through the birth of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). This sought to build a broad alliance of civic organisations [3] around the issue of Constitutional reform. Its objectives were to raise the level of national consciousness concerning the need for a new Constitution, review the Lancaster House Constitution, [4] and draft a “home-grown Zimbabwean Constitution” in a process that involved authentic national debate.

The NCA posed a direct challenge to ZANU-PF by bringing the constitutional debate onto the streets and to rural communities. Its impact on the political scene exceeded all

expectations, [5] with the NCA becoming the largest civil society coalition of the post-independence period. The coalition worked through an executive committee and task forces initially headed by Morgan Tsvangirai, the trade-union leader, a move that cemented the alliance between the union movement and other civil society organisations.

As constitutionalism came to the fore, the state urgently needed to be seen to be responsive. It thus established the Constitutional Commission of Zimbabwe (CCZ) and appointed approximately 400 commissioners to gather people's submissions. The results were used as a basis for drafting a "homegrown" constitution. But this process was unrepresentative and flawed from the outset, and the contents of the draft were not only "contrary to what people said, but also not good for Zimbabwe." [6] The CCZ was problematic not only in terms of transparency and accountability; it showed no particular commitment to gender equity. Women constituted only thirteen per cent of those on the commission, and despite the outcry concerning the low level of representation, no redress was forthcoming.

The women's network soon realised that in the context of a national debate in which women's voices were likely to be marginalised, they needed to protect their own interests. This was especially the case given that the NCA was at first openly male-dominated.

Thus, with two parallel processes underway, neither of which made room for women to explore their own concerns and consolidate their demands, women's organisations came together to carve out their own space. In so doing, they were informed by years of experience of coalition advocacy. It was felt that most of the discrimination women faced was based on customary law or culture. The constitutional reform process was therefore seen as a vital window of opportunity for women.

### **The birth of the Women's Coalition**

So the Women's Coalition on the Constitution was born. It comprised a network of about 66 women activists, researchers, academics and representatives from a wide range of 30 women's and human rights organisations. Launched in June 1999, the Coalition aimed to inform and unite women around the Constitutional reform process. It stood as a broad lobbying and advocacy front that pressed for the adoption of a constitution that would protect women's political, social, economic and cultural rights. It was to include women of all races, linguistic and ethnic groups, classes, religions, occupations (including students) and political parties, drawn from diverse geographical locations across Zimbabwe.

The Coalition faced a mammoth task. From the outset, members pooled resources and complemented each other in order to sustain a process that did not necessarily fall within their particular organisational ambits. However, the participants were united in their understanding of the Coalition as a space in which a women's agenda could be developed and pursued.

These goals were fulfilled through an intensive programme that included a series of national and provincial consultative workshops and conferences to formulate a women's agenda. These were held in both rural and urban areas. The Coalition also embarked on an aggressive media campaign on the Constitutional and reform process. This campaign was supported by the circulation of posters and flyers in the three national languages. T-shirts, scarves and pins were issued, not only to raise awareness of the draft constitution and referendum, but to develop an identifiable constituency.

### **The challenges presented by political allegiances**

Tensions soon began to develop. The two Constitutional reform processes, one government-

orchestrated and the other representing civil society and the emergent opposition, began to divide women according to their political allegiances. As one Coalition member stated: “[T]he women's Coalition had members from the NCA, but at the same time [it] also had links with ZANU-PF, through MPs and commissioners and that created tensions.” [7]

At first, the claim that “we were not going to talk CCZ, we were not going to talk NCA, we were going to talk women” helped to mitigate differences. Early on, the Coalition had resolved that as an entity it would not form an alliance with either the NCA or the government commission, although individuals and organisations within the coalition were free to do so. It was further agreed that the Coalition would lobby both the NCA and the CCZ on gender issues. But this rhetoric could not mask the deepening political polarisation within the country, and potential faultlines began to develop within the Women's Coalition. As one member noted, “If you were aligned to the NCA you were perceived as anti-government, if you were aligned to the CCZ you supported ZANU-PF.” [8]

While women identified the struggle for the entrenchment of women's rights as a common goal, there were multiple views on what strategies to follow to achieve this. Women who pursued the strategy of engagement with the state were often frustrated by the cumbersome state-sponsored process. When a female commissioner was assaulted by a fellow (male) commissioner, this confirmed the patriarchal power differential in a very real way:

It became obvious working for the CCZ that we under-estimated the degree of patriarchy in our society. Every single item concerning women in the CCZ was contested and had to be struggled for, it was not easy. [9]

Women aligned with the more democratic NCA were somewhat more successful. They were vocal about gender imbalances within the NCA and campaigned vigorously for increased female representation on task forces. As a result, at the NCA general assembly held in June 1999, eight women were elected onto the eighteen-member committee.

### **The Movement for Democratic Change and the Women's Charter**

In September 1999, Morgan Tsvangirai announced the establishment of a “political formation”. This would be led by labour movements, with support from allied progressive social forces, some of whom constituted the NCA. Thus began the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). It was seen as “the biggest ever opposition party in Zimbabwe with the necessary national support.” [10] NCA chair-elect Tsvangirai stepped down to concentrate on the formation of the new party, and NCA deputy-chairperson Thoko Matshe, a self-proclaimed feminist and then Director of the ZWRCN, was unanimously chosen to lead the NCA. This was partly because of her strong personality, and partly because the NCA sought to project itself as an alternative democratic space. Matshe's election signalled an important new stage: having a women's movement leader chairing a civic alliance propelled the women's movement into a prominent role within the broader civic society mobilisation. As one Coalition member noted:

To a large extent during the latter 1990s, the whole civic process was in the hands of the women's movement, through the Coalition and our presence in the NCA. The media would call us the group of thirteen because we were the thirteen biggest women's organisations. [11]

This “double militancy” (Hellman, 1992) meant that women were involved in both democratic and women's struggles: “It felt schizophrenic, we were all juggling so many hats, but we were clear that when it came to the Coalition it was about women, women, women first.” [12]

Meanwhile, the Women's Coalition process of nation-wide consultation resulted in a

Women's Charter in 1999. The idea was that this would form the basis of future advocacy efforts, an optimistic attitude clearly expressed by one Coalition member:

Perhaps we were naïve to think we could continue to experience this Utopia where we weren't targeted. We were happy, we organised, we felt that women could be a kind of rallying point. [13]

While civil society groups like the NCA were monitored and severely policed by the state (to the extent that the state-controlled media were instructed not to carry any NCA material), the Women's Coalition seemed not to have attracted the notice of the state. A strong women's outreach programme, strategic civil society alliances and a vocal group of women within state processes meant that the Women's Coalition had a constituency and multiple bases from which to push for change. It thus constituted a powerful force that could direct action.

### **The February 2000 referendum and the 2000 parliamentary elections**

However, the Coalition was about to face its most formidable challenge. In February 2000, the CCZ's draft constitution was put to a referendum, with heated debate as to whether the Women's Coalition would call for a yes or no vote. [14] It was this moment that finally saw the political faultlines split open:

The women's movement realised that they had gone way beyond what they had bargained for... we could no longer stay neutral, it was politics now, that was the game we were playing, and there was no turning back, we had to take a side. [15]

There are many versions of what transpired next within the women's movement. Some member organisations felt the need to remain "apolitical", others knew that the push for a transformative agenda demanded that women vote "No". Members reported a "backlash" and state "infiltration", as "ZANU women" apparently argued in favour of the state-led process within the coalition, reflecting a rising conservatism within the movement.

After much political jockeying and posturing, the Coalition eventually called for a "No" vote in the referendum on the constitution. It argued that among other things, the draft constitution did not guarantee women's rights to equal social and economic standing, including health care and education; it did not uphold their right not to experience violence; it did not offer equal political representation or protect women from discriminatory cultural practices; and generally ignored the wishes of the Zimbabwean people. The Coalition went on to mobilise its constituency, with women's votes contributing to the surprise victory for the "No" vote in the referendum.

This result shocked and galvanised the Mugabe-led state, which had never before been met with such vocal opposition. The government rapidly sidelined the constitutional debate in preparation for the impending parliamentary elections, which were delayed until June 2000. Meanwhile, still riding high on the referendum victory, the Women's Coalition recognised the potential strength of bringing women together across political divides and sought to consolidate its position by voting women candidates into parliament.

However, experience has shown that it is not enough to have women in parliament as a form of window-dressing, as numbers do not necessarily translate into gender equality. [16] Neither does it mean that these forums are accommodating and receptive to women's interests. The Coalition nonetheless began to facilitate a women's political agenda by endorsing and supporting the 55 women candidates who were standing for parliamentary elections: "The powers that be started to see women could be a force to be reckoned with politically. Unlike male politicians, women began talking across political parties." [17]

This was the first time in the history of Zimbabwe that a women's agenda had been articulated in this way. At a meeting in May 2000, women from different political parties sat together to brainstorm on how to beat their male counterparts at their own game. [18] As one participant noted:

Women buried their political differences for democratic justice. Every political party has been guilty of suppressing the rise of women within the ranks, but women are not out of this highly contested political race. We have another battle of our own – challenging men's dominance in politics. [19]

### **The costs of mobilising for women**

But the Coalition was only as strong as its constituent parts and these constituent parts were specific organisations – mostly registered NGOs and CBOs. With commitments to their structures, systems and areas of operation, these structures were already buckling under the pressures of intense political organising. They also had responsibilities to donors, and these did not readily allow them the flexibility to engage with the rapidly changing national political landscape.

Internally, there remained a general anxiety concerning the meaning of politicised action. This nervousness manifested through the stance taken by numerous boards of established organisations, who were in structural positions of power and who suddenly found themselves vulnerable to charges of political activism and even subversion. Board members began calling for a more circumscribed approach to Coalition activities, curtailing affiliation and contribution to the Coalition for a variety of reasons: ZANU-PF allegiance, commitments to donors, or security risks to staff.

State-sponsored violence against all political opponents, real and imagined, presented a very real threat. Members of ZANU-PF and MDC entered into retaliatory battles and the police generally ignored the resulting damage to property, assaults, torture and deaths. [20] Women did not go unscathed, and many were assaulted and beaten for their political affiliations. [21] Both MDC and ZANU-PF women supporters were targeted. Women who identified with the Women's Coalition by wearing Coalition headscarves or pins were also vulnerable, as were women contesting seats in the upcoming elections. Nyasha Chikwinya, a ZANU-PF candidate, was beaten so severely she had to wear a neck brace. Sekai Holland, an MDC candidate, also survived assault.

Women also became victims of violence within their political parties. One activist noted:

Yes, there was violence, even within political parties women were exposed to violence. It was a fight for survival, so there was violence from without, the violence that seized the nation, but also violence from within. [22]

In the face of such political violence, it was clear that the Women's Coalition had overestimated its capacity. It called on women to stand for election, campaign and vote, but when women became vulnerable as a result, it was helpless and could not offer support or protection. Many key organisations lost staff members during this period. The reasons for this included the disjunctures between the perspectives of board members and staff, as well as the deepening national and socio-economic strife, which compelled many women to prioritise their personal and financial security. In one woman's words:

Women activists have been exposed, we've had threats, some implied, some direct. We are doing some serious thinking, counting the costs. I may be prepared to sacrifice myself, but what about those I am responsible to? [23]

This period of intense organising also left many women activists exhausted and in need of space and time to regroup. This “burnout” led to resignations, immigration and withdrawal: “As you can see, all those strong organisations are without staff ... a top layer of leadership has gone.” [24]

This is the context into which we can place the discourses articulated at the Book Café. There was a collective pause after the 2000 elections and the intense activity and expectations that preceded it. Some Coalition members described this as a need to “lie low”, or to “go underground” in the face of what was expected to be an even more violent presidential election in 2001. If the women's movement had found itself in a cul de sac, the Book Café meeting was perhaps the first step towards a period of necessary reflection on the women's movement in Zimbabwe, its form and its strategies.

### **Lessons learnt: sadder but wiser?**

This scrutiny of women's organising in Zimbabwe, particularly focusing on the late 1990s and the repercussions of women's engagement with the Constitutional reform process, raises some pertinent questions. What insights can we gain from the particular features of the Zimbabwe women's movement in the latter 1990s?

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant transformation of women's organising in Zimbabwe, a transformation that runs parallel to the realisation of the power of political consciousness within the movement. The question is, does a conservative state, together with an increasingly hostile political, social and economic environment, give rise to this particular type of coalition politics?

To answer this question fully would require comparative research on other authoritarian or militarised environments. In the Zimbabwean context, one can argue that in the face of state antagonism and the rapidly shrinking space for organising by civil society, the quiet, strategic coalition-building that occurred was advantageous. It enabled women to operate “beneath the radar”, to continue working within bounded organisational entities while simultaneously organising more effectively around common interests. For much of the 1990s, this mode of organising enabled the women's movement to continue its activities precisely because it was not perceived as a threat or a consolidated site of power.

When women did come under attack, it was not solely because they were women advocating a certain agenda, but because they were perceived primarily as political players with the ability to influence and direct the course of action, while maintaining a clearly articulated “women's agenda.” More significantly, women began to see themselves as a political force. This signified a radical change, because women had not presented a political challenge to the state in this way before.

This leads me to reflect on women vis-à-vis the state. The Zimbabwean experience confirms that the state has been the central focus of women's organising. This has been characteristic of women's movements in other African contexts. Manuh, in her analysis of relations between women, society and the state under the People's National Defence Committee (PNDC) rule in Ghana (1993), Tsikata's work on women's political organisations in Ghana (1999), Mama, writing on Nigeria (1999), and Tamale, writing on Uganda (1999), have all drawn similar conclusions. These studies raise questions concerning the “likelihood of existing organisational forms challenging women's oppression or advancing women's political, social or economic interests” (Mama, 1999: 19).

The Zimbabwean case demonstrates the emergence of new kinds of political strategy:

strategies similar to those seen elsewhere on the continent and discussed elsewhere in this issue. (See the feature articles by Shireen Hassim and Aili Mari Tripp, the In Conversation piece on the Ghanaian Women's Manifesto, and the Standpoint piece by Elaine Salo.) The actions taken by the Women's Coalition show that by 1999, the women's movement was in a strong position to determine and take forward both a national agenda and a women's agenda. This tells us a great deal about context and strategy, and how women's understanding of the state in Zimbabwe has profoundly shaped the form and content of their activism.

Women's organising in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s illustrates those feminist and post-structuralist theorisations that see the state as a highly complex and contested terrain. While its members, constituents and institutions may articulate a hegemonic discourse, the state is also a shorthand term for a "network of power relations existing in co-operation and also in tension with and against each other" (Rai, 1996: 87).

This conceptualisation of the state as a multiplicity of sites demands a variety of strategies and actions to take an agenda forward. The extent to which the Zimbabwe women's movement has understood and fully exploited this conceptualisation of the state is debatable. In the main, the movement has viewed the state as an arbiter of development and a bestower of rights. This can be seen firstly through the movement's emphasis on asking, challenging and appealing the state to enshrine rights. Secondly, advocacy has demanded an expansion in the roles of the state through the provision of services and the establishment of frameworks that mitigate gendered impacts and ensure gender equality. In this way, it is seen to be integral to securing women's rights. But the wisdom of fixating solely on rights and legal reform comes into question. As one feminist activist points out:

It seems a pity that 15 to 20 years after the existence of some of these organisations, we still peddle the falsity that the answer lies in the law. You can demand from the state laws from A to Z but it will not work, we've seen it. Our battle is in fact not with the law per se, our struggle is with patriarchy. [25]

Whether women should organise within the state or stay outside of it has been the subject of much debate internationally. Some commentators believe that effective reform can only come via state instruments, while others argue that the state co-opts women's issues. Skeptics point to ways in which new legislation that seemingly favours women has afforded the state – and not women – more power (Ghandi and Shah, 1991). Alvarez (1990) and Jaquette (1989) take both perspectives into account when they argue for more pragmatism – working selectively with the state, while maintaining an awareness of its limitations. What is clear is that in the process of negotiation and engagement with the state, not only are women's agendas often ignored, blocked or watered down, but women themselves are co-opted into state machinations through personal, professional or political allegiances and interests. In this way, the state allows a certain amount of leverage, an allotted space for radical dissenting voices, but this is tolerated only up to a point. The example of the debate on constitutional reform in Zimbabwe, discussed above, demonstrates that the state does not allow for the consolidation of such voices.

Let me also consider the insights gained regarding civil society. Just as the women's movement in Zimbabwe has made demands upon the state, it has also sought alliances from broader civil society. In Zimbabwe, civil society has become an important force in the push for a democratic dispensation, to the extent that civil society and the organisations and political parties it has generated, notably the NCA and MDC, have come to be regarded as the alternative to the ZANU-PF-led state.

Civil society in Zimbabwe is an umbrella term that includes the trade union movement, student activists, churches, anti-capitalist, socialist, human rights and women's movements,

academics and political commentators, the media and development activists. By its very nature, it is heterogeneous and includes multiple and competing agendas. Within an authoritarian national context, the harsh reality is that civil society structures are fragile and have limited reach and capacity.

Moreover, one might think that civil society would be a more receptive recipient and conduit of a gender agenda than the state. But it is something of a political tragedy that broader civil society in Zimbabwe, increasingly assumed to be the voice of democracy and progressive principles, did not at any time spontaneously protest blatant violations of women's rights. It was only around the issue of constitutional reform that the brief alliance between women and broader civil society was cemented. This could be explained bluntly as being borne of instrumentalism; the NCA needed women to legitimate their agenda, draw in their constituency, and secure donor funding. Women then found themselves having to wage a struggle within the NCA for gender concerns to be addressed in a meaningful way.

## Conclusions

How then do women articulate their agendas and formulate their interests? This analysis leads us to consider a third arena, beyond the state and civil society – the question of women's political interests and identities. Molyneux argues that whatever form female mobilisation has taken, it has always expressed demands for full citizenship and rights, while highlighting women's everyday strength and ability to pursue their interests in the public sphere. She goes on to suggest that this formulation of interests, whether they are practical or strategic, is intrinsically linked to identity formation: "Thus women's interests are subject to cultural, historical and political variation" (1998: 233).

The concept of women's interests as informing political identity in this way leads us to consider how women become motivated to act and make certain demands at particular points in time. It would be erroneous to assume that the terrain of the Zimbabwean Women's Movement is all-encompassing, or that women's interests are uniform. To a certain extent, the movement has seen itself as fairly homogenous, and this has been reflected in the fact that discourses and discussions on internal differences and diversities have been glaringly absent. Instead, it has defined itself within a liberal human rights-based agenda that has further contributed to the masking of internal diversity: "We were clear that we needed to articulate a women's agenda, women came together. It was about women. This was the only way to take our issues forward." [26] But as Everjoice Win concludes in her reflection on the Women's Coalition in Zimbabwe, "...if they merely work on common issues and do not recognise the diversity of values and principles which exists within them, coalitions will immobilise themselves" (2004: 26).

Clearly the sense of consensus within the movement has been somewhat spasmodic. Dissonant views, strategies and opinions have repeatedly come to the fore; as one member observed:

There were meetings around constitutional reform where we literally wanted to throw each other out of the window.... It trashed the whole sisterhood thing, you know, it was like getting hit in the face with cold water. Like this is reality, because for those of us who have been in the movement, we always felt that it does not matter what kind of differences we might have, but a sister is a sister. We are bound to gel at some point. But the stark reality is that it was about politics now, it was a repositioning. [27]

This points to a movement whose agenda is constantly being contested internally, as women bring to it different subjectivities and diverse political identities. The movement is neither homogeneous, nor open, but rather a site in which many different agendas come into play. At the heart of these variant voices lies the issue of gender politics within the women's

movements, inadequately explored in the broader literature, but crucial to the shape and definition of a movement.

Zimbabwean women's reticence over being "political" has translated into contestations over what organisations should or should not attempt. At some moments, the voices of women whose political affiliations make them uneasy about challenging the state have surfaced. At other moments, a second set of voices has articulated a gender and development discourse, rooted in the relative safety of international instruments. At yet other moments, a feminist discourse, based on the recognition of patriarchy as a system of male oppression and domination, has become salient. This third articulation seeks a holistic structural transformation of society and relationships.

While a clearly articulated feminist discourse remains largely suppressed, the strategies employed have continued to suggest a feminist consciousness. The Zimbabwean Women's Charter best exemplifies this. Women's persistent challenge to patriarchy through demands for entitlement, the formulation of a women's agenda, and the need to advance this through women's political representation evidence a transformatory agenda informed by a feminist vision.

The Zimbabwean Women's Movement, operating in an increasingly hostile political environment, and traversing similar terrain to other continental women's movements, has not only worked to change the relationship between women and civil society; it has also challenged women's relations with the state. As one Coalition member noted:

The African women's movement is not only the most exciting movement to emerge from the 20th century as a century of nationalism and nationalist resistance, but it is also really at the cutting edge of a new politics. The women's movement is very central to crafting a new politics, a postcolonial politics and this is very central to the vibrancy of the women's movement, because we are overturning everything. [28]

This has major implications for theory; indeed, this article demonstrates the ways in which reflection on activism can pose useful questions for the development of new theories.

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## Footnotes

[1] This took place over a weekend in October 1983. Soldiers and police swept through the major city centres of Zimbabwe, arbitrarily arresting unaccompanied women and charging them with prostitution. Its purpose was to harass and control single women, many of whom had returned home after fighting for independence only to experience unemployment and marginalisation.

[2] These included the Musasa project, which was established in 1988 to address the growing problem of violence against women. National branches of Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) and Women, Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) were established in Harare in 1988 and 1990 respectively. The Federation of African Media Women (FAMWZ) was established in 1988. The Women and Aids Support Network (WASN, established in 1989), sought to deal with the growing HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRWCN, established 1990) focused on research, documentation, advocacy and the distribution of information on gender issues (see *Feminist Africa* 3 for a profile of ZWRWCN). The Zimbabwe Women's Finance Trust and Women in Business concentrated on women's economic interests, while the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA, established 1995) provided poor women with legal advice and lobbied for reform of laws that discriminated against women.

[3] These came to include trade unions, students' movements, the mainstream churches, human rights organisations, media houses, women's groups and opposition political parties.

[4] This had already been amended 16 times in 21 years, most notably to vest power in an omnipotent president in 1987.

[5] By September 2000, the NCA had over 30 000 registered individual members and 200 institutional members countrywide.

[6] See “A Summary of the Main Features of the Draft CCZ Constitution: Some of the reasons why NCA campaigned for a NO Vote”.  
[http://www.nca.org.zw/html/fdraft/fdraft\\_summ.htm](http://www.nca.org.zw/html/fdraft/fdraft_summ.htm). See also “On the Constitutional Trail”, Zimbabwe Biz, November 1999. <http://www.zimbabwebiz/magazine/11-1999/nov04.htm>.

[7] Field interview (all interviews were carried out as part of research for the author's Masters' dissertation).

[8] Field interview.

[9] Field interview.

[10] “MDC Launch Sets Stage for Bruising Battle”, *Financial Gazette*, 16 September 1999.

[11] Field interview.

[12] Field interview.

[13] Field interview.

[14] “Women's Groups threaten to reject draft constitution”, *Daily News*, 20 December 1999.

[15] Field interview.

[16] The 1995 parliamentary elections had seen the largest number of women yet being elected to parliament (17 women out of 150 MPs). Yet it was also during this period that women's rights were most under threat.

[17] Field interview.

[18] “Women Rally Together to Boost Participation in Civic Issues”, *Daily News*, 15 May 2000.

[19] Field interview.

[20] See Statement of the National Democratic Institute Pre-Election Delegation to Zimbabwe, issued in Harare 22 May 2000; “Who is Responsible? A Preliminary Analysis of Pre-election Violence”, *Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum report*, June 2000; “Zimbabwe: Terror Tactics in the run-up to Parliamentary Elections”, Amnesty International report, July 2000.

[21] “Women Brave Violence to say No”, *Standard*, 26 March 2000.

[22] Field interview.

[23] Field interview.

[24] Field interview.

[25] Field interview.

[26] Field interview.

[27] Field interview.

[28] Field interview.

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*Shereen Essof is a feminist researcher. She spent five years working for the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network.*