

Standpoint

This standpoint section is drawn from a debate among feminist scholars that occurred on the GWSAfrica listserv, although both Everjoice Win and Onalenna Selolwane recrafted their letters for this issue of Feminist Africa.

Open Letter to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Other Women in the South African Cabinet

by Everjoice Win

Dear Sisters,

Happy Women's Day to you. I am writing this letter to you, woman to woman. I believe in other women. I don't buy into the oft-heard refrain that "women don't support one another". I celebrate your presence in the highest offices of your land, and I want to continue to have faith in other women. The eighth of March is meant to be a day to celebrate how far we have come as women worldwide. But for us, north of your border, there is no cause to celebrate.

But I am making a lot of assumptions in writing this to you. I assume that you are in leadership to promote and protect the rights of women. I assume that you feel for other women. This is an assumption that those of us who work as feminists often make. We vote women into high offices assuming that they will stand up for our collective rights. We think that because one woman has gone through a particular struggle, she will easily identify with the struggles of others. So I am writing this assuming that you are interested in the rights of women, wherever they are, whoever they are. If you are not, then stop reading right now.

Sisters, you are letting us down. The women of Zimbabwe are hurting. Thousands have been physically abused and raped. Many more are unable to survive from day to day, and millions are groaning under the weight of oppression. Honourable Dlamini-Zuma, I am not talking about the British "kith and kin", whom you like talking about so much. I am speaking only of YOUR kith and kin - black women. Women who have never owned land, either in pre-colonial or post-colonial times, and who have not been given any of the celebrated redistributed land. Our president, Robert Mugabe, is on record as saying that women cannot be given land in their own capacity. But Zimbabwean women know that their rights are being violated every day, in the name of this land.

On the former commercial farms, all poor black women know is that they have lost their means of survival. You and I can argue, from the safety of our good jobs, that they were being exploited by the Rhodies. But for them, half a loaf of bread was better than nothing, and now it's a case of no bread at all! In the absence of alternatives, some women are resorting to commercial sex work, with all the dangers that this now entails (your government's denial around HIV/AIDS notwithstanding, in Zimbabwe we are quite clear that one in every three people has HIV).

Since the 2000 elections, hundreds of female nurses and teachers have fled their rural posts because of the politically motivated and organised violence that has engulfed our country. Most of them remain unemployed because the government refuses to allow them to "transfer". Those who have stayed endure continual emotional and physical violence from so-called war veterans and the "Green Bombers". [1] Young girls, some as young as nine or ten, have been raped and infected with HIV by gangs of marauding state-sponsored thugs. There is no knowing how many black women and their families have been displaced from their homes.

Have you ever wondered what everyday life must be like for an ordinary black Zimbabwean woman right now? Let me share with you what I know. A packet of 10 sanitary pads costs Z\$10 000. A domestic worker in Highfield township earns Z\$15 000 a month, if she is lucky. I

leave the horrors of her monthlies to your imagination. Saying hello to a doctor now costs \$50 000; ten good painkillers cost Z\$15 000. A one-way trip into town from the nearest township by kombi is \$500. Most women walk back and forth every day. Working women still have to cook, clean and take care of everyone. Add to all this the impact of the HIV crisis: it is women who have to care for the sick, who have to look after their babies, and who are denied their reproductive rights. We have reverted to pulling girls out of schools because poor families cannot afford to pay school fees for both girls and boys. Our gender roles and rights questions haven't gone away simply because we are in a political crisis. They have just gotten worse.

You have probably seen various videos and read countless stories about what is going on in Zimbabwe. I know many of you doubt the authenticity of these stories. But you and I know the price that women pay for speaking publicly about any human rights violations they suffer. We know the questions that will be asked: what had she done? What was she wearing? Where was she going? Who is she? Can we really believe her? In the case of Zimbabwe's political violence against women, add another set of questions: which party is she from? Are you sure she wasn't paid by the British? Is it really true that Robert Mugabe, a liberation war leader, could do that? And in the case of the socio-economic crisis: surely these figures are exaggerated? Isn't this just Western propaganda?

That, my dear sisters, is why I say you are letting us down. We are dismayed by the comments that some of you, particularly Nkosazana, have made about our situation in Zimbabwe. As any woman in a violent situation will tell you, there are no prizes for speaking out. If anything, you are ostracised by your own family and community. You are branded a bad woman, or worse, you are violated all over again for daring to open your mouth.

So your public denials and accusations, against those of us who dare to speak, hurt. Telling us that what we are going through is "British propaganda" is the same as accusing any South African woman who is raped of telling lies. Your silence and "quiet diplomacy" does more harm to us emotionally than the physical wounds we carry. Those of you who have experienced domestic violence or rape (and I am sure there are a few among you) must be familiar with the pain you feel when your own family doubts your story. You must know the anguish you go through when his family, and your own, accuse you of being the bad one. You must remember the anger you feel when they tell YOU to change your behaviour.

That is what you and your government are doing to the women of Zimbabwe: partly blaming the victims, mostly silencing them. As you celebrate Women's Day, think about the women and girls of Zimbabwe – more than six million nameless, faceless individuals. Go beyond Bob and Morgan. Talk to us. We are here.

As our rights continue to be violated in the name of "national sovereignty", all we ask of you is not to deny our pain. Don't silence us. Don't deny us the space to name our violations and our violators. May what we are going through NEVER happen to any one of you, or to any woman of South Africa.

Footnote

[1] Members of Zimbabwe's National Youth Service, supposedly designed to lift young people out of poverty. Effectively the ruling Zanu-PF party's teenage militia, they are known as "Green Bombers" for the colour of their uniforms and the chaos and violence that follow in their wake.

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