

Standpoint

Response to Everjoyce Win Concerning the Abuse of Zimbabwean Women's Human Rights

by Onalenna Selolwane

Dear Everjoyce,

I would like to begin by congratulating you on the brave step you took in writing to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, South Africa's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and speaking out on the abuse that the women of Zimbabwe are being forced to endure in silence. Your letter was specifically addressed to South African women, suggesting what they might do to influence their government to end the conspiracy of silence on this subject. But I feel it is a challenge to all of us, particularly those of us in neighbouring Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.

The first issue you raise concerns what the suffering women of Zimbabwe can expect by way of solidarity from other women in the region. Are they wrong or misguided, for instance, in expecting understanding when they name their suffering and express their need for protection against violations of their rights?

Given the networks that we have built in the past decade to address women's human rights across political borders and within national boundaries, this is a pertinent question: are these networks simply for show, or can they be called upon to support women's rights across borders? The women of Zimbabwe are entitled to know what position women in neighbouring SADC governments and human rights organisations take with regard to the situation in Zimbabwe. I believe we have an obligation to answer in our various capacities as women leaders and human rights activists, and that these questions need to be directed to each one of us. I also believe we have a responsibility, both individually and collectively, to respond practically to the human suffering that has spilt across the borders of Zimbabwe, and which bears testimony to the situation at the epicentre.

Secondly, you identify the source of the suffering clearly and unambiguously as politically motivated and organised violence. Like so much of the violence directed against women within the sanctity of home and family, this is supposed to remain unnamed and unspoken, to protect families and men from shame. There is an assumption, as you rightly point out, that liberation war leaders, like husbands and heads of households, have earned an unlimited right to "chastise" (read "abuse and violate") with impunity those that are under their "guardianship". Because they are guardians, "providers" and "protectors", they themselves are protected from having their acts named as violence as this would signify that such acts are wrong morally and legally. I believe this is why the leadership of the SADC prefers silent diplomacy, protecting the liberation credentials of the Zimbabwe leadership at the expense of the victims of violence. But are female leaders also prepared to stay mum to protect patriarchal rights in the face of violence against other women? For in naming the issue as politically motivated and organised violence, you are challenging us to state whether we, as women, want to recognise it as such or deny it that name. Do we prefer denial so that we are not called upon to act? (Here "we" refers to those women who have taken on the responsibility of being spokespersons for and champions of the rights of women. I am fully aware that not all women who have ascended to power would necessarily see themselves as such.)

You also raise the issue of the "messenger" who carries the stories of suffering and violence to the world, only to be disbelieved or ridiculed as women so often are when they break the silence surrounding their abuse, and suggest this might be the reason why the credibility of such stories has been questioned in many (African) circles. The "messenger" in this case is

victims' voices aired via the Western media, or international institutions dominated or sponsored by the West. This raises a number of questions that must be carefully considered.

As most of the programmes of our non-governmental organisations, and even our governments, are largely sponsored by the West, at what point do we accept that such activities reflect the ideals and aspirations of our organisations rather than those of imperial concerns? What criteria do we use to determine where the reality of our experiences ends and Western propaganda begins?

Why, even if these stories of domestic (i.e. national) violence are considered to be incredible or exaggerated, have our governments and human rights organisations not been sufficiently bothered by the possibility that there might be a grain of truth in them warranting independent and therefore more "credible" investigation?

And why do we not have local regional mechanisms and structures for channelling human rights grievances, so that we do not have to rely on Western organisations to be whistle-blowers and monitors? In other words, we have to seriously consider why victims of violence in Zimbabwe had to seek relief elsewhere in the first instance. What does this say about our own commitment to human rights and good governance?

My immediate reaction to your open letter was to contact the Botswana Ambassador to the United Nations in Switzerland (where I am temporarily based), to find out exactly what the position of the Botswana government was, and whether they could do more. It is on account of that conversation, as well as discussions with other colleagues and acquaintances in Botswana, that I would like to make a few suggestions as to how you could broaden your appeal and ensure that there are definite answers to the questions you raise.

As you may be aware, there have been numerous newspaper reports on Botswana's position on the Zimbabwe question, with some even alleging that the Botswana government is complicit in an imperialist agenda to undermine the sovereign integrity of Zimbabwe. But I believe the official channels of communication between the two governments are open and cordial, and that such allegations should not deter Botswana from its responsibilities to the principles of good governance and human rights protection that it (together with Zimbabwe and other SADC, AU and Commonwealth member states) has endorsed in international agreements. Certain of these commitments are reflected in the Harare Principles. These were agreed to by member states of the Commonwealth in Harare in 1991, and include a commitment to the following principles, which are also enshrined in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights:

- democracy and good governance,
- respect for human rights,
- respect for the rule of law.

Until last year, Botswana's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Mr Mompoti Merafhe, was the chair of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which was tasked with monitoring the Harare Principles and overseeing compliance by member states. As a member of the SADC, and ex-chair of this important Commonwealth action group, I believe Minister Merafhe has a moral duty to continue monitoring the extent to which sister countries adhere to the above three principles. I believe it would help greatly if you appealed to him concerning Botswana's position on human rights violations in Zimbabwe, and asked what leverage the Botswana government can and has exercised through its diplomatic relations. In fact, all the SADC member states which are also

signatories to the Harare Principles and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights need to receive an official appeal, and to be asked what they are doing about the situation in Zimbabwe.

But, most importantly, I think that you should appeal to women in the SADC governments. In Botswana, I would suggest that you write an appeal similar to the one sent to South Africa's Minister of Foreign Affairs, directed to women members of the Botswana Parliament and the Women's Caucus. The contact person is Dr Margaret Nasha, who is both a cabinet minister and chair of the Women's Caucus. I think that once you have made a direct appeal to these key people, it would be easier for women's NGOs in Botswana to push for follow-up. However, it is also important to formally notify these NGOs, officially apprising them of the human rights situation of women in Zimbabwe, and asking them to take a stand. If they do not believe what has been broadcast so far, let them lobby for independent corroboration, on the basis of which they could mount follow-up action.

The Foreign Minister of Mozambique currently chairs the African Union Commission, which is committed to gender equity. So both as a member of SADC and this wider regional body, Mozambique also has a moral responsibility to monitor questions of human rights in the region. I would therefore strongly recommend writing to him directly. As with the appeal to the Botswana Foreign Minister, you are aiming to kill two birds with one stone; the idea is to get a reaction clarifying the position of the national government, as well as the wider community of governments. Article 47 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights states that:

If a State party to the present Charter has good reasons to believe that another State party to this Charter has violated the provisions of the Charter, it may draw, by written communication, the attention of that State to the matter. This communication shall also be addressed to the Secretary General of the OAU and to the Chairman of the Commission. Within three months of the receipt of the communication, the State to which the communication is addressed shall give the enquiring State, written explanation or statement elucidating the matter. This should include as much as possible relevant information relating to the laws and rules of procedure applied and applicable, and the redress already given or course of action available.

At the international level, the UN Commission on Human Rights regularly sits in Geneva to receive petitions concerning human rights violations. I think that it would help greatly if Zimbabwean women submit testimony on what they are enduring to this body. However, in making appeals to international bodies, it must be borne in mind that the Zimbabwean government apparently rebuts accusations made by civic organisations, telling the world that such claims are all Western-inspired propaganda. One of the most active NGOs that has made use of the Human Rights Commission has been the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which the Zimbabwean government has tried to discredit by dismissing it as politically motivated and linked to the opposition.

In the meantime, maintain your courage, sister. You are not alone. I hope the South African sisters will also follow up with their respective members of parliament, as well as the women's lobby. Similarly, I hope citizens of other SADC and AU member countries will take up the challenge and act. As we all know, it is very nice to have expressions of sympathy, but even better to have sympathetic practical action.

Dr Onalenna Selolwane is a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Botswana. She is currently also a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Federalism, University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

