# Crisis in the State and the Family: Violence Against Women in Zimbabwe[1]

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**Abstract:** Since the early 1990's, Zimbabwe has been enmeshed in a major economic crisis that has seriously eroded the status of women in that country. For the past three years, the economic crisis has been joined by a political crisis which marks the first major challenge to the Mugabe regime since independence. In addition to the very harsh toll that the economic and political problems have had on poor and low-income African women in particular, especially those involved in subsistence agriculture and the micro-enterprise sector, black women in Zimbabwe have also experienced an escalation in violence committed against them, by both individuals and the state. Such violence cannot be solely understood as physical abuse, but as a phenomenon that takes on a myriad of forms, including the economic and the psychological. Domestic violence and rape have deeply-rooted structural explanations in Zimbabwe linked to the long history of colonialism and white minority rule, political transition, economic crisis and adjustment, changes in expected gender roles for women and men, and the political crisis that emerged in the last few years. Under such circumstances, many men perceive that their power and position in the broader society, as well as within the home, have come into question and unfortunately, all too many men have directed their anger against women. In the midst of this crisis, though, two non-governmental organizations have attempted to address the issue of violence against women—the Musasa Project and the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network. Although the limited resources of these NGO's restrict what they can accomplish, they, unlike the state, are path breakers in the empowerment of poor and low-income women.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, domestic violence and rape have been major concerns of the feminist movement, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere. Wife beating and rape are significant violations of human rights around the globe despite the fact that The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations in 1979 and signed by over 160 nations. "CEDAW recognizes gender-based violence as a form of discrimination against women which impairs or nullifies women's

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enjoyment of their human rights including their rights to life and to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health."[2] While several international organizations, such as the UN, international conferences and many local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to focus their attention on the incidence of violence against women in the South, little work has been done by social scientists within sub-Saharan Africa.[3] The few studies that do exist suggest an increase in violence against women over the past decade.[4] It is now estimated that a woman is raped in South Africa every 26 seconds and more than 20 women are assaulted daily by their spouses in Zimbabwe.[5]

This paper marks the beginning of an exploratory study to examine the increasing incidence of violence against women in contemporary Zimbabwe through a sociological lens. In a conference on "Gender, Justice and Development," at the University of Massachusetts (January, 1993) Peggy Antrobus then Director of DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) stated that there clearly seemed to be a relationship between the adoption of structural adjustment programs in the South and an increasing incidence of violence against many poor women in these societies, who were disproportionately carrying the burdens of adjustment. The critical importance of this issue was later emphasized in an international conference on "Gender and Development" in Harare, Zimbabwe (1999) where women ministers and leaders of NGOs in South Africa discussed the escalation of violence against women in that country, particularly since the transition to majority rule in 1994. The problem seems to have become more entrenched with the election and appointment of black women to positions in the legislature and the cabinet respectively.

Over the past three years in Zimbabwe, the state's campaign of violence against those perceived to be in the political opposition has also resulted in increased violence against women, especially during the seizure of large-scale farms in that country. From these examples, it would appear that the extra burdens that beset low-income women under structural adjustment and the improvement in the status of middle class women, as well as women's political and spatial location in a period of turmoil were somehow related to an increase in violence against women in southern Africa. How can we explain this? Are these reconcilable positions? What factors seem to be operative as explanatory variables in these cases?

To begin to answer these questions, this paper will explore what violence against women means in Zimbabwe and how this relates to the widely accepted definitions of this phenomenon that prevail in the North. Violence against women will be considered with reference to the structural problems in these societies such as economic crises in the region and political struggles linked to the consolidation of majority rule.

This paper will then proceed to investigate empirically the incidence of and factors related to violence against women in Zimbabwe. It will then examine the activities of the Musasa Project, a Zimbabwean NGO specifically focused on violence against women before briefly turning to some of the activities of the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network, an important vehicle in making the violence against poor women more visible. Although domestic violence and rape affect women in all races, ethnic groups and social classes, this paper will focus its attention on the impact of these problems on poor and low-income black Zimbabwean women.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND RAPE: WHAT FACTORS EXPLAIN THIS PHENOMENON IN ZIMBABWE?

In Zimbabwe, as well as in most societies, rape and domestic abuse are clear illustrations of some of the ways in which men exert control over women. I would argue, however, that in the case of Zimbabwe, the story is a far more complex one, due to the nature of colonialism and decades of white, minority rule in this and in other settler societies. In fact, the very definition of "violence against women" itself is far more complicated in these societies when one takes into account the nature of the economic crisis in southern Africa and the impact of globalization on the region. These are so acute that the impact on many poor and low-income women has been absolutely devastating. Moreover, these crises are occurring in states that essentially provide little or no safety net for the poor, who are very disproportionately women. In addition, Zimbabwe's independence and the transition to majority rule over 20 years ago, coupled with the economic crisis approximately 10 years later, have fundamentally challenged the prescribed gender roles for women and men. So, how do these realities in Zimbabwe help us understand a rising tide of violence against women in this society? What do they suggest about the questions we posed earlier regarding the causes for the increasing incidence of violence?

First, let us consider how the current economic crisis in Zimbabwe may have contributed to increasing economic violence against women by briefly exploring early post-independence economic and social history. During most of the 1980's, Zimbabwe experienced significant economic growth and substantially expanded the size of the state.[6] Specifically, the state expanded social services, particularly in education and health care and appeared committed to fostering policies that promoted gender equality. Women and men both participated in the liberation war and the new government proclaimed that it intended to recognize this fact it its new policies. Therefore, one of the state's earliest efforts to advance the position of women was the creation of the Ministry of Community and Cooperative Development and Women's Affairs in 1981. This agency was responsible for working to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and ensure their meaningful participation in all spheres of national development. The state also improved the legal status of women through the passage of the Legal Age of Majority Act, which changed women's position from that of legal minors to full citizens.[7] As a result of these and other state actions, more women and girls enrolled in schools, occupied positions in the formal labor market, engaged in contracts, owned property, and attained credit in their own names.[8] Further, women increased their participation in civil society through creating and sustaining local associations or NGOs to address their needs. The state's actions, combined with women's efforts, did foster greater legal equality and autonomy for some women in the first independence decade.

By the end of the 1980's, however, the Zimbabwean economy experienced decline as a result of lower prices for its primary products, balance of payments problems, drought, and continued regional destabilization by South Africa. By 1988-89, economic growth had already decreased markedly to 5% from a high of 11% at the beginning of the decade. At the end of the first independence decade, the national unemployment rate had increased to one million persons, or 50% of the potential labor force.[9] In an effort to strengthen the economy, the

Zimbabwean state adopted an Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) in 1990 with little discussion of this program outside of Mugabe's inner political circle.

The economic crisis and ESAP led to increased economic violence against women, especially for those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Economic violence can be defined as: property grabbing by male relatives of a deceased man, forced dependency, or neglect of a wife's material needs.[10] From the over 150 intensive interviews that I conducted with women entrepreneurs during the past decade, it is clear that many of these women have experienced economic violence. How did this occur?

Under ESAP, the state retrenched over 40,000 workers, who were mostly men, from the civil service. In an effort to increase the profitability of their enterprises, medium and large-scale firms also engaged in major layoffs. In most cases, since men dominated formal sector employment, they experienced massive displacement in this period. While the state encouraged these retrenched men to begin new enterprises (in the informal sector if necessary) to sustain their families, many men found themselves contributing less and less to the upkeep of their families. They became increasingly dependent on the wages of their partners, the majority of whom relied on subsistence agriculture and/or informal sector work. Therefore, men's contributions to the family in this period of economic crisis declined and in many cases disappeared altogether.[11]

Many women in the microenterprise sector discussed with me how they had to increase their overall contributions to family maintenance, especially the provision of food and payment of school fees due to their husbands' refusal or inability to increase their food allowances or because their husbands had left home. Some men left and sought job opportunities in other cities or across national borders (for example in South Africa or Botswana). They often began new relationships with other women in these "host" areas/countries. Many of these men effectively abandoned their first families and did not continue to support them financially, thus committing "economic" violence. The establishment of common-law unions or "maputo" marriages in host communities are intricately connected with the history of the region, since men were often forced to leave their homes to work in the mines and farms to meet their tax obligations to the colonial state.[12]

Failing to support one's wife and children also illustrates that these men are not fulfilling their expected gender roles. Another indicator of this phenomenon is the increasing percentage of female-headed households in Zimbabwe, currently about 31%. Households tend to become female-headed in Zimbabwe when a male partner/spouse leaves a relationship, as opposed to situations in which a woman never marries. Many low-income entrepreneurs, especially market traders, stated that their situations had worsened as the national economic crisis intensified. The Musasa Project, an NGO providing support to women who have been battered, estimated that 42% of the women receiving counseling services from 1988-1998 suffered from economic violence.[13] Moreover, 50% of their clients are from poor and low-income populations.

In addition to the economic violence waged against low-income women in periods of economic crisis and adjustment, increasing numbers of women have also experienced physical violence. According to Green's study on violence against women in Africa, economic change may well be contributing to physical abuse.[14] In Nigeria, for example, the economic crisis of the 1980's and 90's has made it very difficult for men to meet their responsibilities as heads of

households. Wives resent having to meet the increased financial burdens and this often leads to arguments with their husbands. Under these stressful conditions, it is not unusual for a man to abuse his wife.[15] With respect to Zimbabwe, the economic crisis of the past decade has impacted heavily upon poor and low-income populations. Unemployment has escalated in the formal sector, especially for men. The expansion of primary, secondary, and tertiary education among black Zimbabweans in the 1980's outpaced the growth of formal sector jobs in the country. Many young Zimbabwean men who had increased expectations after the successes of the 1980's were unable to secure employment by the early 1990's in the midst of cutbacks in the state and private sectors. Thus, poor and low-income men have not been able to fulfill their traditional gender roles – responsibilities that include providing shelter and food for their families - in an atmosphere that appears to suggest greater rights and growing economic independence for women. Under these conditions, men are increasingly taking out their frustrations on their partners. There is a strong belief throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa that men should have total authority in the home, and many men feel it is acceptable to hit women.[16]

The economic crisis (which began in the late 80's) has meant that many poor, unemployed women have become even more economically dependent on men. The latter also experience the pressure of rising prices, economic uncertainty, and growing demands on their resources. The increasing stress from the economic situation, changing gender roles and expectations, coupled with the growing pressures in their households leads to an explosive situation in which some men lash out against their partners.

Zimbabwe has been mired in a long history of violence, especially with respect to the imposition and enforcement of white minority rule and the end of white hegemony. Within this context of state violence and the African resistance to the state, black women were also caught in the web of violence – in the public sphere, as well as within the home. During the 1930's, for example, at least one rape per month was reported to the native commissioner of Salisbury.[17] In her work on the position of Shona women in the early/mid colonial period, Schmidt noted that men could beat their wives for what were considered major offenses without retribution from their communities, although wives might strike back:

If a Shona wife resisted her husband's authority by skimping on the food she prepared for him, failed to cook, or refused to sleep with him, she committed a serious offense that struck at the heart of the marriage contract. Under such circumstances, a man could beat his wife without social sanction….[18]

Schmidt's finding confirms earlier research by Holleman on Shona customary law. His work revealed that a husband can moderately punish/hit his wife if she refused to cook for him, clean the house, care for the children or have sexual relations with him.[19]

Other scholars examining the position of women in Zimbabwe have also indicated that women have experienced a long history of violence at the hands of men. Barnes noted that during the black nationalist struggles of the 1940's and 1950's, women were victimized by rape and other forms of violence.[20] Women were attacked in Salisbury during the general strike of 1948. One of the most significant cases of violence against women, however, was the attack and rape of women at Carter House in 1956, a hostel for women in Harare township. A boycott led by the Radical City Youth League resulted in the rape and assault of several women, when in the first days of the boycott, some black women residents of Carter House decided to ignore the

call to abandon public transportation and took a bus to town instead. Barnes described how this boycott against a major white-owned bus company in Harare illustrated a shift to a more confrontational style of resistance to the colonial state and resulted in violence:

A central event in the boycott was the attack and rape of women residents of Carter House, the new 156-bed hostel that was situated directly opposite the township's main bus terminus. (This began when) the bus in which the women were riding was stoned; the police fired tear gas. In the subsequent melee, food stalls were burned and bus shelters destroyed…and shops were looted…Perhaps five or as many as sixteen were raped in the assault on the hostel. The focus of male anger on these particular women illuminates some of the explosive undercurrents of urban gender relations in this period and the abandonment of the spirit of tolerance that prevailed briefly in the early 1950's…[21]

The rape of Carter House residents represents yet another example of African men lashing out against women in times of political unrest and transition, as well as their resistance to accepting changing gender roles for women. At the time of this attack, single, employed, black African women resided at the hostel. These women worked as shop attendants, domestics, and factory workers in Harare and were not dependent on men for their maintenance. They lived independently in a community of other women. During this period, a number of black women workers earned incomes that exceeded those of their black male counterparts and the women taking the bus during the boycott were seen as flaunting their independence and economic status. The living and working experiences of these women challenged traditional gender roles and certainly challenged black male hegemony in one of the only spheres in which they could exert some control – within the family and household. The residents of Carter House, then, were viewed as resisting male authority and defying their expected gender roles and thus, had to be punished and taught a lesson by men, who themselves were resisting the power of the state.

Zimbabwe subsequently fought a long, harsh and bitter liberation war in which women also participated. Sanday notes that where interpersonal violence has become an everyday occurrence and men are encouraged to be tough and aggressive, violence is often expressed sexually.[22] Such actions were apparent in the liberation war, where not only did women and men witness much violence in fighting the Rhodesian army, but black Zimbabwean women also experienced harassment and violence from their comrades:

Leading army officials used to behave as though they were entitled to the marital services of women. Some sexist attitudes in war are also documented, including assigning significant tasks to men, and the humiliation felt by some males on saluting senior ranking female comrades. Cases are also reported where comrades in the struggle took other people's wives and used them for their own sexual gratification.[23]

The injustices and violence experienced by women during the war, however, did not end with independence in 1980. While in the immediate post-independence years the Zimbabwean state was committed to advancing the position of women, the state has since been engaged in many public acts of violence against women. Among these are the beatings of women considered prostitutes in Harare at different times in the mid-1980's and 90's to rid the area of "unwanted elements" in periods when the state was preparing to host an international conference (for example, the Non-Aligned Movement).[24] Later, public demonstrations in

January 1998 by women who were disproportionately bearing the costs of economic crisis and adjustment were met with the violence of the army.

More recently, state-sanctioned violence that accompanied the 2002 pre-election campaign, the presidential elections, and the seizure of white-owned farms has taken an especially heavy toll on women and children. It is alleged that wives and daughters who sympathized with the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) or who were connected to MDC supporters, as well as women farm workers were victimized by ZANU youth brigades. Although the youth brigades were particularly intent on silencing vocal opposition to the ruling party, who were disproportionately male, there was clearly a gendered dimension to their violence. Women believed to be associated with the opposition were not beaten, but were instead often raped or gang raped by members of the youth brigades and state functionaries.

In an article in the British Broadcasting Company's news and the French press, Frances Lovemore, a member of the Amani Trust (a Harare-based human rights group) remarked: "They (the militia) are raping on a mass scale."[25] Tony Reeler, director of the Trust also stated: "Girls were systematically taken and used and abused because of their families' political views…We're seeing an enormous prevalence of rape and enough cases to say it's being used by the state as a political tool."[26] The BBC and Sunday Telegraph further reported that rape camps exist in the rural areas, where women have been individually and/or gang raped by members of the youth brigades and the riot police.[27] Moreover, some children have witnessed the rapes and beatings of their mothers who lived and worked on farms taken over by the Zimbabwean ex-combatants. Therefore, public, state-sanctioned violence against women has become a reality in Zimbabwe today.

Although the transition to majority rule in Zimbabwe occurred over 20 years ago, the establishment of the "new" state in conjunction with the economic crisis seems to have exacted a negative psychological toll on some men. Under the leadership of Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF, blacks were elected to positions in the local and national legislature and appointed to cabinet posts, marking a major shift from the colonial regime. Black women held approximately 10-12% of all positions in parliament as well as positions in the cabinet, such as the Ministers of Cooperative and Community Development and Natural Resources and Tourism and some city council posts in the early post-independence period. This was quite remarkable given that black women's status was only changed from that of legal minors to full citizens in Zimbabwe in 1982. While these changes in the 1980's and 90's in many ways paled in significance to later changes in South Africa under majority rule (where about 30% of all parliamentary seats are today held by women), they still marked some shift in power.

For low-income black men, who were denied basic civil rights and economically marginalized under minority rule, the economic crisis and structural adjustment saw their status within households slipping away. The new higher status positions that some women were occupying in the state threatened male hegemony. Furthermore, that many of their wives, daughters and sisters were able to obtain positions in the informal economy and formal economy, were massive blows to male positions in the family and community. At the same time, many men were losing their positions in the formal economy with the retrenchment of tens of thousands of workers under structural adjustment. Poor and low-income black men could not fulfill their responsibilities as breadwinners. As the economic and political crises

became more entrenched, they saw little chance of regaining their positions. In general, then, black men, most especially those in the poor, low-income and lower-middle income strata saw the privilege that they enjoyed simply based on their gender significantly eroded with the advancement of women at both ends of the socio-economic hierarchy.

Thus, the history of colonialism and minority rule, political transition, and recent economic crisis and adjustment, have all contributed to an atmosphere of violence in Zimbabwe which partly manifests itself in the increasing rate of violence against women, particularly noted in statistics from 1995-1999 (see Table I below). Greater consciousness of violence against women as a major social problem in Zimbabwe and in southern Africa more generally, has also led to higher rates of reporting, although recent studies do suggest that rape and domestic abuse have been increasing in the region.[28]

## THE INCIDENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe's National Report to the Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1994) stated that domestic violence is the most prevalent form of violence against women, and that this works against a picture that a home is a safe place.[29] In 1997, the Zimbabwe Republic Police reported that everyday more than twenty women are physically assaulted by their spouses.[30] Further, "domestic violence accounts for more than 60% of the murder cases that go through the Harare courts."[31] December Green, noting that Zimbabwe is one of the few countries to have collected data on wife beating, points out:

The government of Zimbabwe estimates that wife beating occurs in eight out of ten homes. The number of cases of wife beating reported in Harare alone jumped from 418 in 1988 to 5000 in 1990. The WILDAF (Women in Law and Development in Africa) report found that one in three Zimbabwean females are physically assaulted, one in two are psychologically abused, and one in three are sexually abused. According to a Zimbabwean assistant commissioner, domestic violence accounts for more than 60 percent of the murder cases that go through the courts….[32]

While it is unclear whether these figures represent an actual increase in wife battery or whether the mechanisms for reporting have improved, such an escalation in the number of cases—– by more than tenfold in a two year period— warrants further study.

A major increase in the reported number of women beaten by their spouses occurred at the beginning of the economic crisis and the subsequent imposition of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) in Zimbabwe. While it would certainly appear such that a massive escalation in the number of domestic abuse cases within the first year of the implementation of an adjustment program would be too immediate, the ESAP did result in major declines in the state budget for such vital services as education, health, transportation, and housing during the first year.[33] Within two years of the implementation of the adjustment program, it was estimated that 60-70% of the population had become very poor.[34] Thus, it is likely that relationships within many poor and low-income families were becoming increasingly strained as they struggled to provide for themselves.

The number of reported cases of rape also rises, particularly after 1990 with the economic crisis and the adoption of ESAP. The following statistics from the first few years of adjustment reveal this trend:

**Table 1**

**Violence Against Women, 1987-1992**

| Year | Number of Indecent Assaults | Number of Rapes |
|---|---|---|
| 1987 | 554 | 2550 |
| 1988 | 535 | 2743 |
| 1989 | 563 | 2510 |
| 1990 | 598 | 2643 |
| 1991 | 609 | 2765 |
| 1992 | 611 | 3813 |

Source: Quarterly Digest of Statistics, Central Statistics Office, 1994.

In reading such statistics, it is important to acknowledge that these numbers are only of cases that were reported. Many incidents of violence against women go unreported. Assault, rape, incest, and sexual harassment remain frequently unreported in Zimbabwe for several reasons. Often the person responsible for the crime is a relative, placing the woman in a serious quandary about reporting the crime. In a number of cases, the person is a partner or spouse who occupies the role of major breadwinner and the arrest of such a person might result in additional financial crisis within the home and family. Moreover, women may fear greater physical violence as well as the humiliation of having to testify in public about such intimate matters.[35]

Studies on domestic violence and rape in Zimbabwe reveal an interesting pattern. In her work on violence against women, Alice Armstrong collected 200 case studies—170 of these were women who survived domestic violence and 30 were men who were survivors of violence by women or perpetrators of the violence. Her research maintains that violence in families starts with a slap and escalates into serious injuries as the years go by.[36] She documents the horrors of severe marital violence where wives are severely maimed or killed. Armstrong discusses patterns of "learned helplessness" which is documented in some of the earlier literature on domestic abuse in the US.[37] Some of Armstrong's major findings are:

- Families and communities do not think that a 'mere slap' is wife-beating.

- Women often don't try to get help and families don't intervene when a husband 'only slaps' his wife.

- A 'mere slap' shows there are problems in the marriage and the couple needs help.

- Help only comes after the violence gets much worse, and then it may be too late.

- Half of wife-beaters interviewed thought they had the right to beat their wives, while only five percent of the women interviewed thought the husband had the right to hit them.

- Consumption of alcohol was often involved in cases of domestic violence.[38

It was quite interesting that in Armstrong's study, many men thought that wife beating was the "traditional" way of dealing with a misbehaving wife. Interviews with local leaders revealed that customary law forbids a husband to beat his wife, suggesting some disagreement with earlier studies on gender and customary law among the Shona. Previous studies indicated that if a woman did not fulfill her wifely duties, she could be hit.[39] This range of views point to the fact that customary law has been and continues to be negotiated between/among individuals and groups in Zimbabwe. Further, these examples illustrate how customary law among the Shona, the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe, might have varied significantly based on the local context. For example, for some Shona populations, it might have been acceptable to hit one's wife if she disobeyed a husband's command, while among the Shona in a different region, beating one's wife might have been viewed as acceptable. In the contemporary period, given the growing awareness that violence against women in wrong, Zimbabwean traditional leaders might be more likely to respond accordingly to a researcher's questions, despite the actual practices among the Shona. In general, in both the historical and contemporary periods, discussions with and facilitated by extended family members are largely regarded as an acceptable way to handle conflicts within the family according to custom.

Green notes that in a study by Chirume, Zimbabwean men were also not allowed to beat their wives with certain body parts or dangerous weapons:[40]

According to Chirume, in Zimbabwe, a husband's use of fists and dangerous weapons against his wife is not acceptable. In such cases the community will generally tend to side with the victim. However, there is still sweeping support for less lethal versions of the custom. Chirume maintains that in Zimbabwe, it is widely believed that beatings must not be so frequent as to be a habit, but not too spaced lest the wife forget who is boss.[41]

A group of Zimbabwean women lawyers (WILDAF) found that nearly half (45.3%) of all murders of women in the country are committed by someone currently or formerly involved in an intimate relationship with them— a husband, a lover or an ex-husband.[42] Most women who are killed by their husbands or partners are between the ages of 21 and 40, during these years men's control over women and their sexuality is at its peak. A survey in Harare and Bulawayo that explored the reasons for killing one's wife or partner in 249 cases concluded that this violence occurred because of the woman's alleged infidelity.[43] This is another vivid reminder of the power of patriarchal authority in controlling.

There are no laws in Zimbabwe that recognize marital rape, which frequently accompanies domestic abuse. Presently, there is also no specific law against domestic abuse. All cases of wife beating are handled under laws of "common assault." Fines for such crimes are often a very small sum that certainly do not deter such crimes. Although women who assaulted can apply for a peace order (restraining order) from the courts to keep the husband/partner away, these orders are only binding for 90 days (though they can be renewed). For the same reasons, however, that rape and domestic violence often go unreported, women seldom apply for these peace orders. They fear physical retribution and/or that they might lose the contributions of the male in their households and as a result their children will suffer.[44]

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HIV/AIDS

In the current HIV/AIDS pandemic, rape and marital rape are to be particularly feared, given the fact that one-third of the population is infected with the virus. As discussed by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM):

Women's exposure to violence increases their exposure to HIV/AIDS. Women can become infected as a result of sexual assault or coerced sex and the abrasions and tearing that can accompany these violations increases the chance of infection. Violence and fear of violence may intimidate women from trying to negotiate safer sex, discussing fidelity with partners or leaving risky relationships.[45]

In fact, globally, the incidence of HIV/AIDS among women has increased with incredible speed. In 1997, 41% of infected adults were women. By 2001, this figure had increased to 49.8%.[46] The spread of HIV/AIDS is not random—– it disproportionately affects women and adolescent girls who are socially, culturally, and economically more vulnerable. According to studies by UNIFEM in Zimbabwe, of those individuals who had "experienced a negative income shock due to HIV/AIDS, 77.6% of them were women."[47]

UNIFEM also found that young women in Zimbabwe were most likely to carry the major burdens of health care delivery for those with HIV/AIDS, to such an extent that they often had to discontinue their education to meet their responsibilities. HIV/AIDS is still a highly stigmatized disease in Zimbabwe and due to the worsening economic crisis, much of the economic and emotional support for patients has to come from relatives. Again, we see women primarily assuming these duties and carrying the weight of the disease— as either patients or workers caring for the sick at home.

AIDS can also mean a death sentence for many girl children and adolescents. First, many men assume that young girls are virgins and therefore do not carry the HIV virus. Second, as illustrated in recent news stories about South Africa and noted among researchers in Zimbabwe, some HIV positive men believe that having sex with a child/young girl can cure them of the disease. Thus, growing numbers of girls/young women are (and have been) in danger of rape and infection with the virus.

## RESPONDING TO THE VIOLENCE: THE ROLE OF NGOS AND THE STATE IN ZIMBABWE

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played the major role in responding to the epidemic of violence against women in Zimbabwe. These organizations have been important educational vehicles for increasing knowledge and access to information regarding violence against women in these societies.

This paper illustrates the role of NGOs by discussing the work of two NGOs: the Musasa Project and the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center. These NGOs are illustrative of how civil society can contribute to empowerment and social change.

## THE MUSASA PROJECT

The Musasa Project (established in 1988) has worked to reduce violence against women by "making the general public aware of the illegality of domestic violence."[48] This organization is

the major NGO in the nation focused on the problem of spousal abuse. The organization provides one-on-one counseling services for women who have experienced violence. It also operates the only shelter in Zimbabwe (which can accommodate only 14 people). Officially, women can stay in this shelter for up to two weeks, although in some cases, women have stayed as long as three months. The organization aired a national television program for 13 weeks in 1994 titled, "Women/Madzimayi" which included the personal testimonies of women victimized by their partners. After a few months of realistically addressing the problems that confront many women in that society, the show was discontinued on the government-owned station. During its time on the air, however, it did bring to the public's attention the experiences of domestic violence endured by many lower class women. In this way, it served as an important vehicle of empowerment.

Musasa has been successful in creating partnerships with the police, hospitals, and government ministries. The Project has established sensitivity training programs for police departments to assist them in treating women who have been abused. The organization has been working with new recruits and trying to assist them in how to make initial assessments about domestic violence cases. The organization is also collaborating with the police force and the hospitals to prepare an overall needs assessment program.[49] The Musasa Project also aims to educate policy makers about domestic violence so they can institute gender sensitive policies. In recent years, Musasa has worked closely with women lawyers' associations, the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network, and the Ministries of Justice and Health to stop the violence against women. Given the problems of HIV/AIDS in the region and its linkage to domestic violence, the Musasa Project is currently incorporating an HIV/AIDS education component in all of its programs.[50]

While there has been an increase in the number of reported domestic violence cases in the past decade, Musasa has also witnessed an increase in the number of patients that receive counseling. The number of counseling sessions has jumped from 995 in 1995 to 2781 in 1998.[51] Although the group provides services to women from all social classes, over 50% of their clients have been lower class women.[52]

Despite the comprehensive approach and level of commitment demonstrated by the staff of the Musasa Project, they are facing a very daunting task. Given the increasing economic crisis and a general climate of political problems, the state under ZANU is highly unlikely to address the issue of violence against women. This is the only organization in Zimbabwe focused on eradicating domestic violence. At this point, they are not a self-sustaining organization (dependent on US, British, Danish, and Dutch donors for their funding), but certainly one that is desperately needed in Zimbabwe.

## ZIMBABWE WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER AND NETWORK

The Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network has also been a model program giving voice to the experiences of abused women. Created in 1990, it is the premier documentation center of women's issues and an umbrella organization for many other women's groups in the country.[53] While it has special programs focusing on gender training/research

and the conditions of rural women, it has also provided an outlet through its publications in which the voices of battered women can be heard.

One outstanding example of such efforts was the publication of *Zimbabwe Women's Voices* by the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network in 1995. This book was published in conjunction with the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the NGO Forum in Huairou, China. One of the major reasons for publication of this volume was to enable grassroots women's voices to be heard at the conference.[54] Included in the book were the stories of women who had experienced physical and economic abuse such as the following:

Things went wrong this year in June when my husband died. One of his sons who was married and stayed with his family nearby, took for himself the land left by his father and put it in his name. So I have no land left. My husband's relatives had suggested I become my husband's cousin's new wife. But he refused. I am now staying all alone in poverty, since my husband's brother could not take me as a wife, having one of his own…I now wish that I had got a better education and could have been working instead of going through so much pain. Right from my first husband who used to beat me up, my wish was to see my children through school, but where is the money now? If this suffering continues, I shall be forced to go back to my parents, maybe they will give me a piece of land for me to earn some money for my children's education.[55]

In sharing such stories with women from around the globe at the NGO Forum on Women in Huairou, China in 1995, poor Zimbabwean women empowered themselves. They have told their stories which can provide important lessons for women and men in Zimbabwe, as well as in other nations. Furthermore, the book, *Zimbabwe Women's Voices* that included this and many other stories, was available to women and men in Zimbabwe to inform them of the harsh realities that many women face. In this process, women became important agents of social change, educating a broader public about the various types of violence present in society and the critical role of such acts in their lives. In turn, such knowledge about violence against women in Zimbabwe hopefully stimulated dialogue among women and men across class and ethnic lines about how the situation can be transformed. As a result of these efforts, poor and low-income Zimbabwean women enhanced both the development of civil society and their self-esteem.

**Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates that violence against women in Zimbabwe has clearly reached devastating proportions. Violence against women is becoming more intense and widespread in societies such as Zimbabwe that are currently in the midst of economic and political crises. NGO's such as the Musasa Project and The Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network have been important sources of empowerment for women and have contributed to the development of civil society. They are committed to the eradication of violence against women.

Notwithstanding the work of NGOs, the problem of violence against women calls for more concerted actions by the state. At the very least, the Zimbabwean state needs to move in the direction of South Africa with respect to legislation that fully criminalizes domestic abuse and

marital rape. The state needs to get further involved by providing adequate resources to stem the tide of violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The state also needs to combine these actions with anti-violence campaigns that demonstrate that it will no longer tolerate the rape, maiming, and murder of women. For such campaigns to be truly effective, they need to occur within a context in which the state aggressively promotes gender equality and addresses the deeply rooted structural inequalities that persist in the labor market.

Legislation and funding alone, however, will not change behavior. At a deeper level, the structural conditions that poor and low-income women experience in education and in the labor market must change to make it easier for them to leave violent relationships.

**Notes:**

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Gwendolyn Carter Lectures on Africa, "Zimbabwe in Transition: Resolving Land and Constitutional Crisis," at the University of Florida, Gainesville, March 21-23, 2002. The author wishes to thank participants in this conference for their helpful comments on the previous version of this paper. The author is also grateful for the research support and assistance provided by The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars during the revisions of this paper. Finally, the author wishes to express her thanks to the US Department of Education's Title VI Program and the Bryn Mawr College Africa Fund for research grants that supported this project.
2. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) 2001, p.11.
3. United Nations 1991; Human Rights Watch 1995.
4. Human Rights Watch 1995; Tichagwa and Maramba 1998; Muir 1999.
5. Tichagwa and Maramba 1998; Muir 1999.
6. Stoneman and Cliffe 1989.
7. Osirim 1998.
8. Made and Whande 1989; Osirim 1994.
9. Meldrum 1989.
10. Tichagwa and Maramba 1998.
11. Osirim 1994; 1998.
12. Magaisa 2001.
13. Musasa, 1998.
14. Green 1999
15. Kalu 1993; Green 1999.
16. Green 1999.
17. Salisbury was the name of the capital of Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) during colonialism. With independence, the city was renamed Harare. For a discussion of rapes reported to the government in this city during colonialism, see Barnes 1999.
18. Schmidt 1992, p. 21.
19. Holleman 1952..
20. Barnes 1999.
21. Barnes 1999, pp. 144-145.

22. Sanday 1981.
23. Chigudu 1998, p. 19.
24. The state frequently referred to women who were in downtown Harare unescorted by men in the evenings as "prostitutes." While some of these women were prostitutes, others might be entrepreneurs, such as hairdressers, whose businesses might not close until the evening. Moreover, the downtown streets were generally considered "off limits" - inappropriate areas for women alone or in the company of other women during the night. This idea stems from beliefs associated with urban culture in colonial Zimbabwe from the 1930's – that prostitution was linked to a woman's physical mobility and her independence. If a woman is moving around in the evenings downtown, she could only be looking for one thing. The state and society more generally considered women's acceptable place to be home with their families engaged in domestic activities after sunset. For further discussion of this issue, see Barnes 1999.
25. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa; http://www.aegis.com/NEWS/AFP/2002/AFO20867.html.
26. Ibid.
27. http: news.bbc.co.uk/i/hi/world/Africa.
28. Human Rights Watch 1995; Tichagwa and Maramba 1998; Muir 1999; Green 1999.
29. Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives 1994.
30. Tichagwa and Maramba 1998.
31. Getecha and Chipika 1995, pp.120-121.
32. Green 1999, p.42.
33. Chakaodza 1993; Osirim 1995.
34. Kamidza 1994.
35. Tichagwa and Maramba 1998.
36. Armstrong 1998.
37. Walker 1979.
38. Armstrong 1998, pp 26, 34-45, 137.
39. Holleman 1952; Schmidt 1992.
40. Green 1999; Chirume 1989.
41. Green 1999, p. 36.
42. Watts, Osam and Win 1995.
43. Tichagwa and Maramba 1998.
44. Tichagwa and Maramba 1998
45. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) 2001, p.9
46. http://www.unifem.org/index.php?f_page_pid=32
47. http://www.unifem.undp.org/human_rights/facts.html.
48. Interview with Thoko Ngwenya, 1999.
49. Osirim 2001.
50. Osirim 2001.
51. Musasa Project 1999.
52. Interview with Ms. Ngwenya 1999.
53. Osirim 2001.

54. Geteecha and Jesimen 1995.
55. Mercy Chishanu, Gteecha and Jesimen 1995, p. 58.

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