

3 Men Holding 12 Million People Hostage

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I want to start with a simple question: how do the shocking statistics about Zimbabwean reality – the world’s highest inflation rate and lowest life expectancy rate – translate when it comes to Zimbabwe’s women? What do the current political negotiations mean for women and how are they responding?

To put it differently:

- What is life like for women in a country where inflation is 300 million percent and counting?
- What is life like for women in a country where the life expectancy of women is 34 years?
- What is life like for women in a country where 3 men hold a nation hostage?

It is difficult to answer these questions. It is only once you visit a country that has been torn apart that you can fully understand the implications of the dismembering and subsequently what constitutes life. But the media has become very good at reporting the pulse of Zimbabwe via palatable sound bites and this reporting has been such a recurring blip on the so called media electro cardiogram that we no longer notice it, we no longer notice that it has flat lined. So perhaps we no longer ask questions about “what is life like in Zimbabwe”?

Here is the beginning of a response for today: women are fighting to stay alive. They are fighting to survive. And in Zimbabwe right now the contradictions of this struggle run deep. I listen to stories of women who have nothing to eat, who forage for roots, wild fruit and rats. These are stories of desperation, displacement and despair. But the magic of capital plays interesting games in a context of dire need and so the development of

a highly sophisticated informal economy means that the deprivation coexists with plenty. Everything and anything can be conjured up if you have the money, just not in the places you would expect to find it: petrol is available not at a garage, but under a tree on a quiet side road in Harare's avenues, or at an office on the 9th floor of an office block; after a quick phone call to arrange a pick-up, if you can get through given the ever breaking down mobile networks and stolen fixed line cables, sugar and rice can be purchased from a car boot, and chicken from the hardware store near the train station. Some fresh produce can be bought from women selling on the side of the road, a victory given that roadside vendors were "cleaned up and out" after Operation Murambatsvina removed "the filth", but then given that the country has dollarised, it's essential to have "maUSA", as it's known locally or US dollars, to make your purchases even of a few tomatoes, sweet potatoes or greens.

If you don't have access to "forex", you don't have anything right now and basic commodities will remain an illusion. Depending on the formal sector for jobs or access to services means you just don't survive. The endless queues outside the banks are evidence of the difficulty that women have getting their (and you can take your pick) "re-valued", "de-valued", "under-valued", but certainly hard earned cash out of the banks. This means that everyone is trying to make a quick buck, to wheel or deal to generate maUSA's and remittances from diaspora workers abroad go a long way. And while this may read like a comedy of errors, women whether in the leafy suburbs or in the remote rural areas, are tired of the struggle for survival, of the inconveniences, of deprivation, of trying to figure out where to get the next meal to put on the table.

Women are also tired of the collapsed health care system, characterised by the lack of drugs, the shortage of health care personnel and the breakdown of equipment. They are tired of an ailing education system characterised by continued strikes by teachers due to poor remuneration, lack of supplies including textbooks and stationery, delays in the writing of exams and in 2008, due to elections and political instability, schools operating for only 65 days in the year.

Women have had enough of the electricity and water cuts that sometimes last days and weeks. They are tired of the violence, the grave politically motivated and sexualised violence that women and women activists of all ages have suffered during the post election period and which has continued

to prevail. Women are fatigued by having their roles dictated by the private sphere even when entering the public. They are fed up with the months and of the retrospective years of waiting, waiting while the quality of women's lives continues to decline.

So that's the beginning of a response to the question: what is life like for Zimbabwean women in late 2008. It's only a beginning.

And the 3 Men and their Teams Continue to Deliberate.

The elections on the 29th March 2008 were one in a string, eight in the last eight years, meant to break the stranglehold of the increasingly authoritarian Mugabe led Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) regime. With the birth in 1999 of the Movement for Democratic Change, the elections as an expression of democratic practise were– aimed at reinstating a new and democratic dispensation. But as is widely recorded, the extreme politically motivated violence and accompanying post election machinations have meant that elections have lost their integrity in Zimbabwe and the voting public are both traumatised and fatigued by the process.

The polarisation of Zimbabwean politics means that women only have two options, (now three, with the split in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formation), ZANU PF, MDC Tsvangirai (T) and MDC Mutambara (M). If one takes the time to examine the party constitutions, election manifesto's and programmes, none adequately addresses or expresses a commitment to the priorities and needs as identified by women. Thus, none provides a really viable alternative for a new dispensation which seeks alternatives that allow for the freedom of all. And this freedom is, in the end, not something to be decreed and protected by laws or state, it is something that we shape for ourselves and share.

So there are thoughts that knot my stomach in the wee hours of the morning: can it be said that a potentially "new" dispensation has arrived, as the global press is claiming, if over half of the population's structurally subjugated position at best remains the same or at worst has regressed into a poverty and repression never seen before? If we do call this a victory for a democratic movement, what does it say about our definitions? If we are serious about the so called change that Zimbabwe needs, it is important to be concerned about the quality as well as the quantity of the change. What exactly is the prescription or framework that is going to resuscitate Zimbabwe? We live in a pitiless era of neoliberal market dependency whose end is even

more poverty, and emiseration is not an option. It will require much more radical thinking of what is possible and much more imagination of what is desirable for a so called “new” Zimbabwe. And (the concerns grow) once the current impasse has been overcome and the ink has dried on the agreements and deals, what then? Will we, like we did in 1980, breathe a sigh of relief and put our feet up, basking in the glow of “victory” for a “democratic moment”? Will women be co-opted in order to once again serve patriarchal agendas? How do feminist activists conceptualise the work ahead?

As I write in November 2008, it has been 8 months since the harmonised elections, and subsequent South African Development Community (SADC) endorsed, Mbeki facilitated negotiations that put in place the Global Political Agreement, a hybrid document that provides a framework for the formation of a new government and a plan for the subsequent reconstruction of Zimbabwe. But also as I write, the talks between the principals of political parties have deadlocked and are awaiting the deliberations of a full SADC heads of state meeting. The media tells us that they have deadlocked on the allocation of “key” ministries and apparently even with this so called “new” dispensation on the horizon, the key ministries have been identified as: Home affairs, Finance, Foreign affairs, Information and Defence. Surely if this “new Zimbabwe in the making” was serious in putting the needs of the Zimbabwean people first the key ministries would be identified as that of public works, health, education, women’s affairs and the how of the reconstruction programme would be uppermost in their minds.

But right now that is perhaps too much to hope for.

So while the talks deadlock and the weeks roll into months, women are sacrificed, a country is sacrificed and, the sacrifice is being made on the alter of power – of male ego, political survival, posturing and self interest. The **deliberation of 3 men is holding the country hostage**, and right now it is not clear how the current round of talks are going to bring food back into the shops, teachers back into the schools and medicines back into the clinics; this seems to have fallen off the agenda.

It is Time to Put the Zimbabwean People First

While the men talk in the golden glow of the Rainbow Towers in Harare, women are saying enough! Kwete!

On the 16th of October 2008 at the self-same venue, over 100 Zimbabwean women met, deliberated and had the militant foresight to engage in direct action

by occupying public space in an extremely hostile and policed environment not only to call attention to the injustices in Zimbabwe but to catalyze action, demanding that the talks end immediately. The message here was clear: We are on the frontline of this war and for too long we have suffered. We want change now! We are worn down but not broken! We are here! Look at us, starving. All we want is a “normal” country with “normal” systems that work. And we want that to come now. We will continue to create a community where the social fabric has been ripped apart, we will continue to share scarce resources in a context of extreme deprivation and we will continue to fight and act, to make our voices heard in order to sustain and make ourselves strong so we can challenge sexism and realise the dreams and possibilities of a new Zimbabwe as full and equally participating citizens in all spheres. But right now we, as the Feminist Political Education Project, demand:

- i. availability of affordable and accessible food
- ii. provision of accessible clean water and electricity
- iii. provision of affordable and accessible health services including Anti Retrovirals (ARVs)
- iv. restoration of a functional education system
- v. easy access to our cash in the banks
- vi. the people of Zimbabwe have suffered enough. The suffering must stop NOW!

These demands are bolstered by a range of interventions being carried out around the country by strategically placed formations that are prepared to engage in direct action, political lobbying and pressure. It is difficult to talk of a movement right now and I will not hazard to do that in the space afforded me. How organising manifests in time of crisis needs deeper, longer reflection and theorisation, but writing while doing and reflecting while talking, women’s organising in Zimbabwe has suffered the same fate that broader civil society has and this makes it tricky to suggest that the energies of struggle comprise any version of a co-ordinated engagement.

In the last 20 years the civic landscape has been taken over by donor funded Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) who, as the regime got increasingly more repressive, attempted to speak out but soon lost their voice and power and thus became subsumed into the status quo or at the very least, continued to engage in activities that did not overtly disturb the balances of power. Similarly there are civic groupings which have aligned with political parties and as such, have

lost their objectivity as they jostle to align with the balance of forces. There are many women's organisations in Zimbabwe operating to meet the practical and strategic needs of women. This is important work.

But interestingly there are also autonomous formations comprised of energetic, Zimbabwean feminists who are committed to breaking down boundaries and transforming social relations, to reduce economic and political inequality, in short, to turn the world upside down. These women are committed to mobilising women nationally, and they work to create spaces for women to come together to access information, to share, reflect and strategise in the formation of agendas, in order to more boldly act, demand and claim what is rightly theirs.

This is the painstaking work, to use the language of the day, of movement building. It is this political education work, this very long term work that seeks to unpick centuries of socialisation, that deconstructs the forces of patriarchy and capital, which aims to build the community and create alternatives that can be claimed now. This is the work that ensures whatever government Zimbabwe has, women will hold it accountable. These formations are also committed to engaging political leaders, creating spaces for them to "meet the women" so they know that women are a constituency, that women are watching their every move and that women are prepared to act.

There is no happiness without justice

This is difficult and dangerous work in a context where the levels of repression and violence are high, where everything is under surveillance, and where the space for organising has shrunk and the infrastructure eroded. Zimbabwe's polarised landscape means partisan politics further complicates both strategy and action. Countless, countless women have been arrested, detained, tortured, displaced and on their bodies carry the literal and figurative scars to show for it. No matter what the outcome, it will take several generations to undo the damage on the national psyche.

It is important to turn anger into action.

Many women continue to envision a "new" Zimbabwe and are clear about what they want. In small and sometimes big ways women work to make the dream of feminist futures possible. Even in the harshest of environments. We know that no matter what the outcome of this chapter of Zimbabwe's history, the struggle against sexism requires vigilance, and continued engagement in feminist political education. Women's lives will not change overnight. The effects of patriarchy will continue to manifest through the range of violence that women live with and against which women will continue to organise.

This is what we must be prepared for.

A final word to the men who are holding the people of Zimbabwe hostage:

"You are inaccessible to women! You are inaccessible to the 12 million who at the last census made up Zimbabwe: some who have remained and face the daily grind, some who are in the diaspora, and who know that making the choice to leave is similar to having a baby and committing to have your heart walk outside of your body for the rest of your life, and the countless who in the intervening years have died."

To the men who are holding the people of Zimbabwe hostage: *Show the political leadership that the people of Zimbabwe need right now or ship out.*

"The eternal", according to Spinoza, "is now", and women in Zimbabwe are living history and taking it very personally. The worst cruelties of life are its killing injustices. Zimbabwean women's acceptance of adversity is neither passive nor resigned. It's an acceptance which sees beyond the adversity and discovers there something nameless. Not a promise, for women know that (almost) all promises are broken; rather something like a hiatus, a parenthesis, in the otherwise remorseless flow of history. And the sum total of these parentheses is eternity and in that, the knowledge that: "on this earth there is no happiness without justice".

