

History at the Periphery: Women in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe's patriarchic society, the stories of female liberation fighters have largely been excluded from the telling and retelling of the country's liberation struggle. Within the confines of Zimbabwean society, the vast experiences of liberation fighters have been diluted to a single unitary narrative wherein the liberation struggle is presented as a male pursuit. The fallacy of this narrative leaves the women who took part in the liberation movement as secondary characters with little to no significance in the goals and outcomes of the liberation war. In an effort to bring the experiences and voices of female liberation fighters to the foreground, scholars such as Lyons (2004) and Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) have published compelling works that make strides in giving female liberation fighters agency that integrates their stories into Zimbabwe's liberation history.

This paper reviews the roles experiences of the women who took up arms in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. While the role of women in the liberation struggle has been contracted in historical presentation and national discourse, there are women who have been able to tell their own narratives. In this paper, the narrative of Chengetai is an example of how the women who participated in Zimbabwe's liberation can gain agency by telling their own stories and locate their place in history. By expressing her own experiences, ideas, and thoughts, Chengetai forces the reexamination of a dominant narrative that commandeers the experiences and views of those who took part in the liberation movement and struggle, particularly the women who seem to be at the periphery of national and historical discourse. Chengetai's experiences underscore the complex and varying experiences of female liberation fighters. Focusing on the experiences of female liberation fighters in Zimbabwe provides an important opportunity to discuss how gender influences the manner in which history is constructed, organized, and legitimized.

History at the Periphery: Women in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle

The presence and participation of women in war is neither new nor unusual (McFadden 2001). Many examples across time and cultures show women playing a significant role in conflict. With plenty of historical and modern examples to examine, there is a sense that women are yet to be the main characters in historical presentations and analysis of war (Coulter 2008). This means that war, and history at large, present women as complimentary or secondary characters who exist at the margins of history. This is what has happened to the women who participated in Zimbabwe's armed struggle for independence. Sanctioned by the administration of President Robert Mugabe, the history of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle is often presented as a single story or narrative that creates a strong sense of a population that was bound by solidarity, patriotism, and

political consciousness. In this narrative, the men, and women of Zimbabwe, under an oppressive Rhodesian government accepted the right and duty to use force and violence against colonialism. The single narrative of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle is peppered with words such as patriotism, solidarity, right, and duty. On the surface, these words seem innocuous enough, however when one examines how these words frame the experiences at and of war, they do not adequately capture the experiences of all those who took up arms against the colonial structure, particularly women.

Against the backdrop of a patriarchic society, powerful and prominent men who were involved in the liberation struggle have appropriated the history of the struggle, and it is their voices that are heard. This effectively presents the liberation struggle as a male enterprise in which women are viewed as secondary players in comparison with their male counterparts (Coulter 2008). As the history of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle is told and retold, where are the women? What are their stories, and how are they located within the country's history?

In 1996, 16 years after Zimbabwe gained independence, a feature film was released depicting the experiences of women liberation fighters. Despite being met with controversy upon its release, *Flame* is a compelling and useful medium in discussing who is included in Zimbabwe's liberation history and how their stories are told. Discussing the impact of the film, Lyons (2004, 253) stated that *Flame* was not just "an account of women's roles in the liberation war," it was an influential "challenge to the way the Zimbabwean story has been told." Prominent organizations such as the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA) attempted to ban the film, citing its "negative portrayal" of the liberation struggle (259). In this case, the "negative portrayal" refers to varying narratives about women's roles in the armed struggle, which at times "do not correspond with much of what has been written in Zimbabwe about the war" (259). The response to *Flame* showed that any perceived "form of opposition as well as any dissenting voices" is not tolerated and dismissed as irrelevant and treacherous (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011, 2). But how can the experiences of real people be irrelevant and treacherous? Women who fought in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle are forced to accept the dominant narrative without the space and grace to express their own. In essence, in order to be seen as "patriotic" and "legitimate," their own views and experiences cannot share the same stage as the dominant narrative (Onslow 2011, 6). The controversy surrounding *Flame* is representative of a larger debate on not only the role of women during the liberation struggle but also their value and importance as liberation fighters and members of society.

In an effort to locate the experiences and voices of women in the discourse of Zimbabwe's liberation history, this paper reviews the history of women in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and discusses the factors that have negated the presence and value of women's experiences in liberation history. In addition to examining scholarship that has extensively discussed the role and experiences of women in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, this paper presents the narrative of one woman, Chengetai, to illustrate how the ability to tell one's story introduces individual agency in historical representation. To appreciate the narratives and experiences of Chengetai and the women of the liberation struggle, it is important to understand the historical and social context in which they operated.

Zimbabwe's Colonial History

Among the 15 British colonies in Africa, Zimbabwe was the last to gain independence (Blair 2002, 10). As with many African states, Zimbabwe's colonial history is long and complex (Sibanda 2005, 1). Cecil John Rhodes, an envoy of British imperialism, and a group of British settlers entered Zimbabwe in 1890 seeking to build a "British empire that would stretch from Cape to Cairo" (19). Rumors of the availability of gold in abundance led Rhodes to claim the territories of Mashonaland and Matebeleland (Modern day Zimbabwe) as Rhodesia, a state bearing his name (19). Rhode's entry into Zimbabwe marked the beginning of 90 years of colonial rule over the people of Zimbabwe "with full blessings from the British crown" (26).

Under colonial rule, Blacks were denied access to shared political power, economic privileges, and social justice (Shamuyarira 1965, 16). For example, in order to qualify as a voter in the years of Cecil John Rhodes, the founder of Rhodesia, one had to earn fifty British pounds (£50) a year, be a resident of the country, and be able to complete a form written in English without any assistance (48). Over 70 years after Rhodes made his claim to the country, the 1961 constitution of Rhodesia stipulated that one had to earn £6 a week in addition to completing four years of secondary education (124). Due to the disparity in access to education, power, and financial resources, very few Africans qualified to vote (150).

The demarcation of African and White society was further highlighted by the disparity in wage earnings. White workers were paid more than their African counterparts regardless of skill or qualifications (Shamuyarira 1965, 103). In 1963, the average annual wage earned by Africans was £114, while Whites earned £1217 (103). Perhaps echoing what many thought, Shamuyarira stated, "There is no rate for the job, only a rate for your skin color" (103). These very real disparities created what Fairchild (1994, 192) referred

to as a “compartmentalized society.” With laws and practices that divided the nation based on race, colonialists adopted a paternalistic attitude towards Africans, viewing them as unintelligent and inferior “people that needed to be treated as children, with harsh discipline” (Sibanda 2005, 26).

By the early 1950’s, Africans in Zimbabwe started to call for their inclusion in the political process (43). For decades, Africans waited for Whites to remove injustice of their own accord and good will (Mtisi, Nyakudya, and Barnes 2009, 115). White politicians such as Sir Roy Welensky, former Prime Minister of the Federated Territories of Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland (Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi), attempted to placate Blacks by arguing for gradual advances for them, stating:

“We believe that the African should be given more say in the running of the country, as and when he shows his ability to contribute more to the general good, but we must make it clear that even when that day comes, in a hundred or two hundred years’ time, he can never hope to dominate the partnership. He can achieve equal standing, but not go beyond it” (Sibanda 2005, 51).

Africans objected to the fact that Whites took it upon themselves to decide this matter at all, for these professed gradual advances were merely lip service to the disgruntled population, with no intent for actual change (Shamuyarira 1965, 22). Facing the seemingly unsympathetic conscience of the colonial establishment, African nationalist leaders from the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) decided to pursue an armed struggle for independence (Mugabe 1983, 122). According to Mugabe, a prominent figure of the liberation struggle, the war was not about “violence for violence sake” (158). Rather, it was a necessary instrument in “securing the necessary peace and the necessary justice in the country,” as previous nonviolent measures such as “boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations did not bring about any change” (158-159). Representing the position of African nationalist leaders, particularly from ZANU, Mugabe asserted, “We enjoy no rights and privileges and have therefore absolutely no concessions left to offer to our slave-masters in quest for our freedom. The only offer we can give is that of war” (101). Echoing Mugabe’s statements about the intent of the war, Alexander and McGregor (2004, 89) affirmed that the armed struggle for Zimbabwe was about fighting an unjust system of government that created separate and unequal societies divided along racial lines.

Women and War

Part of what makes Zimbabwe’s liberation history complicated, specifically the history of the armed struggle, is the inclusion and exclusion of the identities of the people who took

up arms. As the liberation history is discussed and debated, what is missing is the “often unspoken experiences of female freedom fighters” (Lyons 1997, 12). It is impossible to construct Zimbabwean history without including the contributions of the many women who joined the liberation struggle. Women actively participated in sustaining the armed struggle, thus weakening any claims that the liberation movement and war were a male enterprise.

The controversy and reception of the film *Flame* and the lack of women’s narratives within the telling and retelling of Zimbabwe’s liberation history are glaring indicators of the challenges of finding a prominent place for women in the country’s history. Perhaps the narratives of the women who participated in Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle exist at the periphery of the country’s history because of what Stiehm (1989, 224-232) referred to as the myths of war. According to Stiehm, military pursuit hinges on the following myths: (a) War is a manly endeavor, (b) Men are warriors and must protect, and (c) Soldiers in the field are dispensable. In Zimbabwe’s context, these myths are sustained by the insistence on defined gender roles mandated by patriarchy. This particular discussion is not unique to Zimbabwe; however, it serves as useful framework in examining why the narratives of women are shut out of national discourse in favor of the experiences and narratives of men, especially powerful and prominent men.

War is a Manly Endeavor

Within patriarchy, men and women have their place and roles in society, and they must be aware of what is required of their roles. One of the male participants in my 2013 study, Patrick, stated that women liberation fighters were “not seen or treated as equals.” According to Patrick, the view of the female combatants by his male counterparts was that they were “supposed to be sitting at home making babies and cooking for men, while men did the hard work.” In this case, “hard work” was fighting in the liberation struggle.

If fighting the liberation war was designated for men, then women were expected to be in what Stiehm (1989, 224) called a “reserve army,” that functioned to aide and replace the men once the heavy lifting was done. This logic promotes the idea that when women joined the liberation struggle, they were coming at a time when all the hard work had already been done by men and they were coming in merely as adjuncts who did not contribute significantly to the war effort. Women being restricted to assignments such as carrying supplies, cooking in the camps, and tending to the sick and wounded shows that there was an order to Zimbabwean society that was imposed and followed, even under the challenges and confines of

war camps. Women, regardless of the roles they later took on during the war, were not and could not act like or be men by occupying roles reserved for men (Manyame-Tazarurwa 2011).

Men as Warriors and Protectors

Within the same confines of patriarchy, men are viewed as warriors and protectors and it is their job to go out to war and protect the homeland. Women are expected to know their roles as the protected, and a reversal of roles would be unacceptable to the social order. The problem with this myth is that women are assumed to be ignorant about the dynamics and challenges of war, which is why they need warriors and protectors. The myth further promotes the idea that men are specially trained, selected, and armed as protectors and warriors, and women are protected for their own good since they do not have a grasp of the dangers of war (Stiehm 1989, 230). However, in Zimbabwe, the women who joined the liberation struggle had various reasons for joining the war effort. To be sure, not everyone was politically motivated to join the war; however, the studies conducted by Lyons (2004) and Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) show that many understood the political, social, and economic implications of the liberation struggle. There is no evidence to show that gender had a part in how individuals internalized the liberation struggle.

Soldiers in the Field are Dispensable

According to Stiehm (1989, 230), this particular myth “is never explicitly stated.” When it is stated, it is packaged in a way that promotes unity: “We are all in this together. We are all warriors. We are all brave, willing, and valiant” (231). What is really being said under the veneer of cohesion is that not everyone comes back from war. Some will meet untimely deaths, and others will survive the ravages of war. So it follows, according to the construction of the myth, that there is nothing special or worth noting about a woman liberation fighter because it could have been anyone going out to war. This myth very easily dismisses the narratives and experiences of women in war because if soldiers are dispensable, then the narratives of women are not novel and not worth singling out for discussion and debate. The existence of this myth, whether it is explicitly or implicitly understood, subtly but powerfully encourages the exclusion of women in historical presentations of war

The Role of Women in Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle

According to Mtisi, Nyakudya, and Barnes (2009, 159-160), many women “wanted to make a contribution to liberation,” but “gendered identities and equalities” during and after the war have made it difficult to define the role of women in Zimbabwe’s liberation history. In an effort to bring the experiences and voices of women liberation fighters to the forefront, scholars such as Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), Musengezi, and McCartney, under the name Zimbabwe Women Writers (2000), as well as Lyons (2004) have published compelling works that recognize the role of women in the liberation struggle. According to Lyons (2004, 107), women were not recruited to join the liberation struggle until 1972. Some women were voluntary recruits and others “joined up because of widespread oppression and perhaps out of patriotic duty” (108). One-woman liberation fighter interviewed by Lyons shared that she joined the liberation struggle because she “wanted to liberate the country because the British colonized us, and there were only some jobs that only Whites could get” (108). Another joined the armed struggle at the urging of a friend after hearing “people were being educated by the nationalist forces in their camps” (109). Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) offered a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which women were recruited to join the war effort. In Nhongo-Simbanegavi’s analysis, variants such as age, socioeconomic status, and education played a part in the decision to join the liberation struggle. Based on interviews carried out with women liberation fighters, Nhongo-Simbanegavi concluded,

If they were young girls, they rarely held any political opinions prior to recruitment and may have ventured out to war out of curiosity. What older women looked for in the war was largely shaped by the nature of the hardships they had already faced in life, depending on their specific location in their respective societies. Illiterate women, for example, women who came from peasant backgrounds were more likely to have a firmer grasp of the injustices of colonial land policies in comparison to their relatively educated colleagues whose major grievances may have been lack of education and job opportunities. (26)

It is important to note the variety of reasons for joining the liberations struggle, as it illustrates the different contexts and experiences that women add to the history of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle. The assumption of a unified experience of the women who participated in the war, whether perpetuated by the guardians of history or the women themselves, stifles and excludes the stories of those whose experiences attribute different meaning to events of the past (Scott 1989, 681).

The role of the woman liberation fighter was complicated, particularly against the backdrop of Zimbabwe’s patriarchal society. According to Lyons (2004, 93), “traditional gender roles between men and women became increasingly blurred” during the armed struggle. Women who had previously been confined to domestic roles were now finding

themselves being sent “to fight, educate, and politicize the majority of peasants living the rural areas on the need for revolution and armed struggle” (94). Lyon’s statement gives the impression that the armed struggle completely allowed women to step out of and away from the confines of patriarchy. However, women liberation fighters were not viewed as simply soldiers. Above all, they were women, and their gender forced them to be viewed as secondary players compared with their male counterparts. Whether as a policy strategy or adherence to cultural beliefs, even high-ranking women such as Joice Mujuru, the Vice President of Zimbabwe as of 2014, fostered the idea of maintaining domestic roles within the war zone. She reminded the women in the camps: “We have a lot of duties to do here. We came to help keep the wellbeing of the boys, washing their clothes, cleaning their houses and treat them when they are sick. We also have the duty of carrying materials for the boys” (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2004, 54).

When women were recruited to join the war in 1972, their duties were restricted to carrying supplies and weapons to the frontlines (Lyons 2004, 109). Such duties were viewed by military commanders as “a woman’s work,” in addition to mobilizing the masses, preparing and cooking food in the camps, and taking care of the wounded (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000, 43). The “more manly duties of engaging the enemy at the battlefield” were reserved for the male liberation fighters (42). However, “a woman’s work” proved to be dangerous, as the women liberation fighters who carried supplies and ammunitions to the frontlines were “often confronted with ambushes and attacks from Rhodesian soldiers” (Lyons 2004, 109). As a result, women in the armed struggle demanded training so that they could protect themselves from enemy attacks (Manyame-Tazarurwa 2011). According to the accounts of various women collected by Lyons (2004) and Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), women liberation fighters did not receive military training until 1976. After receiving military training, women were still not permitted on the front lines. Some women liberation fighters “wanted to face the enemy like any guerilla soldier at the time and resented being kept in the camps” (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 200, 119). Despite their training, there seemed to be no effort on the part of leadership to redefine the roles women were expected to assume (56).

In addition to being confined to non-combat roles, women were shut out from leadership circles and policy making. While women had a physical presence in the armed struggle, their participation in war strategy, camp administration, and political negotiations was almost nonexistent. Very few women rose to ranks of influence within the military and political structure (Lyons 2004, 234). One such individual was Joice Mujuru, Zimbabwe’s Vice President in 2014. Mujuru was part of the high command, a corps of senior officers who were responsible for planning and executing military strategy

(234). Mujuru's appointment to the high command was an achievement for her, but it did not change the fact that female liberation participants were viewed as accessories to the armed struggle rather than main players or at least on par with the men.

Chengetai's Narrative

An invaluable addition to the history of women in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle is the introduction of personal narratives. Alongside research and scholarly work, personal narratives give an in-depth view of the participation of women the liberation struggle. In this paper, Chengetai's narrative is an example of how women can individually take ownership of their histories and narratives and move from the periphery to the center of history. By expressing her own experiences, ideas, and thoughts, Chengetai forces the reexamination of the portrayal of women in Zimbabwe's armed struggle. Chengetai's experiences underscore the complex and varying experiences of women liberation fighters. Focusing on the experiences of women liberation fighters in Zimbabwe provides an important opportunity to discuss how a particular history is constructed, organized, legitimized, and ultimately, how and where individuals are located in historical representation.

Chengetai was a participant in my 2013 study that examined the personal experiences of Zimbabwe's liberation fighters. Chengetai is a Roman Catholic nun in Zimbabwe. Her experience and background is very different from most of the liberation fighters, male and female. As Chengetai told me her story, it was clear that she was the main character in her story. In her historical and personal narrative, she emphasized different philosophies, times, places, and people, and how she located herself within that context. The ability to tell her story in her own words locates her within Zimbabwe's history on her own terms.

Life in Rhodesia

Chengetai is a nurse by training. She joined the liberation struggle in 1975 at age 27 and had already spent a number of years as a Catholic nun and trained nurse. Given her age and time spent in the urban areas in Harare, then Salisbury, she was able to provide an extensive description of life in Rhodesia based on her experience. Chengetai recounted the segregated education system that "seated us in lower levels. We were not to mix with White students. White pupils were treated as more intellectual than us. Even if we had some genius Africans, they belonged to the township (areas designated for Africans) schools." As a nurse, she observed the same kind of discrimination in the healthcare system. Africans received medical care from "medical assistants" who were not as well trained as registered nurses.

Medical assistants were trained by doctors but “did not have the theoretical experience.”

Life in townships where Africans lived was “monitored by what they called town management boards.” These boards were composed of “White guys who would go around with cars to check whether the trash bins had been emptied, the street lights were lit, there was enough water, and there were no vendors around.” To further illustrate the stringent rules and regulations that governed the lives of Africans, Chengetai gave an account of conditions for men who lived in men-only apartments in the townships. For their spouses to visit, they had to secure a pass from the municipal office for a two or three day visit. The colonial government tried managing all aspects of the lives of Africans. Whole communities were subject to the watchful eye of colonial institutions that explicitly and implicitly dictated a way of life. Chengetai’s explanation of the role of “town management boards” suggests the African family structure, from the colonialist’s perspective, was tenuous, insubstantial, and needed to be managed.

Joining the Liberation Struggle

Chengetai described joining the liberation struggle as partly by serendipity, partly by association, and partly by coercion. As a trained nurse and nun, Chengetai served at Catholic hospitals around the country. While at work, Chengetai recalled hearing “rumors from the villagers that there were armed people moving around who were not soldiers.” In addition to hearing rumors about the existence of liberation fighters, Chengetai also encountered them at the hospital.

One evening in 1977, a group of young guys came into the mission. They were armed with AK’s, bazookas, and machine guns. They explained to us that they were known as “*vana mukoma*: freedom fighters.” They had come to liberate Zimbabwe because it was under the oppressive regime of the Rhodesians. They told us that they were not against Whites, but they were against the system Whites were using to rule Africans. They said Rhodesia belonged to Africans, and Whites were foreigners. They wanted the country back to the hands of Africans. That is how I learned about the war.

Chengetai described frequent contact with the freedom fighters as they came to Catholic hospitals for medical support and provisions. During these encounters, Chengetai stated she “had no way out and had to meet these guys, and listen to their demands.” Later on, Chengetai was “arrested for collaborating with the freedom fighters.” She was detained for more than 30 days without trial and “interrogated about the freedom fighters and whatever the Rhodesian army wanted

to know.” Her time in detention seems to be a pivotal point in her commitment to the liberation movement.

After my detention in Marondera, I was geared (ready) to be a full time liberator of Zimbabwe because what I went through was very taxing and excruciating. So I decided that at one time, before I was released from detention, I had promised that if I found a way to go to Mozambique to join the freedom fighters I would do that. I knew that it was the only way to liberate ourselves. We needed to fight. We needed to take up arms. Though I was in the convent, though I prayed, I felt we were being oppressed.

The opportunity to go to Mozambique presented itself. On a day that she described as “something else,” Chengetai found herself surrounded by armed liberation fighters who informed her, “The secretary of the party, Robert Mugabe wanted me in Mozambique, but could not tell me why for security reasons.” During that ordeal, Chengetai found herself “shaking and did not know what was going on.” She left the convent and walked “almost 100 kilometers (62.1 miles).” Describing the journey to Mozambique, Chengetai recalled eating “wild fruits,” and “anything that was edible.” Water was scarce because “most of the water was poisoned by the Rhodesian Security Forces.”

Chengetai reported that her parents did not know her whereabouts. Even the Catholic Church did not realize that she had been “abducted.” The Church, and eventually her family, received unconfirmed reports that she was part of a group of nuns that had been killed by freedom fighters. However, a friend who was a Jesuit priest and also working with the freedom fighters relayed a message to her parents that she was “in good hands, but needed to be with the freedom fighters until Zimbabwe got independence.”

Experience of War

The goal of wanting “to liberate ourselves” was at times tested by the harsh conditions of war. Chengetai recalled leaving a “lifestyle” with “scheduled meals and prayers,” and being part of a new lifestyle that required her to “change names” to keep from being identified “by the enemy.” She described enduring harsh physical and emotional challenges. The physical conditions of war were accompanied by emotional experiences, such as giving up her personal identity and accepting the possibility of death.

Chengetai spent nine months in Mozambique. She was stationed at the “commando,” a mobile military unit, where the “big” (prominent) people stayed.

There, she “helped treat the casualties, guys with broken limbs, gun shots, and malaria.” During her time at the commando, she was under the direction of “liberation movement leaders such as Josiah Tongogara, Josiah Tungamira, and Ernest Kadungure.” One indicator of the harsh conditions was the lack of infrastructure and equipment. While treating casualties, Chengetai recalled seeing “so many maimed people. These were young people who had lost their limbs and became disabled because of the war.” The scarcity of resources meant “There were no theatres (surgical operating rooms) in the bush. If you had to heal, you healed. If you had to die, you just died. The little bit that could be done was done. I cannot forget the suffering I saw.” According to Chengetai, as long as the armed struggle continued, she would continue to live “under the rain, with lice, with mosquitoes.”

The Woman Liberation Fighter

Chengetai insisted that being a woman liberation fighter “was no issue.” She explained, “Everyone was in the war as a liberator. Whether woman or man, you did the same duties and the same training. You were taught how to operate a gun, how to put a landmine, how to pick up certain tactics that had to be done in the war. You had to learn the same thing because the goal was to achieve liberation.”

Chengetai’s comments contradict what other participants in the study shared about women in the war. Though men and women “received the same training,” women liberation fighters were “not treated or seen as equals.” As a religious figure, it is possible that the male liberation fighters treated Chengetai with deference as she noted, “All the groups we met were told that they had to look after us in a special way because we were nuns.” Chengetai’s privileged status is also underscored by the fact that educated women, or “elite women,” were given job such as administration, stewardship over classified documents, and medical services provision (Manyame-Tazarurwa 2011).

Faith

An important part of Chengetai’s experience as a liberation fighter was her faith. She shared that her faith in God protected her during the war, with constant prayers to “help us achieve this and go back home.” Though her job was to tend to casualties, Chengetai still managed to go to mass. Attending mass led to a close call on her life. After attending mass while in Maputo, Mozambique, “a bomb blew up” in the old seminary that housed her and other nuns who were part of the liberation struggle.

Chengetai did not express any doubts about maintaining her religious commitment and her commitment to the armed struggle. In her view, “the two of them worked together.” In fact, she used her religious calling to explain her participation in the liberation struggle: “I believed God had given us a country. As Africans we belonged to Zimbabwe. We had our own country. Just like the children of Israel. They were being ill-treated in Egypt, making bricks, doing this and that. They were working like slaves.”

Emphasizing how her war experience influenced her religious commitment, Chengetai spoke of empowerment, resilience, and vigilance. With conviction, she said,

“The liberation struggle empowered me so much. I tell you, if I had not gone to the war, I would have left the religious life long back. In religious life, you were not taught the kind of resilience, the kind of vigilance to watch over, to learn things properly, and to understand them. What I saw in the bush, there was no time for immaturity. You were going to die and you had to put up with whatever was going on. There was no fragility during the war. You had to put up with a lot of pain, a lot of atrocities. So when I came back, I knew that I could not be shaken.”

Reflection

Chengetai reflected on the memory of her fallen comrades, who she described as not having “died for nothing.” She conveyed a debt of gratitude, as she felt that she “owed them so much.” Chengetai spoke of the young people who “went into the bush and trained, and sang for Zimbabwe.” She saw many of these young people as casualties and “cannot forget the suffering that these people went through.” For Chengetai, “the war was not a drama. This was not just done to please anybody. It means a lot to anyone who is called Zimbabwean.” Due to her experiences, she seemed to exhibit a sense of political consciousness that led her to declare that an armed struggle “was the only way to liberate ourselves.”

Conclusion

After navigating and surviving the harsh personal and collective challenges of war, the women who were a part of Zimbabwe’s liberation efforts seem to have been forgotten (Manyame-Tazarurwa 2011). It is worth repeating that it is impossible to construct Zimbabwe’s liberation history without including the contributions of the women who participated in the armed struggle. As scholarship on Zimbabwe’s liberation history continues, scholars and students have a prime opportunity to reassess the ways in which women are included and excluded in Zimbabwean history. By inquiring about the presence and participation of women in Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle and the country’s

history, scholars and students are asking, "how else it could be told?" (Harris, Carney, and Fine 2001, 13). Asking about the narratives and experiences of women can help to create an academic and social framework that includes varying experiences and perspectives about the war.

The silencing of the narratives of the women who fought in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle does not negate their value or place in the country's history. The stories of the women who fought in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle provide invaluable sights, sounds, and words; a kind of *mise en scène* that helps to deconstruct and reconstruct the intensity of the struggle. By reviewing the experiences of women, complemented by Chengetai's narrative, this paper attempts to exhort a greater appreciation and curiosity about the role of women in the liberation struggle. Failing to ask about the experiences of women maintains a false impression of history and reality (Webster and Mertova 2007, 7). There is still more work to be done in terms of integrating women's voices and experiences into national history. Though it is useful to illuminate the silenced voices and the lack of varied perspectives, the greater cause is to integrate those voices and perspectives into official and unofficial accounts of Zimbabwe's history, thus moving from the periphery to the center of history.

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