

Thirty years after political independence: Creating political space for Zimbabwean women

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Summary

As Zimbabwe celebrates 30 years of independence, it finds itself at yet another defining moment. Although women played a high profile role in the struggle for democracy and better governance in Zimbabwe, they are still fighting for political space. The culture and practices emanating from the prevailing patriarchal order in Zimbabwe pervade all aspects of life, undermining ideals of a society based on equality, equity, justice and sustainable development. Even with the attainment of independence from white colonial rule in 1980, the discourse on women's rights has remained anchored in the critique of the system of governance and how its deeply rooted patriarchal practices prevent women from enjoying their universally accepted human rights.

The repression of Zimbabwean women before, during and after colonial rule has resulted in them suffering the double yoke of oppression and marginalisation. The intensified contest for political power over the past decade has impacted greatly on women, who have not only endured brutality, but lost their voice, while being further marginalised from the country's governance discourse and economic development. Women's voices are also muted in international diplomacy, despite recognition of their sacrifices during the intensified political violence and awareness of their oppression.

The shrinking political space within which women operate has also undermined their ability to mobilise and accumulate the political currency necessary for them to effect change. This is further compounded by the fact that, in response to their dire personal situations, women have been compartmentalised based on polarised political positions for survival.

Zimbabwe is undergoing a transition that will make or break this fragile society and its hopes for a future of peace, stability and prosperity. Zimbabwe's own birth from white colonial rule to independence is testimony to the centrality of a politics of inclusion in transitional processes so as not to undermine lasting peace and democratic governance. Zimbabweans desire a democratic transition that will result in political stability. Zimbabweans want a transition that opens up the democratic space for all; one that gives both women and men the right to vote for leaders of their choice, participate in the writing of a new constitution, and enjoy basic human rights such as access to education and adequate healthcare.

There is widespread consensus that women have an important role to play in post-conflict political transitions. History has proven that the inclusion of women as key stakeholders in transitional processes results in long-term solutions that benefit the society as a whole.

It is clear that Zimbabwe is at a crossroads, with Zimbabweans involved in processes they believe will usher in a new democratic society. Key among these is the current Government of National Unity (GNU) formed in September 2008 under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed by three political parties — the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T) and the MDC. The GPA recognises the importance of women:

...recognizing, accepting and acknowledging that the values of justice, fairness, openness, tolerance, equality, non-discrimination and respect of all persons without regard to race, class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, political opinion, place of origin or birth are the bedrock of our democracy and good governance.¹

¹ Agreement between the ZANU-PF, MDC-T and MDC on resolving the challenges facing Zimbabwe, signed 15 September 2008.

However, the way the debate has been framed by the different players (political parties and civil society) lacks an adequately gendered perspective. To make a successful transition towards a democratic society that recognises women as key stakeholders in equal partnership with men, women must be included in the transitional processes, in finding solutions to end the conflict and in building a new democratic society.

A serious paradigm shift is needed within the transitional process from a male dominated model to a holistic gendered one in which women's participation is recognised and appreciated in the ushering in of a new democratic society – a paradigm shift based on international principles and guidelines that have a bearing on women's participation and their role in transitional processes towards peace. Women have an important role to play in transforming society through conflict resolution and peace building, as outlined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security:

...stressing the importance of [women's] equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.²

The failure by the GNU to deliver on key issues to do with ending violence, the pervasive culture of impunity and other issues to do with democratic accountability cannot be divorced from its failure to deliver for women at different levels of society, especially as important stakeholders in conflict resolution. It is not coincidental that the trampling of human rights has continued unabated even with an inclusive government in place. Speaking during the commemoration of the brutal attacks against civic and political leaders on 11 March 2007, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai lamented the lack of democracy in the country, despite the inclusive government: "We have not yet made the type of progress or democratic reforms which were the very reason for entering into this new administration".³

It is clear that Zimbabwe's envisaged transition towards a more peaceful, democratic society cannot take place without the full participation of women. Be it in their small communities in the villages, in national politics or in international diplomacy, their voice is crucial to the building of a new Zimbabwe.

2 United Nations Security Council (2000) *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), Women, Peace and Security*. New York: United Nations.

3 Ndodana, S. 2010. "No progress on democracy: Tsvangirai". *ZimOnline*, 12 March 2010. [Online] Available at: <http://www.zimonline.co.za/Article.aspx?ArticleId=5824> (accessed 23 September 2010).

Introduction

Amid much hope and euphoria, Zimbabwe gained independence from the colonial Rhodesian regime in 1980. The feeling was that majority black rule would bring with it the anticipated political and economic reforms to do with 'one-man-one-vote', wealth redistribution and equality for all. As for the rest of Africa, the aspirations of Zimbabweans for a new political order have remained a far off dream and proper independence an illusion.

Consequently, after 30 years of 'independence', the political terrain in Zimbabwe is still heavily contested. The country is poorer than it was in 1980 and is characterised by deepening inequality. The majority of its 11 million citizens are languishing in poverty as the social structures collapse (health, education system and social services) and the country's resources are plundered. In particular, Zimbabwean women have been pushed to the periphery of political and economic life, struggling to survive.

In the midst of the despair, the formation of the inclusive Government of National Unity (GNU) under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) seems to have ushered in hope for Zimbabweans and provided a reprieve from the persistent political and economic pressures endured by citizens on a daily basis over the past decade. More structural and political challenges must be faced before the GNU can deliver holistic change — even as its own viability is under threat as a result of unresolved issues.

Article VI of the GPA contains some important commitments to gender justice:

Mindful of the need to ensure that the new Constitution deepens our democratic values and principles and the protection of the equality of all citizens, particularly the enhancement of full citizenship and equality of women.⁴

The GPA also includes a perspective on national healing and reconciliation, a process with great relevance to women. The GPA establishes an Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration under the President's office, pertaining to the whole government. Article VII of the GPA, on the promotion of equality, national healing, cohesion and unity, sets out that:

The Parties hereby agree that the new Government: will ensure equal treatment of all regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, place of origin and will work towards equal access to development for all; will strive to create an environment of tolerance and respect among Zimbabweans and that all citizens are treated with dignity and decency irrespective of age, gender, race, ethnicity, place of origin or political affiliation.⁵

Moreover, Zimbabwe is signatory to various international instruments and agreements that seek to promote and enhance the status of women in society (i.e., Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on Economic and Social Rights, Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Beijing Platform of Action and SADC Protocol on Gender and Development). Section 1.11 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides that these international instruments be ratified and incorporated into national law, but not all of them have been.

4 Agreement between the ZANU-PF, MDC-T and MDC on resolving the challenges facing Zimbabwe, signed 15 September 2008.

5 Ibid, Article VII

This paper posits that, due to the failure of Zimbabwe at its birth to start on the right footing with democratic governance encompassing equal opportunities for all, including women, political and economic progress has been retarded, presenting an even bigger challenge for the pro-democracy movement to ensure a paradigm shift and reverse the status quo. No analysis of the state of the women's movement in Zimbabwe is complete without considering the country's past of exclusionary politics, which has marginalised women, who were considered second class citizens until the enactment of the Legal Age of Majority in 1982. This is further compounded by the fact that, even with heightened calls for democracy and better governance, Zimbabwe remains a deeply patriarchal society, a phenomenon that transcends all spheres of life — cultural, religious, political and social.

This paper argues that the inability of the Zimbabwean women's movement to thrive rests on a number of historical factors compounded by the deeply entrenched patriarchal nature of the society, which has renewed itself with more intensity and force over the generations, presenting women with a double struggle: a fight against state tyranny and a fight for space within the pro-democracy movement to articulate their own agenda. Women in Zimbabwe find themselves either in a compromise position or at loggerheads with the various fractions of patriarchy. This greatly undermines their ability to build consensus on issues that unite them and to move forward.

Zimbabwe's women's movement

Under colonial rule, there was silent agreement between white males and black males in the oppression of black women, as white 'Victorian' notions of the subservient and domestically industrious woman found resonance within traditional African culture. The collusion of white and black patriarchy resulted in the formulation and codification of the legal system known today as Customary Law. Joan May describes this system as an "invented tradition" because "rules which might have evolved, customs and traditions which might have altered radically or gradually been discarded in favour of more adaptive legal norms harden and are subject to manipulation rather than evolution".⁶

During liberation, women liberators started organising themselves and creating 'safe spaces' in which to articulate their issues, which they hoped would be part of the new Zimbabwe. According to Woman Plus, a publication by the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network, in an edition that focuses on the women's movement in Zimbabwe:

During the struggle for independence the liberation Movements had women's wings. Although they were more concerned with the immediate task of liberating the country from colonialism, there is evidence to show that women's issues began to be considered in the 70s in anticipation of the new socio-economic and political order that was to be created at independence. For example, in May 1979, the ZANU Women's League organised the Xai Xai Conference in Mozambique and one of the tasks for the conference's consideration was the review of customary law practice and tradition with a view to the modification of those aspects which inhibit the emancipation of the woman.⁷

6 Ziyambi, N.M. (1997) *The battle of the mind: International new media elements of the new religious political right in Zimbabwe*. Oslo: University of Oslo, pp 7–9. Available from: Department of Media and Communication (info@media.uio.no).

7 Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRN) (2001) *Tracing the path of the women's movement. Final Edition of Women Plus*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/email/WomenPlus/1-101.pdf> (accessed 23 September 2010).

On women liberation fighters, feminist Patricia Chogugudza states:

Zimbabwean women, like their counterparts in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, joined the armed struggle. Their hope was that with the revolution, gender equality would be certain. Women who could not conform to tradition saw the revolution as an opportunity to escape difficult situations. Yet feminist critics argue that at the end of the struggle, women's status actually fell as nationalist leaders and nationalist-oriented societies, in the quest of preserving tradition, expected women to be guardians of culture and respectability, or mistresses of the emerging ruling elites, or wives and mothers, recruiters for political parties, and labourers for the new market economy, while men were engaged in competition for political power in the state and the accumulation of wealth.⁸

According to Horace Campbell, women's current position is the result of the historical fact that Zimbabwe's transition from white colonial rule did not dismantle the structures of patriarchy or oppression, which happen to serve the current regime just as well.

The Lancaster House Constitution of 1979 was a compromise document between the white minority regime and male representatives of the various liberation movements, arrived at after a three-month debate. Viewed largely as a ceasefire document, the transitional process that followed had a very narrow and male-biased approach to resolving the conflict. Women were absent from the negotiating table. This is despite the fact that women had borne the brunt of much of the violence, fought alongside their male counterparts, and sacrificed their lives in the prolonged and vicious armed struggle. As Campbell points out in his critique of the patriarchal model of liberation:

The victory of the guerrillas in the liberation struggle had been a joint effort of both men and women, but in the post-independence period, African males who had celebrated women in combat called on the same women to carry out their respectable role as mothers.⁹

One can argue that it was at that particular historical moment that Zimbabwean women were shackled in patriarchal bondage, from which they have never been freed. What is even more frightening in the way history is repeating itself is that women were not passive combatants, but had a very active discourse on their emancipation and welfare should independence be attained. Women's agenda and perspective did exist before independence, not only among Zimbabwean women, but even with their African counterparts who were also at the forefront of liberation movements.

The battle for emancipation continued even after independence. The government structures set up to serve the 'interests of women' became suspect as they were largely vehicles of sloganeering and entrenched women in a subservient role. For example, a Ministry of Women's Affairs was set up in 1981, not to deliver change, but to ensure male superiority in the new Zimbabwe. Feminists Rudo Gaidzwana and Ona Jirira were among the first women to academically critique this patriarchal model of governance.

Even as these women tried to articulate a women's liberation agenda at the time, women's consciousness of their own oppression was obscured by the promise

⁸ Chogugudza, P. (n.d.) *Gender and war – Zimbabwean women and the liberation struggle*. [Online] Available at: http://arts.brunel.ac.uk/gate/entertext/6_2/ET62ChogugudzaED.doc (accessed 23 September 2010), p 36.

⁹ Campbell, H. (2003) *Reclaiming Zimbabwe. The exhaustion of the patriarchal model of liberation*. South Africa: David Phillips and Trenton.

of a new Zimbabwe. In fact, the backlash against the pioneers of the women's movement soon after independence was quite severe, especially for those who advocated for women's emancipation. This backlash was more vicious from fellow females than males. Success for any woman was measured in terms of the domestic sphere. Marriage and children were taken as signs of being organised and stable, relegating women to the domestic sphere in which they are easier to control and regulate through cultural and traditional norms.

It is no accident, therefore, that the first attack on women was against those who broke the routine by going out to work in the formal sector and coming home in the evenings just like their male counterparts. The first attack was 'operation clean up' in October 1983, in which soldiers and police swept through the major city centres of Zimbabwe, arbitrarily arresting unaccompanied women and charging them with 'prostitution'.

The attacks and injustice suffered by Zimbabwean women became a point for mobilisation by women through the setting up of NGOs such as the Women's Action Group in 1983. "These (at least initially) saw Zimbabwean women of all races working together to challenge the patriarchal precepts of a society that tolerated the abuse of women by men, and the increasing invocation of tradition to validate discriminatory behaviour."¹⁰

The second attack on women was the bid to replace the Social Welfare Organisations Act with new legislation that would make the control of welfare organisations, most of which were headed by women, much easier. In late 1994, the Private Voluntary Organisations Bill was gazetted, and by March 1995 it was law.

The Association of Women's Clubs, then chaired by Senator Sekai Holland, was one of the organisations, to be struck off the NGO roll. Holland challenged the suspension in the Supreme Court. She argued that the action contravened Section 18 of the Constitution (protection of the law) on the grounds that no fair hearing was provided, and that it also contravened the right to freedom of assembly and association and the right to freedom of expression. The Court agreed with her first argument and declared Section 21 of the Act unconstitutional, but it did not comment on the contravention of the other rights. The Government backed down and respected the ruling of the court.

After 30 years of independence, the women's movement in Zimbabwe can still be defined by its main motivation: the creation of a 'safe space' for women to mobilise and articulate their issues for the common purpose of building the necessary political currency to effect positive change, in which the main challenges have been agenda setting and self-renewal within a hostile and rapidly shrinking operating environment.

The operating environment — Shrinking spaces for women

In the current operating environment, earlier gains by the women's movement have been reversed and women have been forced to concentrate on survival. The average life expectancy for a Zimbabwean woman is 34 (latest figures, reported in 2006) — the lowest in the world.¹¹ This figure speaks volumes about the level of suffering of women under the current multi-faceted crisis, made worse by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. With the economy in collapse, 72 per cent of Zimbabweans live

10 Essof, S. (2005) "She-murenga: Challenges, opportunities and setbacks of the women's movement in Zimbabwe". *Feminist Africa*, Issue 4.

11 Nordqvist, C. (2006) *Zimbabwe life expectancy lowest in the world*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/41339.php> (accessed 15 June 2010).

below the poverty line, hyperinflation was recorded in 2008 at 160,000 per cent and rising, and the health and education sectors are in complete collapse.

Given the above, one can safely conclude that the mounting problems facing Zimbabwean women have forced them back to a more primitive era where their main value was based on their reproductive capacity and functions within the family and community as mothers and caregivers. As the economic and political crisis deepened, women greatly subsidised the state as they took over basic functions in the domestic arena at the expense of their hard won gains as members of the workforce or in the public domain.

Women are also seriously undermined and underfunded in the political parties, lacking the power and agency to influence their parties. Women's wings (MDC Women's Assembly and ZANU-PF's Women's League) operate as support structures for the male party leaders. Instead of creating space for women to freely express their needs, these 'wings' are there to contain and mould female members into 'good cadres', according to the expectations and for the satisfaction of the male leaders. Yet both ZANU-PF and MDC-T recognise and honour the important role played by women; both parties have women in the leadership, women with a track record as fighters for political rights.

The performance of the main political parties has also been dismal in terms of promoting women to positions of power and decision-making. The country has failed to reach the 30 per cent representation of women in parliament since 1980, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: Unicameral Parliament

Elections and appointments	Seats	Men	Women	% of Women
1990	150	133	17	11.3
1995	150	129	21	14.0
2000	150	136	14	9.3
2005	150	126	24	16
2008	210	180	30	14.29

Source: Government of Zimbabwe figures available at: http://www.parlzim.gov.zw/cms/FactSheet/History_of_Women_Parliamentarians.pdf

Women are faced with obstacles in dismantling patriarchy within their political systems, and have also suffered from political violence. A report released by AIDS-Free World in December 2009 reports how sexual terror in the form of rape was used by ZANU-PF as a strategy against female opposition activists:

AIDS-Free World's investigation of the rape surrounding the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe reveals two stark facts: it was a widespread, systematic campaign against MDC female members and supporters, calculated to intimidate, humiliate, and punish them — and by extension, their families — for their political affiliation; and the patterns and similarities that emerge from survivors, show that history in Zimbabwe is repeating itself.¹²

This is supported by the Sonke Gender Justice Network which reported, that in 2008, "more than 2000 women of all ages were abducted, raped, tortured, and beaten across Zimbabwe for their political affiliations".¹³

¹² AIDS-Free World (2009) *Electing to rape: Sexual terror in Mugabe's Zimbabwe*. Johannesburg: AIDS-Free World. Available at: <http://www.aids-free-world.org/content/view/full/339/198/> (accessed 10 June 2010).

¹³ Sonke Gender Justice Network (2009) *End politically motivated violence against women in Zimbabwe*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/end-politically-motivated-violence-against-women.html> (accessed 25 August 2009).

The report by Aids-Free World further states that every one of the women targeted for rape was either a member of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), or was closely related to a member of the MDC.

The sustained series of relentless violent attacks on women leaders in civil society has impacted on the ability of individual women to continue in the struggle. The brutality meted out against female civil rights activists, is well documented, one of the most famous being the case of Jestina Mukoko, Director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project.¹⁴ Mukoko was abducted from her home by members of the dreaded Central Intelligence Organisation in December 2008 and held captive in police custody for several weeks, where she was brutally tortured, before being brought to court.

Another example is the case of the Secretary General of the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe, Gertrude Hambira, now living in exile in South Africa.¹⁵

Hambira's ordeal began last February when she was interrogated by members of the Joint Operation Command regarding her work in championing the rights of farm workers, whose rights have been violated and livelihoods destroyed as a result of Zimbabwe's chaotic land reform programme. Hambira, through video footage taken with mobile phones, has exposed all forms of brutality on farms, including sexual violence meted out against female farm workers.

However, while the operating environment has been particularly difficult for women in the leadership of both civil society and the opposition, the main MDC-T party has also been found wanting in so far as intra-party democracy and respect for women's rights is concerned. A system of patronage exists that favours those aligned to senior male leaders, instead of merit based on hard work and sacrifice. A case in point is the contested case of veteran trade unionist Lucia Matibenga, who was unceremoniously removed from her position as the chairperson of the Women's Assembly in favour of the wife of the party leader, Morgan Tsvangirai's financier Teresa Makone.¹⁶

Bridging the gap among women

Women living in poverty have been forced to prioritise survival, abandoning aspirations for equality in favour of meeting more basic needs. The strategies employed to address the many socio-political issues women are faced with also vary. Most recently, the absence of a united agenda among women has meant that they have entered the constitutional reform process divided, undermining their ability to champion change collectively. Women's opinions on a new constitution are polarised on the basis of their organisations or political parties, undermining their ability to agitate for women's issues in the new constitution. In other words, women in Zimbabwe lack a united agenda and common strategy for achieving their agenda.

14 Howden, D. (2009) "Jestina Mukoko: 'Mugabe's henchmen came for me before dawn'". *The Independent UK*, 17 January 2009. [Online] Available at: <http://www.news.independentminds.livejournal.com/2009/01/17/>.

15 Amnesty International (2010) *Zimbabwe union leader hiding after police raid*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/zimbabwean-union-leader-hiding-after-police-raid-2010-02-24> (accessed 25 September 2010).

16 Kwinjeh, G. (2007) "Dismantling patriarchy in the MDC". *Pambazuka News*, 31 October 2007. [Online] Available at: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/letters/44143> (accessed 25 September 2010).

An example of a poor result due to the lack of a united women's voice is how women failed to collectively lobby for 50:50 representation on committees tasked with the revision of the country's supreme law. The co-chairpersons of the Constitution Parliamentary Committee (COPAC) are all male representatives of the three parties, Paul Mangwana (ZANU-PF), Douglas Mwonzora (MDC-T) and Edward Mkhosi (MDC). Even the chairpersons of the thematic committees and their deputies are predominantly male; of the seven chairs from ZANU-PF, only one is a woman, the MDC-T seconded three women out of seven chairpersons, while the MDC's two chairpersons are men.¹⁷

Zimbabwean women have also had difficulty in defining themselves as either feminists or gender activists, with a lot of energy spent in trying to distinguish one from the other, instead of identifying key issues as a basis for solidarity. Whatever a woman's orientation, all women — urban, rural, feminists and gender activists — have an interest in the cost of sanitation, health issues that pertain to women, and access to basic health/education.

Women's Coalition — test case for united front

The Women's Coalition was formed in 1999, at the height of the constitutional reform process, with the aim of creating a space for women to articulate their issues in relation to the constitution. Chaired by feminist Thoko Matshe, the Coalition has made great strides in mobilising women across the political, class and ethnic divide for a common agenda.

Zimbabwe's transition — A struggle within a struggle

The crucial question is whether or not the pressure on women will ease now that the GNU is in place, leading to the opening up of crucial spaces for them to engage — beyond political boundaries, class hierarchy and NGO compartments — for a new social order that recognises their status as full citizens with entitlement? Most important is how women will use the current transitional process to forge unity, synergy, and create the crucial linkages that will result in the necessary political currency for them to influence change. The unhealthy narrative in which women are viewed as weak, divided, and lacking direction and a collective agenda can and must be changed in order to influence the current male-dominant political discourse.

At this juncture, a critical analysis through the gender lense of the current transitional process, the structure of the GNU and the participation of women becomes crucial. However, the fact that key national processes such as constitutional reform are male-centred and that there was only one female negotiator, deputy Secretary General of the MDC-M, Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga, should send warning bells that Zimbabwean women are yet to arrive.

Representation of women in government

The Zimbabwe Election Support Network reports that ZANU-PF appointed only 13% women to minister posts and 5% to deputy minister posts. MDC-T appointed only 20% women to minister posts and 10% to deputy minister posts. The MDC appointed 33% to minister posts and none to deputy minister posts. The three political parties fall short of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender and Development Declaration, which stipulated that states had to ensure at least 30% women in political decision-making structures by 2005. It is clear that political rhetoric and commitments made in relation to women's political empowerment have not been matched with action.¹⁸

¹⁷ "Women take campaign to cyberspace". *The Standard*, 13 February 2010.

¹⁸ Zimbabwe Election Support Network (2009) *Ballot update*. Issue No. 2/March 2009.

A gendered critique of the GNU has to start with its structure, which sadly mirrors the patriarchal nature of the political parties represented in it, in which decision-making remains a male prerogative. The few women who are in government are generally not representing women, but their own political parties.

Another issue of concern is that the donor community has not adopted a gendered strategy in the disbursement of funds, be it to individual political parties or to the GNU itself. This is tantamount to funding and sustaining the patriarchal status-quo. The past ten years (since the first elections with MDC in 2000) has seen a serious bonding between the patriarchal leadership and donors, to the point where women specific programmes for fundraising are often discussed with male leaders first before funding is approved. Hence, no critique of the weakened status of Zimbabwean women would be complete without an assessment of how the donor community is perpetuating inequality.

While the MDC-T and the MDC have based their political orientation on social democracy, a transformative ideology towards social justice and sustainable development of which gender equality is key, much more needs to be done before these policy principles are realised. A factor that has greatly undermined the participation of women in politics is resources; it is easier for men to access resources with which to campaign. Women, merely by being poorer than men, are marginalised from crucial political processes, losing out in the competition for political power.

Even more important in the present situation is the undermining of attempts to address issues of gender justice within the transitional justice process, which deals with past injustices and the remaining culture of impunity, as well as fostering a new culture of accountability.

A safe space for women

Given the serious obstacles listed above, the key question is where to place an understanding of the women's movement in Zimbabwe, and where to locate a safe space for women to organise for their cause collectively beyond social boundaries, be it class, ethnicity or race. Women's emancipation in society cannot happen in a vacuum. The ability of Zimbabwe's women's movement to mobilise for its collective cause is intricately linked to the environment in which it operates. Shrinking political space has led to the dissipation of collective energies as survival politics take centre stage, undermining solidarity around crucial issues related to women.

Two-stage struggle – History repeats itself

During Zimbabwe's liberation, women were sold the concept of the 'two-stage struggle': first, join the men in fighting the colonial regime to attain political power and, then, women's issues will be addressed. This is repeating itself in the current struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe.

The idea of the two-stage struggle repeating itself is further articulated by feminist Shereen Essof:

The two tier struggle that we have experienced in national liberation struggles has really resulted in zero for women. So no matter what the outcome of this election, the struggle against structural oppression for women's human rights and for full citizenship as the position and condition of women's lives will not change overnight.¹⁹

¹⁹ Essof, S. (2005) "She-murenga: Challenges, opportunities and setbacks of the women's movement in Zimbabwe." *Feminist Africa*, Issue 4.

The yearning for freedom by Zimbabwean women is, therefore, not a new phenomenon. They have historically understood their subjugation under patriarchy and organised against it. However, the question to ask with a view to bringing to the fore a fresh narrative that breaks from this cycle is why is history repeating itself?

Zimbabwe has travelled 30 years of a rocky road towards emancipation, but the issues in 2010 are the same as they were in 1980. Whatever the legislative or constitutional gains, the fact of the matter is that Zimbabwean women still face a huge battle to emancipate themselves. Those who have sought to drive the feminist agenda have largely been seen as obstacles in the bigger struggle as defined by men.

Conclusion — How can women be agents of real transformation?

Zimbabwe's economic and social collapse calls for a change in direction. Men and women of honour must stand up and be counted. No one person has a monopoly on shaping the future of the country — change should be informed by a collective agenda. Talk about democratic processes that are inclusive of women should not just be rhetoric: it is about shaping Zimbabwe's future for all Zimbabweans. Neither is it about the present generation, it is about posterity. What will future generations look back and say about their mothers and fathers?

Sadly, the onus is on women to rise up and unshackle themselves. Surely 30 years of independence should serve as a clarion call for Uhuru (independence) among women? Women need to take matters into their hands, as they have done historically, and set a fresh agenda for national politics.

Suggested steps include:

1. **Identify fresh platforms for discussion:** We need to go back to basics in terms of stocktaking — where are the women and what are their issues?
2. **Plan for various scenarios:** Women must be prepared so as not to be caught off-guard again in the events that are fast unfolding.
3. **Identify areas of influence:** Who are the strategically placed women and what can they do to influence change in their areas of operation (government, parliament, senate, NGOs, diaspora, and so forth)?
4. **Establish a uniting platform/convener:** What are the potential uniting platforms? Who are the credible conveners?
5. **Establish regional/international linkages:** What are the best platforms to push the Zimbabwean women's agenda regionally and internationally?