

# ZIMBABWE BRIEFING

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## On Gender-Based Violence During Elections in Zimbabwe

*Remember when I was a small child and in middle of the night and early hours of the morning I heard a cry, a scream, and other disturbing screams; it was the women in my neighborhood located in the small town of Marondera responding to physical and mental abuse by their husbands. My mother was not spared either. Women would be beaten, sometimes naked; they ran outside for help. Today it would be my mother; tomorrow it was a woman next door and on a Friday or month end it could be most women in the neighborhood. I am therefore a product and a victim of Gender based violence (GBV) at household level. When I became a young adult at university, again some of the female students were psychologically and physically abused. These students were beaten for refusing to have sex with men; and for starting a new love relationship. Now as a mother and professional I experience psychological gender based violence at various levels. What is silent in this trajectory of GBV is that women have also experienced this violence on the political scene- from the liberation war to jamba and the crisis period which includes elections and Marange diamond fields abuses. Adding all these forms, levels and platforms of violence one can see violence, violence and violence perpetrated against women in Zimbabwe and these are women in Africa.*

*"We need to voice the violence, to hear the stories of all those affect-*



*ed by violence...Spreading the word, breaking down the taboos and exposing the violence that takes place among us is the first step towards effective action to reduce violence in our own societies." (Gro Harlem Brundtland)* Women have been victims, perpetrators and agents of violence throughout electoral processes in Zimbabwe. Women in Zimbabwe remain with permanent scars, some have died, and others have been injured, whilst most of them remain traumatized by past and continued incidents of violation of their fundamental right of enjoying peace, against violence. Women in the rural areas of Zimbabwe were known supporters of ZANU PF. However there was increasing discontent as a result of poverty and increasing suffering. The March 29 elections had shown that the opposition party-MDC

T had gained support in the rural areas and hence some rural constituencies were won by MDC-T. It is believed that the women in the rural areas had also voted for Morgan Tsvangirai betraying ZANU PF. They had been the major recipients of food aid from government. It is believed that violence was unleashed to these women after the March 29 elections. 'Operation Makavhotera papi' which was implemented after the March 29 elections sought to know who had voted for which party and candidates in the March 29 elections. In other words this defeats the whole purpose of 'your vote is your secret'.

In fact this operation meant that both men and women do not have voting rights. This Operation is tantamount to removing the constitutional right to participate in elections.

Gender based violence during the elections in Zimbabwe was perpetrated against women whose husbands and sons had fled the harassment in the rural and urban areas. Some women and children who remained behind were tortured, killed and abducted. Their villages and property were destroyed. Their cattle, grain and property were looted. Some of these women were forced to leave their homes. This means that women's livelihoods were disturbed as a result of this Gender based violence.

Violence against women was used to punish them for supporting a political party. Pambazuka in 2008 reported that in Manicaland and Mashonaland

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## Coordinator's Note - Dewa Mavhinga

### Impunity sustains state-sanctioned political violence

Earlier this week Zimbabwe's vice president and ZANU-PF second secretary, Mrs Joyce Mujuru made a startling confession in her address to a meeting of business leaders and senior ZANU-PF officials. She admitted that some people have killed in the name of ZANU-PF and that sections of the police have committed brutality in the name of the party.

It is common cause that use of violence and coercion has been a central tool for ZANU-PF since its formation in August 1963 with the main objective of waging an armed liberation struggle. At independence in 1980, there was no leadership renewal or change of mindset to renounce violence and embrace democracy. Violence during the liberation struggle was not only against the Rhodesian forces, communities suffered significant violence at the hands of the liberation forces. Perceived 'sell-outs' or collaborators with the Rhodesian forces received public, violent punishment designed to instil fear in the hearts of thousands. To this day, ZANU-PF's tools of trade have remained the same, and, as they say, if a hammer is your tool, then all problems look like nails.

For Zimbabwe, the major and underlying problem with violence is that it is not inter-party violence, or random community violence; it is state-sanctioned violence which often goes unpunished. The absence of the rule of law, means that we are not equal before the law, a member of ZANU-PF can reasonably expect to act violently in defence of his party without any repercussions, if anything, a reward would be expected. With ZANU-PF firmly controlling sections of the police, the Attorney-General's office

and the judiciary, the overall result has been that those responsible for widespread electoral violence have gone unpunished.

Impunity, where one acts wrongfully with the knowledge that they will not be punished, is entrenched in Zimbabwe. To deal decisively with the state-sanctioned violence, key justice institutions such as the police, the Attorney-General's Office and the judiciary must be strictly impartial, independent, professional and apolitical. This is not the case in Zimbabwe at present. The present Attorney General, controversially appointed by President Mugabe, has often openly declared his partisan standing. And Police Commissioner-General Augustine Chihuri has gone as far as declaring that only an election which results in a Mugabe victory is acceptable. The GPA has failed to transform Zimbabwe's justice institutions from being mere ZANU-PF extensions.

Without independent institutions, Zimbabwe, on its own, cannot end state-sanctioned violence. Without a full restoration of the rule of law, the sense of state-protection will continue to inspire ZANU-PF supporters and allies to perpetrate political violence. For the record, for the politically motivated killings of at least 163 MDC supporters in the lead up to the 2008 presidential runoff election, not a single prosecution or conviction has been secured. This is despite eye witnesses presenting evidence to police and naming the perpetrators. A standard police response to a report of politically motivated violence is, "we cannot assist; this is political."

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Central women and girls were raped and abused by the youth militia. Women were tortured and abused in order to force them to tell where their husbands were hiding. They were raped and or physically assaulted to force their husbands whom they suspected to be opposition parties to return home. Sexual violence against women was also enforced to settle scores amongst families and individuals and precipitate their expulsion from the communities they lived. This led to displacements of women because of gender based violence during elections.

Gender based violence became an issue during electoral processes in Zimbabwe because women were afraid to go and report their cases to the police who often said that such violence did not fall under their jurisdiction but it's political issues which should be resolved at political levels. One can call this a decay of the rule of law. The problem was also elevated by the fact that the police were said to be abusing women during the crisis. Hence whilst women are protected by law on rape, this becomes ineffective when the protection cannot be implemented. Women and children should be confident

and feel secure when they see a policeman or a soldier. There is therefore the need to restore confidence to women that the security forces can protect women and their dignity during an electoral process. Gender based violence during the elections have silenced women. They do not want to talk about it; they do not want their cases recorded because they feel insecure about their future. This also applies to victims of rape during the conflict period. Women prefer not to talk about their rape experiences because they are afraid of being chased away by their husbands and communities. Reporting about rape is seen as something that cannot be said openly. Women contracted HIV/AIDS from such rape cases during election violence. Accessing antiretrovirals has never been easy for women in the rural and urban areas. Stocks of antiretrovirals in Zimbabwe are always not adequate. Women cannot afford to pay bus fare to get to the nearest clinic.

Whilst there have been significant steps to fight against domestic violence in Zimbabwe through the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, gender based violence still manifest itself in Zimbabwean society particularly in the election

and post-election period. The state should effectively prevent, investigate and prosecute violence against women. In the current set up, women are at risk on political violence. There should be institutional reforms which ensure that prohibition against women's violence is guaranteed and any legislation will be applied effectively. Women's economic empowerment reduces the risk of violence since it helps to promote financial independence, a sense of social value and improved self-esteem.

Women in Zimbabwe should continue to fight for their spaces so that they can make significant contribution to development in Zimbabwe and for the future generations. Zimbabwean people should preserve their ubuntuism and maintain the dignity and integrity of women. God bless the women of Zimbabwe and their children wherein lay the men.

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