

## Sex Slaves: The Plight Of Women In Civil Strife Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

This study was prompted by media reports that talk of rampant sexual abuse in youth camps during elections preparations in Zimbabwe, especially since the ‘famous constitutional no vote’ which triggered the controversial fast track land reform programme driving the country into chaos. The researchers thus embarked on a qualitative research based on documentary analysis and unstructured interviews with female cross border traders plying the Harare-Johannesburg road. The study established that because of the civil strife and the economic meltdown women are exposed to risk of sexual violence, forced marriages, coerced sex, and loss of homes, families and social support. These developments force women into transactional sex in order to secure their lives and those of their husbands and children, or to gain access to shelter or services. In transit to South Africa, they are exposed to differing levels of HIV infection. Throughout the journey from home women are harassed, gang-raped by male counterparts, abused by truck drivers and forced into sexual relationships with the South African police. This situation makes the probability of women getting HIV/AIDS very high. Most of them are already ill and have the burden of looking after children they get unwillingly.

**Keywords:** Sex slaves, civil strife, women, gender, sexual violence, rape, HIV/AIDS.

### 1. Introduction

Conflict situations make girls and women especially vulnerable in multiple ways. Forced marriages, coerced sex and voluntary remarriage are all common in conflict situations where men and women have lost partners. Rape may be used by opposing forces as an instrument of terror or as a symbol of victory. The loss of homes, income, families and social support deprives women and girls of the capacity to generate income and they may be forced into transactional sex in order to secure their lives (or those of their husbands or children), escape to safety, or to gain access to shelter or services. In transit, refugees who are sexually active (through choice or necessity) will be exposed to different populations with differing levels of HIV infection.

In this paper we look at the nexus between sexual abuse / rape and civil strife. Although we approach the problem from a broad global perspective, we are mainly concerned with developments in Zimbabwe. We start by giving you a brief history of Zimbabwe before looking at issues of methodology and contextualising the problem. We then go on to discuss both theoretical / conceptual understandings and empirical evidence beyond Zimbabwean borders before taking the discussion to Zimbabwe using a historical and evolutionary perspective. We argue that civil strife communities reduce women to nothing more than sex objects. According to Amina Mire (2000:2) the female body has been used as a source of pleasure, plunder, political power and so forth. It is seen as passive, acted upon so that it produces sons of the nation. For Manathoko (2000: 76) “women are given in marriage, sent as tribute, traded, taken in battle, bought or sold... Men are also trafficked but only as shares, athletic stars, serfs, rather than as men”. Women themselves have surrendered to the situation and some of them view themselves as commodities to be enjoyed by men as implied in the following schoolgirl’s observation that, “Girls sleep with teachers for marks, money and transport. We all know about it.” (The Star, March 2008).

### 2. Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a long history of successes and failures. Its current boundaries were drawn in the 1890s by British colonialists during the scramble for Africa who named the country Rhodesia. In 1980, after a protracted civil strife and war, it became independent and was renamed Zimbabwe after the Great Zimbabwe Ruins.

It is important to note that the history of Zimbabwe has anecdotes of civil strife, wars and violence in which women were both leading actors and victims. Great Zimbabwe is said to have fallen partly because of succession disputes. The Rozvi state crumbled because of schizophrenic authoritarianism and civil strife. The Nguni groups, especially the Ndebele, who took advantage of the weak and falling Rozvi state, were always raiding the Shona chiefdoms. The whites used both treachery and the gun to take over Zimbabwe. The colonial state was characterised by violence, war and civil strife. The post-colonial state has also been characterised by violence and civil strife starting with dissidents and gukurahwindi in south western parts of the country, through election periods and then the fast track land reform and beyond era.

During these 'moments of madness' women suffer most and like anywhere else in the world they have been always reduced to sex objects to be enjoyed by men (both civilians and armed forces).

### 3. Methodology

This paper is based on both literature review and empirical study. The methodology used was largely qualitative research based on documentary analysis and unstructured interviews with female cross border traders plying the Harare-Johannesburg road and economic refugees in South Africa.

### 4. Contextualising the problem

Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 127) quote the Bible, which says the original sin in the Garden of Eden was woman's. She tasted the forbidden fruit, tempted Adam, and has been paying for it ever since. In the Old Testament Book of Genesis (1999) the Lord said, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shall bring forth children and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee". This summarises the position of women today:

- they produce children in pain;
- they are mothers and wives;
- they cook, wash, clean and sew;
- they take care of men and are subordinate to male authority;
- they take care of children, the elderly and the sick; and
- they are largely excluded from high status occupations and positions of power (Musingafi, 2008; 2010).

With the current HIV/AIDS menace studies have already revealed that they are the most vulnerable partly because of their biology. The Economist (2006: 87) reports, "As HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, has spread, it has hit women increasingly hard... Figures from UNAIDS... show that 74% of young people infected in Sub Saharan Africa are female." The journal goes on to say:

Biology is part of the problem. The skin lining the vaginal tract and, in particular, the cervix contains immune system cells that make their way to the surface in response to infection. These are cells of the type that HIV infects... A man who wants to protect himself can don a condom. To achieve the same end, a woman must persuade him to do so, and no amount of persuasion can ensure that this happens.

Added to this, biologically only women can be raped, men are only manipulated in succumbing to the whims of a woman (Musingafi, 2008; 2010).

According to Musingafi (1990: 3), "Religion... explicitly relegates them a subordinate position. Christianity openly states that women must depend on men while they are rearing children 'for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church' (Ephesians 5: 23). He further observes that Islam sees them as rotten, unholy, diabolic and psychologically disabled. For society to remain pure and uncontaminated women must not be put in authority. Gallagher (1981: 15) concurs and observes that women are seen as "cursed by the sin of eve, crooked because are made from a rib, bestial by nature, greedy and crafty". Islam goes further and ensures that women have to be cleansed through mutilation of their sexual organs to gain honour before Allah (Aldeeb, 1994, 1997)

Molokone (1997: 1), Moore (1993: 47), Meena (1992: 11), Todaro (1992: 159), Batezat and Mwalo (1989: 3-4), and many others, all agree that women suffer far more than men. Molokone writes, "Women and female headed families constitute the majority of poor households in the SADC region." The World Bank (1994) concurs thus "women are over-represented among the poor". Todaro takes it further thus, "In virtually every country, there are more women than men at the lowest level of income... Generally households headed by women are among the poorest groups in society." He further argues that poverty lays a heavy burden on women because of their dual roles in the economy. They often work both inside and outside the home. They are usually less educated, have fewer employment opportunities and receive lower wages than men. They have less access to land, capital and technology, and this lack of access diminishes the efficiency of production both inside and outside the home.

Industry and commerce have also played their role. Meena (1992:11) reports that in the music industry women have been reduced to [naked] dancing queens and sex objects. They are used for sensational purposes. The African woman is the most affected. Meena (1992:11) observes that the tourist and the advertisement industry depict the superiority of the white woman's physical appearance and the reverse for black woman. Commercial companies, especially the cosmetic industries, exploit this prejudice and manufacture certain chemicals which are used by black women to change their hair, colour and so on. Some of these chemicals are a health hazard.

Thus, as put forward by OXFAM (2008), 'in spite of the significant efforts of many national governments and at international level, the situation of women has worsened. The feminisation of poverty has accelerated in the last decade and further increased women's dependence and vulnerability'.

All human communities have been found guilty of ill-treating and making women unbearably poor. Mary Daly, as quoted in Hoagland and Fry (1992: 313) found the following forms of community torture of women in the international community: European-witch-burning, Chinese-foot-binding, Indian Sultee, North and East African genital mutilation, American gynaecology, and so forth.

Thus women are hit most by both natural and artificial calamities. When times are hard like in Zimbabwe today, or in war situations like in the Middle East, they are physically and psychologically tortured, maimed, sexually abused, raped, and so forth. The chain does not end. Perhaps declaring women an endangered species can summarise the whole picture.

One of the respondents in Musingafi's (2008) study in Chachacha had this to say about the man who inherited her after the death of her husband:

I don't love him like I loved my husband. I only accepted him so that I stay with my kids at my homestead. Otherwise they would have asked me to leave both my homestead and my children. But I am as good as an unmarried woman. I fend for my three children. He only visits us once in a while. I also want the relationship that way so that I exercise my sexual freedom. I know if they discover that I have an affair they are likely to ask me to leave the homestead. But they will not succeed. I now know my rights though I still feel I am one of them- I belong to the family. I can't imagine a life outside the family

One of the interesting findings in the above study was that other than those who entered into sexual relationships for financial/commercial reasons, most said they entered into sexual relationships because like anyone else they had sexual feelings.

## **5. Women and violent conflict**

Violent conflict results in mass displacement and women represent the majority of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees globally. By 2009, there were more than 3 million displaced people in Colombia, the majority of them women and girls. Of the violations reported by women to the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, nearly a quarter were related to forced displacement.

Around the world, women fleeing from conflict are at risk of abuse during transit, in camps and during return and reintegration. In a 2008 survey in Colombia, nearly 18% of the women questioned said that physical aggression and

sexual violence were the drivers for their displacement. In camps for displaced people in Darfur (the Sudan), inappropriate design of facilities and the need to travel long distances outside the camp for firewood or other necessities have increased the risks of violence for women (UN, 2002).

The UN (2002) reports that 250,000-400,000 women were raped during the 1972 war for independence in Bangladesh. More than 800 rapes were reported to have been committed by Indian security forces against women in Jammu and Kashmir. There is evidence that rape has been used as a tool of political repression during specific periods of dictatorship in Haiti. In pre-genocide Rwanda, HIV infection rates were estimated at 25% (and considerably more than 35% among the military). The conflict itself created large numbers of refugees, exposing women and girls to further risk, and contributing post-genocide to a sense of fatalism among surviving women. To provide some sense of the scale of rape committed during the genocide it is believed that every surviving female had been raped. Some survivors report that their persecutors told them that they had been allowed to live so that they might "die of sadness". A survey of 304 survivors reported that 35% had become pregnant following rape and it is estimated that between two and five thousand *enfants de mauvais souvenir* (children of bad memories) resulted from rapes committed during the genocide (Musingafi, *et al*, 2011).

Within refugee camps many women will be less likely to have the 'benefit' of male protection and may be even more vulnerable to assault as a result. There is likely to be little recourse to justice, and those charged with responsibility for administering it may themselves be implicated in abuse. The design of refuge camps may inadvertently increase vulnerability. For example communal latrines, inadequate lighting, insensitivity to internal power dynamics among refugees, lack of protection for those who collect wood or water, may combine to render women and girls even more vulnerable to assault (Musingafi and Dumbu, 2012).

UNHCR estimates that women and children constitute 80 per cent of the world's refugees and IDPs. Each phase of displacement, including initial displacement, flight, protection and assistance in refugee and displaced persons camps, resettlement and reintegration has different implications for female and male refugees and IDPs. Flight is often triggered by severe sex discrimination and gender-based persecution which may combine with discrimination and abuse on other grounds, such as ethnicity, religion and class. Refugee, returnee and internally displaced women and girls often suffer discrimination and human rights abuses throughout their flight, settlement and return. For example, women and girls may be forced into providing sexual services to men in exchange for safe passage for themselves or their family or to obtain necessary documentation or other assistance. Children are at an increased risk of becoming separated from their parents, families or guardians. Girl children who become separated from their parents may face the risk of sexual abuse and being forced to serve in fighting forces and groups.

In both refugee and IDP camps, women and girls can be at risk of human rights abuses due to the weakening of existing community and family protection mechanisms. Internally displaced women and girls are subjected to "physical and sexual attacks, rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment, increased spousal battering and marital rape". For example, in Liberia, among the more than 1 million returning internally displaced persons were many women and girls who were struggling with the consequences of rape and unwanted pregnancies.

Musingafi and Dumbu (2012) further argue that women who have been raped suffer further marginalisation. Many often become pregnant and bear children whom they have to feed and take care of. Already desperately poor, the need for increased resources exacerbates an already dire situation. Social stigma and scorn of rape victims is strong. Families and husbands often disown victims of rape, leaving them to fend for themselves at greater risk of further sexual violence and abuse.

According to Ward and Marsh (2006) the motivation for rape committed during armed conflict varies. The violence can be more or less random -- a by-product of the collapse in social and moral order that accompanies war. They report one example in the DRC where a mother walked into her house to find a paramilitary raping her 10-month-old baby. Such incidents are not only limited to combatants. Men from the local community may exploit the chaos of conflict to commit sexual violence against women without fear of punishment. Under the volatile and disorganised rule of the Mujahideen, for instance, rape and sexual assault in Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul were reportedly so commonplace that the oppressive police state established after the Taliban takeover in 1996 was initially perceived by some women as a welcome reprieve.

Ward and Marsh (2006) argue that sexual violence may also be systematic, carried out by fighting forces for the explicit purpose of destabilising populations and destroying bonds within communities and families. In these instances, they argue, rape is often a public act, aimed to maximise humiliation and shame. In Timor Leste, Indonesian military reportedly raped women in front of their families, and forced Timorese men to rape Timorese women. Researchers on a 2004 fact-finding mission to Northern Uganda spoke with one man who was commanded by rebels to have sex with his daughter:

I refused. ... They ordered my son ... for the fear of a cocked gun he complied. ... I was then forced to have sex with a hole they had dug in the floor using a knife. ...They forced my private part in the hole several times -- the skin was totally destroyed. ... It was impossible to fight someone who is armed. ...This was all done in front of my wife, son, and the daughter. ...My wife went mad.

A Sudanese man recounted his family's similar degradation in Darfur:

In February 2004, I abandoned my house because of the conflict. I met six Arabs in the bush. I wanted to take my spear and defend my family, but they threatened me with a weapon and I had to stop. The six men raped my daughter, who is 25 years old, in front of me, my wife and young children.

Ward and Marsh (2006) say there are cases when sexual violence against women is also used to quell resistance by instilling fear in local communities or in opposing armed groups. In such cases, women's bodies are used as an envelope to send messages to the perceived enemy. In Burma a government army major approached a young girl and asked her about her parents whereabouts and ordered his soldiers to wait at the edge of the farm and arrest anyone who came to the farm. He then raped the girl in a hut several times during the day and at about 4 a.m. burned her alive in the hut, and left the place with his troops. Comparable violations by Russian soldiers in Chechnya have been reported during mop up operations that ensue after rebel Chechen fighters have decamped a town. Of four Chechen women vaginally and orally assaulted by Russian military in February 2000, one purportedly suffocated to death while a soldier sat on her head.

In conflicts defined by racial, tribal, religious and other divisions, violence may be used to advance the goal of ethnic cleansing (Ward and Marsh, 2006). Public rapes in Bosnia, for example, were used to instigate the flight or expulsion of entire Muslim communities. Forced impregnation, mutilation of genitals and intentional HIV transmission are other techniques of ethnic cleansing. Women in Rwanda were taunted by their genocidal rapists, who promised to infect them with HIV. In Bosnia, Muslim women impregnated by Serbs reportedly were held captive until late term to prevent them from aborting. In Kosovo, an estimated 100 babies conceived in rape were born in January 2000 alone.

Many other instances have been identified where women and girls are abducted for the purposes of supplying combatants with sexual services. According to one soldier from DRC, 'Our combatants don't get paid. Therefore they can't use prostitutes. If we politely ask women to come with us, they are not going to accept. So, we have to make them obey us so we can get what we want.' An elderly victim from Liberia, thought to be around 80 years old at the time she related her story to investigators, acknowledged being held by rebels in the town of Voinjama, where at night, the men would come, usually more than one, and rape her.

The UN (2002) reports that the international presence which follows armed conflict has been linked to an increasing demand for prostitution and trafficking of women and girls. For example, an investigation of refugee camps in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone revealed the sexual exploitation of women, girls and boys by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers in exchange for basic provisions.

## **6. Women in post-conflict situations**

Evidence suggests that sexual violence does not necessarily end with the cessation of armed conflict. Ward and Marsh (2006) report that incidents of rape are reported to have increased sharply in the context of ongoing insecurity in post-war Iraq, for example. One of the victims, Dalal was abducted, held overnight and allegedly raped in 2003 by

four Iraqi men. In other post-conflict settings, incidents of rape may decrease, but risk of exposure to forced or coerced prostitution, as well as trafficking, may increase. Events in the Balkans, where prostitution and trafficking burgeoned in the aftermath of wars in the former Yugoslavia, illustrate how criminal elements may replace fighting factions in the ongoing sexual victimisation of women and girls. The added presence of peacekeeping forces, who have been implicated as users of commercial sex workers in places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Timor Leste and the DRC, may supply a notable portion of local demand.

### **7. Women in civil strife Zimbabwe before colonialism**

In the brief description of Zimbabwe above, we have already shown that the history of Zimbabwe has been punctuated by civil strife since time immemorial.

In the early quarrels and civil wars among the Shona chieftaincy and groupings, women were used as gifts or offerings for marriage to the other party in conflict as a strategy of managing conflict. According to Shona oral tradition, later during the Ndebele raids, young beautiful Shona women were forcibly taken to go and serve their Ndebele masters and warriors as extra wives and concubines. Ugly and old women were simply raped and butchered together with their male counterparts.

### **8. Women in the civil strife colonial era**

The white men came with an unquenched thirst for the African woman. During the early days of colonialism they raped African women at will. Most of the coloured population in Zimbabwe today is a result of these forced sexual encounters.

During the war of liberation young women were forced to become concubines of both liberation fighters and the Rhodesian forces. The Rhodesian forces did not discriminate between the married, the unmarried and the old. All were sexual food for them. Freedom fighters went to the extent of beating up parents whose daughters had run away to the cities forcing them to call back their daughters so that they continue raping them. When the war ended most young women had fatherless children, maimed bodies and wounded hearts.

### **9. Women and independent Zimbabwe**

Independence came in 1980. The euphoria and celebration of independence translated to further abuse of young women (former *chimbwidos*) by young men (former *mujibhas*) during the night celebrations. Of course, sexual intercourse between these young people during the night celebrations was based on mutual agreement. The only problem was that whereas the female partner thought that these were beginnings of a happy marriage, for the male partner it was nothing more than a moment of relief; these young women had been abused by the gunmen, so it was their turn to enjoy the already abused women.

The dissident activities in south western Zimbabwe translated to more sexual abuse and rape for women. There are reports that both the dissidents and government soldiers raped and abused women sexually before killing them. Some of these women were pregnant. The situation during this civil strife can simply be summarised as 'moment of madness'. Children who up to today do not know their fathers were forced into the wombs of women through incidents survivors would not want to remember. Five to ten men would rape one woman one after another before killing or living her to die of the grueling pain.

There are also unpleasant stories at the workplace, schools and colleges. In some quarters women get high offices as long as they are generous with their thighs. At colleges, sometimes people talk of a thigh for a pass. All this mounts to lawlessness and insecurity for women.

### **10. The fast track land reform, elections and national service**

Towards the end of the 1990s there was unrest in Zimbabwe largely because of the biting effects of ESAP, government arrogance and leaders impunity. People did not only go to the streets but rejected the 1999 draft constitution which they felt did not represent their inspirations. Meanwhile the people of Svosve had begun invading white farms. The rejection of the draft constitution did not go well with the government (ZANU PF in particular). They became schizophrenic, encouraging people (youth, women, ex-combatants and ZANU PF leadership) to invade

white and political opponents' farms and firms. This resulted in violent conflict that claimed thousands of lives and maimed millions bodies and hearts.

Soon after the rejection of the 1999 draft constitution a new strong political party, the Movement for Democratic Change, emerged. Although the new party was largely from the labour movement, it incorporated strong forces from the academia, business community, lawyers and whites, among others. The new party posed real threat of grabbing power away from ZANU PF. To counter the threat ZANU PF reacted by encouraging lawlessness, violence, impunity, creation of youth camps during elections, 'national service', and introducing a compulsory national and strategic studies subject in polytechnics, colleges and vocational training centres. In this new largely insecure environment the actual losers were women who were exposed to all forms of sexual abuse.

In youth camps, youths became wild and young women were sexually abused by rogue elements of ex-combatants. Most contracted HIV/AIDS and many of them are already dead because of grueling poverty, lack of access to ARVs, stress, trauma, madness, and so on. Because of violence and the resultant biting poverty, many people migrated to neighbouring countries and overseas where they became economic refugees. Some (the majority of whom women) became cross border traders.

What then happened to those who chose travel across borders? In the next section we look at the experiences of Zimbabwean women on the road to South Africa and in South Africa.

#### **11. Findings from female cross-border traders and economic refugees in South Africa**

In 2008 one of the researchers enrolled for Masters in Development and Management, and subsequently PhD studies in Governance and Public Management with the North-West University-Vaal Triangle Campus. On his way up and down South Africa, he mingled with different classes of women in cross-border buses, at railway stations, in shops and residential areas in Johannesburg, Tshwane, Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark. The picture he got from these women was not encouraging. Some of the inhuman experiences of these displaced and economic migrants are as outlined in the next paragraphs.

On their way to South Africa both illegal migrants (border jumpers) and legal migrants were either gang - raped by fellow border jumpers, or raped / sexually abused by truck drivers, South African police and other government officials. In South Africa they either had to bribe officials and authorities in kind (sleeping with them) or they were put in cells before they were deported back home, only to come back by the same route they came before.

Most of them were given work for peanuts; the money they got was far below what can sustain a human being throughout the month. Hence most found themselves supplementing the meagre wages with either prostitution or any other illegal ways e.g. stealing, selling drugs, selling fake identification documents etc.

There was also the issue of human trafficking. Young women were moved from Zimbabwe as sex slaves in brothels where they provided sexual services in exchange for either accomodation or meagre wages from the brothel owner who gets all the money paid by those who came in for the exploited girl's services. Most women were forced into 'love relationships' which they would not otherwise accept if they were economically stable. In these relationships they were economically, emotionally and physically exploited / abused by their so called lovers. For instance, one of the women-interviewees worked for her Nigerian lover in an internet café for no pay. As a 'wife' she was made to believe that she owned the shop. The guy took away all the money gained from the business. He frequently harassed and beat her up. Sometimes he chased her away from the house but still the young woman believed the guy loved her. This was very common in South Africa.

According to the IOM Report on the xenophobic attacks, dozens of women were raped during the xenophobic violence. The report also states that 62 people, including 21 South Africans, were killed, 100 000 people displaced and property worthy millions looted and destroyed or seized by local residents and leaders. Foreigners (the majority of whom women) were seen as sub-human and therefore they were given derogatory names like *kwerekwere* and *girigamba*.

Zimbabwean women were exposed to high risk of HIV/AIDS infection both as mistresses, prostitutes, forced lesbians and homosexuals. They got into these relationships for survival. They married South Africans who they were not in love with so that they got official residential documents. They were murdered, burnt in their shacks, beaten up, humiliated by locals as they were accused of going out with locals' husbands, accessing social grants using fraudulent identity documents, spreading unknown diseases (e.g. the worm disease that spread into the vagina which is said to be caused by the Nigerians), not participating in local practices and struggles but waited to benefit from the efforts of others, stealing locals jobs and space since they were preferred by employers ahead of locals, and so forth.

## 12 Summary

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