

## Voting with their Feet: Women's Flight to Harare during Zimbabwe's Liberation War

Joyce M. Chadya

Volume 18, numéro 2, 2007

Global Histories  
Histoires mondiales

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018222ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018222ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)  
1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Chadya, J. M. (2007). Voting with their Feet: Women's Flight to Harare during Zimbabwe's Liberation War. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(2), 24–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/018222ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cette communication explore les expériences des femmes des régions rurales du Zimbabwe qui ont été forcées de se déplacer vers la ville de Harare au cours de la guerre de libération dans les années 1970. Les femmes se sont retrouvées coincées entre un gouvernement colonial répressif et les armées coercitives de la guérilla. Les gestes de violence posés par les combattants des deux côtés ont mené à des déplacements massifs, les femmes et leur famille quittant les régions dévastées par la guerre pour se réfugier dans des centres urbains comme Harare. Dans les histoires d'exode des femmes se trouvent des réflexions sur les rapports hommes-femmes dans une guerre menée en grande partie dans des régions rurales où les femmes représentaient la majorité des habitants, et une guerre dont la plupart des combattants étaient des hommes. Ainsi, les rapports hommes-femmes ont contribué tout comme ils ont été influencés par la guerre. Les récits des femmes révèlent également les coûts socio-économiques et émotionnels de la guerre, à peine soulignés dans le discours nationaliste de la guerre de libération. Au centre de ces comptes rendus se révèlent la résistance, le courage, la peur, et surtout l'action des femmes des régions rurales dans des circonstances très difficiles.

# Voting with their Feet: Women's Flight to Harare during Zimbabwe's Liberation War<sup>1</sup>

JOYCE M. CHADYA\*

## *Abstract*

*This paper explores the experiences of Zimbabwean rural women forced to relocate to the city of Harare during the liberation war in the 1970s. Women found themselves squeezed between a repressive colonial government and coercive guerrilla armies. The accompanying war-induced violence from both sides of the combattants led to massive displacements as women and their families fled from the war-torn areas to urban centres like Harare. Within women's stories of flight are reflections of gender relations in a war fought largely in the rural areas where women were the majority of the dwellers, and a war in which most of the combattants were male. Gender relations thus informed, and were influenced by the war. Women's narratives also reveal the socio-economic and emotional costs of the war hardly acknowledged in the nationalist discourse about the liberation war. At the centre of these accounts is a revelation of resistance, courage, fear, and above all agency by rural women under very difficult circumstances.*

## *Résumé*

*Cette communication explore les expériences des femmes des régions rurales du Zimbabwe qui ont été forcées de se déplacer vers la ville de Harare au cours de la guerre de libération dans les années 1970. Les femmes se sont retrouvées coincées entre un gouvernement colonial répressif et les armées coercitives de la guérilla. Les gestes de violence posés par les combattants des deux côtés ont mené à des déplacements massifs, les femmes et leur famille quittant les régions dévastées par la guerre pour se réfugier dans des centres urbains comme Harare. Dans les histoires d'exode des femmes se trouvent des réflexions sur*

---

\* Funding for this study was provided by the Compton Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, University of Minnesota, and University of Manitoba. I would like to thank Allen Isaacman, Jim Johnson, and Amy Porter for invaluable feedback in the process of developing this paper. Also thanks to all the women and men who made time to talk with me about their experiences of fleeing from rural Zimbabwe to urban centres. Joyce M. Chadya is a professor of History at the University of Manitoba.

1 "Voting with their feet" was a phrase said by one formerly displaced woman, Eneti Musimbe, who was referring to women's decision to walk away from the war-torn countryside.

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

*les rapports hommes-femmes dans une guerre menée en grande partie dans des régions rurales où les femmes représentaient la majorité des habitants, et une guerre dont la plupart des combattants étaient des hommes. Ainsi, les rapports hommes-femmes ont contribué tout comme ils ont été influencés par la guerre. Les récits des femmes révèlent également les coûts socio-économiques et émotionnels de la guerre, à peine soulignés dans le discours nationaliste de la guerre de libération. Au centre de ces comptes rendus se révèlent la résistance, le courage, la peur, et surtout l'action des femmes des régions rurales dans des circonstances très difficiles.*

Currently, Zimbabwe is attracting contemporary scholars because of the political and economic crisis in the country.<sup>2</sup> However, the current crisis should not obscure an earlier history of the struggle for independence in which Mugabe, as leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), alongside Nkomo, leader of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), as nationalist leaders, played a prominent role. Already, there is a plethora of scholarly work on the liberation war. This body of literature focuses primarily on the history of nationalist movements, the war nationalists waged, the peasant support they received, peasant struggles, and the role of religion during the war.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the richness of the literature, a number of pertinent questions remain unanswered. For instance: What happened to those people, especially women and girls, when they found themselves squeezed between a repressive colonial government and coercive nationalist guerrilla armies? What happened to women who did not want to support the war by being cooks, informants, and messengers for the guerrillas, or to women who did not want their daughters to

---

2 See for example, Martin Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe* (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2002); David Blair, *Degrees of Violence: Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe* (London: Continuum, 2003); Andrew Norman, *Robert Mugabe and the Betrayal of Zimbabwe* (London: McFarland and Company, 2004); Martin Meredith, *Mugabe: Power and Plunder* (United States of America: Public Affairs, 2002).

3 See, among others, David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985); Terence O. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985); Irene Staunton, *Mothers of the Revolution: War Experiences of Thirty Zimbabwean Women* (London: James Currey, 1990); Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse: Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2000); Norma Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Zimbabwe Women Writers Association, *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-combatants* (Harare: Zimbabwe Women Writers Association, 2000).

be involved in “licentious sexual behavior” with the guerrillas?<sup>4</sup> What options were available for those who were afraid of the war, of the omnipresent danger of being killed by either the guerrillas or the Rhodesian soldiers? What caused them to make the choices they did? My study begins to fill that void by focusing on the experiences of internally displaced women who fled from the militarized rural areas to the capital city, Harare, between 1974 and 1980.

In this paper I challenge the nationalist narrative of a homogenous and unified rural population which stayed in the countryside for the duration of the war and blindly supported the liberation movements. I shift the angle of vision to focus on women who fled from the war-torn areas to the urban centres, Harare in particular.

My paper also opens up a new way of thinking about rural-urban migration. For a long time, the standard interpretation stressed that in southern Africa the capitalist modes of production and taxation that accompanied colonialism forced African men to leave the rural areas in search of labour in towns and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> In that context, capitalist preference for male labour meant that women’s migration to the cities was discussed as an appendage to that of men — largely as wives visiting husbands for short periods and returning to the countryside.<sup>6</sup> But as the working women who were raped during the 1956 bus boycott reveal, some also migrated in search of work.<sup>7</sup>

Until the 1980s, the dominance of the migrant labour paradigm was so great that other forms of rural-urban migration in southern Africa were overlooked. In the 1980s, however, historians of African women began challenging the androcentric nature of the migrations by demonstrating that, despite stringent urban influx controls, women had migrated to towns since the inception of colonial rule.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there remained silence on war-induced migration, despite several liberation wars that raged in southern Africa: Angola from the 1960s until 2002;

---

4 Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 207.

5 See Charles van Onselen, *Chibharo: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Charles van Onselen and Ian Phimister, *Studies of the Mine Labor in Rhodesia* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1978).

6 Teresa Barnes, “*We Women Worked so Hard*”: *Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999).

7 For more on African women and their lives in Harare, see Timothy Scarnecchia, “Poor Women and Nationalist Politics: Alliance and Fissures in the Formation of Nationalist Movements in Salisbury, Rhodesia, 1950-56,” *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996).

8 Among the scholars who have demonstrated that women have been migrating to urban centres are: Teresa Barnes, “*We Women Worked so Hard*”; Lynette Jackson, “‘When in White Man’s Town’: Zimbabwean Women Remember Chibheura” in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds., Jean Allman et al. (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000), 191-218; Teresa Barnes, “Virgin Territory? Travel and Migration by African Women in Twentieth Century Southern Africa,” *Women in African Colonial Histories*, 167.

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

Mozambique, 1960s to 1992; Namibia, 1980s to 1992; South Africa, 1970s to 1994; and, finally, Zimbabwe from the 1960s to 1980 and 1983–1987.<sup>9</sup> By focusing on rural-urban migration during the Zimbabwean liberation war, I will contribute to the history of women's migration and the impact of wars on rural women.

Prior to the liberation war, Zimbabwean women followed the migration patterns established by male migrant workers. Because women did not have access to urban housing in their own right (except for the female hostel at Mbare), they had to live with husbands, unofficial husbands (*mapoto*), or other male relatives.<sup>10</sup> They first had to inform their husband/male relative of the impending visit, so he could make living arrangements. Due to housing shortages and the high cost of living in the city, children were almost always left in the countryside with their grandmothers. Female rural-urban migrants were always outnumbered by men, something that was changed by the war-induced migration.

Harare provides an ideal site for exploring the experiences of internally displaced women during the liberation war in Zimbabwe. It was very close to war zones, Mtoko and Mrewa in particular.<sup>11</sup> Harare received the largest number of internally displaced people during the liberation struggle. Approximately 15,000 displaced people lived in *zvikweshe* (plastic shelters) at Mbare Musika, Harare's largest bus termini, located in the then segregated African township of Mbare.<sup>12</sup> Displaced women "chose" to settle, illegally as squatters, at Mbare Musika, because it was the point of entry into Harare for all the Africans who travelled on rural-urban buses. The large municipal market at Mbare Musika provided the women with income-generating opportunities, through hawking and vending food and other commodities. Furthermore, Harare was the only city where the colonial government built temporary houses (402 at Mbare Musika by the end of 1979) to accommodate displaced people. Thousands more two-roomed houses were built by the Mugabe regime in Harare's dormitory town, Chitungwiza, at independence.<sup>13</sup> It was the first time women outnum-

---

9 For South Africa and Namibia these were anti-colonial wars. For Zimbabwe it was a struggle for independence up to 1980 and then a civil war between 1983 and 1987. In Mozambique and Angola the wars started as liberation struggles which turned into civil wars at independence in 1975.

10 For more on *mapoto* relationships, see Barnes, "We Women Worked So Hard"; Koni Benson and Joyce M. Chadya, "Ukubhinya: Gender and Sexual Violence in Bulawayo, Colonial Zimbabwe, 1946-56," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, no. 3 (2005): 587-610.

11 Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War*, 33.

12 Musika is a Shona word for market, so Mbare Musika refers to the market/bus termini at Mbare. Until 1981, the city of Harare was known as Salisbury, while Mbare Township was called Harare. For purposes of this study I use current names to avoid confusion.

13 Harare City Archives (hereafter HCA), Illegal Occupation: Squatters, Confidential Minutes of the Department of Community Services, Report No. 140/7, 25 October 1978, File RH B/18/1, "Establishment of Basic Facilities for transit Settlement in the Old Brick Area of Harare."

bered men in a squatter camp. Even so, the majority of displaced women became invisible to colonial officials as they lived with their kin in African residential areas.<sup>14</sup> Because some of these displaced women still live in the houses and hostel built by the state, they were easily accessible for interviews.

## Sources

Historians of African social history in general, and African women's history in particular, have lamented the paucity of written records about ordinary Africans in their attempts to reconstruct history from below. I was fortunate to find a wealth of written records which gave me a window into rural women's flight to Harare during the war. These records include the little used Harare City Council archives, newspapers, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) records, and Rhodesian soldiers' memoirs. The interviews conducted by reporters of the newspapers are particularly important because they can be viewed as a form of "oral history collected at the time of historical enactment, despite the institutional setting of their production."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Rhodesian ex-servicemen's memoirs are eyewitness accounts and are quite revealing of the atrocities that forced rural women to flee. This information exists in spite of the Rhodesian government's efforts to expunge that history by torching official records at the end of colonial rule in 1979.

Like other scholars, I acknowledge that "conventional" published sources are problematic as they are embedded in a colonial discourse that masks and disguises the social realities of women fleeing from war zones in Zimbabwe. Therefore, I interviewed 65 displaced women and men between March 2003

---

14 The City Council figures were much lower than 15,000. I arrived at this figure by extrapolation. While statistics are necessary to appreciate the size of the problem, they are at best estimates, and at worst, misleading. In fact, the numeratory surveys carried out by the city of Harare were made problematic by the nature of squatting and the relationship between war refugees and the City Council officials. Because the colonial state and the municipality viewed refugee squatting as illegal occupation of public land, refugees were not always present at the time Council workers came to count them. In addition, refugees were so suspicious of any colonial officials that many ran away when Council officials arrived. Although there are estimates of the number of people who lived at the Mbare "transit camp," the other camps that had mushroomed in Harare do not have statistics. Those who became integrated into the local communities, and thus were far from the gaze of the state, were never counted. In fact, informants argued that those who went to live with family far outnumbered those who stayed at Mbare Musika. HCA, Illegal Occupation, 25 October 1978, File RH B/18/1, "Establishment of Basic Facilities for transit Settlement in the Old Brick Area of Harare."

15 Pohlandt-McCormick made this pertinent remark regarding the use of court records as a source for the reconstruction of social history. It is my opinion that the same can be said for contemporary newspaper interviews. For more see Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, "I saw a Nightmare ..." *Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising*, June 16, 1976, PhD Thesis, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999: 41.

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

and January 2004. Of these 65, 60 were women and 5 were men. Among them were formerly displaced women who remained in the city after independence in 1980. I also did a follow-up on those who immediately returned to the countryside at independence. All the formerly displaced women in this study fled from Shona areas, particularly northeastern Zimbabwe, where ZANLA forces operated.<sup>16</sup>

In the process of telling their stories, women tackled issues of gender relations during the armed struggle, and the social, economic, and emotional costs of the liberation war, costs that were hardly acknowledged in the nationalist discourse about the struggle. They remembered family members who died, either as combatants or civilians. They provided details of their onerous flight from the war-torn countryside. Unlike the accounts of the men I interviewed, women's memories of flight centred on the survival of the family. The stories reveal courage, fear, agency, adaptation, resilience, and resistance. These accounts gave the women's own version of how things happened and offered perspectives that were not represented in written records.

I conducted the interviews just 23 years after the war ended in 1980. I felt privileged to obtain these eyewitness accounts. I recognize, however, that the passage of time can change people's perceptions of what happened. To complicate matters, the socio-economic and political turmoil that Zimbabwe is currently experiencing may have coloured the women's stories.<sup>17</sup> It is no wonder that some of the formerly displaced women I talked with had their own agenda in agreeing to be interviewed. This was best summarized by one woman who said:

[I] wanted their [women's] suffering to be recorded. Now we are always being reminded about how the boys [guerrillas] suffered in the bush! How about us the parents? Our daughters were abused, our chickens were eaten. The com-

---

16 ZANLA forces largely operated in Shona-speaking areas, while ZIPRA forces operated in Ndebele speaking areas. Displaced people from southwestern Zimbabwe fled to Bulawayo, the second largest city. According to city council reports, most of the displaced women at Mbare Musika came from Mrewa and Mtoko, while the rest came from elsewhere in Shona-speaking districts. See, HCA, *Illegal Occupation: Squatters*, City Council Report, June 1979, File RH B/18/1.

17 According to Geiger, oral histories represent a connection between the present and the past given the time of the telling and how current politics/events might colour the way that history is told. Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997), 6. For more on the act of remembering, see Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001); Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, The Mind and The Past* (New York: Perseus Books, 1996). Werbner has written an interesting piece on state memorialism of the war, see, Richard Werbner, "Smoke From the Barrel of the Gun: Postwar of the Dead, Memory and Reinscription in Zimbabwe," in *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. Richard Werbner (London: Zed Books, 1998), 71-104

rades are now being elevated as if they fought that war alone. Would they have won it without us? Some of us ran away because of the losses we had incurred, husbands, livestock, homes, I cannot even name it all!<sup>18</sup>

In my use of both written and oral sources, I always remember that no document or language is entirely innocent or neutral. I also realize that refugee women's stories are individual, personal accounts that I use to interpret historical experiences of all women displaced to Harare. However, individual accounts can offer insights into common experiences, making it possible for us to better understand the war-induced flight to Harare. The women's and men's stories cited in this paper proved to me that, in the words of Charles van Onselen, "[H]istory lives in the minds of its people far more powerfully than the cracked parchment of its officialdom might know."<sup>19</sup> The stories tell us about the refugee women themselves, as much as they do about the socio-economic and political environment in which they lived.

### **The Militarization of Zimbabwe's Peasants and the Countryside**

The liberation war in Zimbabwe created a highly militarized countryside. Because guerrilla warfare, unlike conventional warfare, has no front, the front for the independence war in Zimbabwe was everywhere and constantly shifting. Battlefield sites were on rural roads, at shopping centres, in schools and people's homes, by the cattle dip tanks, in the bush, and many other places. Besides direct combat, Rhodesian soldiers poisoned water sources, while the guerrillas mined roads.<sup>20</sup> Rural civilians were, thus, "at the front, even if one has never lain in a trench or fired a single shot."<sup>21</sup> They became the chief casualties; thousands were killed or maimed when they got caught in the crossfire.

As well as facing the militarization of their rural space, rural Zimbabwean women were themselves extremely militarized. According to Cynthia Enloe, while militarization usually concerns the armed forces, it can also refer to how "people can become militarized in their thinking, in how they live their daily

---

18 Muchaneta Choto, Mbare, interview by author, 17 April 2003.

19 Charles van Onselen, *The Seed in Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper 1894-1985* (New York: Hill and Young, 1996), 10.

20 For more on the biological and chemical warfare employed by the Rhodesians, see Ian Martinez, "The Use of Bacteriological and Chemical Agents During Zimbabwe's Liberation War of 1965-1980 by Rhodesian Forces," *Third World Quarterly*, 23, no. 6 (2002): 1159-79; Luise White, "Poisoned Food, Poisoned Uniforms and Anthrax or How Guerillas Die in a War," *Osiris, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, Landscape of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environment*, (2004), 220-233.

21 Ryszard Kapuscinski, "Dispatches from Zones of Insecurity: Selected Reportages from Bush in Polish (Busz Po Polsku)," *Alphabet City*, no. 7 (2000): 183.



VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

lives, in what they aspire to for their children or their society, without ever wielding a rifle or donning a helmet."<sup>22</sup> The militarization of rural civilians was largely due to the nature of guerrilla warfare employed by ZANLA forces. Such warfare required close collaboration between the peasants, viewed in Maoist terms as the water, and Guerrillas, viewed as the fish. Guerrillas needed the peasants to supply them with food and intelligence in order to wage a successful war.<sup>23</sup> The close collaboration between peasants and guerrillas was used as an excuse by Rhodesian forces for its failure to distinguish between civilians and combatants and its adoption of war strategies that indiscriminately killed both.

Because the process of mobilizing support for the guerrillas was basically gendered, women were affected differently than men. Men were generally mobilized to give intelligence information. Maintaining pre-war gender roles, women were, first and foremost, recruited as cooks. At *pungwes* (night parties) women were addressed broadly as parents, and, more specifically, as *anamai* (mothers), albeit revolutionary ones.<sup>24</sup> ZANU leaders emphasized this iconography by talking about how women were "breast-feeding the revolution."<sup>25</sup> Invocation of this motherhood image was meant to appeal to women's maternal instincts; women became mothers of the guerrillas in the sense of being the key providers of food.<sup>26</sup> Women and girls also took on roles as laundresses and porters, and sometimes gathered intelligence and relayed messages.

For some women, this militarization of motherhood was cemented by the fact that their own children, husbands, and brothers had crossed the border into Mozambique to train as ZANLA guerrillas.<sup>27</sup> At *pungwes* guerrillas often reminded women, "Mothers, we are your children, take care of us. *Pamberi nemugoti* [Forward with the cooking stick]. *Pamberi nemadzimai* [Forward

---

22 Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

23 Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel Griffiths (New York: Praeger, 1961), 82.

24 *Pungwe* is a Shona word meaning all night. During the war it took on an added meaning: nighttime guerrilla held mobilization meetings. Interviews with Eliatha Kanga and Tsitsi Semba. Interviews by author, Seke, Chitungwiza, 12 November 2003. For more see Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War*, 170-212; Norma Kriger, "The Zimbabwean War of Liberation: Struggle within the Struggle," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, no. 2 (1988): 304-22; David B. Moore, "Democracy, Violence, and Identity in the Zimbabwean War of National Liberation: Reflections from the Realms of Dissent," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995); David J. Maxwell, "Local Politics and the War of Liberation in North-East Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, no. 3 (1993).

25 *The Zimbabwe Review* (5 June 1978).

26 Faith Pasi, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 8 December 2003.

27 According to Enloe, one does not need to hold a gun to be considered militarized. The mere fact that Zimbabwean mothers participated in the liberation war meant that they were militarized. For more see Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 235-88.

with women].”<sup>28</sup> Guerrillas also inspired rural women into “mothering” the cause by talking and singing about Mbuya Nehanda, the female spirit medium, perceived as the icon of female resistance to colonial rule.<sup>29</sup> At least initially, women were seldom suspected of helping the guerrillas, as they were viewed as apolitical. But, in their assigned traditional role of motherhood, women became, in Staunton’s words, “mothers of the revolution.”<sup>30</sup>

For the colonial government, rural women were expected to sacrifice their sons to the Rhodesian military. The call-up introduced in 1976 required all boys who had completed secondary school to serve in the Rhodesian army before they could enrol in any post-secondary training.<sup>31</sup> For rural women it meant sacrificing “their old age security,” as they had worked long and hard to send their sons to school hoping they would, in turn, take care of them.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, women who were married to policemen lost their husbands to the military, as policemen were required to go to “operational areas” during the war.

Failure to please either the guerrillas or the government brought disastrous consequences to rural people. They could be killed, tortured, beaten in public irrespective of age or status, have their children immersed in water by soldiers to force them to talk; whole villages were burned and livestock confiscated; many people were imprisoned. It was from this war-induced violence that women “chose” to flee to Harare.

### **Gendering Rural Zimbabwe**

The Zimbabwean liberation war created a highly gendered environment which contributed to the gendered war-induced migration. All the formerly displaced women I talked with pointed out how gendered the war was, how both combatants were highly masculinized. In fact, the state had no female soldiers, and only a few female guerrillas were symbolically deployed in the war zone.<sup>33</sup> Women identified male combatants as the perpetrators of the different forms of violence and coercion. Furthermore, at this time, the majority of rural civilians were female.

---

28 Mrs. R Muti, Maramba, interview by author, 15 December 2003.

29 Mbuya Nehanda’s medium, Kagwe, led the Shona people in their resistance against colonial occupation in the 1896-1897 anti-colonial resistance. For more see Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*.

30 Staunton has presented this argument in *Mothers of the Revolution*.

31 For more see Luise White, “Civic Virtue, Young Men and the Family: Conscription in Rhodesia, 1974-80,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37, no. 1 (2004): 103-21.

32 Mercy Rugwaya, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 13 July 2003.

33 Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse*, 37-98; Tanya Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls*, (Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2004), 107-86; Zimbabwean Women Writers Association, *Women of Resilience*.

## VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

It is true that women were the majority of the rural dwellers before the war because of colonial preference of male labour,<sup>34</sup> but the war raised the imbalance to a higher level, as more young men were conscripted into, or voluntarily joined, the Rhodesian or guerrilla forces. In addition, more rural men than women were killed or imprisoned by both sides. The result was a preponderance of widows and female-headed households, leaving rural women to carry the burden of the war.

The recruitment of women as cooks, laundresses, porters, and, occasionally, as intelligence gatherers, made them particularly vulnerable as both sides accused them of fraternizing with the enemy. Women suffered from the brutalization of their bodies, from beatings, torture, and sexual abuse. It was to escape this situation that many "voted with their feet" as they sought sanctuary in urban areas such as Harare.<sup>35</sup>

Discussing peasant response to forced cotton cultivation in Mozambique, Isaacman argues the importance of establishing the intent of peasants' flight in order to avoid the trap of defining all such flights as resistance. War-induced flight from rural Zimbabwe was complex and the line between flight as a form of covert resistance and flight as a survival strategy is blurred. Women's reminiscences suggest that the war created an environment in which the intent of flight was multi-faceted. Some women were "running away with their lives" because they were on guerrilla death row or because they had been sold out as guerrilla supporters to the Rhodesians. For other women it was because they simply wanted to resist supporting guerrillas, whatever the reason. In the context of warfare where women consistently faced "young men with guns," sometimes flight was the only choice. Consider Lucia Ngoruma, whose husband was killed by guerrillas because he was a "sell out":

Initially we were all happy to support them. But after they killed my husband I did not want to contribute not even a single cent. As long as I remained there (in Mt Darwin) I had to provide for them. No-one could challenge the boys [guerrillas]. You just had to do what they wanted, [or] you were in big trouble.<sup>36</sup>

Such "weapons of the weak" were used to avoid direct confrontation with the guerrillas given power relations in which the guerrillas always had the upper hand.<sup>37</sup> Lucia, like many other rural women, also fled because, as the war

---

34 Lyons, *Guerrilla Guns and Girls*, 96; Christine Sylvester, "Simultaneous Revolutions: The Zimbabwean Case," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16, no. 3 (1990): 472.

35 Interview with author, 8 December 2003.

36 Interview with Lucia Ngoruma.

37 For a more elaborate discussion of hidden forms of resistance, see Allen Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), 205-38; James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

became protracted and intensified, there was a real risk that she and her family could die. Other women took advantage of the situation to flee from unhappy marriages. Lucia's interview, like many others, reveals that women responded from multiple positions, each of which had a different intention: as a wife, she wanted to resist supporting the guerrillas; as a mother she wanted to ensure the survival of her family. Both meant fleeing to Harare.

At the centre of displaced women's stories about flight was the struggle to survive. Women bore the responsibility of daily life in rural Zimbabwe, which included not only farming, fetching water and firewood, but taking care of the young and the old.<sup>38</sup> These activities were disrupted or stopped entirely by the war, making life unbearable for women and their dependents; hence, their resolution to flee.<sup>39</sup> What follows is a chronicle of women's stories about why and how they fled from the war-torn countryside to Harare.

### State-Induced Rural-Urban Displacement

Internal displacement to Harare between 1974 and 1980 is a story about the liberation war and the violence perpetrated against rural civilians that accompanied it. The war began on a small scale in the mid-1960s. The opening of the Tete border with Mozambique in 1971, and the whole eastern border in 1975 to ZANLA guerrilla incursions, meant the war intensified and spread to the rest of the country.<sup>40</sup>

The Rhodesian government passed a number of laws as counter-measures to guerrilla activities. Most important was the Emergency Regulations Act of 1973.<sup>41</sup> The Act empowered the state to pass legislation without parliamentary approval. Legislation passed included curfews, martial law, and collective punishment.<sup>42</sup> Collective punishment included burning villages, confiscating

---

38 A masculinity that had developed in colonial Zimbabwe meant men left rural areas for work in the colonial economy while women remained behind taking care of the old and the young. For more see, Elizabeth Schmidt, *Farmers, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth, Heinemann: 1992), 71-121.

39 Kriger's *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, 147, corroborates women's testimonies on this fact.

40 Before 1971 ZANLA forces launched their attacks from Tanzania. But after an agreement with Frelimo, the liberation movement fighting against Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique, ZANLA forces began infiltrating into Zimbabwe from the Tete Province. For more see J. K. Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia* (Dover: Croom Helm, 1985), 221.

41 It was because the Rhodesian government did not want to legitimize the war by passing war legislation that a series of emergency laws were passed to deal with the "war situation." The war was, instead, referred to as an insurgency conducted by terrorists funded by Communists. See Peter Godwin, *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996).

42 Although curfew was largely applied to rural areas, Mutare, the third largest city on the border with Mozambique, was the only urban centre where curfew was applied. See the *Umtali Post* (24 May 1976).

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

cattle and food, and closing schools, clinics, beer halls, butcheries and stores.<sup>43</sup>

The state imposed summary fines, imprisonment, and corporal punishment for aiding the guerrillas. Whole families or villages were often tortured at military camps for failing to report the presence of guerrillas or for feeding them. Children were tortured to force their parents to talk.<sup>44</sup> Concurring with testimonies from the women I interviewed, Ken Flower noted that by 1973 "there was a mounting spiral of violence: guerrillas against tribesmen to force their allegiance; Security forces against tribesmen suspected of supporting the guerrillas." One person described peasants' hopelessness: "If we report to the police, the terrorists will kill us. If we do not report, the police suspect us of harboring terrorists. We just do not know what to do."<sup>45</sup>

As an anti-insurgency measure, the Emergency Laws empowered the District Commissioners to force peasants in operational areas into intra-rural relocation. Beginning in Chiweshe district in 1974, followed by the large area from Dande in the northeast to Chiredzi in the southeast, the state systematically forced a massive displacement and resettlement of rural people from their traditional villages into camps called "protected villages" (pvs).<sup>46</sup> By 1979 a total of 750,000 people (mostly women) lived in 234 pvs.<sup>47</sup> No people in the history of colonial Zimbabwe had ever experienced such a rigorous rural restructuring program.

First developed and implemented by the British in Malaysia in the 1950s, pvs were intended to isolate and demoralize guerrillas by depriving them of much-needed peasant support.<sup>48</sup> But unlike the British, the Rhodesians did not have the financial and human resources to invest in these villages. A pv in Rhodesia was basically a piece of land pegged off by the state by the roadside

---

43 In fact, the Rhodesian government passed the Indemnity and Compensation Act in 1975, supposedly to compensate civilians for the losses incurred due to security forces action, but this act actually benefited only white civilians.

44 Bruce Moore-King, *White Man, Black War* (Harare: Baobab, 1988), 17-18.

45 Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly, An Intelligence Chief on Record: Rhodesia into Zimbabwe, 1964-1981* (London: John Murray, 1987), 122.

46 *Ibid.*, 122-23; Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, "Rhodesians Never Die" *The Impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia, c1970-1980*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 104. While most of the movement was intra-district, there were cases in which villagers were moved well beyond their own districts. Some of the villagers from Madziwa were relocated in a different region 400 km away. See Staunton, *Mothers of the Revolution*, 11-26.

47 Cilliers, *Counter Insurgency in Rhodesia*, 90.

48 For more on pvs in Malaysia, see Bruce Hoffman, Jennifer M. Taw, and David Arnold, *Lessons for Contemporary Counterinsurgencies: The Rhodesian Experience* (Rand: California, 1991), vii; Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly*, 134. The strategy was also employed in Algeria, Vietnam, Angola, and Mozambique with dismal results; "IODC, Angola: Secret Government Documents on Counter-Subversion, (New York, 1974), 27-51.

— far from areas easily accessible to guerrillas. They were fenced, gated, and manned by guards.<sup>49</sup> Pvs were supposed to have indoor plumbing and electricity, but the government could not afford it.<sup>50</sup>

Nor were the Rhodesian government's psychological campaigns effective to wrest control of the peasants from the guerrillas.<sup>51</sup> The state lacked the capacity to legitimate itself among Africans. Instead of winning over the "hearts and minds" of the people "herded" into pvs, the government simply envisioned pvs as a form of collective punishment. Pvs were viewed as a counter-measure to "terrorist" recruitment and they served as a way to create free-fire zones. Above all, they provided the state with an opportunity to monitor and control the movements of peasants. Of course, referring to these villages as "protected" was highly misleading. Peasants called them "keeps," that is, where they were kept.<sup>52</sup>

Families living in pvs suffered from overcrowding, inadequate and sub-standard accommodation, lack of essential social services, hunger (even starvation), humiliating body searches, harassment, and punitive punishment by guards. They were, of course, caught in the crossfire when guerrillas attacked pvs in a bid to force peasants back to their old villages.

Even then Minister of Internal Affairs, Jack Musset, under whose Ministry the pvs fell, admitted that pvs constituted "a social upheaval of serious proportions," and the peasants' move into pvs could lead to a "traumatic experience."<sup>53</sup> Other liberal white government officials saw the establishment of pvs "as a serious error in judgment, a disgrace to us who purport to value civilized standards."<sup>54</sup> However, such voices were drowned by those white men who argued that Africans understood only the language of force.

Women faced a number of problems as they were forcibly interned. Their homes were burned and they lost property in the process of moving. Faith Pasi of Mtoko district, for example, sadly recalled how she watched their houses go up in smoke:

---

49 The guard forces were not under the Ministry of Defense but the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Guards were ill-equipped and ill-trained for their duty. Unlike the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not have a war budget. In the centre of the pv or near the entrance was located the guard forces' prefabricated quarters surrounded by sand bags to shield from bullets.

50 The Rhodesian government simply put peasants into unfenced collective villages. Moor-King, *White Man, Black War*, 22-3; interview with Maria Mashanga (Chitungwiza, 17 April 2003), Emily Mushanya, (Chitungwiza, 17 April 2003).

51 Very few Africans in the rural areas had access to newspapers and even fewer had access to radios, let alone televisions. Elaine Windrich provides a detailed discussion of the Rhodesian propaganda campaign in *The Mass Media in the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1981).

52 Interview with Faith Pasi; Eneti Musimbe, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 8 December 2003.

53 Quoted in Godwin and Hancock, "Rhodesians Never Die," 105.

54 *Ibid.*, 106.

## VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

On the day we were supposed to go to the protected village, soldiers came and torched our houses .... If you were slow in removing your possessions from the house they were also burned .... My husband and I stood there, helpless, as our home since we got married burned ... all our toil, just like that.<sup>55</sup>

As a member of the Rhodesian forces, Moore-King's war-time memoir echoes Faith Pasi's experiences. He noted how a white soldier informed one family that they should "have been over to the collective village weeks ago [and that soldiers would] start burning the huts in exactly ten minutes."<sup>56</sup>

Peasants were usually given very short notice to move.<sup>57</sup> In one instance peasants were ordered "to move all [their] property into the keep in a single day."<sup>58</sup> Memory Misa and other villagers in Mtoko were also forced to move in less than a day. This suddenness, worsened by the imposition of curfew, rendered many moves "chaotic." Many lost their belongings.<sup>59</sup> No one was compensated.

Forced relocation was especially hard for rural elite families that had developed their homesteads, building "modern" houses with brick under asbestos.<sup>60</sup> But the army did not take such social differentiation into consideration. Eneti Musimbe remembered peasants also lost property due to vandalizing and looting by government forces and opportunist villagers.<sup>61</sup> For Eneti, and many like her, living in pvs was a constant reminder of their losses.

On arrival peasants had to quickly erect shelters made from grass and tree branches.<sup>62</sup> Later, they built more durable pole and dagga huts, still a far cry from the fire-baked brick houses prevalent in rural Zimbabwe by the 1970s.<sup>63</sup> Pvs were, by any standards, seriously overcrowded. An average population of about 2,700 were squeezed into one pv.<sup>64</sup> Pvs lacked essential sanitary facilities, and peasants had to hurriedly construct pit latrines at the edge of their 15

---

55 Interview with Faith Pasi.

56 Moore-King's platoon was assigned to see to the relocation of that village into a pv. Moore-King, *White Man. Black War*, 7.

57 Godwin and Hancock, *Rhodesians Never Die*, 104; interview with Muchaneta Choto.

58 Staunton, *Mothers of the Revolution*, 5-6.

59 Memory Misa, Chitungwiza, interview with author, 23 December 2003.

60 Mrs Munzara, Unit D, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview with author, 10 December 2003.

61 Eneti Musimbe, Mbare, interview by author, 18 April 2003.

62 Esther Mude, Maramba, interview by author, 13 October 2003.

63 Interview with Faith Pasi.

64 Interview with Esther Mude; Dan Wylie, *Dead Leaves: Two Years in the Rhodesian War*, (Pietermaritzberg: University of Natal Press, 2002), 126. Kriger gives a range of between 1,000 and 3,000 for pvs in the Mashonaland East, the province in which Mtoko and Mrewa districts are located. Each family was allocated a 15 square metre stand that was hardly large enough to support their accommodation. Consequently, many huts were crammed onto the stand. Most families adapted by sharing sleeping quarters, as those with young children slept with them in the same room. Interview with Esther Mude.

square metre stands.<sup>65</sup> Pvs inmates, therefore, endured flies and odour from too many open latrines, which were too close to the houses.<sup>66</sup> Many inmates rightly believed that flies spread communicable diseases, such as diarrhoea.

The pvs had no schools, hospitals or clinics, and few stores operated. In Mtoko, Uzumba, Maramba, Pfungwe, and Mt Darwin, for example, these services collapsed by the end of 1977. Mary Rota recalled:

The war forced us to go back to *chinyakare* [old times.] Women gave birth in their homes. Old women became important again because of their knowledge of medicinal plants which people had slowly stopped using.<sup>67</sup>

For women living in overcrowded pvs life was made more intolerable by being under the constant gaze of guards, who, besides monitoring their every movement and demanding to see identification on a regular basis, also thoroughly searched their bodies and luggage.<sup>68</sup> Women felt that the groping hands of young guards were inappropriate and dehumanizing. Body searches touched the core of women's dignity and respectability, especially for senior women. They violated gender, generational, and behavioral norms that women such as Rona Mambo found hard to stomach:

A man young enough to be your son caressed your breast and you stood there silent because he had a gun. But inside you were seething, "What kind of a prostitute does he think I am?"<sup>69</sup>

Taking advantage of the power wielded by the guns they held, guards made sexual advances to unmarried and even married women. In a rural society where women hardly talked about sexual abuse, they suffered in silence.<sup>70</sup>

Parents in the pvs resented the loss of control over their daughters' sexuality and, by extension, their chances of fetching a good *lobola*.<sup>71</sup> Government

---

65 Unlike Blair toilets, which are more user-friendly, these makeshift pit latrines were shallow and not ventilated. The Blair Research Institute in Zimbabwe invented the Blair toilet in the 1980s. It is now being used in many parts of rural southern Africa. Village health worker, Wedza, interview by author, 3 July 2003.

66 Mrs. Dzikama, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 6 December 2003.

67 May Rota, Maramba, interview by author, 13 December 2003.

68 Mr. Francis Newton Munazvo, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 10 June 2003; Teresa Barnes, "'Am I a Man?': Gender and the Pass Laws in Urban Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930-80," *African Studies Review*, 40, no. 1 (1997): 59-81.

69 Rona Mambo, Wedza, interview by author, 29 June 2003.

70 Women were often threatened with their families' or their own corporal punishment or even death, if they refused. Esnathi Tema, Zengeza, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 23 December 2003.

71 *Lobola* is bridewealth paid by the groom to the family of the bride. It is practiced in many African societies. Among the Shona a daughter's virginity at marriage was a source of pride that earned the parents *mombe yechimanda*, a virginity cow, from their son-in-law. In contrast,



VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

forces took liberties with young women without any intention to marry. Parents whose daughters were made pregnant by the Rhodesian forces could not challenge them as they were above reproach.

When women went out of the pvs to work their fields, fetch water or firewood, or to do laundry in the river, they were always suspected of carrying food to guerrillas. Therefore, they were searched thoroughly on both leaving and returning. Sometimes women were made to jump up and down until the guards were satisfied that they were not hiding anything. One woman was made to "jump so hard that the wrap cloth she was wearing fell off, and as she had nothing underneath, she stood there naked."<sup>72</sup> Another woman's menstrual cloth fell to the ground and "she walked away crying from embarrassment and humiliation."<sup>73</sup> These humiliations were in total disregard of a central tenet of the Shona culture: deference to married women.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, when a woman was caught sneaking food to guerrillas the whole pv suffered collective punishment.<sup>75</sup>

The rigorously enforced dawn to dusk curfew left women with very little time to work their fields. The long distance between the pv and women's farms, the guard-imposed village confinement, and the general insecurity caused by the war made it impossible for women to tend to their crops, leading to food shortages and even starvation.<sup>76</sup> By the late 1970s, food shortages were so pervasive that food distribution by non-governmental organizations such as World Vision was necessary.<sup>77</sup>

What made pvs and other war-torn areas especially unbearable for most women was that their husbands could not visit from the city. Men feared being detained in the rural areas either by guerrillas or Rhodesian soldiers, or worried that they might not be able to get buses back. Because of this situation, Diana Nyathi and her family, for example, did not see their father for over six months.

---

having a child outside marriage diminished a girl's chances of ever getting married, let alone fetching a good *lobola*. For more, see Women and Law in Southern African Research Trust, *Lobola: It's Implications for Women's Reproductive Rights in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002).

72 Seri Jeni of Mt Darwin in *Mothers of the Revolution*, Staunton, 7.

73 Mrs. R. Muti, Mtawatawa, interview by author, 10 December 2003.

74 Mr. and Mrs. Namate, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 3 August 2003.

75 Interview with Memory Misa.

76 Luis Tendu, Mt Darwin, interview by author, 15 December 2003; Mrs Munzara and Maria Vhinara, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 11 November 2003; Emerida Mbira, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 23 December 2003; Dan Wylie, *Dead Leaves*, 138. In Mtoko, for instance, a 14 year-old boy was killed on Boxing Day 1978 well before dusk. See, Moore-King, *White Man, Black War*, 62-3 for details. See also, Godwin and Hancock, "Rhodesians Never Die," 210, 229.

77 These food shortages and the increasing number of malnourished children prompted sixteen leaders of major churches to urge the government to dismantle the pvs on humanitarian grounds. *The Rhodesian Herald* (1 October 1976); interview with Esnathi Tema; Tsitsi Semba, Mbare, interview by author, 13 May 2003; Margaret Rerwa, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 3 August 2003.

Months and sometimes years passed before men had news about their families, or before they were able to send money and supplies. For many women, it became an insupportable burden.<sup>78</sup>

It had been government policy to introduce pvs in all operational areas, but by 1977 the war had spread throughout the country, making it uneconomical and impossible to intern all rural people. Army commanders began to argue against pvs.<sup>79</sup> In 1978 the state began to dismantle the pvs, in part to release more personnel for actual fighting.<sup>80</sup> The confusion created by the dismantling of the pvs only worsened the plight of pv inmates.<sup>81</sup> The move left the former inmates homeless and disoriented.

Peasants who lived in districts where pvs were not established, and were, therefore, left in their traditional villages also suffered atrocities by Rhodesian forces.<sup>82</sup> War-time measures, such as the dawn to dusk curfew, martial law, and punishment for aiding guerrillas, and the war-induced insecurity also applied to them. War memoirs of Rhodesian forces are replete with accounts of atrocities committed against rural civilians.<sup>83</sup> Moore-King admits that he “fought and killed, sometimes I tortured and murdered, often I burnt and destroyed but we never thought too much about it.”<sup>84</sup>

All peasants in pvs or traditional villages suffered from the confusion caused by Rhodesian pseudo-guerrillas, the “Selous Scouts.” Formed in 1975, they were a tracking and intelligence gathering non-racial unit, which often used infiltration of guerrilla groups.<sup>85</sup> Their success at posing as guerrillas made it hard for women to tell guerrillas and Selous Scouts apart; they “dressed the same, carried the same guns. Some of them [Selous Scouts] were former comrades now forced to work for Smith [the Rhodesian premier] after capture.”<sup>86</sup> To make matters worse, when it came to meting out punishment,

---

78 Interviews with Eneti Musimbe; Cecilia Zverima, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 11 November 2003; Faith Chari, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 11 November 2003.

79 Wing Commander Gaunt argued against the establishment of more pvs on the grounds of manpower shortage. *Parliamentary Debates* (Salisbury: Government Publications, 21 September 1977); Dan Wylie, *Dead Leaves*, 138.

80 *The Rhodesian Herald* (11 October 1978).

81 The Rhodesian parliament began debating the sustainability of pvs in the face of escalating war costs, and the ever-increasing demand for military manpower to monitor and control pvs. *Parliamentary Debates* (Salisbury: Government Publications, 1977-1978.)

82 As the war spread throughout the country from 1976, the cash-strapped Rhodesian government did not have the resources to drive all the peasants into pvs.

83 Pat Scully, *Exit Rhodesia* (Cottsworld Press: South Africa, 1984); Moore-King, *White Man, Black War*; Godwin, *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa*; Dan Willie, *Dead Leaves*; Flower, *Serving Secretly*.

84 Moore-King, *White Man, Black War*, 60.

85 The Selous Scouts were responsible for 68 per cent of the total kill rate in the war.

86 Ticharwa Dzirimbe, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 8 November 2003.

## VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

government forces did not differentiate between civilians who willingly co-operated with guerrillas and those who had been coerced. As one woman explained, "You did whatever the person holding a gun wanted. The truth is we had no choice."<sup>87</sup>

### Guerrilla-induced rural-urban migration

By the time the second phase of the war began in December 1972, violence and coercion from guerrillas had been rather limited, as guerrillas were trying to rally the peasants to support them. Guerrillas attempted to politicize peasants at *pungwes*, using emotional speeches, poems, and songs about the purpose of the war and why peasants had to support it. As more guerrilla groups infiltrated the countryside, however, it became progressively difficult for their leaders to monitor and control their activities, and those of *mujibhas*, resulting in widespread summary executions of "witches and informers" falsely accused of anti-guerrilla crimes.<sup>88</sup>

Guerrillas usually practiced witch hunting (wicked women, witches, prostitutes, and enemy collaborators) at *pungwes*, where the accused was publicly beaten, maimed, or killed.<sup>89</sup> At *pungwes*, accusers often chanted slogans, such as "*Pasi nevaroyi* [Down with witches]."<sup>90</sup> Testimonies reveal that guerrillas carried into war traditional gendered notions of witchcraft, hence the majority accused of witchcraft were female.<sup>91</sup> More often than not, the accused was never given an opportunity to defend herself.<sup>92</sup> It was because of situations such as these that, when they learned about their impending death, women fled to Harare, where they hoped urban anonymity would protect them. As the war

---

87 Naume Mutoweheku, Mbare, interview by author, 23 August 2003.

88 For more see Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War*, 170-212; Norma Kriger, "The Zimbabwean War of Liberation: Struggle within the Struggle," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, no. 2 (1988): 304-22; David B. Moore, "Democracy, Violence, and Identity in the Zimbabwean War of National Liberation: Reflections from the Realms of Dissent," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995); David J. Maxwell, "Local Politics and the War of Liberation in North-East Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, no. 3 (1993).

89 Wickedness is a term borrowed from Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sherryl A. McCurdy, *Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001). According to them the concept of wickedness was "used to label and stigmatize women whose behavior in some way threatens other people's expectations of 'the way things ought to be'." I use the term in the same sense; Mrs. Rodwell Chituche, Mtawatawa, interview by author, 15 December 2003.

90 According to Mildred Tsindi, witchcraft also came to refer to all evil activities that women could do against the guerrillas. It referred to poisoning guerrilla food and selling out.

91 While none of the women I interviewed admitted to being accused of witchcraft, they all agreed that some women had been. However, some of the women were just unfortunate members of the community who fell victim to petty rivalry and jealousies because they were economically better off than other women.

92 Sekai Munzara, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 24 December 2003.

prolonged into the late 1970s, guerrillas began killing whole families of sell-outs as a deterrent. This brutality triggered flight by relatives or any person accused of any crime by the guerrillas.<sup>93</sup>

Guerrillas often punished women for being spies and sell-outs.<sup>94</sup> Women whose sons and husbands had joined the Rhodesian forces were under constant watch and suspicion. As punishment for these “heinous” crimes, women were beaten, sometimes maimed, or even killed in public view at *pungwes*.<sup>95</sup> When it came to meting out punishment, guerrillas conveniently disregarded their own rhetoric of woman as mother, because culture dictated that mothers could not be punished by their children.<sup>96</sup>

Feeding the guerrillas was a duty. Women were told not only what to cook but also what not to cook:

[The guerrillas] wanted chicken, beef, goat meat or pork .... But how many people had meat to spare? We hardly ate meat ourselves! .... Group after group passed through our village in Mt Darwin demanding *sadza* [maize staple] with meat.<sup>97</sup>

Although feeding guerrillas was not voluntary, many women did wholeheartedly support them, largely because they believed in the guerrillas’ cause or because they had brothers, sons, or husbands who had joined guerrilla forces. Such women “hoped that another woman somewhere was also feeding [their] sons, brothers or husbands.”<sup>98</sup> Some provided for guerrillas to spite the Rhodesian forces who had tortured them.<sup>99</sup> But, women such as Naume

---

93 Evelyn Maroro, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 24 December 2003.

94 Kriger’s and Nhongo-Simbanegavi’s findings were corroborated by many women I talked with.

95 While public punishment was meant to be a deterrent, scholars have divergent interpretations of such public atrocities. Kriger, for example, has argued that such public atrocities were used by guerrillas as a means of coercion. She also stresses that the public atrocities were used by different rural groups trying to further their own interests, hence “struggle within a struggle.” Kriger, *Zimbabwe’s Guerilla War*, 129-33. For Lan, killing of witches and sell-outs was the guerrilla effort at creating political legitimacy. David Lan, *Guns and Rains: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985), 167-70. In Angola, MPLA similarly carried out public punishments in areas in which they operated. For more see Inge Brinkman, “War, Witches and Traitors: Cases from the MPLA’s Eastern Front in Angola (1966–1975),” *Journal of African History*, 44 (2003): 303-25.

96 According to Ranger, guerrillas were also helped in this aspect by the fact that they did not operate in their districts of origin and, therefore, did not have kinship linkages to the people they punished and also because they carried guns. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 207.

97 *Sadza* is a thick porridge made from maize and is the staple food for most Zimbabweans. *Cabbage* was a code name for beef stolen by guerrillas from European farms. Interview with Faith Pasi.

98 Interview with Esnathi Tema.

99 Interview with Eneti Musimbe.

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

Mutowehuku resented being ordered "to cook and wash clothes by a man who is not your husband and [and yet] I could not perform the same tasks for my husband, who had paid *lobola* for me, who was working in Harare."<sup>100</sup> Those whose sons and husbands were in the Rhodesian forces cooked for guerrillas with heavy hearts, "knowing that once they were full, they hunted for, or planted landmines that killed, our loved ones."<sup>101</sup>

On the whole, guerrillas dealt with rural civilians in a summary and brutal way to instill fear, dissuade them from selling out to the Rhodesian forces, and coerce them into supporting guerrillas. As recounted by Brother Chishiri, "One woman was forced to watch while her husband was being killed by the guerrillas," and another, "was at a *dare* [kangaroo court] where she was told by guerrillas to be the first person to chop her husband who had been accused of selling out."<sup>102</sup>

Like the security forces, the guerrillas' licentious sexual behavior with young women in war zones was a source of distress for parents who could only watch as their daughters became "comfort" women.<sup>103</sup> Many a mother lied so that her daughter did not have to go to guerrillas' *poshtos*.<sup>104</sup> Diana Chitukwa's excuse was that her daughters were having their menses. Luckily, guerrillas did not like girls who were in this condition. The following week she sent her daughter to Harare.<sup>105</sup> As Chitukwa remembered, "nobody talked about it [or protested] but we all knew what was happening at the *poshtos*."<sup>106</sup> In the event of pregnancy, parents had no recourse to traditional authorities — power had shifted to "the young men with guns," who settled disputes with violence.<sup>107</sup>

---

100 Interview with Naume Mutowehuku.

101 Interview with Esnathi Tema. In fact, it was because of the frequency and fatality of guerrilla atrocities against Rhodesian African armed forces' families that the Rhodesian government began building houses for such families in urban centres. In 1978 the government wanted to set aside stands in Dzivarasekwa, Harare, to build housing for soldiers' families. HCA, Illegal Occupation: Squatters, File RH B/18/1, "Resettlement of Squatters," 11 October, 1979. The state also built houses for soldiers in Masvingo town. Dr. Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, interview by author, 17 June 2003.

102 Brother Chishiri, Hatfield, 4 December 2003. He was a Roman Catholic missionary of the Jesuit Order who worked with internally displaced women at the Mbare Musika Camp and as a counselor recollected women's stories of losing their loved ones in very sad circumstances.

103 Interview with Maria Vhinara. "Comfort" women was a term I borrowed from Nelia Sancho, "The 'Comfort Women' System during World War II: Asian Women as Targets of Mass Rape and Sexual Slavery by Japan," in *Gender and Catastrophe*, ed. Ronit Lentin (New York: Zed Books, 1997), 144-54.

104 *Poshtos* were sleeping places for guerrillas in the bush where they slept in twos or threes while one was on guard.

105 Diana Chitukwa, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 11 November 2003.

106 *Ibid.*

107 Interviews with Eliatha Kanga, Esnathi Tema, and Maria Vhinara; Mr and Mrs Njarimada, Chitungwiza; interview by author, 8 January 2004. For more on how power shifted from traditional authorities to the guerrillas, see Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 207.

Consequently, many young women gave birth to “fatherless” war children. As one informant pointed out, they were easily recognized as most were poignantly named: *Tafirenyika* (we will die for the country) and *Rusununguko* (freedom), being examples.<sup>108</sup>

Some women went to Harare because guerrillas ordered them to go and collect their husbands and sons who worked there. Guerrillas wanted to foil the Rhodesian government call-up, which recruited among urban workers and high school graduates.<sup>109</sup> Calling workers back to the rural areas was also meant to sabotage the colonial economy, which remained highly reliant on male labour. Guerrillas wanted to increase their own support base and recruiting ground. It was such a mission that took Hazvina Mlambo of Chimanimani to Harare for the first time in her life. When she could not find her husband, she was too scared to return to Chimanimani and face the wrath of the guerrillas. She chose instead to join other displaced women at the Mbare-Musika Camp.<sup>110</sup>

Many women and children fled to Harare because they were made homeless after guerrillas burned their pvs. In 1977 alone, guerrillas burned nearly 10 per cent of the pvs in Mrewa and Mtoko.<sup>111</sup> Many more were burned in 1978. As one refugee woman at Mbare Musika put it, “I am willing to go home but where am I going to stay. My huts were burnt down and I will have no place to stay.”<sup>112</sup>

The impact of the liberation war on Africans living on white commercial farms has been largely ignored because it has been assumed that only those in the communal areas were affected. Oral histories collected from formerly displaced women reveal otherwise. Mineva Zakama, for instance, was an immigrant of Mozambican origin who worked on a commercial farm in Mrewa since the 1950s. Guerrillas came to the farm where she worked and force-marched all the workers, mostly Mozambican and Malawian immigrants, to Mrewa in December 1978.<sup>113</sup> Headman Kakwidzo of Mrewa was then ordered to give them stands on which to build their houses.<sup>114</sup>

---

108 Interviews with Esther Mude, Diana Chitukwa, Eliatha Kanga, Mineva Zakama, and Maria Vhinara.

109 Interview with Margaret Mumbereni; Timothy Hadzivakwi, Mbare, interview by author, 15 September 2003; Johnson Tekeny, Mbare, interview by author, 3 August 2003. Margaret's brother was, in fact, called up and he served for two years, while Johnson Tekeny had to leave his job at the Coca Cola Plant in Bulawayo as he fled from the call-up.

110 Interview with Mrs. Hazvina Mlambo.

111 Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War*, 109.

112 HCA, *Illegal Occupation: Squatters*, Report from a social welfare field assistant for the Harare Township, P.J. Makwili, File RH B/18/1, “Squatters Musika,” week ending 1 October 1978.

113 Mineva Zakama, Unit H, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 23 December 2003.

114 When I was conducting interviews for a different project on clandestine labour migration in Mozambique, I actually came across many people of Mozambican origin who told me the same stories of being force-marched to ‘reserves’ by the guerrillas.

## VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

The plight of immigrant workers forced to leave white commercial farms for communal areas was particularly serious. Without food or belongings and without any kin, they found themselves very marginalized and vulnerable. Worse, "war followed [them] into the reserve."<sup>115</sup> One night when Mineva and other villagers in Mrewa were forced to go to a *pungwe* in the bush, their base was bombed and six people died. The following morning, Mineva and her family left Mrewa for Harare.<sup>116</sup>

While rural female civilians have been portrayed as mere victims of the Zimbabwean liberation war in nationalist historiography, it is my contention that they were also agents of their own survival. They actively sought better ways to survive. Thousands of women undertook the long, arduous, and dangerous journey to seek refuge for themselves and their children. The burden of choosing safe routes and carrying and leading children to the safety of urban centres fell on women. It is to that flight that I now turn.

### **The Long Walk to Safety: Women's Flight to Harare**

Once women decided to flee from the rural areas, the most immediate problem they confronted was determining when and how they would flee. War-induced movement into urban spaces was unique because of the circumstances under which women left their homes. How and when they travelled differed significantly from earlier rural-urban migrations. Women talked of the suddenness of the decision to flee and of walking long distances encumbered by young children and often with babies on their backs, usually at night to avoid detection. Their stories stressed hunger, fear of getting caught, and the worry they had for family, livestock, farm implements, and property left behind. Whatever reasons women fled their homes and however they chose to leave, the journey to Harare was a dangerous and risky one. Some women were forced to accomplish their journeys in a relay format.

As primary caregivers of children, "[no] woman could leave her child behind and live with herself."<sup>117</sup> The problem of flight was compounded by dependents. Eneti Musimbe's words above bring to the fore the centrality of motherhood and how it affected women during the war. As mother, women made decisions not only for themselves, but for their children.

The nature of the war and its intensification, especially after 1975, caused both the guerrillas and the state to enforce mobility control of peasants. Flight

---

115 Reserves and communal areas were one and the same. These were areas designated as African areas in the 1931 Land Apportionment Act. Up to 1969 these areas were known as African reserves, but the name was changed in 1969 to communal areas. Mineva Zakama and Selina Furamenga, Shamva, interview by author, 22 December 2003.

116 Mineva Zakama, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 23 December 2003.

117 Interview with Eneti Musimbe.

became increasingly dangerous. In the event that they were caught they could suffer from all forms of punishment, such as torture or death.

Under these circumstances rural women's flight to Harare was shrouded in secrecy. There was always the possibility that other family members left behind could suffer reprisals. After sending her teenager daughter to Harare for safety, Memory Dzadya endured several *mujibha* visits. They threatened and cajoled her to tell them where her daughter was or else she would, "face the consequences." One day she told the *mujibhas* that she was going to fetch her from Harare. She left with her other three children and never went back.<sup>118</sup> In the Matsika area, a woman who tried to use the same ploy to run away was forced to leave her young children behind to ensure her return.<sup>119</sup> These challenges notwithstanding, many women took the risk, in most cases without telling anyone or saying goodbye even to family.

Some women sought permission to travel from guerrillas, instead of sneaking out of controlled areas. Chances of being granted permission were slim unless they could establish purpose, such as running an errand for guerrillas. This ruse was particularly viable given that women could pass road blocks easily, as they were less likely to be suspected of being guerrilla agents.<sup>120</sup> But this pretext was also problematic because one was expected to bring back the supplies. Nevertheless, it was not unusual to find women prepared to face the consequences by taking that opportunity to flee.<sup>121</sup>

In places such as the Mrewa district, it was almost impossible for women to flee without informing the village authorities. Rather than tell the truth, Evelyn Maroro, a divorced mother of seven, informed the headman and *mujibhas* that she was taking her children to her ex-husband's home in a different district.<sup>122</sup> While informing *mujibhas* was some form of security, Evelyn also feared that because "they [*mujibhas*] knew you were not there and they could steal your belongings. Nobody would question them because of fear."<sup>123</sup> As the war progressed into the mid- to late 1970s, *mujibhas* and other rural people took advantage of the absence of families to steal their property.<sup>124</sup>

Women who were relatively better off, like those owning brick under asbestos houses, livestock, and farm implements, found it hard to sneak out of their villages. They told a few trusted relatives or friends because they wanted to leave their property in good care. But even that was no guarantee that they

---

118 Interview with Memory Dzadya.

119 Susan Mbira, Makomo, interview by author, 18 January 2004.

120 Interview with Muchaneta Choto.

121 Emily Tenge, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 7 January 2004.

122 Evelyn Maroro, Zengeza, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 22 December 2003.

123 Interview with Evelyn Maroro.

124 Interviews with Evelyn Maroro, Eneti Musimbe, and Faith Pasi; Luis Pasare, Mt Darwin, interview by author, 26 December 2003.



VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

would find their property intact.<sup>125</sup> Consider Rudo Hamadziripi whose home was bombed in 1978. She simply fled, “left everything ... Storage bins of grains; ... all the other household things I had bought with my own sweat. I decided that was not as important as the safety of my children.”<sup>126</sup> Frequent sudden attacks forced women to develop a strategy whereby they hid some clothes and provisions away from home — in caves and along rivers — in case home was no longer accessible.

Women fleeing from pvs usually had to get passes from the guards. On the pass was written the name of the pv the woman originated from, where she was going, and for how long: “The passes were given after serious questioning about where we were going and why. If you did not answer the questions satisfactorily you were denied the pass.”<sup>127</sup> Women pointed out, however, that the passes came in handy at checkpoints as they were documents coming from state officials.<sup>128</sup>

Flight was usually by individual families and at night. Moving in small groups was favourable because women and their children could move quietly and reduce the chance of getting caught. Inmates fleeing after their pvs were burned almost always fled at night because that was when guerrillas burned pvs. In any case, timing was crucial if women were to avoid detection. Night flight had one other advantage. Rhodesian security forces were afraid of moving at night, a time when guerrillas, with their superior knowledge of the bush, had an upper hand. Consequently, there were fewer battles and that diminished the chances of being caught in the crossfire. If women encountered soldiers in their night-time flight, they could be imprisoned or tortured for breaking curfew under the Law and Order Maintenance Act.<sup>129</sup>

Women who had left the rural areas in the early years of the war had it easier. There were no restrictions on travel imposed by either Rhodesian or guerrilla forces. Buses still ran and there were no checkpoints requiring identity cards. It made it easier for women to pack their belongings and carry as much as they could to Harare.<sup>130</sup> People who fled in the late 1970s did not have that luxury.

At the height of the war, from 1977 to 1979, women had to walk long distances because buses had stopped operating. Districts such as Mt Darwin and other parts of Mtoko were hardest hit. In 1978, for instance, Naume Mutowehuku walked all the way from her village in Mt Darwin to board a bus

---

125 Mildred Tsindi, Zengeza, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 22 December 2003.

126 Rudo Hamadziripi, Interview by author, Mtoko, 23 December 2003.

127 Mrs Rodwell Chituche and Selina Chituge, interview by author, 30 November 2003.

128 Ibid.

129 The Law and Order Maintenance Act was enacted in 1961, but it was constantly revised in the 1970s to meet the needs of the Rhodesian army during the war.

130 Interview with Eneti Musimbe.

at Mtoko Centre, a distance of over 40 km. Because she wanted to put as much distance as possible from “battlefield,” she “continued walking even when her legs got swollen.”<sup>131</sup>

In 1975 Eliatha Kanga and her three children left their home at night and walked for a distance of about 20 km, even though buses were still running in Mrewa. They were trying to avoid being seen by other villagers who might perceive her departure as refusing to support the liberation war. For the same reason, they walked past the nearest bus stop and boarded the bus further away from their village.<sup>132</sup> Esther Mude and her family, taking advantage of the fact that their pv was not yet fenced or manned, left at night when Edina (her daughter) was about 12 years old. They walked “quite some distance” along the Harare-Mrewa road before they waved down and got a ride in a truck carrying vegetables to Harare.<sup>133</sup>

Because most of the women running away were of child-bearing age and had children who could hardly walk, their flight was made more arduous. Cecilia Zverima fled a pv in Mt Darwin and walked for five days carrying two children for a distance of 50 km to get to the nearest bus stop.<sup>134</sup> Monica Chitima walked from Uzumba with a six-month baby strapped on back, a bag on her head, and holding her two young children’s hands. They had to stop and rest many times because the children could not walk long distances.<sup>135</sup>

The war forced women to “go back to *chinyakare* [the old ways]” in many ways. Important here is how women not only *walked* long distances but that they often chose to go through the bush rather than taking a road. Road construction and the availability of road transport was seen as a symbol of progress, but the militarization of roads through guerrilla-planted landmines transformed such spaces into sites of carnage. While landmines were meant for the Rhodesian military, they indiscriminately killed and maimed civilians, and forced bus companies to stop travelling to places such as Mount Darwin in 1976.<sup>136</sup> In fact, “once they planted landmines, guerrillas warned people to avoid the particular roads or sections of roads.”<sup>137</sup> Walking the roads was also dangerous because guerrillas often ambushed Rhodesian forces. Fleeing women also steered clear of roads to avoid detection by soldiers who might offer them rides in order to use them as collateral or shields.<sup>138</sup> The assumption was that guerrillas would not shoot at Rhodesian trucks carrying civilians.

---

131 Interview with Naume Mutowehuku.

132 Interview with Eliatha Kanga.

133 Interview with Edina Mude.

134 Interview with Cecilia Zverima.

135 Interview with Monica Chitima.

136 Interview with Esnathi Tema.

137 Interview with Eliatha Kanga.

138 Interview with Esnathi Tema.

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

As Brinkman rightly argued, guerrilla wars change the way in which roads are understood.<sup>139</sup>

Walking through the bush at night, however, presented its own problems — the biggest of which was encounters with guerrillas who did not want them to abandon the countryside. Because guerrillas' success depended on peasant support, guerrillas often "'escorted' [fleeing women] back to their homes without negotiation" and sometimes beat them up for trying to leave.<sup>140</sup> There were, however, exceptions. When fleeing with her family from Rushinga one night, Agnes Chikwato was "surprised by a group of guerrillas who carried the young. Our village had been bombed and because they [guerrillas] knew this they did not force us back." During the day, when the Rhodesian soldiers were likely to be patrolling, Agnes and her family hid along rivers where it was easy to get water. They could only cook at night under the cover of darkness when the smoke would "not sell [them] out." Like many other women, Agnes was happy she was able to "run away with [her] children" because many children were lost during the "confusion triggered by the sound of guns."<sup>141</sup>

Walking in the bush at night without light was hard, especially through rough terrain or thick forests. There was always the danger a woman could misplace her step and fall. One woman, for example, misplaced her feet, lost her balance, and tumbled down the side of a steep slope. During the dry season, snapping twigs were "enemy number one" because they could "announce your presence."<sup>142</sup>

The rainy season presented a different set of problems. It was difficult to walk in drenched clothes and children, especially, could get sick from staying in wet clothes. Jessica Namate remembered one day when they were in flight it started raining. She was with her two younger sisters. They "never stopped walking and [their] clothes dried from body warmth once it stopped raining." The biggest problem, however, was a big river along their path, which was flooded making it impossible to cross it. The bridge downstream had been blown up by the guerrillas. Jessica and her sisters had to wait until the river subsided.<sup>143</sup>

Running away without food meant that women had to rely on the bush for survival. Those who fled during the rainy season were lucky because there was wild fruit, but "cooking slowed us down [and] increased our chances of getting caught."<sup>144</sup> Those who fled from the rural areas during the dry season had to

---

139 Inge Brinkman, "Routes and the War for Independence in Northern Angola," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 40, no. 2 (2006): 207.

140 Interviews with Eliatha Kanga, Rudo Hamadziripi, and Mildred Tsindi.

141 Interview with Cecilia Zverima.

142 Interview with Naume Mutowehuku.

143 Jessica Namate, Seke, Chitungwiza, interview by author, 7 January 2004.

144 Interview with Faith Pasi.

endure hunger for as long as they were in the bush, because “fruit trees were out of season.”<sup>145</sup>

Not all women fled at night. Memory Misa of Mtoko fled in “broad day light after their protected village had been burned.” But, as she pointed out, she took advantage of the fact that she was an elderly woman. Few combattants had the audacity to harass old people.<sup>146</sup>

At the beginning of the war most flight took place in the form of inter-district relay, as women fled from districts along the northeastern border to districts which were relatively safe further inland. For those involved in this inter-district migration, the move was meant to be temporary; most hoped the war would be over soon and they could return to their villages. The Matoko people, for example, relocated to Mrewa where the war was not as intense as in Mtoko.<sup>147</sup> Once the war became intense in 1975 the Matoko women were forced to resume their relay migration which finally ended in Harare.

Class was also a factor in the flight to Harare. Some of the first women to leave the countryside were those whose husbands had better paying jobs and had urban family housing in Harare.<sup>148</sup> For the majority, the alternative was to hold out as long as possible or to settle on their own in the then segregated township of Mbare. Widows and those whose husbands earned meagre wages, which could not sustain a family in the city, trickled in small numbers at first and then increased with the escalation of the war. According to *The Rhodesian Herald* up to 400 peasants, mostly women and children, arrived at Mbare Musika in Harare on a daily basis from 1978.<sup>149</sup> Without any accommodation, their destination was Mbare Musika bus station where the refugees established a camp that lasted until independence.

## Conclusion

Both the Rhodesian and guerrilla forces engendered war-related violence in rural areas making rural life “a living hell” and leading to displacement to Harare. But women were more than simple victims of a harsh racist regime and coercive guerrillas. They did not all stay in the rural areas to support the guerrillas as implied by nationalist histories. Zimbabwean liberation war historiography is a reflection of scholars’ interests in how the war was conducted, not in women’s experiences. As demonstrated above, women resisted both guerrilla demands and Rhodesian forces’ atrocities by fleeing from the countryside.

---

145 Interview with Esnathi Tema.

146 Memory Misa had to get a new identity card before fleeing because she could not pass any roadblock without it. Interviews with Memory Misa, Esther Mude Nyathi, and Emily Tenge.

147 Alice Kanga, Mtoko, interview by author, 4 December 2007.

148 Interview with Maria Vhinara.

149 *The Rhodesian Herald* (19 February 1978).

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET: WOMEN'S FLIGHT TO HARARE DURING  
ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR

Flight to urban centres, which were relatively safe, was a way of ensuring that their children survived the war.

The liberation war transformed female rural-urban migration in fundamental ways. While it is a historical truism that wartime migration fed on pre-war female rural-urban migratory patterns, it had characteristics of its own. First, the migration to urban centres was not planned as in pre-war times. Women simply left whenever the situation called for it. Second, the rate of migration was unprecedented. Third, as highlighted by statistics in *The Rhodesian Herald* noted earlier, for the first time in the history of rural-urban migration in Zimbabwe, women migrants to Harare far outnumbered men. Men had dominated rural-urban migration until the first half of the 1970s. In the late 1970s, the protracted and violent war gave rise to a rural-urban migration dominated by women. That the majority of the internally displaced people in Harare were women speaks volumes about the impact of the war on female rural-urban migration. Fourth, unlike the pre-war female rural-urban migration, women did not leave their children with their grandmothers in the countryside. Fifth, while in pre-war times women came to urban centres for short periods, usually in the dry season when demand for labour in the rural economy was low, during the war women came for an indefinite period. Most stayed for the duration of the war, and many never went back to the rural areas after the war.<sup>150</sup> The shift in female rural-urban migration had a permanent imprint on urbanization as the ratio of men to women in the city was permanently changed in favour of women. Finally, war-induced migration transformed stereotypes about the social composition of homeless people in Harare. Prior to the war, "squatter hood" was considered characteristically male, but war-time migration neutralized the gender characteristics of squatter settlements.

\* \* \*

**JOYCE M. CHADYA** is a professor of history at the University of Manitoba. Her research focuses on colonial southern Africa. Areas of specialization revolve around nationalist movements, liberation wars, and urbanization with a particular focus on women. A recent graduate of the University of Minnesota, Joyce did her PhD research on rural women displaced from Zimbabwe's countryside and re-settled at Mbare Musika, Harare, during the liberation war – 1974-1980.

---

150 At the end of the war, from 1979 to 1980, the City of Harare, in conjunction with the state, allocated housing to the formerly displaced. Some were relocated to hostels at Mbare Musika, while others were resettled in Chitungwiza, a dormitory town on the outskirts of Harare.

**JOYCE M. CHADYA** est professeur d'histoire à l'Université du Manitoba. Sa recherche porte sur l'Afrique australe coloniale. Ses domaines de spécialisation sont les mouvements nationalistes, les guerres de libération, et l'urbanisation en mettant l'accent sur les femmes. Récemment diplômée de l'Université du Minnesota, Joyce Chadya a fait sa recherche de doctorat sur les femmes des régions rurales qui ont quitté la campagne du Zimbabwe pour se réinstaller au marché Mbare Musika, à Harare, au cours de la guerre de libération – 1974-1980.