Guns and Guerrilla Girls
Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle

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Abstract

"Guns and guerrilla girls, and women in the Zimbabwean national liberation struggle fighting side by side with their men." These words, rhetoric from a liberation war evoke an image of the heroic woman warrior wielding an AK47 assault rifle with a baby strapped to her back, fighting for political independence. Investigating the roles and experiences of "women warriors" in Zimbabwe's anti-colonial national liberation war, reveals certain glorifications which have served to obscure and silence the voices of thousands of young girls and women involved in the struggle.

Seventeen years after national liberation, the experiences of women ex-combatants remain sensitive and contested. Considering the feminist expectations of "women warriors", the problems associated with the inclusion of women in an armed/military guerrilla force are discussed. Women guerrilla fighters and consequently women in Zimbabwe have been (re)represented and associated with the discourses of war which have glorified, obscured or silenced the women's voices. Fictional accounts, public and national symbols and other multiple discursive layers have re-inscribed the women back into the domestic. This domestic image is counter-posed with the nationalist and feminist constructions of the guerrilla girl.

The production and release of the Zimbabwean film Flame, about two young girls who joined the struggle, highlights the political sensitivity of the issues relating to women's war time activities, including accusations of rape by their male comrades in the guerrilla training camps. An overview of women's involvement in Rhodesian and Zimbabwean history, anti-colonial struggle, and the African nationalist movement, provides the necessary background for a critique of western feminist theories of nationalism and women's liberation in Africa. Historical records are juxtaposed with the voices of some women ex-combatants who speak about their reasons for joining the struggle and their experiences of war. White Rhodesian women's roles are also examined in light of the gendered constructions of war.

By examining the role of women in the liberation war it is hoped that there will be some closure on the unresolved pain and suffering of many women ex-combatants. The issue of rape in war is important here as it demonstrates the point of departure from the glorified images of guerrilla girls and women in the struggle. This investigation of Zimbabwean women who joined the struggle demonstrates amply that a (western) feminist pre-occupation with African women as guerrilla fighters, as symbols of national liberation and women's liberation in Africa, has contributed to the silencing of their experiences of war which were not as "heroic" as written in the rhetoric of both nationalist propaganda and consequent feminist interpretations.
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