

Review

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Counting the Cost of Courage: Trauma Experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe Report, Women of Zimbabwe Arise, Bulawayo: August 2008

“It is a Challenging Time...”

These are the words that first crossed our minds when we discussed this report ‘Counting the Cost of Courage: Trauma experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe’.

The report by Women for Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) was launched on 3 September 2008 at the African Gender Institute (AGI). Reading the report one is reminded of the words of Sylvia Tamale who calls for feminists to be poetically drunk! In quoting words by the 19th century French poet, Charles Baudelaire “Be Drunk”¹, she challenges human rights defenders, feminists and women’s rights activists to be “elated, exhilarated and drunk on our cause, our objectives, our mission, our obligations”. This is the feeling one gets on reading the WOZA report – women human rights defenders who are not “tipsy” but completely immersed, “giddy”, with what they believe and stand for.

With disturbing pictures of continued violence against women by state agents, the WOZA report brings to light the depth of trauma affecting Zimbabwean women in light of the country’s political, social and economic repression. This report is a search for facts about the nature and prevalence of human rights abuses visited upon WOZA activists, but it is also an assertion of passion and fury, and its drive towards the documentation of (some of) the risks taken in the quest to demand a democratic and just Zimbabwe deserves critical respect.

WOZA, a Ndebele word meaning “come forward” is a social justice movement engaged in non-violent civic action in a politically repressive environment. In response to the social, economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe, WOZA created space to allow Zimbabweans, especially women,

to articulate issues they were too fearful to raise alone. The report points to the struggles of WOZA within a context of desperate times in Zimbabwe since the year 2000. Despite all this WOZA has emerged as a leader in social justice and transformation. Since its formation, WOZA has conducted over 100 peaceful demonstrations that have brought together over 2000 women in the struggle to demand internationally agreed rights such as the right to: assembly, expression, quality healthcare, and living standards in a failing economic system. Members of WOZA have protested over various injustices and crimes against humanity. They aim to keep the voice of protest alive.² All of these freedoms outlined in the WOZA report are enshrined in not only international conventions and protocols that Zimbabwe has ratified, but also in the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

The focus of WOZA protests is precise though the way protest occurs involves diverse activities and a range of contextually specific demands since 2000. The report indicates that action by members has included protests over the lack of inclusion of ordinary citizens in the SADC mediation process in June 2007, demands for an end to the political violence based on the March 2008 presidential elections and protests over the dilapidation of the economy due to ill conceived government policies. This range of “voice” shows the fearlessness of WOZA members in treading paths that others may have feared to take, and in directly engaging the state. The report cites political and economic security violations in addition to the commonly reported social violence. This is a significant step in thinking about human rights violations. It opens up the way to disaggregating information on state-sponsored repressions and violations during political crises and, reaching for a more refined analysis. This analysis for Zimbabwe holds the key to the larger picture of social transformation, social justice and democratic change.

For anyone unfamiliar with the difficulties of organizing in Zimbabwe, the report is a reality check as it reveals both the overwhelming enormity of the task ahead for WOZA and the people of Zimbabwe, and the risks of taking on such a task. The Mugabe government has been consistently hostile in response to WOZA members. WOZA protests are unique in their non-violent approach, but they always, provoke hostile and violent reactions from the state agents who send their security forces to disperse the women violently. Instead of the government responding to the underlying political, economic and social problems that motivate women to protest, the police have brutally attacked WOZA members, physically and verbally abused them and further,

have imprisoned them in police cells sometimes overnight with their young children.

The report documents, using quantitative methods, persistent long-term systemic violations of human rights in Zimbabwe by a ruling party desperate to cling to power. The violations include widespread intimidation and harassment of opposition activists, arbitrary arrests and acts of political violence. As the report illustrates, any attempts by political and civic groups to press for alternative policies has been met with repression thus cutting off any possibilities for working towards the improvement of people's lives.

The report is based on quantitative research conducted by WOZA in 2007 to investigate the extent of certain forms of trauma suffered by its members as a result of state repression. 2000 women participated in the study, which reveals the depth to which the political and economic instability has affected the women of Zimbabwe. The study was carried out and completed before the wave of political violence following the 29 March 2008 elections. So, the atrocities committed since April are not part of this report, but it is more than likely that they would deepen the picture of State repression against activists.

The research sought to document two broad categories of trauma suffered by WOZA women; "displacement experiences" and "organized violence and torture" (OVT) mainly from the hands of state agents such as the police and army. According to the report, most women interviewed experienced more incidences of trauma after the country's independence from Britain than before independence. Of the 1, 983 WOZA members interviewed, fourteen per cent experienced trauma as a result of a lack of food in 1979, compared to a staggering sixty-six per cent between 1980 and 1999. On health, nine per cent did not have access to medical treatment in 1979, whereas between 1980 and 1999 this figure shot up to twenty four per cent. On shelter, six per cent did not have access to shelter in 1979, while the number doubles between 1980 and 1999. The rate of dependency has also risen from eleven per cent in 1979 to twenty five per cent between 1980 and 1999. Between the year 2000 and 2007, 2007 recorded the highest levels of trauma with the lack of food topping the list with the percentage of those suffering a lack of food being as high as fifty seven. These point to poverty as one of the main challenges of future work in reconstruction of Zimbabwe.

This kind of documentation is important because it is a first step in redefining global security – focusing on the interleaving human dimensions

of state brutality, both overt and covert. As noted in a report by the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), the concept of local, national and global security has been almost exclusively defined in military terms, thus equating human security with weapon-based security. What the WOZA women have done is to insist on a broader vision, one that puts human life and human rights at the forefront to include lives free of all forms of violence. It is also important in historicizing and drawing the intersections of human rights, democracy and good governance or the lack thereof as being rooted in patriarchy. The report articulates the experiences of women in Zimbabwe and their activities, which are the consequences of women's social and political positions in relation to their lived experiences. This is important since it aids the articulation of women's experiences, and thus "contributes to the process of transforming women's consciousness by giving female activities and experiences public presence and legitimacy" (ACCORD Report).

WOZA members should be saluted for their courage. The report is a challenge and a call to movement building – the power in collective action. The WOZA struggle illustrates that if ordinary people do not question and do not speak out; they are in effect endorsing such violations of human rights. The efforts by WOZA bring to life important lessons on movement building and activism. What cannot be achieved by one person, can be achieved through collective action. There are lessons on efficacy of strategies that are employed in working towards gender equity, social justice and opportunities for activism, collaboration and alliance building. As Symington and Sprenger point out at times there is a "sense of urgency and trepidation, an acute awareness of the struggles of the past and uncertainty about the future" (2005: 2). These are the emotions *Counting the Cost of Courage* evokes. Through the mobilization of women at different levels in Zimbabwe, this report gives some hope, a sense of optimism of Zimbabwean women's willingness to act with renewed vigour – to act collectively, decisively and effectively.

The WOZA report is a refreshing reflection on how change happens given repressive conditions. "Change happens when we say 'no'. When we say no to discrimination. And to dehumanisation. Change happens when we defend each other's rights to dignity. Change happens when we stand to be counted. Change happens when we create spaces for transformation" (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2006:10) . The WOZA report is clear on the commitment to change.

It is also, however, chillingly clear on the costs of that change. As such, the report goes beyond a contribution to knowledge about a very

specific period in Zimbabwean history. It works as a clarion call to activists everywhere, especially those committed, through feminism and a vision of an interdependent, self-sufficient, and peaceful African continent, to go beyond the page. The people of Zimbabwe (and WOZA is only one of the groups battling to create knowledge, alternatives, and political hope) deserve our solidarity. It is time to act.

References

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Endnotes

1. This paper was presented at the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID) 10th International Forum on Women's Rights and Development (How Does Change Happen?), Bangkok, Thailand, October 27-30, 2005
2. Women for Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) Report, *Counting the Cost of Courage: Trauma Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders*, August 2008.
3. Paper presented at the AWID 10th International Forum on Women's Rights and Development (How Does Change Happen?), Bangkok, Thailand, October 27-30, 2005

