

# Spirit of Nehanda

## Zimbabwe women politicians

In recent years participation by Zimbabwean women in formal politics has been low. Yet, argues **Joyce Jenje Makwenda**, Zimbabwe has a history of powerful women politicians.

**T**he four-tier Zimbabwean election, which was mired in confusion, controversy and uncertainty, has come and gone. According to the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association), Zimbabwe elected 28 women into its lower house of assembly in the 29 March 2008 general elections. The election saw a 49% increase in women candidates since the last election of 2002. A total of 919 women contested for seats in what is proving to be a landmark election for women politicians.

At a women's conference in Beijing, China in 1995, it was recommended that 30% of any legislature should be women. Yet in Zimbabwe, until now, unlike Rwanda where 49% of parliamentarians are women, the number of women parliamentarians has been very low.

In 2005 only 24 women were elected in the 150-member House of Assembly, constituting only 16% of the seats in the house. And yet it is the woman who wakes up every day confronted with problems of food for the children, clothes and income. Women, by and large, remain accessories in the political arena largely dominated by men,

yet they constitute more than 50% of the electorate. Their political activity largely remains confined to singing at rallies and campaigns and preparing the atmosphere for male speakers.

But what constitutes this failure for women to make meaningful inroads into politics? Domestic violence, intimidation, corruption, suppressed voices, controlled space and lack of encouragement all contribute to gender imbalances in politics and mainstream decision-making. Few women have the courage to participate as electoral candidates because of the fear of pre-election violence and intimidation.

However, despite the hurdles that women face in the political realm, they continue to strategise on how their voices can be heard in mainstream politics. This is clear when looking at past historical eras in Zimbabwean political history. The most significant eras were the pre-colonial; the pioneer (colonial) era from the 1890s; the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-1963); UDI 1965-1979, and the post-colonial era. Each era reflects women's involvement in Zimbabwe's political history.

### WOMEN & PRE-COLONIAL TIMES

In pre-colonial Zimbabwe, women's voices in politics were very strong. Mbuya Nehanda and Queen Lozikeyi are some examples.

The first rebellion against British settlers was led by Nehanda, a woman, through a spirit medium. Her legacy continued during the war leading to independence from white colonialists. Before she was hanged in 1898, she said, "My bones will surely rise again!" Indeed, during the war of liberation Zanu (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) Forces were inspired and 'guided' by Nehanda's spirit. According to David Lan, Nehanda inspired the struggle and through art, her effigy became an important insignia of Zanu (Zimbabwe African National Union) PF literature, with the effigy of her head and shoulders printed above Robert Mugabe's. Today Nehanda's effigy is hardly used as it was during the struggle. And what happened to Nehanda's painting?

Queen Lozikeyi, King Lobengula's first wife, took over the reigns of the Ndebele nation in 1894 when it was in turmoil after King Lobengula's disappearance. Many argue that Lozikeyi was one of the best political strategists in



Queen Lozikeyi, King Lobengula's wife



Muriel Rosin



Margaret Dongo



Joyce Mujuru



Thokozani Khupe

Zimbabwean military history. She ensured that the military was well equipped during the 1896 rebellion. She also argued for a better organised rebellion than that of the 1893 rebellion.

Queen Lozikeyi remains an icon for the people of Zimbabwe. Like Nehanda, she inspired Zipra's (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army) war during the 1970s. According to Jeremy Brickhill, the Zipra fighters buried two bullets, one FN (rifle used by Rhodesian forces) and one AK gun at the queen's grave. The FN bullet represented the Rhodesian forces, while the AK bullet represented the guerrillas. The Zipra soldiers did this to inform Queen Lozikeyi's spirit that the country was at war and needed her strength. Maintaining a balance between political power and economic power, Lozikeyi is thought to have been one of the richest people in the history of Zimbabwe. Mbuya Nehanda and Queen Lozikeyi were clearly the foremothers of Zimbabwe's liberation.

#### WOMEN IN MODERN POLITICS

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that African Zimbabwean women began to participate in modern day politics.

Ruth Chinamano was the first woman political detainee at Gonakudzingwa, after leading a women's protest against injustices against women by the colonial government of the 1950s. Chinamano took part in national politics during the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the UDI and post-colonial Zimbabwe. She

put her country first before her children, who came second.

Chinamano was one of the 8.6% of women elected to parliament on a PF Zupu (Zimbabwe African People's Union) ticket from 1980-1985. She later became a member of the Zanu PF Central Committee after the Zupu and Zanu Unity Accord in 1987. Sadly Chinamano died poor and in her last days could not even afford basic things for her day-to-day life.

Muriel Rosin, a rare white woman and the only female MP in the Federal government during the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, was instrumental in building the Highfields Township. Highfields was the first township where black people were allowed to own title deeds to property. She was fearless and opposed some of Ian Smith's policies. Smith found her a constant irritation so much so that he once sent a secret service agent to talk to Rosin's husband, an eye surgeon, and persuade him to restrain his wife. Her husband told the agents to go and talk to Muriel themselves, but they were too scared to face her. After independence she served on various boards and commissions.

The liberation war saw both men and women taking up arms to fight colonial rule. Jane Ngwenya, under Zipra command, was one of the first women to take up arms and go into the bush to fight.

Although many women joined the struggle under Zanla and Zipra, very few were rewarded after the war, when they were expected to assume the 'woman's role'. Reintegrating into the community

was a double jeopardy. The society did not accept them as 'women', and they found themselves working twice as hard as 'ordinary' women so as to be accepted in the society.

Some women combatants lost themselves in the process and became more subservient than their counterparts who did not take up arms in the war. Many families would not approve of their sons taking ex-combatants for a wife. Some of the women find it very difficult to talk about their experiences both during and after the war, and some wonder why they even went to war.

But one woman ex-combatant who changed the terrain of post-independence Zimbabwean politics is Margaret Dongo (*nom de guerre* Tichaona Muhondo). She refused to give up her fighting spirit, and challenged a fraudulent electoral system and won her case, and became the first ever woman independent MP standing in Sunningdale.

Believing in women's economic empowerment, Dongo engineered many self-help projects for women during her tenure as a member of parliament for Sunningdale. Because she was highly vocal in parliament, she fought single handedly to stop many bills from becoming law. At one time a male parliamentarian threatened to beat her up when he felt challenged.

After independence women were appointed as ministers, although very few got full ministerial positions. Most of them assumed positions of deputies. Joyce Mujuru (*nom de guerre* Teurai Ropa) was one of the few women appointed a

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**(Mavis Chidzonga)**

full minister. As Minister of Women Affairs, she lobbied for the Legal Majority Act of 1992, which opened the door for women to be able to take decisions without men.

Mujuru continued to encourage women to fight for their rights, and also encouraged them to join trade unions. She remains the highest ranking woman in Zimbabwe politics, the first woman to attain a high post in government as the vice-president of the country, yet still her fate hangs in the balance!

Due to pre-election political violence, women sometimes drop out of the race for political office. Betty Mutero, the first black councillor in Bulawayo's Njube Township in the 1950s, has always been interested in council politics in order to help her community. In 2000, she dropped out of the parliamentary election race in order to protect her dignity. “I don't want to end up running in the township lifting my dress or without a dress at all [naked], because of violence, I want to keep my dignity,” she said.

She saw how some male politicians used money to buy votes by taking advantage of the desperate situation of women in the townships, and also buying beer for the youths who would in turn become violent and attack political opponents. Mutero, who was a Zanu PF candidate, stated that she could not corrupt and turn the youths into hooligans by buying them beer, the very same

people that she would like to lead, so she decided she would watch the race from a distance.

Mavis Chidzonga a Zanu PF candidate and MP for Mhondoro from 1995 to 2000, said the violence starts in parliament where women are intimidated, humiliated and silenced. Sometimes the whole saga turns into physical abuse when male politicians feel challenged by women.

Priscilla Misihayimbwi, an outspoken MDC, parliamentarian between 2000 and 2004 spoke of some of the problems she encountered when campaigning in 2000. She ran into a police station for sanctuary when rowdy youths wanted to beat her, only to be told that she could not stay in the police station as the station would be stoned! In the same year Thokozani Khupe, a former trade unionist and deputy president of MDC Tsvangirayi, was also attacked while campaigning.

In Zimbabwe women continue to fight to be in mainstream politics. Sarudzayi Chifamba-Barnes a gender and political activist encourages more education, free and fair campaigning, as well as the introduction of a gender quota system for the selection of parliamentarians in the constitution which would increase women's involvement in politics.

Countries where quotas for women have been written into the constitution or introduced through national legislation include

Uganda, Argentina where it is mandatory that 30% of elective posts are reserved for women, and India where 33% of seats in local municipal bodies are reserved for women.

Denmark, Norway and Sweden are among the countries with the highest political representation of women in the world. Sweden has 40% of parliamentarians as women, while Finland has 34%, Norway 38%, Denmark 34% and Iceland 25%. In the UK the New Labour Party introduced gender quotas for the selection of parliamentarians, and in 2005 the New Labour Party had 98 women members of parliament out of 258 members compared to 17 out of 180 for the Conservatives.

Women in Zimbabwe like in the rest of the world will continue to strategise in order to be part of the highest decision-making body of their country. LE

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