


---

**Gender Politics and Gender Backlash in Zimbabwe**

*Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, Emory University*

doi:10.1017/S1743923X08000524

In sub-Saharan Africa, the history of women’s involvement in liberation struggles and the realignment of gender relations following independence have long been characterized as a kind of gender backlash. Whether national independence from colonial or settler rule

---

I am grateful to Katherine Dunning for valuable research assistance and to Aili Mari Tripp, Kathy Dolan, and Sue Thomas for comments.
was achieved in connection with nationalist movements or armed struggles, the scenarios of gender relations are remarkably similar. Particular groups of women are mobilized during the struggle for national liberation, their issues become part of the liberation movements’ agendas, but following the achievement of independence, these same women are rapidly demobilized and the issues they raised during the national liberation struggle get marginalized amid competing and “more urgent” state priorities. Scholars have illuminated the historical and cultural specificities of this pattern in particular cases (Geiger 1997; Kruks, Rapp, and Young 1989; Seidman 1984 and 1999; Tétérault 1992; Urdang 1989). While this pattern fits with colloquial understandings of backlash, identifying the pattern does little to shed light on how state power gets infused with gender meaning in postindependence politics or how these power dynamics evolve.

By conceptualizing backlash as the resistance of those in power to disadvantaged groups that are working to change the status quo, Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames (in this issue) move toward the development of a more rigorous theoretical framework for understanding backlash, with particular emphasis on gender backlash. This conceptualization implies that changes that threaten the interests of those in power have occurred. Those in power include those that hold political power as well as those who are in positions to exercise “power-as-capacity,” which includes noncoercive means of producing outcomes that are in the interests of powerful individuals. With power-as-capacity specified in forms that are coercive and noncoercive, their framework allows for backlash to be linked to different configurations of power that are dynamic and comparable. This essay explores the strengths and limitations of the concept of backlash by drawing upon my own research on rural women’s participation in the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe and more than 20 years of postindependence gender politics.

Zimbabwe attained political independence from settler rule in 1980 following almost a decade of armed conflict and more than two decades of agitation by African nationalist groups prior to the armed conflict. In addition to the nationalist agenda of attaining political power and increased economic opportunities for Africans, the armed struggle was also characterized by other issues that involved regaining control of land and reasserting political and cultural authority, as well as ethnic, lineage, and generational conflict (Lan 1985; Martin and Johnson 1981; Ranger 1985). Throughout this period there were tensions and contradictions between nationalist leaders seeking political power and more radical
factions espousing broader transformative agendas (Astrow 1983; Kriger 1992; Phimister 1988). After eight years of armed conflict, political independence was not the result of decisive military victory but, rather, the result of a negotiated settlement brokered by the international community. After the cease-fire in 1979, the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU[PF]), the liberation movement-turned-political party, won the elections and began a process of consolidating political power.

Unlike liberation struggles in neighboring Mozambique and South Africa, the liberation movements in Zimbabwe had only limited ideological commitments to the liberation of women. Between 1972 and the cease-fire in 1979, different groups of African women participated in the struggle for national liberation in different ways. Some young women crossed the borders into Zambia and Mozambique to join the military wings of the main nationalist organizations either willingly or, in some cases, as a result of coercion. Young rural women who stayed in the country were pressed into living with combatants. Older rural women supported the movements by providing food and carrying supplies or information about the location and strength of Rhodesian forces.

Commitments to gender equality were more situationally based than ideologically driven. In the early days of rural mobilization, women combatants were used to shame rural men into joining the armed struggle. Later, armed combatants articulated an agenda of cultural nationalism that involved the return of lost lands and a reassertion of patriarchal authority, even as they addressed rural women’s concerns about gender relations within households. In Wedza district, for example, women went to the combatants with problems mainly involving errant husbands who were withholding funds for food and school fees, while taking second wives and spending too much time at the local bar (Ranchod-Nilsson 1992). There are some examples of liberation movements articulating gender equality as part of an agenda of military training and of broader social transformation, including the enforcement of military rank over gender rank within some of the camps in the early stages of the war, demands from male and female combatants that male combatants stop sexually exploiting female combatants, and a call for an end to cultural practices associated with bridewealth. These examples are limited in that they occurred primarily in the early phase of the armed struggle and in training camps located outside of the country (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000; Ranchod-Nilsson 1994; Weiss 1986).
In the absence of a strong commitment to gender equality during the war, at independence the ZANU(PF) government was faced with multiple and contradictory gender agendas that coexisted during the liberation war and no clear agenda for gendered social transformation (Ranchod-Nilsson 2006). But the liberation war also sowed the seeds of a women’s movement that actively campaigned for women’s rights after independence and became a part of the opposition coalitions from the mid-1990s.

These contradictory gender agendas and the early gains of the women’s movement set the stage for what is widely viewed as a gender backlash in Zimbabwe’s postindependence politics. In the first decade of independence, numerous legal reforms were enacted to improve the lives of Zimbabwean women. Some of the most far-reaching and controversial reforms included the Legal Age of Majority Act (1982), which conferred majority status on women at the age of 18; the Matrimonial Causes Act (1985), which gave women rights to property in marriage; and, the Customary Law and Primary Courts Act (1981), which repealed the judicial authority of chiefs and ensured financial support for deserted and divorced wives and their children under customary law. These legal reforms were consistent with public commitments ZANU(PF) made to international supporters and in line with international pressure to improve the status of women through efforts such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). But they did not reflect a consensus on gender relations within the country, which contributed to growing backlash sentiments within government and among those who advocated a return to (patriarchal) African culture.

Immediately after independence, progress in legal reforms was mirrored in the activities of the Ministry of Community Development and Women’s Affairs and in the growth of women’s organizations. At its inception, the staff of the new ministry embarked on a massive collection of national data on women’s economic, health, and legal circumstances (MCDWA 1982). Observing these changes in the early 1980s, sociologist Gay Seidman wrote that Zimbabwe appeared “to be unusual in the extent to which government leaders, especially women, have been willing to declare themselves committed to feminist goals” (1984, 420). Over the next two decades, women’s organizations such as the Musasa Project, Women’s Action Group, Women in Law and Development, and the Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Center and Network addressed a range of women’s issues, from violence against women and HIV/AIDS to legal reform and literacy.
During the same period, however, women combatants were demobilized in disproportionate numbers to their male counterparts and often rejected by their families and local communities. By picking up guns, wearing trousers, and fighting alongside men, women combatants had stepped far outside socially acceptable women’s roles. Also, in a society that practices bridewealth and values feminine chastity, the fact that women combatants had lived together with men made them sexually suspect. The controversial film *Flame* depicted the sexual abuse of women combatants by their male counterparts and their rejection by male ex-combatants and their home communities following the war (Sinclair 1996). The government’s high-profile land resettlement schemes relegated women to secondary status (Goebel 2005; Jacobs 1989). Perhaps most troubling, during the first decade of independence, the state carried out “clean-up” campaigns to rid urban areas of so-called prostitutes and vagrants in 1983, 1985, 1987, and 1988. In each case, women who were not accompanied by men were targeted as negative social influences, arrested, and taken away. In April of 1999, the Zimbabwean Supreme Court’s verdict in a case involving inheritance effectively undid 20 years of legal gains for women by adjudicating the case in terms of customary law, in which “women’s status is … basically the same as that of a junior male in the family” (Justice Gibson Muchechetere writing on behalf of the Supreme Court, quoted in “Zim Women Fight for Lost Rights”, *Daily Mail and Guardian*, 10 June 1999; see also Ncube 1999).

The shifting gender transformations, rooted as they were in the contradictory gender agendas of the liberation struggle, did not occur in a vacuum. In fact, others have argued that in a much more general sense, the economic and political legacies of the liberation war were “profoundly ambiguous” (Phimister 1988) and that this ambiguity helps to explain Zimbabwe’s economic, political, and social transformation since independence (Sylvester 1990). The gender backlash that followed independence unfolded during a period of economic transformation characterized by early optimism in the decade following independence to contraction and restructuring under internationally mandated structural adjustment programs during the 1990s and economic crisis and failure following the government’s forced land acquisition after 1979. These economic transformations were accompanied by the growing authoritarianism of President Robert Mugabe and his ruling party, ZANU(PF).

At the time of this writing, Zimbabwe is in the midst of a political crisis following the government’s violent response to the electoral success of the
opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in the March 2008 presidential election. This has been exacerbated by an economic crisis that has resulted in an inflation rate that is presently at 11 million percent a year, the highest in the world (Chinaka 2008). The current political crisis in Zimbabwe has its roots in the government’s early attempts to suppress opposition in Matabeleland, with the 1986 Unity Accord, election-related violence, and, most recently, organized campaigns of terror targeting MDC politicians and supporters. The government’s growing authoritarianism was reflected in a shift in gender priorities from an emphasis on integrating women into national development to the political mobilization of women in support of a de facto one-party state.

The beginning of Zimbabwe’s third decade of independence marked a turning point in postindependence politics. The country experienced a multifaceted economic crisis fueled by a decade of structural adjustment, drought, labor unrest, and President Mugabe’s capitulation to war veterans’ demands for compensation and benefits. In response to frustration over slow land resettlement and growing economic hardship, the government created a fast-track land-resettlement program that involved seizing lands deemed to be “underutilized.” Implementation of this program was accompanied by land invasions, violence, international condemnation, and a coalescence of opposition forces in the MDC.

The gender dynamics of this period are not fully understood, but there is evidence of women becoming targets of sexual violence because of their association with the MDC. Prior to Zimbabwe’s presidential runoff election at the end of June, there were numerous reports of women being sexually assaulted because of their association with the MDC (Bakwa 2008). According to the director of the Girl Child Network in Zimbabwe, “rape is being used as a weapon of political intimidation to instill fear in us, our families and our communities.” Youth militias have raped an estimated eight hundred girls on rural bases set up to intimidate opposition supporters.¹ The violent assault of women’s bodies is well documented as a tactic of nationalist violence and genocide (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault 2000).

The backlash against women’s rights had its roots in the contradictory gender practices and gender agendas that coexisted during the liberation war. Efforts to improve women’s circumstances through legal reforms,

economic opportunities, and public campaigns met resistance from the very beginning. As Zimbabwe’s economic and political circumstances changed during the first two decades of independence, the particular forms of backlash and the forms of resistance to backlash politics also changed.

Viewing the gender backlash in the case of Zimbabwe through the theoretical lenses set out by Mansbridge and Shames suggests some important analytical advances. It is significant that the resistance of those in power to changes in the status quo is conceptualized as power-as-capacity, “and because it [power-as-capacity] often changes over time in response to changing conditions and relations, we conceive of backlash as a process of dynamic resistance” (Mansbridge and Shames pp. 623–633). The element of dynamism here is critical. In cases of gender backlash, conceptualizing power-as-capacity in dynamic terms makes possible an analysis of how gender meanings get infused with power in different ways and an understanding of changes in the context of a dynamic social process. As Linzi Manicom writes, “struggles over the appropriate roles for women and men . . . reveal not only those issues that divide society, but also how the exercise of power becomes infused with gender meaning in particular circumstances” (1992, 448).

In the case of Zimbabwe, conceptualizing backlash in this way makes it possible to see how the structures and tactics involved in backlash politics shifted in response to changing economic contexts, involving, for example, an internationally mandated structural adjustment program or agricultural failure as the result of drought or regime changes, such as increasingly authoritarian governments. So instead of the backlash story ending when social change has been undone, in the case of Zimbabwe, when legal reforms have been undone and the state has exhorted women to support the party without making demands, this dynamic conceptualization of backlash highlights the ways that social processes evolve and change over time. Understanding gender politics in this way draws attention to spaces where women can and do continue to find ways of organizing for social and political change, even in the face of power that is determined to restore the status quo or to undo social change.

This framework also opens up the door for much more nuanced comparative work. Analyses of backlash that employ more colloquial understandings of the term do not lend themselves to comparative research in ways that would allow us to understand how, for example, global processes linked to production, development aid, or transnational social movements might shape the politics of backlash in particular
cases. In Zimbabwe, international agreements on the status of women, such as CEDAW, and nongovernmental organizations committed to women’s issues have influenced the politics of gender backlash. The government acceded to the international agreement but did little to follow up. Women’s organizations, on the other hand, established ties with international organizations, which strengthened the ability of the local organizations to resist backlash efforts (Dorman 2003; Ranchod-Nilsson 2006).

The case of gender backlash in Zimbabwe, and in other African countries, also points to several issues that suggest the need to modify Mansbridge and Shames’s theoretical framework. First, in this case, as with other anticolonial struggles, backlash is not framed in terms of a return to the gender status quo of the period immediately preceding change. The proposed theoretical framework characterizes backlash as a “reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power,” or the response of individuals who want to reinstate their former power-as-capacity with an even greater intensity (Mansbridge and Shames pp. 623–633). While this may be true in a general sense, there is a significant historical gap created by the intervention of colonial rule. So the narrative of declining power may involve decades or more of colonial subjugation. The desire to reinstate lost power is not a desire to reinstate power that has been directly experienced. Rather, as in the case of Zimbabwe, the reassertion of social order based on the patriarchal family and the “imagined community” of the gendered nation that accompanies state consolidation are part of the fiction of national identity (Ranchod-Nilsson 2006). Whether the history of loss framed by colonial history makes the politics of backlash more or less powerful is a crucial question. Mansbridge and Shames’s assertion that “when one knows what a capacity feels like, knows one can have it, and accustoms oneself to it, one begins to naturalize its existence and comes to think of it as a right” (p. 627) does not apply when capacity is imagined, not directly experienced. Whether that makes it a more or less powerful force in shaping backlash is a subject for further analysis.

Second, backlash in the case I have highlighted, and probably many others, occurs in the context of broader social transformation. In Zimbabwe, gender transformations were only one dimension of broader social, economic, and political transformations that accompanied the demise of colonial or settler political authority and the establishment of order. And, even then, it is widely acknowledged that the social transformations following independence reflected the contradictory
legacies of the liberation war. In these circumstances, does backlash provide the most useful framework for understanding the consolidation and assertion of power? Does backlash provide an analytically useful framework for understanding gendered social change and resistance when there is no established status quo?

Finally, what are the limits of backlash? Or when is a backlash no longer a backlash? The sexual assault of women and girls in connection with the violent suppression of the opposition MDC party during Zimbabwe’s most recent elections is not a direct response to social changes associated with the changing status of women or with shifting gender relations. Rather, it is a terror tactic aimed at male authorities in the MDC. The women and girls who are being assaulted are the wives, daughters, and mothers of MDC supporters and activists. That is not to say that there are no women supporters or activists within the MDC. There are. But the fact that the women being raped are not prominent political figures and that they are being raped in front of family members suggests that this particular form of violence is a way of asserting the power of the dominant political party against those (men) associated with the opposition.

The gendered social transformations that followed struggles for national liberation in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Kenya, South Africa, and other African countries were infused with power struggles related to political and economic consolidation, as well as ethnic, religious, and racial identity. The Mansbridge and Shames framework opens the door to locating gendered backlash within these multiple and interconnected transformations by emphasizing power-as-capacity and the dynamic nature of backlashes. However, as the case of Zimbabwe suggests, the framework is also seriously limited by references to changing the status quo in circumstances where the postcolonial status quo has yet to be established. Finally, backlash does not help us understand circumstances where violence against women occurs in the context of conflict between opposing groups. In these circumstances it is not gains made by women that are being targeted; rather, women’s bodies are assaulted because they serve as the boundaries of particular ethnic, national, or cultural groups. With this in mind, the framework offered by Mansbridge and Shames seems better suited to social movements that are not as multifaceted as anticolonial liberation movements.

2. Ibid.
REFERENCES


