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Narratives of women in politics in Zimbabwe's recent past: the case of Joice Mujuru and Grace Mugabe

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses media narratives of Joice Mujuru's fall from Zimbabwe's political hierarchy and Grace Mugabe's speeches during the "Meet the People" rallies that were held in Zimbabwe's ten political provinces between 2015 and 2017. Media texts about Joice Mujuru's political demise are analysed as reproductions of gender stereotypes used to justify women's marginalisation in politics, while Grace Mugabe's speeches are read as political performances of her power(lessness) as the wife of the then president (the late Robert Mugabe) and leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)'s Women's League. Drawing on ideas of female political representation, this paper discusses representations of the political experiences of Joice Mujuru and Grace Mugabe between 2014 and 2018 to highlight the gendered aspects of politics, and explores whether women's presence in political leadership in Zimbabwe translates into substantive representation of women.

Keywords

Zimbabwe; politics; women's representation; Joice Mujuru; Grace Mugabe

Introduction

Recent research has shown a much-improved level of participation by women in politics in various parts of the world. This is illustrated in the observation that the "phenomenon of women as Heads of State seems to have become less uncommon in the past decades" (Zoonen 2006, 288). Indeed, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Liberia and Chile, for example, have had female presidents, and Theresa May and Helle Thorning-Schmidt served as prime ministers of Great Britain from 2016 to 2019 and Denmark from 2011 to 2016, respectively. Jacinda Ardern is the current prime minister of New Zealand, a position she has held since 2017. Angela Merkel of the Christian Democrats in Germany was "elected as Bundeskanzlerin in 2005, a position never held by a woman before" (Zoonen 2006, 288), and still held the post in 2021. In the United States of America, Hillary Rodham Clinton was the Democratic presidential nominee in 2016, the first female presidential candidate of a major political party in America. Thereafter, Kamala Harris was in November 2020 elected the first female US vice president, the highest-ranking female official in the history of the country.

Referring specifically to the African continent, Tripp (2001) describes the 1990s as a "decade of progress," which saw a significant number of African women politicians running for presidency, seeking party nominations and becoming vice presidents, prime ministers and house speakers. In Zimbabwe, which is the focus of this paper, Joice Mujuru was elected vice president in 2004, a position that, until her appointment, had never been occupied by a woman. To date, she is the only female politician to have occupied that post in the history of the country. In spite of these notable improvements in women's participation in politics, however, "women still make up a small minority of presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, governors, mayors, and high court judges around the world" (Joshi and Goehrung 2018, 351). Notwithstanding the overwhelming evidence that women politicians are far fewer in numbers than their male counterparts in Zimbabwe (Maphosa, Tshuma, and Maviza 2015), there have been some formidable women politicians in the history of the country's politics. The most prominent and memorable of female politicians in Zimbabwe's past and present include Joice Mujuru, Priscilla Misihairabwi, Margaret Dongo, Oppah Muchinguri, Shuvai Mahofa, Nyasha Chikwinya, Grace Mugabe and Thokozani Khupe. Such examples are meaningful, but, as Dahlerup argues,

> an increasing presence of women in parliamentary settings, while important, does not explain impact; instead, it is necessary to consider what women *politicians* actually *do* in order to assess whether the

> presence of women translates into the representation of their interests. (Dahlerup 1988 as cited in Cullen 2018, 487, emphasis added)

It is indeed important to analyse the personal experiences of women in politics to understand their prospects and challenges (Manyeruke 2018), but, as I argue in this paper, such analyses are equally important to explore whether their presence actually translates into substantive representation. The article draws on Phillips' (1998) ideas about political representation to reflect on the significance and complexities of female political representation in Zimbabwe. Having female representatives in politics is important for a number of reasons. As Phillips argues, it appeals to principles of justice between the sexes, because it is "patently and grotesquely unfair for men to monopolize representation" (Phillips 1998, 228). Second, it is an opportunity to have a legitimate voice for women that may help in addressing particular concerns that arise out of women's experiences (Phillips 1998). Essentially, "there are particular needs, interests, and concerns that arise from women's experience, and these will be inadequately addressed in a politics that is dominated by men" (Phillips 1998, 233). As Phillips shows, "the argument for women's interests or women's concerns rests on three conditions: that women have a distinct and separate interest as women; that this interest cannot be adequately represented by men; and that the election of women ensures their representation" (Phillips 1998, 234).

In light of these theoretical underpinnings, this paper uses four sections to address its aims. It begins by outlining the methodological framing of the study. The second section discusses some recent historical contexts and events that highlight the subtle ways in which patriarchal domination and female marginalisation persist in politics in Zimbabwe. This is done to justify the urgent need for stronger and uncompromised female political representatives, who have the capacity to effectively protect the interests of women in a country whose politics remain very much patriarchal in nature. The third section discusses the media narratives of Joice Mujuru's fall from the highest political offices and her political experiences thereafter as gendered discourses that shed light on the masculinist rhetoric that undermines women's participation in and contribution to politics in contemporary Zimbabwe. The final section analyses Grace Mugabe's speeches to bring to the fore the idea that her political power arose from the fact that she was the wife of the then president, and the various ways in which she can be understood as an example of compromised female representation in Zimbabwean politics.

Methodology

This paper draws on media representations of Joice Mujuru's fall from Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in 2014 and her political experiences thereafter and on speeches made by Grace Mugabe at selected political rallies between 2015 and 2017. In both cases, themes emerge from a general reading of the sources. Stories about Mujuru's demise are drawn mainly from the online version of the state-controlled newspaper *The Herald*. Ncube opines that women in politics in Zimbabwe are "framed either as eternal mothers, 'whores' or witches" (Ncube 2020, 25). Those framed as "witches" or "whores" are said to be unruly women who "disrupt, on one hand, the traditional definitions of women's roles (invisible, passive, domesticated and lacking agency) and, on the other hand, the male hegemony of the public sphere in general and politics in particular" (Ncube 2020, 25–26). Mujuru was considered "unruly" (Chigumadzi 2018, as cited in Ncube 2020, 25) within the ruling party ZANU-PF for wanting or hoping to succeed Robert Mugabe as Zimbabwe's president. This kind of thinking informed most of the stories published by *The Herald* following Mujuru's political demise. As a result, my discussion draws on *The Herald*'s stories and not those of the privately owned media, which were largely sympathetic to Mujuru following her expulsion from ZANU-PF (Sabao and Visser 2016; Gadzikwa 2017).

This study also draws on Grace Mugabe's political speeches delivered during her "Meet the People" rallies that were held in various provinces between 2015 and 2017. I discuss the speeches "as a specific sub-genre of political texts" (Schäffner 1997, 1), in which Mugabe speaks to ZANU-PF members and supporters at the height of factional fights, in a bid to position herself as political successor to her husband, President Robert Mugabe. In my discussion of Grace Mugabe's speeches, I relate her "linguistic behaviour to political behaviour" (Schäffner 1997, 2), with a view to understanding her words as political performances of her power(lessness) as the president's wife. In that regard, my discussion grapples broadly with Joice Mujuru and Grace Mugabe's lived experiences as prisms through which we can learn more about women's gendered position(s) in contemporary Zimbabwean politics.

Reading gender into Zimbabwean politics

The world over, politics is predominantly a male domain in which women are either directly or indirectly marginalised. Although women make up 52% of Zimbabwe's population, and therefore constitute a majority, they occupy fewer positions of power than their male counterparts. This means that they are marginalised in the political sphere. Their marginalisation has been

symbolically exposed in some significant contexts and national events. By way of example, the bull and cockerel were the respective party symbols of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), the two major political parties that waged Zimbabwe's War of Liberation. Although both symbols have since been discarded, their use confirmed the observation that in the "postcolony[,] power dons the face of virility" (Mbembe 2006 as cited in Mutekwa 2009, 737). These "phallocratic metaphors of state power" (Musila 2012, 154) were discarded in 1987, following the Unity Accord that saw the merging of ZANU and ZAPU to form ZANU-PF. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that the portrait of the rooster still features on the ZANU-PF headquarters building in Harare. I take this enduring presence of the rooster to symbolise that the political structures within ZANU-PF remain very much masculinised.

Current ZANU-PF party structures too reveal an implicit masculinisation of political power. The party is made up of the Women, Youth and Main wings. This structure highlights the concept of hegemonic masculinity and how it finds expression in politics. Although the Main Wing includes all members of the party, the absence of a Men's League may imply that men do not need such an organ since they are generally the dominant force in the Main Wing and the political arena more broadly. Where the zoning of women and youth is concerned, it could be argued that hegemonic masculinity offers marginal subject positions from which both groups can speak. However, this "general association of women with youth (and children) casts women and women's proper activities in the domestic sphere as subordinate to 'real politics,' the business of the party leadership (the men)" (Christiansen 2007, 92). The Women's Wing in particular has been described as a female space, "where its members are given little or no scope to influence policy formulation, not even policies directly relevant to them" (Geisler 1995, 546).

Events at ZANU-PF's Annual National People's Conference, which ran from 11 to 16 December 2018 in Esigodini, illustrate well the notable and persistent power asymmetries between men and women in Zimbabwe's political space. The ZANU-PF Annual Congress brings together party leaders from the grassroots to the national level. On the first evening of the congress, some women delegates participated in a fashion show, in which the other male and female delegates formed part of the audience, and where the first lady, Auxilia Mnangagwa, was the guest of honour. The three winners of the show were respectively awarded a refrigerator, a four-plate stove and a microwave oven. These awards symbolically confirm the Women's League as just "another kitchen" (Geisler 1995, 547). Indeed, these appliances are, in Zimbabwe, thought of as female devices, which women are encouraged to

proudly own, in keeping with established gender stereotypes and domestic roles. The idea of a fashion show, a beauty contest for women politicians, during what is supposed to be an important political meeting, can be interpreted as a parallel performance that has little to do with the real business of the congress. If the National Congress brings together party leaders, men, women and youth to make important political decisions as equals, why then would women be the only ones whose bodies are made spectacle of and placed on display during such an event? One wonders what a woman's body in party regalia means, especially to a patriarchal gaze. This performance by women evokes Mbembe's thinking about the "subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure," which "remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system" (Mbembe 2001, 110). This fashion show, an apolitical activity of the Women's League, is strongly suggestive of a party ideology (and women's complicity) to keep women in domesticity, even in a space that is outside of the domestic space. I interpret the women's fashion show, performed at a political meeting, as symbolic of the general political marginalisation of the women's wing and its activities.

Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri chaired the proceedings of the congress because she is the incumbent National Chairperson of ZANU-PF, a position she has held since 2018. More than once during the congress, she was addressed as Chair*man*. The male politician who invited Muchinguri-Kashiri to the podium saluted her as "National Chairman, sir," to which she protested "What is sir*? Ndiri* Madam" ("What does sir mean? I am [a] Madam").[1] The post of National Chairperson is a powerful one within ZANU-PF, and, until recently, it has been occupied solely by men. The above-mentioned repeated mistakes – mere slips of the tongue, one might be tempted to say – are not in fact random but a vivid illustration of the way in which people associate positions of power with men. On another level, the ways in which Muchinguri-Kashiri was wrongly addressed serve to symbolically undermine her capabilities to effectively carry out this role. However, her response – "What does sir mean? I am a madam" – is a bold statement about female agency and presence that challenges pervasive cultural associations of political power with men.

Margaret Dongo, another female politician, who was expelled from ZANU-PF in the 1990s and was also the first independent candidate to win a seat in parliament, once concluded that male politicians within ZANU-PF, at a particular time in history, behaved like Mugabe's wives. In that statement, Dongo used existing sexist discourses to highlight politicians' perceived weaknesses or culturally expected show of docility. Women's perceived passivity is invoked to derogate both male politicians and wives, and Dongo's feminisation of male politicians was an attack on both the males and wives,

both of whom were perceived as weak subordinates: male politicians subordinated to Mugabe and the wives to their husbands. In a different but equally resonant context, Leslie (2015) states that an acquaintance of hers remarked in 2010 that "Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration." Leslie argues that the speaker managed to derogate both "the male members of the administration by deeming them not to be men, and Hillary Clinton by deeming her to be a man, and thus not really a woman" (Leslie 2015, 111). In indigenous Zimbabwean cultures, weak men are generally effeminised while strong women are masculinised. For instance, the Shona saying "*mukadzi uyu murume pachake*" ("this woman is in effect a man") is often used to describe "strong" women, who have trespassed into what society perceives to be men's territory. These traditional discourses are often adopted and used to interpret people's behaviours, even in politics.

Gendering Joice Mujuru's political fall and the (im)possibility of rising

Joice Mujuru is one of Zimbabwe's liberation war heroines, and she also headed various ministries in Robert Mugabe's regime. She became Zimbabwe's first woman vice president in 2004 and her ascendancy was considered a Zimbabwean feminist victory by some, while critics believed she was just window dressing, a façade to mask an otherwise essentially masculinised Zimbabwean political space (Christiansen 2007, 93). Indeed, several scholars have discussed the intersections of gender and political power using the example of Joice Mujuru's ascendancy into the presidium (Christiansen 2007; Nyambi 2015). Christiansen's (2007) book chapter "Mai Mujuru: Father of the Nation?" explores the "father of the nation" concept to locate Joice Mujuru's position in Zimbabwean politics and to ask whether her becoming an "icon" of power would result in a negotiation of imaginaries of power in Zimbabwe. This study seeks to build on and expand Christiansen's conversation. It discusses the media narratives about Joice Mujuru's fall and political experiences after her political demise as gendered discourses, which could shed light on the masculinist rhetoric that undermines women's participation in, and contribution to, politics in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The short background to Joice Mujuru's political fall is that Mugabe was old and the nation as well as his political party expected him to eventually retire, yet it was not clear who would succeed him. Mujuru was in good standing to succeed Mugabe, since she had ascended to the vice presidency with his full backing (Nyambi 2015). Another reason for her credibility was that she had a distinguished track record in the war for liberation (Tendi 2016). On her

inauguration as vice president, Mugabe had hinted that Mujuru might succeed him:

> To the Women's League, we promised you that we will respect the resolution we made in 1999 with respect to the quota for women. Now there she is. Don't be deceived by that body. She is a young woman. But do you want her to remain in that position? When you choose a Vice President, you don't want her to remain in that position forever, do you? ("Aim Higher", *High Beam Business*, 7 December 2004, as cited in Nyambi 2015, 61-62)

The 1999 ZANU-PF women's quota policy invoked by Mugabe in that statement was meant to guarantee some semblance of gender parity within the party's leadership. However, after Joice Mujuru's political fall, that policy was subtly ridiculed in media narratives. Nathaniel Manheru – a shadowy, faceless character until it was discovered he was George Charamba's *nom de plume* – uses Mujuru's political fall to ridicule the women's quota policy in the following manner: "She was not bright! Aah, don't forget she came in to represent the women's bloc . . . it was about representing women; she came from the women and the President had to oblige" (*The Herald* 2016). The Zimbabwe women's quota presented a façade of the envisioned gender parity in political representation, but as Charamba's statement shows, this quota did not fundamentally change the way people thought (or think) about women's political leadership. The statement clearly attacks Joice Mujuru and suggests that she was a token representative, appointed vice president merely to meet quota requirements and not for her political credentials (see O'Brien and Rickne 2016, 112).

Women who become members of parliament (MPs) through the implementation of the women's quota policy in Zimbabwe are also ridiculed. They are derogated and called "Bacossi Members of Parliament" (see Magaisa 2020). The derogatory label "Bacossi MPs" is adapted from BACOSSI (Basic Commodity Supply Intervention Facility), a 2008 Zimbabwe Reserve Bank initiative aimed at subsidising basic commodities. Just as the basic commodities were considered substandard, so are the women who become parliamentarians through the women's quota policy. They are seen as having a "lower status politically" (Magaisa 2020) and as being essentially "incompetent and incapable of winning contests based on merit" (Dube 2018).

Nathaniel Manheru, in the media report cited earlier, purports to have had a conversation with a female friend who dismissed Joice Mujuru, saying, "she is not the best from us . . . she was chosen for her mediocrity *and satisfies the politics* of patriarchy" (*The Herald* 2016; emphasis added). That Mujuru might

not have been the best of ZANU-PF female politicians at the time is arguable. Furthermore, the observation of this woman (whether she indeed exists or is Manheru's creation) hints at a lack of female solidarity on one hand, and, on the other, suggests how the gender quota within ZANU-PF could have been manipulated to sustain patriarchal domination beyond satisfying the distributive logic: by choosing *not the best* from among the women, which is described here as a patriarchal strategy of sustaining dominance. The words of this "woman" echo the argument of Misihairabwi and Kwinjeh (2005, as cited in Ncube 2020, 31) that Mujuru had been selected as vice president because "she did not threaten the power of Mugabe."

After her expulsion from ZANU-PF, Mujuru formed her own political party, known as Zimbabwe People First (ZPF), in 2016, but abandoned ZPF to form a new party, called the
National People's Party (NPP), in 2017. She then became a presidential candidate in the 2018 harmonised elections, representing a consortium of little-known parties falling under the banner of the People's Rainbow Coalition. The coalition did not garner meaningful support during the elections. During her campaigning, Mujuru was haunted by ZANU-PF's reputation for violence and human rights abuses. She tried, with arguably little success, to distance herself from that association (SABC 2017a; BBC 2017). Throughout her 16 March 2017 interview with Stephen Sackur on *BBC HardTalk*,[2] Mujuru emphasised that hers was a lone voice, which had failed to influence the manner in which things were done within ZANU-PF. This statement could be interpreted in various ways. One possible interpretation is that she was trying to dissociate herself from the negative side of the political party that she had once had a part in leading, and thereby sell herself to the electorate as a "clean" character before the election in which she was running. However, it could also be pointed out that Mujuru's perceived marginalisation as vice president highlights the general weakness of this position in modern politics (see Goldstein 2008, 374). One might also argue that Mujuru's marginalisation exposed Mugabe as an autocrat and herself as a subservient junior – a position that most men and women in ZANU-PF occupied in relation to Robert Mugabe. While she conflated her *powerlessness* with a failure to challenge Mugabe, citing respect for elders and loyalty, we can understand from this that whereas her vice presidency signalled a renegotiation of female participation in politics, it did so in a context where patriarchal domination persisted. The women's quota policy helped to promote Mujuru to a position of power (see O'Brien and Rickne 2016, 113), but then her perceived *powerlessness* as vice president under Mugabe's regime might mean that equal presence in positions of political power is not necessarily an indication of political equality (see Phillips

1998, 232). In that sense, Mujuru's vice presidency could not have been a "substantive representation" (Pitkin 1967, 102) of women in politics in Zimbabwe, but was rather a kind of *token representation*.

Mujuru's statement that she was a vice president with no power to shape political outcomes within ZANU-PF has been interpreted elsewhere as substantive proof that "women cannot govern; cannot oppose" (*The Herald* 2016). Her perceived failure in politics is deployed to stereotype women as fit only for domestic chores (see Ncube 2020), as illustrated in the following excerpt from a media report:

> Mujuru was the name of the husband. What is inside her is from her Mugari side. So Joice Mugari is very different from Joice Mujuru. We only understood this when we gave her this post and asked her to work. We saw that the mettle of the Mujurus is different from the Mugaris. Mugari is a person who is only for domestic work. (*The Herald*, 17 March 2017b)

Mugari is Joice Mujuru's maiden name. This sexist depiction of Mujuru in the media by a former member of her political party, ZPF, suggests that she was given the party's leadership role on the basis that she was the wife of a powerful man, not by virtue of her own credentials. This resonates well with a question posed by Ncube (2020): Could Mujuru have been anything more than the general's wife? Here we see a reinforcement of gender roles, where politics is perceived as masculine, while women are said to be good at and fit for only domestic roles (see also Ncube and Yemurai 2020).

However, it is important to note that Mujuru belonged to a group of what Geisler, in her discussion of the Botswana National Party (BNP), termed "wives of powerful politicians" (Geisler 1995, 550; see also Ncube 2020). In her aforementioned interview with Sackur (BBC 2017), she highlights the fact that her husband had always warned her to be careful of ZANU-PF "boys," and she clearly connects her victimisation in the party to the death of her husband. Her abusers were able to get to her because her "powerful" husband and "protector" was dead. In fact, Solomon Mujuru's "accidental" death was, in some circles, perceived as a strategy to disempower Joice Mujuru (see Fontein 2018). Besides the Mujurus and the Mugabes, there have been and are other couples in ZANU- PF. It could therefore be argued that this is one of the ways in which female representation in ZANU-PF and in government could be compromised. Women who enter politics as the "wives" of powerful men give the impression that they have been "brought" into politics, and they may choose to remain in a submissive position to their husbands-cum- benefactors.

Mujuru's liberation war heroism was reversed when she was identified as a threat to Mugabe's power. In particular, her widely acclaimed shooting of a Rhodesian helicopter within ZANU-PF war narratives was recently dismissed as a lie when she apparently fell out of favour with her political colleagues. Christopher Mutsvangwa, a war-veteran leader and ZANU-PF stalwart, led the rejection of a claim that all along had been used to imagine and sustain Joice Mujuru's liberation war heroism. Interestingly, one woman, Linda Mangwende, was available to corroborate Mutsvangwa's claims. As reported in *The*
Herald of 2 December 2014, Mangwende claimed that the photograph of a woman combatant with Mujuru's name at the bottom actually depicts Mangwende herself. So, although ZANU-PF Women's League was instrumental in the rise of Mujuru when they requested that one of the two vice president posts be filled by a woman (Nyambi 2015), some women also played a significant role in the smear campaign that legitimised Joice Mujuru's removal from the vice presidency (see Nyambi 2015; Tendi 2016). This is illustrated by the position that Mangwende took in discrediting Mujuru's liberation credentials. Grace Mugabe is another female figure who was at the forefront of such female complicity. In this way, both Mangwende and Mugabe act as "patriarchal subjects" (Ncube 2020, 30) who support men against fellow women, and "patriarchy is always sustained by [such a] 'cat fight' cartoon version of women's relationships to each other" (Enloe 2017, 8; see also Dube 2018).

Tendi (2016) notes that "prior to Mujuru's political descent, [President Robert] Mugabe wheeled out his wife, First Lady Grace Mugabe, on a nationwide campaign to denounce Mujuru and pressure her to resign as Vice-President." Here, it is implied that Grace was not acting independent of her husband, but was rather a pawn and a willing accomplice in Mugabe's political plans (see also Ncube 2020, 31). Grace Mugabe's role in Mujuru's fall shall be revisited in the next section, which reflects on her political power(lessness) within ZANU-PF. The smear campaign against Mujuru could arguably be viewed as a kind of symbolic violence that was deployed to keep her out of a position of power (Albaine 2015 as cited in Biroli 2018, 681). Her expulsion from ZANU-PF made way for a male candidate, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who is the current president of Zimbabwe. The expulsion is also an example of the "gendered informal sanctions often imposed upon women who show political ambition" (Verge and de la Fuente 2014, 73).

Besides having women as willing accomplices, the smear campaign against Mujuru was in some other ways gendered. For instance, one of Mujuru's critics, George Rutanhire, told a morally and politically damaging story about

her participation in the liberation struggle. He reported that in 1973, Mujuru was a *Chimbwido* (a helper) who, on a particular day, had sex with Comrade Chipembere. He further claimed that a battle started while the two were being intimate, forcing Chipembere to fight that particular battle naked (*The Sunday Mail* 2016). From Rutanhire's recollection, Chipembere – and not Mujuru – is the one who shot down a helicopter. Rutanhire genders Mujuru not only as a *Chimbwido* but, more importantly, as a sex object and prostitute. This depiction of Mujuru serves to minimise her contribution to the liberation war, undermining her distinguished war record (see also Nyambi and Matsika 2016).

In the same newspaper article and to serve the same purpose, Mujuru is demonised as a "patriarchal subject" (Ncube 2020, 30) who colluded with male liberation fighters and facilitated the sexual abuse of girls in guerrilla camps (*The Sunday Mail* 2016). In a related media report, Geoffrey Nyarota discredits Mujuru on the basis of her *nom de guerre* "Teurai Ropa" (Spill the blood), which he genders as "weird" and gruesome, especially as the name of a female fighter (*The Herald* 2015). In that narrative, Nyarota rehearses "conventional views of the relationship between gender and war," insinuating "the maleness of war" and the notion that women, who are ordinarily expected to be "non-violent," do not fit well into the matrix of war (Turpin 1998, 3).

Mujuru was also depicted in the media as anti-women and pro-men. The media used the rumours that Mujuru was planning to join hands with Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T), prior to the 2018 general elections, to label her as someone who hated women and preferred a "male decision making" leadership style (*The Herald*, 10 March 2017c). Her words, uttered in a song supposedly directed to ZANU-PF Women's League – "*pakati penyu pane achandipandukira*" ("there are some among you who would betray me") – were used to portray her as anti-women. "She has betrayed women. She can't be a female leader. She is back to being led by men, even those at the very deep end of their wits" (*The Herald*, 10 March 2017c). Manheru, too, interpreted Mujuru's so-called preference for male political acquaintances as "a conspiracy against womankind" (*The Herald* 2016).

Gender was also an issue in countering the campaigning against Mujuru prior to the 2018 harmonised elections. Mujuru was "sold" as an alternative model to the current violent and oppressive patriarchal government. One of her supporters reportedly said that

> Zimbabwe had been ruled by a man for thirty-seven years. We can see that the male leader has destroyed the country. In Liberia, Taylor ruled the country and messed it up, when he was removed, a woman took over and

> look at how good the country has become. If it happened in Liberia . . . why can't we try it in Zimbabwe? (*NewsDay*, 5 July 2017)

Some also believed that the country had suffered for too long and therefore needed a mother's love – a mother to nurture the nation. The nurturant appeal (Hayden 2003) that the country needs a motherly president paradoxically supports conventional gender roles and stereotypes and the sexism in Zimbabwean politics instead of deconstructing them.

Caring and nurturing are indeed assumed to be feminine traits. But some urgent questions one might ask are: What does it mean to be caring and nurturing? And how are Zimbabwean female politicians supposed to do that? These questions are pertinent given that Zimbabwe has had more than its share of economic woes for more than a decade, and is now characterised by extreme levels of corruption by politicians and in public institutions. Mujuru herself, for instance, was accused of defrauding some state enterprises, such as the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), of thousands of US dollars (Moyo 2016, 258). The accusations could be taken as mere politicking, but given the magnitude of corruption in Zimbabwe, Mujuru's claims to cleanliness remain doubtful. In 2004, when Mujuru became vice president, some of her supporters viewed her as "fairly clean" (Christiansen 2007, 95). Christiansen, however, questioned the so- called cleanliness. She pondered whether the supporter who made the statement truly "regards Mujuru as not as tarnished by corruption scandals as her male counterparts, or that this is a particularly a female quality on her part" (Christiansen 2007, 95). We know of at least one female Zimbabwean politician, Prisca Mupfumira, who in 2020 was accused of defrauding the state of millions of US dollars, and at the time of writing this article, her case is still in the courts. So, the question remains: Are abusers of political power only obese men of power (Mbembe 2001, 107)? What Zimbabwe urgently needs, then, is not only gender parity in politics, but men and women who have people's needs at heart and in mind.

In the next section, I use Grace Mugabe's speeches to discuss her ways of bargaining with and making gains from patriarchy in pursuit of political power. I also use her experiences to think through some of the ways in which women politicians become compromised political representatives who enter politics, but not necessarily in order to protect the interests of women.

Grace Mugabe's patriarchal (bar)gains

Grace Mugabe is the widow of the late Robert Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for thirty- seven years, from 1980 to 2017, when he was ousted from power through a military intervention. She was the first lady of Zimbabwe from 1996

to 2017. Grace was Mugabe's second wife, whom he married traditionally (via *lobola* rites) when his first wife, Sally Mugabe, was lying in hospital, dying. In quite a few of her political rallies, Grace complained that Zimbabweans were comparing her to Sally, putting their photographs side by side and calling her a prostitute (see also Ncube 2020).

Grace Mugabe became a force to reckon with within ZANU-PF from mid-2014, when her battle to succeed her husband as president gathered momentum. Before that, she acted within the limits of the wife of the president, concentrating on philanthropic work, which included running a children's home. Between 2014 and 2017, she transformed herself from president's wife to president's wife-cum-politician when she assumed the leadership of the ZANU-PF Women's League. Mugabe delivered several speeches at her political rallies, dubbed "Meet the People" rallies, which took place in all ten administrative political provinces of Zimbabwe (see Santos and Ndhlovu 2016). These rallies were public events that increased her political visibility within ZANU-PF and in the nation, and they became sites in which she achieved political agency. The speeches were delivered in a political environment where Robert Mugabe's position as the centre of power in ZANU- PF was threatened. She appropriated the rallies to prop up her husband's political hegemony. She addressed ZANU-PF supporters and dealt with members of the party who were vying for her husband's post. From one rally to another, she reiterated that there was "no vacancy in the State House" (*The Herald*, 18 February 2017a); that Mugabe had been chosen by God and would rule the country even beyond the grave (*NewsDay* 2016); that he was irreplaceable (SABC 2017b); and that it was Robert Mugabe's prerogative to name his successor when the right time came. One could therefore argue that Grace Mugabe spoke against factions within the ruling party to protect her husband's political position. In that sense, she acted like Robert Mugabe's surrogate (Van Wyk 2017, 160).

In speaking to and shaming perceived enemies, Grace Mugabe described herself as *mafirakureva* or a person willing to die for telling the truth, even when it makes some people uncomfortable. She also presented herself as a voice of authority, as implied by her (in)famous phrase "Stop it," which she often used to reprimand persons accused of fanning factionalism within the party (see *Zimpapers Digital* 2016; *Zimpapers Online* 2017). She took it upon herself to name and shame perceived party detractors in an attempt to restore order within ZANU-PF in the face of heightened factional conflicts. She often reminded her audience that she was a powerful woman, the first lady of the country. *The Herald* took the cue and presented her to the public as "Dr Amai Grace Mugabe" (see *Zimpapers Online* 2017). The academic title, Dr, was

meant to display her intellectual acumen, and at some rallies she even boasted "*ndakadzidzaka ini*" ("I am educated, I will have you know"; *The Insider* 2017). The *Amai* (mother of the nation) title was significant to Grace Mugabe's gendered political discourse. *Amai* and *Baba* (mother and father of the nation), in reference to Grace Mugabe and Robert Mugabe, respectively, bestowed authority on both in a context where the "nation-as-family metaphor" is invoked (Lakoff 1996).

Mugabe took her motherly role very seriously, and from time to time she summoned her "political children" to the podium to publicly reprimand or discipline them, and give them guidance. The interesting part is that the majority of the "children" summoned to the podium were powerful men in ZANU-PF and in government. Ray Kaukonde, George Charamba and Kazembe Kazembe are good examples of men publicly shamed by Grace Mugabe. Ray Kaukonde was ZANU-PF's Chairman of Mashonaland East province and also a member of the Politburo. George Charamba was, at the time, Robert Mugabe's official spokesperson, while Kazembe Kazembe was a party member in Mashonaland Central. Kaukonde was shamed during the "fights" to remove Joice Mujuru from the vice presidency, and Charamba and Kazembe were shamed during the Mnangagwa fights. I will demonstrate the manner in which each of these men was publicly humiliated. Mugabe would speak to Kaukonde with disrespect and without fear:

> *Ndakamuudza uyu, uyu, uyu kuti uri kunyepa Kaukonde . . . achingosekerera zvake ndikamuudza kuti usanyepa . . . vanogona kugezaka vana Kaukonde, vachinyemwerera mazino akanaka, nyemwerera tione*, it's a fake smile! *Ndakambomudeedza uyu* 2008. I almost punched him. (I told this one, this one, this one, that he is a liar, Kaukonde . . . always smiling, I told him that he should not lie . . . he is clean and well-groomed, he has good teeth, always smiling . . . Smile, let's see! . . . I summoned him in 2008.)[3]

Kaukonde, however, did not heed the belittling order to smile. We could take this as a form of protest. George Charamba and Kazembe Kazembe, in different contexts, took to the podium and returned to their seats as ordered, in ways that one might take to be performances of subservience. Mugabe humiliated the men at a time when she was the leader of ZANU-PF's Women's League. One could argue that she was not relying on her power as the leader of the Women's League. Rather, she tapped into her power as the wife of the president. These humiliations were possible because as the wife of the president, Mugabe shared the "same nests and *reaped* the same benefits of hegemonic masculinity" that her husband represented during that time

(Muchemwa and Muponde 2007, xv, emphasis added). She understood her position to be a very powerful one. At one point she said:

> *Inini hapana chandinoda nokuti ini nditori panyanga kudhara. Pane kutonga kushoma saikoku? . . . zvinonzi Mai Mugabe vanoda kutonga, ini ndichitotonga?* (There is nothing that I want because I am already in a position of power. Is there any power that is more than what I already have? . . . They say I want power, when I already have it?)[4]

In that statement Mugabe reminded her critics that she was the president's partner, and was therefore just as powerful as he was. Her perceived power could be seen in the manner in which she influenced the course of events in the ruling party, when she played an active role in the expulsion of both Joice Mujuru and Emmerson Mnangagwa from government and ZANU-PF in 2014 and 2017, respectively.

At one point, Mugabe said that people confused her position with that of one who wanted to usurp power. She revealed this at a rally in Mberengwa, stating: "*hanzi Mnangagwa ave secretary waMai Mugabe*" ("people say Mnangagwa has become Mrs Mugabe's secretary").[5] Indeed, those speculating about Mnangagwa's loss of power to Grace Mugabe had seen her tremendous influence within the party.

Mugabe felt that she was doing well as a Women's League Secretary in advancing women's interests. At one rally, she said: "*Pandakaitwa mutungamiri wemadzimai ndakanyatsounderstander mandate yangu kuti ndinofanira kusimudzira madzimai*" ("When I was appointed leader of the Women's League, I clearly understood that my mandate was to uplift women").[6] In this position, Mugabe also saw herself performing a role similar to that of Mbuya Nehanda. Nehanda remains an important symbol of the fighting spirit central to the quest for justice during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. Mugabe runs a children's home in Mazowe, at a place where Nehanda was arrested and taken to Harare for prosecution. She conceives this as a symbolic link: "*saka ini kana ndichishanda pagomba ipapo ndinozviona ndichiita represent Mbuya Nehanda* ("so when I am working from that [hole] space, I see myself as representing Mbuya Nehanda)."[7] The irony, however, is that at her children's home, she performs a gendered role as mother and nurturer, yet Nehanda, whom she thinks she represents, went beyond performing domestic roles to fight for political and social justice alongside men.

In an address to the Women's League leadership meeting in Harare on 20 September 2016, Grace Mugabe assured the then vice presidents (Mnangagwa and Mphoko) that the Women's League was content with the political

arrangement at that time, where the two vice presidents were both male, and that the Women's League would only seek a rectification of this power imbalance in 2019.[8] On 4 November 2017, however, in one of her rally speeches she demanded a female presence within the presidium:

> constitution *yanga yakagadzirwa zvakanaka. Yaiti one of the vice presidents shall be a woman. Zvakachinjwa pakabva Amai Mujuru . . . taakuida position yedu*. (the constitution is well conceived. It stipulates that one of the vice presidents shall be a woman. But things changed when Joice Mujuru left the post . . . but now we want our post.)[9]

Grace Mugabe conceived Mnangagwa as an enemy who needed to be purged from the ruling party. She did this in support of a political faction dubbed the G40 (some of whose powerful party members rallied around her). It could be argued that she may have become a pawn of the male members of that faction, since it is doubtful that they thought of her as their preferred presidential candidate (see Ncube 2020). They might have taken advantage of her proximity to Robert Mugabe in order to remove Mnangagwa from the position of vice president because of the potential threat she posed to their own political plans.

But things were not as clear as that argument suggests. In some instances, Mugabe showed that she wanted to take power herself, as either vice president or president:

> *ko ivo Vice President Mnangagwa vakasiira mukadzi wavo constituency. A precedent was set. Ko iniwo nhasi ndikati President ndisiireiwo chigaro? A precedent was set . . . ko ini ndikapinda zvakaipei? Handisi mumusangano? Kana vanhu vachida kushanda neni vachiziva kuti ndinoshanda zvakaipei*? (Mnangagwa left his wife his parliamentary constituency. . . . and what if I also request my husband to do the same? What is wrong with that? Am I not a member of the [ZANU PF]? If people want to work with me and they see that I work, is there anything wrong with that?)[10]

Mugabe's statement showed that she had aspirations for the presidency of ZANU-PF herself, but as Asuelime (2018, 91) notes, we can still ask whether she was a powerful woman or merely the wife of a powerful husband. Conceding that she never had power of her own helps us in understanding her political dependency that became evident when her husband's fall also triggered her own fall. This is important inasmuch as it confirms there are diverse types of female politicians in Zimbabwe. Much like Joice Mujuru, she

belonged to a group of what Geisler (1995) termed wives of powerful politicians.

As intimated earlier, Grace Mugabe played a key role in the political fall of Mujuru and the subsequent rise of Emmerson Mnangagwa in December 2014. In other words, by ending Mujuru's membership in ZANU-PF, Mugabe contributed to the rise of Mnangagwa (Nyambi 2015; Tendi 2016; Hove 2019). Unwittingly, then, she colluded with the patriarchy. The symbolic violence that she inflicted on Mujuru is reminiscent of what Chesler (2001) elsewhere describes as woman's inhumanity to woman. Her demonisation of Mujuru, in feminist thinking, does not make her a likeable character (Ward 2017). Thus, she cannot be looked at as a role model of a successful and respectable woman politician (see Phillips 1998).

In attacking Mujuru, Mugabe used sexual slurs against her, as illustrated below:

> I set up Mujuru and I now have a recording of her in a mini-skirt, speaking ill of me and the President. . . . She was recorded while she was wearing a mini-skirt. I do not know whether she wanted to lure this person [whom she was conversing with] or not because the way she was dressed, it is embarrassing for a person of her stature. Do you know what she was saying in that video? She was saying "Why is Grace not telling her husband to step down?" (Tendi 2016, 222)

Various gender issues are central to that narrative. Mugabe interprets wearing a mini-skirt as an inappropriate and indecent way of dressing for a vice president and a public figure of Mujuru's body, size and age. Here, she rehearses a conventional discourse that a mini- skirt is sexually provocative and thus a signifier of immorality. She evokes the same discourse in a different context, reportedly addressing Zimbabwean women in general: "If you walk around wearing mini-skirts displaying your thighs and inviting men to drool over you, then you want to complain when you have been raped? That is unfortunate because it will be your fault" (*The Telegraph*, 22 November 2015). Mugabe rehearses the discourses that mark the female body as erotic, but even more so employs sexist/ misogynist language and "blaming-the-victim" discourse. As in the fabricated narrative of Mujuru wearing a mini-skirt, Grace Mugabe's statement above is an example of what Tamale (2016) views as a deployment of "women's bodies as a battlefield for cultural- moral struggles." In the statement, Mugabe goes beyond the moral discourse to invoke "rape myths – false beliefs used mainly to shift the blame of rape from perpetrators to victims" (Suarez and Gadalla 2010, 2010). The premise in the rape myth connects wearing a mini-skirt to rape and articulates that "women dress in

body-revealing attire in order to seduce men and convey an interest in sexual advances. This supposedly makes them culpable for any subsequent sexual invasions by the men they had allegedly seduced" (Moor 2010, 116).

Mugabe uttered that statement in 2015, when she was the leader of ZANU-PF's Women's League. Her statement about mini-skirts showed an ignorance of the current feminist agenda against women's objectification. Mugabe supported the objectification of women, yet she was supposedly in the Politburo to protect their interests. By supporting women's objectification, she was not advancing the interests of women in her party, although representing "means acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin 1967, 226). This leads one to ponder, once again: Does the presence of women politicians in positions of power always guarantee feminist politics? It is possible, then, to argue that Grace Mugabe presented herself as an illegitimate voice of ZANU-PF women's interests in the party's Politburo. I make this observation with the full knowledge that feminism is not always coherent (Pringle and Watson 1998, 219). One could, however, argue that Grace Mugabe was not leading the Women's League to represent women's interests. Rather, perhaps she had ulterior motives. As some critics have already noted, with Robert Mugabe's impending death, Grace Mugabe needed to secure her vast economic interests (Mudiwa 2017; see also Hove 2019).

Concluding remarks

I begin my concluding remarks by noting that Joice Mujuru and Grace Mugabe are more similar than they are different. Both have PhDs, that Zimbabweans doubt they earned. Both could be characterised as women who entered into politics because of their husbands. Both have been accused of being prostitutes; for Mujuru this was during the liberation war, while for Mugabe it was because she had (traditionally) married Robert Mugabe while his first wife was sick and dying. Both were accused of accumulating ill- gotten wealth. Both were referred to as "mothers" when their roles in politics suited patriarchal dictates, and "whores" or "witches" when they sought to impose themselves as "active political subjects" (Ncube 2020, 26). However, these women are also different in many ways. Commonalities and contrasts between them highlight not only the complex positions that women politicians occupy in Zimbabwe, but even more the gendered aspects of politics. In analysing representations of Mujuru and Mugabe's political experiences, I was able to engage with the following question: Does women's presence in political leadership in Zimbabwe translate into substantive representation of women in politics?

The media texts about Mujuru's fall from the vice presidency in 2014 and her attempts to establish and lead a new political party prior to the 2018 elections show the enduring power asymmetries between men and women in politics. Mujuru's political demise in ZANU-PF and the government in 2014 highlights a missed opportunity to have had a female president in Zimbabwe, which confirmed that the presidency in this country, to use Anderson's (2002, 105) words, remains "a bastion of masculinity." There are many obstacles that prevent female candidates from reaching the highest political post in the country. Besides patriarchal strategies of maintaining dominance that hinder women's progress in politics, the lack of feminist solidarity also presents serious challenges. Troubled intra-women relations in politics reveal themselves when some women collude with the patriarchy to perpetrate symbolic violence against female colleagues, as exemplified by the role that Grace Mugabe played in Joice Mujuru's fall. I used Mujuru and Mugabe's positions as wives of powerful men-cum-politicians to talk about one of the ways in which female representation in in Zimbabwean politics could be compromised. It is against this background that the study determined that, rather than concentrating on the *number* of women who occupy positions of political power, perhaps we should investigate their experiences in politics as well as the contributions they make to the country's politics. In other words, do they have real power "not as dominance but as energy, capacity and effectiveness" (Mansbridge citing Follet 1998, 149)? In addition to accountable politicians, not the "wayward" type who do not "abide by their pre-agreed programmes" (Phillips 1998, 237), Zimbabwe also needs more women in politics, more women voting for women, and responsible women politicians of integrity, who can tackle the problems posed by patriarchal hegemony – women of integrity who can help to eradicate the rampant corruption and misuse of power in political offices.

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWA8uOXQnkA, accessed 8 August 2019.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO7ZiqiPAxg, accessed 8 August 2019.
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTDk4Kuqmsk, accessed 7 August 2019.
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHNk0_6-8KE&t=19264s, accessed 17 February 2020.
5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y5F2pKEzd8, accessed 17 February 2020.

6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCk8p_IlyF8, accessed 17 February 2020.
7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUYPSqguc5Q, accessed 17 February 2020.
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQ_5emaIOAo, accessed 17 February 2020.
9. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89Jf9Rq1KVc, accessed 17 February 2020. 10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89Jf9Rq1KVc, accessed 17 February 2020.

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