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Female bodies, agency, real and symbolic violence during the coronavirus pandemic: The experiences of women politicians and activists in Zimbabwe

Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity 2021

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abstract

In May 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova, all members of the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance, participated in a demonstration to draw attention to escalating poverty among vulnerable communities during the COVID-19-induced lockdown. Immediately after the demonstration they were allegedly abducted, tortured and sexually violated by State security agents. In response to these allegations, the State accused the women of taking part in an 'illegal' demonstration. The experiences of these three women are an appropriate entry-point for discussion of the vile – in the sense of the objectionable – treatment of women in the national politics of Zimbabwe. In this article it is noted that the coronavirus crisis experienced in Zimbabwe is inextricably linked with the country's political crisis, which continues unabated. For instance, the Government's heavy-handedness in enforcing COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, especially in the early days of the pandemic (March/April 2020), appears to have had a clear agenda: to limit democratic space and participation by crushing all forms of dissent. The overarching argument made in this article is that citizens' experiences of the convergent political and coronavirus crises in Zimbabwe are deeply gendered. In particular, I draw on the experiences of women in politics and civil society in Zimbabwe in order to allow for deeper understandings of women's agency during the coronavirus pandemic, and of the extremely gendered use of violence by the State to contain what it essentially views as political 'dissent'. I discuss women's participation in the aforementioned protests as emblematic of a vocal public presence which, however, exposes their bodies to real and symbolic gendered State violence.

keywords
coronavirus, State violence, agency, female bodies

Introduction

The novel coronavirus global pandemic, first identified in Wuhan, China in late December 2019, quickly spread to the rest of the world. However, it has had an uneven impact within and across nations. Despite predictions in the early days of the pandemic that countries in Africa were 'a ticking time bomb', at the time of writing this article (June 2021) the continent had not been as adversely affected by the pandemic as, for example, North America and many parts of Europe. Zimbabwe recorded its first known coronavirus case on 21 March 2020, and by 13 June 2021 it had 39 959 confirmed cases and 1632 known coronavirus-related deaths (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021). It is evidently not possible to generalise how countries in the world, and in Africa in particular, have been affected by the pandemic. For this reason, I seek to highlight how Zimbabwe has been affected by the pandemic, arguing that people's experiences of it have been deeply gendered.

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, the Government initially declared a 21-day lockdown as from 30 March 2020. This lockdown was thereafter extended for a further month. Since then, the Government has imposed further lockdowns, depending on the prevailing sanitary conditions. During the first total lockdown all citizens were required to stay at home, except those offering essential services. These included health workers, security forces and supermarket workers. Staying at home meant one could only go outside the home for the purposes of seeking food and health care. In addition, the national borders were closed, except for returning citizens and permanent residents. Security forces were deployed in all cities to enforce this lockdown. As the Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence (WALPE) in Zimbabwe noted in April 2020, "women as the majority of primary care givers and burdened with domestic and unpaid care work were harassed by state security agents during lockdown when they went out to look for water at communal water points, food in supermarkets or even medicines in pharmacies (WALPE 2020).

The events that inform the discussion in my analysis took place shortly after the initial lockdown of March 2020. On 13 May 2020, Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova participated in a demonstration organised by the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A) Youth Assembly against the authorities' failure to provide social protection for the poor during the COVID-19 lockdown. Later, they were reportedly abducted and tortured by unidentified male State agents. Mamombe is the

current Member of Parliament for Harare West and Chimbiri and Marova are MDC-A Youth leaders. The MDC was the first opposition party to pose a serious challenge to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU PF) since the country attained independence in 1980 (Raftopoulos 2000). Thus, the MDC's formation in 1999 changed the political landscape in Zimbabwe. Attendant to the subsequent power struggles between the two political parties has been the entrenchment of violence "as a political tool" (Asuelime & Simura 2014, p. 70). With this in mind, I understand that the violence suffered by Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova as intended to disrupt not only the 'operations' of opposition politics but also to scare women away from politics.

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a renowned novelist and filmmaker whose work reveals her keen interest in women's emancipation. By virtue of being a writer, she is a political actor who, with her first novel *Nervous Conditions* published in 1988, entered a field previously dominated by male writers (Andrade 2002). Five weeks after the abduction of Mamombe and others, Dangarembga took part in a one-person protest against the response by the Zimbabwean Government to COVID-19. On 31 July 2020 she participated in an anti-corruption march, was arrested and released the following day on bail (Zinyange & Jongwe 2020). She was charged with contravening Section 37(1)(b) of the Criminal Law (Codification & Reform) Act by participating in a gathering with the intent to promote public violence, breach of peace or bigotry. She was acquitted of these charges on 18 June 2021.

The State in Zimbabwe has used 'institutionalised violence', arrests, abductions and torture as tools of repression of political dissent (Sachikonye 2011). Apart from physical violence, the Government of Zimbabwe has routinely deployed legislative instruments to shrink the democratic space (Hove & Chenzi 2020, p. 122). Some of the laws that have been used by the State are 'customarily' understood as the law, even when they are technically 'unlawful' (see Hove & Chenzi 2020). Women, who have always been key political actors in Zimbabwean politics – whose contribution to national politics dates back to the precolonial period, as attested to by the role played by the spirit medium Nehanda during the colonial period – have also been confronted with the State's institutionalised violence. Being in that public space of politics means that women have also been targets of State violence, as exemplified by the experiences of the women whose political lives I focus on in this article (see Sachikonye 2011; Ncube 2020). Against this background, I examine the participation – physical and otherwise – of Joana Mamombe, Cecilia

Chimbiri, Netsai Marova and Tsitsi Dangarembga in demonstrations against the Zimbabwean Government's COVID-19 policies as emblematic of gendered vocal public presence. I further argue that such forms of agency expose their bodies to real and symbolic 'masculine' State violence.

This article is organised into three sections. In the first, I present the methods that I employ in the article. I particularly explain the essence of studying the individual women's experiences as a way of thinking about and through the various modes of women's participation in politics as well as the many struggles they encounter within the political space in Zimbabwe. This is followed by a section in which I discuss the ways in which Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova entered the public space as political actors and encountered the State's violent reaction in the form of physical torture and other forms of symbolic violence. In the last section of the article, I am interested in how Tsitsi Dangarembga has recently engaged the State regarding the diminishing democratic space in Zimbabwe. I seek, to this end, to highlight how the Government's heavy-handedness during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in the early days of the pandemic highlighted the manner in which restrictions of the movement of citizens resulted in gendered violence and the shrinking of the democratic space.

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Reconstructing women's agency, power and vulnerability

In this article I draw on the personal experiences of the four female politicians and activists during the global coronavirus pandemic in Zimbabwe as a lens from and through which I can think through and highlight women's agency in politics in Zimbabwe. I look at the individual women alongside each other. In other words, I consider the individual women as an assembly or chorus (Hartman 2019), whose individual struggles form a generalised narrative of women's experiences. This method of assembling their individual stories and experiences in politics creates a space in which I seek to retrieve their political lives from oblivion. I particularly publicise their political lives against a background of the State's misrepresentation of their experiences of violence in politics. In this analysis, I reconstruct the experiences of these women by redefining their identities as political actors. I specifically invoke the women's intimate dimensions of their political lives as figuration of the generalised histories of Zimbabwean women's "dynamic cycle of power and vulnerability *at the hands of the state*" (Diabate 2020,

p. 3, my emphasis). The overarching aim is to challenge the State's power to silence women's voices with the intention to violently take away from them the capacity to be political actors.

Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova, on the one hand, and Dangarembga on the other, took part in separate but related demonstrations against the Government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, and here their actions could be interpreted as an assembling – which in this case produced a reaction in the form of State violence. The presence of their bodies 'on the street' during the demonstrations vocalised 'their opposition to the manner in which the State had handled the COVID-19 crisis. In that respect, they assumed agency and became political actors. Here I adopt the most basic definition of agency as "the capacity to act … to initiate change or to commit oneself to a transformative or challenging course of action" (Charrad 2010, pp. 517, 519). By 'leading from the front' a heightened visibility and activism, the women's agency challenges the naturalisation of men's domination in politics (Butler 2004; Walsh & Scully 2006; Ncube 2020).

The bodies that, on the days in question, congregated, moved and spoke together (Butler 2011), in the sense of Fanghanel's "revolutionary bodies" (2019, p. 162) included both male and female bodies. The reality that after a demonstration by men and women, only women were targeted for abduction and torture (Moyo 2020) attests to the many ways in which State violence in Zimbabwe is deeply gendered. Besides being targeted because of their gender, the violence that Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova in particular faced in politics is distinctive in its form and effects. The Zimbabwean State assumes a masculine demeanour, and this gender identity "influences state-sponsored violence that the country has experienced and continues to experience" (Togarasei 2020, p. 2). Firstly, the perpetrators of violence against these women were all male. Secondly, the violence that they experienced – physical and symbolic – in one way or the other mainly targeted their bodies.

Whereas the experiences of Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova demonstrate the pains of being women and on the margins of politics in Zimbabwe, Tsitsi Dangarembga's positionality as a female activist reminds us that being on the margin "also harbours the potentiality to alter the centre" (Fanghanel 2019, p. 163). Through protests, conversations and public lectures from the position of female marginality, Dangarembga has wielded agency to scrutinise the State and bring the world's attention to

the political crisis in Zimbabwe. These women's 'modes of participation in politics' are not only forms of agency, but they force what Andrade (2002, p. 46) calls a "reconsideration of the political and the public". The women claim a critical position in a space where they are routinely and sometimes violently excluded. This is particularly the case because politics in Zimbabwe as a public space is not inclusive but is rather, by default, a "preserve of men" (Ncube 2020, p. 31; see Mangena 2021).

I further engage the State's masculinised violent strategies of silencing directed at women political actors. With regard to Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova, I concentrate on how, beyond the physical violence experienced through torture, the State subjected them to further symbolic violence in the manner in which it misrepresented their experiences and portrayed them as 'criminals' rather than survivors of violence. The State's silencing strategies involved the use of 'language' through State-controlled media reports, in which the State framed and dismissed the torture as 'false claims'. This confirms the way in which the State-controlled media in Zimbabwe is used to sustain the hegemonic discourses or narratives of the ruling party (see Ranger 2004). As Thapar-Björkert, Samelius and Sanghera (2016, p. 148) note:

> Language can constitute violence and be co-constituted by it. Language includes and excludes, it frames discourses through which social reality is constructed, and consequently has implications for power.

State-controlled media, especially *The Herald*'s online version, effectively 'eclipsed' the women's experiences of torture, describing them as 'law-breakers'. This has been a strategy deployed to thwart attempts to hold the State accountable for the political violence that is directed at 'voices of dissent'. Indeed, to assert that the three women were tortured, as I do in this article, is to issue a provocation. It is a declaration that would and is intended to shift people's attention to the main locus of crime committed by the State. It is also to envision the violence that the women suffered and excavate their repressed narratives of pain. A study of the experiences of women politicians and activists in Zimbabwe in the context of the coronavirus pandemic could not be more timely, as the world is struggling over the meaning of the crisis, and is especially concerned about the pervasive injustices that the global pandemic has exposed. The overarching frame of this article, then, relates to the 'rights and dignities of the body of woman' and the declaration that the right to achieve agency, is a "fundamental human right that has to be addressed" (Eze 2014, p. 89).

‘She is a rogue legislator, a breaker of the law’: Criminalisation of female agency

The demonstrations that Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova participated in can be understood as a “bodily and linguistic exercise of rights” (Arendt,1958 cited in Butler 2011, p. 5), in which they spoke on behalf of ‘the poor’. However, the State, in a bid to maintain its hegemony, considered the protesters as threats, breakers of the law, and hence “disobedient, transgressive, and troubling” bodies (Fanghanel 2019, p. 149). The violence that the three women suffered afterwards constituted intimidation by the State. Inflicting pain on the bodies of these protesting women politicians was an attack on their right to speak, since that right, in the words of Butler, “is precisely what is exercised by the body on the street” (2011, p. 10). In other words, the violence contributes to limiting the women’s participation not just in governing, but also in exercising power. There is a connection between the construction of the three women as troubling bodies and the torture that they were later allegedly subjected to, according to their testimonies. They narrate how ‘some men’ took them to a forest, where they were thrown into a pit, tortured, beaten, sexually assaulted, forced to drink each other’s urine and eat each other’s faeces. The driving motivation behind these acts of torture seems to be linked to a desire to weaken their active participation in politics (Perraudin 2005): participation in both the senses of being politicians and of being present and taking part in politics.

Upon release by their abductors, Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova were, according to Moyo (Moyo 2020), “distraught, [and] the youngest, Netsai, was crying inconsolably, and could not speak. They were filthy, their clothes torn and in different states of undress”. The images circulated in the media (see for instance, Ndoro 2020) represented the state that the women were in when they were released by their tormenters. The circulation of the images on social media and through mainstream media offered other forms of representation that opposed the State’s representation which placed the problem as the women themselves. Circulating the images in a way publicised the violence and the attendant injustices beyond Zimbabwe. The images could also be taken as an alternative form of representation which complicates the dichotomy of oppressive government and oppressed female bodies. The fear in Marova’s eyes in one of the photos spoke of the horrible experience that she underwent. In one of the images, Joana Mamombe was in dirty and tattered clothes. She could barely walk without support. Both pictures

reflected distressed bodies subjected to inhuman treatment. They told of bodies in pain and clearly defied allegations by the State that they could have 'faked' their abductions. The circulation of the photos in the media, as well as invoking them in this discussion, may be seen as problematic. Their circulation in the public sphere, for example, may be traumatic for the victims who have to relive it, as well as for those who see the photos. But then, these photos bear witness to a case of violence that the State has done everything it can to suppress. Publicising them in this manner, then, is an attempt to push the narrative of the women's experiences of State violence into the public sphere, and therefore constitutes a strong subversion of the State narrative.

photos

In hospital after the ordeal Mamombe and Chimbiri tearfully narrated what they had gone through (ZimStones 2020). They spoke, for instance, of how Netsai's breasts were fondled, and how objects were inserted into Chimbiri's anal passage. What both women went through constitutes rape in its broadest sense as framed by Cahill (2001). Cahill explains that rape goes "beyond the traditional definition of non-consensual vaginal penetration by a penis to the imposition of a sexually penetrating act on an unwilling person," which includes the penetration of any bodily orifice by any bodily part or nonbodily object (Cahill 2001, p. 11). This violation is repeated even after the torture, in the case of Chimbiri, who was reportedly assaulted and molested at a police roadblock in the presence of her lawyer en route to report to Harare Central Police Station, as required under their bail conditions. Her lawyer, Mr Shava, reportedly said: "my client, Chimbiri, was assaulted and molested in my presence. I felt helpless … a soldier tore off her top and brassiere and fondled her" (*Human Rights News*, 2020).

The women's narrations of their experiences are "deeply personal and potentially traumatising to recount" (Hillsburg 2017, p. 841) According to Pollock (2013), recounting traumatic experiences may cause more pain; in the sense that it opens the tender space of suffering encountered in the moment that recounting tries to articulate. But speaking out, as the case Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova, is a necessary and urgent exercise. Indeed, they should/ought to speak in order to counter the versions of their torture that the State has been crafting. The State's representation places the problem as the women themselves, and the other, alternative narratives oppose the State's "institutional fictions … and violent abstractions authorised as fact and truth" (Hartman 2021, p. 129). Such counter-narratives include

the witness offered by the women's tortured bodies, that frame the women as people victimised by the State. Refusing to see the pain that the survivors of violence articulate – as the State does, through the official narrative riddled with lies and fabrications – constitutes epistemic violence, where the testimony of the vulnerable is unjustifiably denied. Dotson uses the term epistemic violence to "denote the harm that audiences do when their ignorance prevents them from understanding the testimony of a speaker" (Dotson 2011, cited in Glazer 2019, p. 59). It is another serious form of silencing in which the survivors' narratives are dismissed, or twisted (Glazer 2019, p. 59).

Despite such silencing strategies, speaking about a violent experience "transcends the limits of core linguistic capability" (Mbembe 2010, p. 38). This narration of violence beyond the linguistic mode is the core function of the disfigured bodies as witnesses, which testify to the violence experienced. The bodies produce a counter-narrative to the dominant coverage of the 'violence' in the State-controlled media. In particular, they pose a serious threat to the State's strategy of silencing, which is evident in various forms of digression. From May 2020 until the present (June 2021), the Government of Zimbabwe has made concerted efforts to dismiss the case, and for the greater part it has diverted attention away from the abductions in ways that defeat the course of justice for the survivors. The silencing is associated with what Adichie (2019) describes as "not hearing people", which then implies that the survivors do not matter. 'Not hearing' the victims of torture, in this sense, imposes on them subjectivities of worthlessness (Fanghanel 2019). For instance, instead of addressing the concerns raised by the protesters and identifying the perpetrators of torture, the Government has concentrated on articulating the 'illegality' of the demonstrations and used that as a basis for incarcerating the survivors:

> Mamombe et al should be punished for their highly irresponsible disregard for the lockdown restrictions. For her, as a legislator she ought to behave more responsibly as a whole constituency looks up to her for leadership in the fight against COVID-19. Moreso, she is a role model for young girls. Right now, she is a rogue legislator. A breaker of the law, who is faking abductions and specialising in circulating sordid degrading nude pictures, all to justify alleged torture. (Shiri 2020)

Kazembe, the current Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage Minister, announced that the demonstration was illegal and explained that "there are certain procedures that should be followed such as informing the police before staging the demonstration … [which therefore] violated the lockdown regulations. There was no social distancing" (*The Herald*, 18 May 2020). The torture has been dismissed as an example of "false claims of human rights abuses" (Runyanga 2020), which were sponsored by a third force: "the US

Embassy in Zimbabwe, and the usual western cohorts" (Shumba 2020). The violence that Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova suffered has been dismissed as a case of "self-abduction" (Runyanga 2020). Foregrounding the 'illegality' of the demonstrations therefore obscures the conditions that bred them. Constructing the tortured women as criminals defeats the course of justice in significant ways. First, it underplays the women's victimhood. Secondly, it means that the perpetrators of violence are 'ignored', and no one will be brought to book because those who are supposed to serve and protect see *themselves* as the victims. Legality, then, becomes a tool wielded against the marginalised (in this case, women and members of opposition political parties) in moments of crisis.

After the torture, Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova continued to suffer what Barratt (2018) elsewhere describes as symbolic verbal violence from mainly State actors in the form of "public and relentless circulation of misogynist imagery, metaphors and language" (Gqola 2007, p. 115). The following statement, coined by a State-controlled newspaper in reaction to circulation of the victims' photos capturing the state that they were in after the torture, is an apt example of such aggression:

> While Mamombe et al are being objectified and used by cowardly male MDC leaders as political objects, and more cunningly, as sexual objects, the ladies' moral compass is brought into sharp focus. Why take pictures of breasts and torsos with no visible marks of any torture, save to be pornographic? What is lost on Mamombe is that she and the other ladies are victims of inhuman and degrading treatment from the MDC-A male leaders. (Shiri 2020)

Instead of seeing the photos as evidence of torture, Shiri in the above citation claims that the women were objectified by their political party, and in the process further objectifies them. In what reads as a "body centered attack" (Idahosa 2020, p. 988), he presents the photos as 'pornographic' and the women as immoral. Relatedly, the women have also been described as 'whores' by Energy Mutodi, then Deputy Minister for Information, in a tweet that went viral. On 20 May 2020, Mutodi posted the following text on Twitter:

> Details emerge [that] MDC youths Joanna Mamombe, Netsai Marova & Cecilia Chimbiri went out for a romantic night to Bindura with their lovers, who are artisanal miners. They parked their car at a police station for safety but tragedy struck when they demanded foreign currency for services (Mutodi, [@energymutodi], 20 May 2020)

Mutodi herejustifies the violence against women by calling them prostitutes. His thoughts are connected to the notion that violence against 'prostitutes' is justified and that "their bodies are open territory for assault" (Miller & Schwartz 1995, p. 10). In a related interview, Tafadzwa Mugwadi, the ZANU PF Director of Information and Publicity, described the women's torture as "abduction drama" and labelled the three

women as “little girls” and “little slay queens” (Mugwadi 2020). What we get from these diverse media forms which frame the women as immoral, slay queens, little girls and whores, is the State’s reaction to women’s protest in the form of “contestation … and misreading” (Diabate 2020, p. 3). While the women’s protest can be considered as a form of ‘speech’, the State’s response through all these framings works as political speaking – as diagnostic silencing par excellence that is intended to depoliticise the women’s actions, in other words, to take away their political agency.

At another level, the use of ‘little girls’, ‘slay queens’ and ‘whores’ as slurs is not only about depoliticising the actions of these women, but speaks to broader contexts where femininities are constructed and policed in the public sphere. It is related to the workings of colonial violence, for instance, the codifications of the law that prohibited black women’s access and mobility to urban areas, constructing the private sphere (the traditional and the rural as a falsely safe and natural space for women). Examining the dichotomies of private/public and rural/urban, Chigumadzi (2018, p. 54) offers a cogent analysis of this colonial violence, arguing that “in the 30s, some African patriarchs colluded with the colonial state to introduce passes restricting African women’s movement in urban areas.” Given such a broader context in which women’s presence in the public and urban space is heavily policed, any ‘wrong’ utterance or ‘wrong’ doing by a woman can easily and quickly leave her being called and labelled a whore in Zimbabwe. It is for this same reason that it is fairly ordinary for police to ‘arrest’ women for being out in bars alone. In relation to the specific use of the label ‘slay queens’, Mugwadi uses it to disparage the women politicians and activists. Whilst the label ‘slay queen’ might be disparaging, it also points to the broader interest in the politics of (hyper)visibility itself (see Ligaga 2020). Women’s presence in the public sphere is thus framed as already wrong, and this is itself a problem. In this thinking, before the women politicians and activists have even said and done anything in the public sphere, their mere presence there is considered wrong and inappropriate. Once they begin to speak truth to patriarchal power, they are disparaged as slay queens and whores whose main objective is to destabilise patriarchal and masculine power. As Chigumadzi (2018, p. 59) argues, such labelling and name-calling speaks to an “old nationalist fear about African women and their place in time. A fear that if we allow these women their full history, then they might become too troublesome and demanding in the future.” In this thinking, the disparaging tone sets out to ensure that women politicians and activists do not become troublesome and

that they occupy what is deemed their correct space, in the private space of the home, away from the exercise of political power.

The physical violence and torture described earlier are therefore supplemented by symbolic violence enacted through media narratives that vilify and criminalise the women's activism. This kind of violence is cyclical and is the major cause of the citizens' silence in Zimbabwe. Silence, in this case,

> is taken as the absence of expressive action and institutional voice – it individualizes and privatizes citizens by rendering their actions publicly invisible. Silent citizens are inattentive to public issues, never weigh in on public affairs, do not debate, protest, take action and, most importantly, do not cast judgement through the ballot box. (Gray, 2012, np)

Writing about the vulgarities of the State in the post colony, Mbembe (2001, p. 110), notes that "to exercise authority is, above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it, to disempower them not so much to increase their productivity as to ensure their maximum docility". This point is borne out by the fact that, sometime in October 2020, Joana Mamombe was being treated for "anxiety disorder" (Madzianike 2020). One can easily connect this condition to the "physical and emotional wounding" (Norridge 2012, p. 19) that she experienced during and after the torture. There have been efforts by the State to dismiss her health condition as a tactic to delay her trial (*The Herald*, 15 September 2020). It is possible to take the political and associated symbolic violence as ways of tiring the body in order to disempower the target. In Mamombe's case, the State's intention to dispose of the transgressive body is confirmed in the proposition to recall her from Parliament on grounds of her mental instability (*The Herald*, 31 October 2020). If the recall succeeds and if she does not recover, for Mamombe there seems to be limited, to use Showalter's words, "triumphant survival in the face of overwhelming odds" (2013, cited in Hillsburg 2017, p. 334; see also Diabate 2020).

A vigilant scrutiny of the State: Tsitsi Dangarembga and the crisis of 'a shrinking democratic space' in Zimbabwe

Besides taking part in protests locally, Dangarembga, through conversations and public lectures, has used her voice to bring the world's attention to the political crisis in Zimbabwe. In protests and lectures or conversations, she is mainly concerned with articulating how the crisis adversely affects ordinary Zimbabweans. This could be seen in her participation in the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter conversation moderated by Jacana Media on 13 August 2020. Moreover, in a sense, her arrest on 31 July 2020

influenced her thinking about the democratic right to demonstrate that the Zimbabwean State routinely denies its citizens. In an interview with *Aljazeera,* she says, in this regard, that

> My arrest and the arrests of others who protested on July 31, or even in the days leading up to July 31, indicate that the right to peaceful protest is seriously eroded in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean citizens are expected to keep silent and docilely accept whatever the authorities decide to do, or face arrest for peacefully expressed differences of opinion. (Dangarembga 2020a)

If the arrests of protesters by the Zimbabwean State are aimed at silencing them, then one could say that Dangarembga refuses to be silenced. On the contrary, on 27 October 2020 she delivered the 7th Oliver Tambo Memorial Lecture, titled 'The post-crisis crisis after Uhuru'. In this lecture she undertook a detailed examination of the State, and showed the various ways in which it routinely breaches the dignity and security of the person. In tracing what Simatei (2005, p. 85) elsewhere calls "linkages between colonial violence, the violent responses to it or decolonization, and the violations of the rights of citizens in the postcolonial/neocolonial state", Dangarembga highlighted the practice of violence in contemporary Zimbabwe, which dates back to the liberation struggle. She talked about the "violent otherising discourse that informs state interaction with citizens" and interpreted it as the State's tactic of instilling fear of the consequences of non-compliance into citizens. The manner in which Dangarembga continues to subvert State discourse shows that she is brave and not prepared to be cowed by intimidation by the State.

The Zimbabwean Government's denial of the existence of a crisis in the country has been extremely disturbing. Dangarembga's take on the subject is that

> while the Zimbabwean state argues that there is no crisis in Zimbabwe, as a community voice, I argue that where a population is subjected to repetitive cycles of violence, which repeatedly violate discursive freedoms guaranteed under the constitution, there *is* a nation-state in crisis. (Dangarembga 2020b)

In the above citation, Dangarembga exercises her constitutional right to speak her thoughts, and in effect utters truths that the Zimbabwean Government consistently silences or evades. This way of speaking truth to power can be viewed as subversive in how it challenges the way in which power is exercised by those who rule. Moreover, it can be noted that saying things that people do not want to hear and in ways that people do not want to hear them, as Dangarembga does, constitutes resistance.

Even though in the 7th OR Tambo Memorial Lecture she did not restrict herself to the feminist issues that preoccupy her fiction and films, Dangarembga cited the case of Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova as a telling example of State complicity in granting impunity to perpetrators of political violence.

She identified two kinds of impunity: official and unofficial. She defined unofficial impunity as where the State fails to pursue the perpetrators of political violence. She highlighted how, in the case of the three women, the perpetrators have not been pursued; rather, the women have been charged with faking their abductions – a situation that leaves them without justice.In her latest novel, *This Mournable Body* (2018), Dangarembga "focuses particularly on *women's bodies*, which suffer a tremendous amount of physical and emotional abuse throughout the narrative, but also display amazing strength and resilience" (Cogbill-Seiders 2019, p. 100). Sadly, however, Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova's bodies are 'unmournable' in the sense of Teju Cole's concept of "unmournable bodies" of "military combatants and civilians, whose deaths are 'not meaningful' to westerners" (Cogbill-Seiders 2019, p. 100). To borrow Butler's words (2004), Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova are turned by the State into persons undeserving of grief or even incomprehensible as lives. Speaking about bodies in pain, just like "writing a pain body and also reading such a body", is an act of resistance (Dangarembga 2020c, p. 3). In that sense, speaking about the activists' bodies in pain, as Dangarembga did, was an act of resistance against the State's politicisation of their experiences of torture.

Concluding remarks

The four women whose experiences I have discussed in this article refused to be silent and be silenced by heavy-handed State apparatus. They took an active role in national politics. The starting point of their struggles was principally the injustices experienced by the poor during the coronavirus pandemic, which they felt needed to be addressed. For them, then, the COVID-19 crisis created an opportune battlefield. However, the State itself took advantage of the pandemic and the different legislations enacted to curb the spread of the pandemic to silence activists. It is as if these women politicians heeded Dangarembga's clarion call for women:

> … to take the space for themselves. *Not to* wait for the space to be given to *them*. … until women engage as women for themselves and for the wider society, *they* will remain silent, *they* will remain unseen, erased. (Dangarembga 2020a, my emphasis)

As I argue in this article, in the case of Mamombe, Chimbiri and Marova the cost of speaking up becomes overwhelmingly huge, especially in a society where the State uses several violent tactics to silence voices of 'dissent' and in a state that fails to realise that "in a democratic system, dissent is not treason" (Adichie 2020, np). Inflicting any kind of pain on female bodies, as in the case of the three women, is intended to

scare them away from politics and doubles as a deterrent to women aspiring to be politicians. These examples, while very personal, are nevertheless symptomatic of a larger political context, in which women wield agency even as they grapple with various challenges relating to gendered violence. The failure to bring those responsible for the torture of the three women justifies violence against women, and simply attests to how the full humanity of women is ignored.

In this article I hoped to add voice to dialogues that make visible the violence that women suffer in politics in Zimbabwe. Such dialogues are important interventions aimed at articulating the urgent need for "a more level field of participation in politics" in contemporary Zimbabwe (Ncube 2020, p. 32).

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