

Tendai Biti's 'Seven Ugly Men': Missing Women & the Alliance
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In the past week the very perceptive activists from Kastwe Sisterhood published a horrifying story about girls dropping out of school and selling their bodies to all kinds of men. The traumatic testimony was from a girl who is 9 years old saying sometimes she is paid 25cents for sex. This is how horrifying and mutilated our condition has become. But the nation and its decadent leadership is too busy. The response of the government was as usual, government by operations, to 'round up' the vulnerable girls. Talk about organized power and public policy. In Bindura the vitriol from Graceland continued apace, this time the target was ED Mnangangwa. The winds are now blowing towards propping Sydney Sekeramayi. Zodwa Wabantu took precedence and Bishop TD Jakes was taken pictures with tyranny while the 'poor suffer what they must'. In places like Hopley Farm and Hatcliffe one can feel the thickness of poverty in the air – and when medieval diseases like cholera break out it is here they raze the most. Commercial sex work is a way out for most of these 'wretched' like Frantz Fanon said. The make shift houses are made of plastic, wood, very few bricks and corrugated iron. If a fire were to break out here the place would turn into a human incinerator. There would be no rescue from the fire department. The Mayor and a whole council can not even collect rubbish what of a fire?

In South Africa when a fire started in Khayelitsha the place was turned into a blast furnace. Raging waves of flames tore relentlessly into wood, plastic, clothes, paper and with paraffin stoves and maybe gas stoves lying around the whole area was turned into a home-made booby-trap of improvised explosive devices. Make no mistake about it the face and mass of this poverty is largely female. This is why we are quickly reminded of the following words: 'Women liberation is not an act of charity'. These were the words of Captain Thomas Sankara before he was grotesquely murdered in Burkina Faso. We begin from these words because we have closely followed the process around the building of an opposition alliance in Zimbabwe and more recently Blessing Vava (Gravitas Volume 12) argued that the 'MDC Alliance must go beyond being a highschool reunion'.



Fig 1.0 MDC Alliance: What happened to Women ?

One of the critical elements that has been seriously lacking is a conscious and therefore deliberate process of actively involving women: firstly, in the post-colonial civil society terrain women have presented one of the most organized and unified movements culminating in the Women's Charter; secondly women have been organising independently through the Women's Coalition, under the Electoral Convergence 2018 and also SheVotes 2018; thirdly, we must not forget in Zimbabwe poverty has a human face and that face is perversely female; fourthly let us remember that when the NCA women the 'No Vote' the Chairperson was Thoko Matshe and the women's movement was prominent in securing that win! Engaging women must not be an act of charity but it must be qualitative and therefore substantial. Shereen Essof's book *Shemurenga : The Zimbabwe Women's Movement 1995 -2001* (2013) and also Horace Campbell's book *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation* are good reads about how an exclusionary 'liberation moment' and a 'post-colonial marginalization has cost women liberation in Zimbabwe. As Pat

McFadden would charge 'We need a sustained, radical critique of the links between systems of privilege, exclusionary practices, and the perpetuation of women's cultural and political repression in all our societies' (See Pat Macfadden , Works and Days 57/58 Volume 9 - 2011).

Chairs for Patriarchy and Violence for Women

The very fact that on the same day the MDC Alliance was being launched Thoko Khupe the only elected Vice President of the MDC was being brutalized is not a mistake of circumstances. One is reminded of Trudy Stevenson's bloodied face and also the haunting of Lucia Matibenga in 2007. It is not a misfortune of circumstances that in its history ZANU PF (including ZANU and ZAPU); the MDC, the PDP, Transform Zimbabwe, and ZUM never had women either as President and or as Secretary General. The platforms that sought to mobilize the opposition like CODE, NERA and now the Alliance have been loose assemblages of patriarchy. Often women are the deputies; Deputy Secretary General, and deputy of this and that office. Is this some revenge of nationalist-cultural-conservative patriarchy that we have missed? This is not a superficial question. It has real social and political consequences at the ballot. The juggernaut of Achilles, after vanquishing enemies unfettered, faltered because of a heel.



Fig 1.2 SheVotes2018: Women are organising independently

Women voices are pushed to the periphery systematically. Recently, women Members of Parliament like Jesse Majome, Priscilla Misihairambwi-Mushonga, Nomathemba Ndlovu and Jasmine Tofa had to write a letter to the Speaker of Parliament to highlight this systematic discrimination of women even in the House of Assembly. The number of women in the National Assembly has not gone anywhere near what the constitution envisages. In the last election what was puzzling is that the ruling ZANU PF had more women candidates in their ranks than that of the opposition. The very fact that the MDC leader had to use 'Presidential powers' to appoint 'two men' into the 'presidium' is evidence enough of women exclusion gone mad. But here is the point we are making here: if the MDC Alliance does not deliberately put women liberation at the centre of its agenda then the whole alliance cavalcade will be a false start.

Women Electoral Convergence and SheVotes 2018

There is a very slippery slope here that a process which does not place women's agenda at the center of today's politics will take the progressive social forces to the contradictory phases of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). In the NCA women quickly discovered that while 'men' were committed to constitutional reform they were not automatically open to a progressive women's agenda. The Women's Coalition experience and how they built a nationally organized women's movement and developed the Women's Charter is an instructive phase. In the current phase of contestations the importance of electoral mobilization was put forward robustly by

Priscilla Misihairambwi-Mushonga when she stated that ‘the boys’ are too busy with ‘seats in the leadership’ than presence in the community. In an interview with Violet Gonda she said the following:

But, initially, right now, we have said look here guys, boys are focused on something else and we can’t be fighting with them and telling them ‘stop what you are doing’. They are focused on sitting in and dealing with this thing about leadership, about seats, which is ok, let them do that but somebody has to be putting their hands on the wheel, so to speak (violetgonda.com – 25 June 2017 interview with Priscilla).

In the same interview Priscilla hammered why it was important that women focus on (i) putting a women’s agenda on the electoral terrain (ii) voter registration, (iii) mobilization, (iv) participation and as (iv) candidates. It seemed that the MDC T Spokesperson all but agreed that they have been on a wild-goose chase for the past 5 years when they sought a strategy to (i) boycott all elections and (ii) push for reforms. It begs many questions and one wonders if these impulsive decisions are not being driven by ‘Jobs for the boys’. This was a resolution from a very rushed conference of the MDC T and after years trying to get ‘ZANU PF to reform itself out of power’ the reality has hit home. The MDC T made a strategic blunder and it will pay heavily for it in terms of lost time. The aftermath of the 2013 election had struck them like a thunderbolt and send them fragmenting and pushed them into a cul de sac they now have to retreat from. A few of us argued then that that when dealing with an electoral authoritarian regime like the one in Zimbabwe you never surrender an inch of gained ground: boycotting elections after the fact only served to let ZANU PF manage its internal fissures with minimum pressure from the opposition. Boycott politics has no impact on a regime with no face to save.

Women Are a Game Changer: Remembering the Women’s Charter

After years of confronting feudal-patriarchal modes of rule in post-colonial Zimbabwe the women’s movement captured their vision and demands in the Women’s Charter. That Charter must be translated into living reality. While the Constitution has made all sort of declarations on gender and women’s rights these remain just that – words al thunder, fury and no real bite. Our friends in the Alliance must be very careful not to build another ‘boys club’ and like like Tendai Biti said Zimbabwe’s future can not be decided by ‘seven ugly men’. The Alliance must be quickly rescued away from a ‘constituency’ based horse trading game in which *men* bargain how to share the ‘gifts’ and ‘spoils’ of a war which has not been fought. Generals were never rewarded for wars yet to be fought. When Julius Ceasar meets Maximus, he asks: ‘how should I reward Rome’s General?’ It was after the war and not before. Perhaps, just perhaps, rather than Zimbabwe’s young intellectuals celebrating about meeting ‘the first lady’ they must be asking structural questions about women liberation in Zimbabwe and that way we can avoid the seduction of power and being mobilized into building another personality cult – a careful reading of Thomas Sankara, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral would be a good start before we are marched into the cul de sac of false Gods.

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