



Focus on Community Peace Building Practices

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NPRC, WOMEN SAFE SPACES: DELIVERING JUSTICE FOR WOMEN?

About this Publication

This publication, *Focus on Community Peacebuilding Practices*, published by Heal Zimbabwe Trust is informed by the imperative need to bridge the knowledge gap between local community level practices and experiences and national to global level efforts contributing towards building sustainable peace. This is achieved by sharing knowledge, practical experiences and creative ideas on community level peacebuilding, violence prevention and conflict transformation processes. The publication also provides comprehensive insights on empirical grassroots peacebuilding methodologies while reflecting on diverse best practices, healing and reconciliation processes.

Heal Zimbabwe Trust

Established in 2009 in response to the Global Political Agreement, which birthed an inclusive government, which advocated for depolarization and reconciliation at the national level, Heal Zimbabwe sought to translate the national level consensus to sustainable social cohesion at the lowest level of communities by placing special emphasis on the use of local knowledge peacebuilding systems and expertise. We envision a, 'socially cohesive nation that enjoys tolerance, peace, and prosperity at all tiers of the society'. Our mission is to 'promote tolerance, peace and inclusive prosperity hinged on the observance of socio-economic and political rights of Zimbabwean citizens. Since establishment in 2010, Heal Zimbabwe continues working on human rights protection, implemented peace-building interventions and supported victims and survivors of diverse forms of conflict and violence. The organization's work prides in bottom-up development strategies

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Introduction

'Can the NPRC processes help deliver justice for women who are victims of past human rights violations, from the liberation struggle traumas to decades of economic discrimination? What about women perpetrators?'

The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) recently created safe spaces for women to engage with the Commission's transitional justice interventions. It is the Commission's reflective conscience that in times of conflict women and girls experience unique violations and are sensitive victims that require safer spaces to tell their stories. Women generally suffer from physical and emotional violence because of their gender and societal positions. They are physically and emotionally tortured by being sexually abused, used as political baits, through enforced disappearance of

their husbands, sons and daughters as well as though deliberate discrimination from socio-economic levers.

Heal Zimbabwe commends the NPRC's initiative as it resonates with the organisation's interventions that values women specific platforms through Women Safe Spaces for Reconciliation (WSSR).¹ Heal Zimbabwe's experiences with WSSR is that creating safer spaces for women to narrate their experiences of human rights violations ensures that their voices are heard and that justice is served. The spaces protect them from public humiliation, re-traumatisation and socio-cultural discrimination associated with exposure of personal conflict experiences. Therefore, this article provides more insights on the importance of Women Safe Spaces in healing and reconciliation processes while reflecting on Heal Zimbabwe's experiences in working with women only safe spaces in politically volatile communities.

What are Women Safe Spaces?

Safe spaces are generally groups or places where people feel physically and emotionally secure to mingle and share moments or experiences.

Therefore, women safe spaces represent groups or platforms where women feel secure physically and

¹ The women safe spaces are groups of not more than 20 women representing 20 households that are already existent within the communities. The spaces comprise of women from diverse socio-economic and political backgrounds, denominations and ages who meet on their own to build peaceful relations. The groups meet every fortnight to discuss peace building issues as well as other issues hindering social unity in their communities and they agree on various activities to address the identified issues. These women will engage with various community stakeholders such as churches, traditional leadership, local government authorities and business people, among others, on issues of peace building issues that are important to their community. These women with the assistance of HZT are expected to facilitate reconciliation and peace dialogues within their localities.

emotionally to socialise and share their experiences without the presence of men. Heal Zimbabwe established such spaces dubbed Women Safe Spaces for Reconciliation (WSSR) with a view to help women raise their voices and be heard in violence prevention and conflict transformation issues without the dilution of men's presence and interferences.



Figure 2: Bikita Women posing for a photo after their Safe Space meeting

The assumption of Women Safe Spaces is that men are the assumed perpetrators against gender-based violence. According to Schröttle (2016) statistically, men are unequivocally default perpetrators of violence. "Both women and men are primarily victims of violence by male perpetrators. Women comparatively rarely act as perpetrators of severe violence."² This assumption justifies the essence of women only spaces to advance socio-economic and political justice for women. Reflecting on the recent NPRC women only platforms held in the Matabeleland and Mashonaland East Provinces, women safe spaces are platforms conducive for women to narrate

² Schröttle M., Vogt K. (2016) Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Violence: Empirical Results from National and International Quantitative Violence Research. In: Kury H., Redo S., Shea E. (eds) Women and Children as Victims and Offenders: Background, Prevention, Reintegration. Springer, Cham

their experiences of human rights violations and abuse during Zimbabwe’s past conflict episodes with a view to facilitate truth telling and ultimately closure. This crucial practice enhances women sensitive issues to be heard in a favourable platform where confidence and courage to speak out is gathered and constructively exploited.

According to the UNFPA, safe spaces must be characterised by leadership and empowerment of women, survivor centred, safe and accessible, community involvement, should be coordinated and tailored to support the victims. Below is a summary of the attributes,

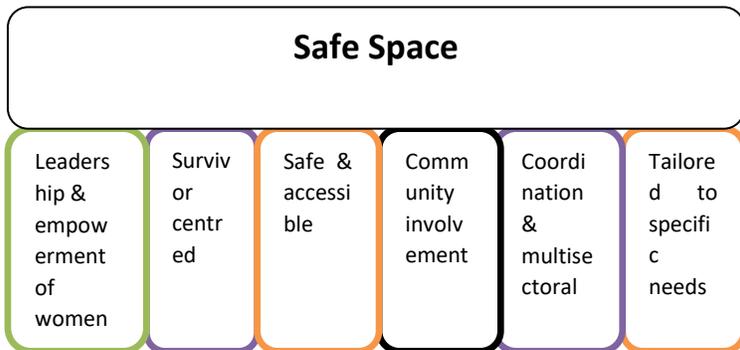


Figure 3: Safe Space attributes: Adapted from UNFPA (2015) Women and Girls Safe Space: A Guidance Note Based on Lessons Learned from the Syrian Crisis.

Why Women Safe Spaces Matter

The central objectives of creating Women Safe Spaces is to establish safe platforms where women and girls can gather confidence and courage to reconnect with their homogeneous self, share experiences, socialize to rebuild collective networks, acquire contextually relevant skills and access multi-sectorial GBV response services and information on issues relating to women’s rights, health, and services.³ In the Zimbabwean context,

³ Maglietti, M. and Miquel, J. (2015) Women and Girls Safe Spaces – A Guidance Note Based on Lessons Learned from the Syrian Crisis. [Online] Available at: <https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/resources/women-and-girls-safe-spaces-a-guidance-note-based-on-lessons-learned-from-the-syrian-crisis/> (Accessed: 15 October 2019)

women safe spaces broadly contribute towards collective platforms where women share their experiences to face their past and re-build their future aspirations. Zimbabwean women and girls have experienced somber violations straddling from sheer politically induced physical violence to denial of basic social and economic rights including access to sanitary ware.

Women-specific spaces in healing and reconciliation processes create safety in terms of confidentiality of the women’s narrations, enhances free speaking, improves confidence and improves knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards emotional healing. This means, women and girls would be able to gather strength to narrate their experiences knowing their stories will not be used to judge their personalities as usually is done when men are involved. Hence, men’s presence interferes with safety in spaces of women-specific concerns.



Figure 4: A Safe Space dialogue meeting in Gutu.

In view of Heal Zimbabwe’s perspective, women safe spaces largely fulfils the broader United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR1325) which recognizes the under-valued and under-utilized contributions women make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and peace-building. Thus placing its WSSR as sustainable

platforms to generate women's potential to shape Zimbabwe's broader national healing and reconciliation framework. This perspective agrees with the ICTJ's argument that "Women must play a central role in the design and implementation of transitional justice measures if policy is to adequately respond to their needs."⁴

Generally, the necessity of women safe spaces is that they strengthen women's social-emotional confidence, while enhancing emotional wellness as a tool for combating victimhood in their daily lives. It enables women, collectively; to become problem solvers, become assertive, understand how to deal with diversity and how to handle feelings towards healing, reconciliation and community building.

Will the NPRC deliver justice for Women Victims?

In view of the NPRC mandate the fundamental question is 'Can the NPRC processes help deliver justice for women who are victims of past human rights violations, from the liberation struggle traumas, the Gukurahundi sexual violations, Operation Murambatsvina displacements and decades of economic discrimination and their continuing marginalisation from effectual decision-making processes.'

During public consultations conducted by the NPRC earlier in 2018, the institution promised to create women specific spaces to address their conflict experiences and healing needs. "In all our conflict episodes, women have been the most affected, so through the victim support, gender and diversity committee we will have women only spaces where women are going to engage. ... "Even as we talk about Gukurahundi, women were disproportionately

⁴ ICTJ (2019) Gender justice. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ictj.org/our-work/transitional-justice-issues/gender-justice#targetText=Transitional%20justice%20responses%20to%20gender,communities%20targeted%20for%20their%20gender> (Accessed: 15 October 2019)

affected and a lot of how they were affected are issues that cannot be said in public, so we are going to create spaces where these women are going to participate," (CITE, 2019).⁵

The NPRC delivered its pledge beginning in July 2019 a step that demonstrates the NPRC's commitment to delivering its promises. Explaining her experience during the women only spaces, Commissioner Musanhi said "The stories that were told by women were heart rending and very emotional, no one deserves to go through what some women went through during the Gukurahundi era," (The Standard 2019).⁶ The fact that the NPRC promised and delivered registers milestones the NPRC has scored since the promulgation of its enabling Act on January 25, 2018. More importantly, the safe spaces engagements definitely shape the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission's healing and reconciliation framework, especially in terms of developing gender sensitive victims' support systems and response structures.

However, without delving into the broader national healing and reconciliation needs, it remains to be seen whether the NPRC will deliver the justice that women want in order to recover from the wounds of past conflict experiences characterizing Zimbabwe.

⁵ CITE (2019) Gukurahundi hearings: NPRC to create women-only spaces. [Online] Available at: <https://www.cite.org.zw/gukurahundi-hearings-nprc-to-create-women-only-spaces/> (Accessed on 18 October 2019)

⁶ The Standard (2019) Gukurahundi victims narrate harrowing tales. [Online] Available at: <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2019/08/04/gukurahundi-victims-narrate-harrowing-tales/> (Accessed on 18 October 2019)



Figure 5: A women safe space dialogue in Zaka

Women Perpetrators: A femininity dilemma

Do the NPRC women safe spaces recognize the possible existence of women perpetrators? In any conflict situation, there are women perpetrators, accomplices to the commission of gross human rights violations. They act as merchants of death, intelligence carriers and active tempo raisers. This category of women gives a challenge to Women Safe Spaces given that they may want to be part of the safe spaces yet they are known or perceived accomplices to the commission of violence against other women. What is more complex is when the women are victims who once been part of the violation curtain raisers. With their presence, the supposed safe space becomes an unsafe space. The NPRC faces a dilemma if trapped in this situation.

Heal Zimbabwe's experience is that it is difficult to separate women victims and women perpetrators from the community safe spaces for two reasons. Firstly, establishing women victims' only spaces objectifies them and discriminates them from the rest of the societal women. Secondly, the spaces create a barrier to reconciliation, which is the primary purpose of ensuring reintegration, forgiveness and collectivity. Thirdly, the supposed women perpetrators may be victims of the same

system they helped to victimize other women leading to accidental re-victimization.

In addition to the above, there is a danger of emphasizing sexual violence in conflict as the major women's concern. There are multiple subjectivities that women carry in this context, for example, they are considered victims, survivors, activists and largely as perpetrators too.⁷

Reflections and Recommendations

The NPRC has started off well in terms of integrating gender issues in the national healing and reconciliation agenda. However, there should be gender specific responses to the violations that women suffered. The responses should deliver gender sensitive justice for women victims, combat any forms of violations and marginalisation against women as well as guaranteeing non-recurrence of violence. It is doubtful if the current NPRC platforms were able to develop broader mechanisms to ensure that re-traumatisation does not occur. However, it is a good practice that the Commission received counselling support from partner organisations albeit leaving the victims recounting their memories could trigger trauma without sustained support services.

The NPRC is wrongly establishing safe spaces **FOR** women. Instead, the NPRC must create safe spaces **WITH** women. Heal Zimbabwe's WSSR are structures that are established by women and they are sustained by women in the target communities, hence, they can last beyond the lifetime of the organisation. Comparatively, the NPRC's safe spaces are healing platform where women participate, whereas Heal Zimbabwe's spaces created with and by women are community owned sustainable spaces i.e. FUBU (For Us By Us). Hence, it is essential for the NPRC to find modalities to establish women safe

⁷ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (2017) Inclusive Justice: How Women Shape Transitional Justice in Tunisia and Colombia

spaces that go beyond the lifetime of the Commission.

Of greater importance, in the NPRC's processes, is ensuring that the national healing and reconciliation mechanisms meaningfully addresses the root causes and consequences of women and girls abuse including the levers of gender-based violence. The women safe spaces established by the NPRC were sort of events as opposed to systematic structures that are aligned to preventive actions and institutionalised non-recurrence buffers. It is essential that while the gender-based violence horrors are recounted, hope for a non-violent future is built for the victims and the society. Below are some specific recommendations the NPRC may need to consider to strengthen the women specific spaces as healing mechanisms;

- The women safe spaces must become sustainable empowerment platforms that avoid reinforcing victimhood and objectifying victims;
- Safe spaces must be established in convenient places where the memories of abuse will not be triggered and the spaces must be physically and emotionally secure to avoid intrusions;
- Sustained platforms (through regular meetings) must be established to transform the memories into empowerment and positive courage to conquer victimhood;
- There is need to create leadership among the affected women and girls to champion healing and reconciliation beyond their peers into the broader community;
- Awareness raising must be intensified on gender sensitivity in national healing and reconciliation to strengthen linkages between victims and the broader community to address gender based violence beyond past conflict episodes;
- Inter-agency collaborations and coordination with, for instance, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission may help improve redress of current and possible future gender based violence and conflict against women.

- As part of ensuring non-recurrence, the NPRC must establish early warning and early response mechanisms to detect conflict and gender-based violence.
- The NPRC must create opportunities for access to justice as they meet women in their different safe spaces. It is recognisable that during the safe spaces meetings, the NPRC provide counselling services and this can be more impactful if lines of access to justice are also opened during the process.

A woman with a voice
is, by definition, a
strong woman." —
Melinda Gates

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