Becoming Postcolonial

_African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship_

In the early 1980s Zimbabwe was touted as a nation that held the promise of a resolution to the seemingly intractable problems of de-colonization and stability in southern Africa. As is true throughout the southern Africa region specifically, and the continent in general, the notion of stability was defined in direct relation to the maintenance of classed and/or raced interests within Africa.

In Zimbabwe, a country where 1 percent of the population owned more than 70 percent of the land at independence, the most difficult problem was that of land—the most critical resource of the postcolonial Zimbabwean society. To resolve it, a deal called the Lancaster House Agreement (see appendix page 19) was reached in 1979 between the new ruling class of Zimbabwe, which included Robert Mugabe, the independent country’s first prime minister, and the British government. The agreement made provisions to establish a land fund, financed by the British and United States governments, which would compensate willing white farmers who sold their land to be redistributed among blacks. However, resistance from the white settler community eventually resulted in the state appropriating many of the farms, but fewer than 70,000 peasants were resettled on them, and the great majority of the land fell into the hands of government officials and wealthy elite black businessmen. Accusing President Robert Mugabe of corruption, the British withdrew aid...
from the land grant program; sanctions were imposed on the country; and Zimbabwe became embroiled in internal political opposition and a land and economic crisis in which the majority of blacks remain desperately impoverished and disenfranchised. Masquerading as a constitution, the Lancaster Agreement was in reality a means to retain the privileges of the white settler elite and the ruling, if impoverished, black elite ruling class at the expense and exclusion of the majority of Zimbabweans.

In the twenty-first century, we are confronted with the reality of both the collapse of neocolonialism and the need to craft new social and political systems that will fulfill the needs of millions of African people, including African women, who, by and large, were excluded from the benefits of independence. Zimbabwe provides an excellent example of how the transition to a postcolonial society has given rise to new sociopolitical challenges, and how, in particular, the twenty-first-century women’s struggles can lead us to a new framework in meeting them. I position women’s resistance agency for rights and entitlements, and their engagements with the state, at the center of this notion, because they are at the cutting edge for the emergence of a different politics on the continent, which can lead to all citizens living the wholesome lives promised by the extraordinary moment of change that independence provided.

While the neocolonial dispensation that followed the Lancaster Agreement afforded many Zimbabweans with some, limited, social, educational, and economic benefits, it fell short of the transformative changes needed to shift the society from one embedded in exclusionary state and legal practices to one that provides all citizens access to the most fundamental resource in the society—arable land. The fact that these changes have not taken place is evidenced, in part, by the fact that the lifestyle of the white commercial farmer has remained largely untouched by the continued marginality of millions of poor Zimbabweans who exist on the edges of his numerous farms (sometimes running into hundreds of thousands of acres). The assumption of the white farmer that he could continue to live as though black Zimbabweans had readily given up the memory of resistance against brutal racist repression and murder and the indignities of having had to live under white dominion was in and of itself a stupid self-delusion. But this is what most white settlers wanted and thought they got through British intervention. Consequently they continued to exploit the labor of hundreds of thousands of black farm workers, most of whom the
Zimbabwean state considered outsiders and who were not protected by any labor legislation, nor were they allowed to register as citizens of the new state. Among these hundreds of thousands of dispossessed people, who were stranded on white farms, were large numbers of women and children, whose unpaid labor remained critical to the maintenance of a luxurious lifestyle for the white settler family. The collusion of white farmers with the neocolonial state in the exclusion of black farm workers from the protections and entitlements of citizenship during the early years of Zimbabwean independence is only one of several critical issues that must be factored into any analysis of the current crisis destroying this society. White farmers continued the practice of indentured black labor and child labor until recently (the late 1990s), when they were forced off the farms. The rape and plunder of the bodies of black workers and their daughters/wives by rampaging radical nationalist militias, and the marking of black workers as traitors to the Zimbabwean nationalist vision, are brutal expressions of the further exclusion of a community of people whose vulnerabilities were intimately tied to the privilege and continued wealth of white commercial farmers in this country.

During the intervening years it was not uncommon to hear whites in Zimbabwe exclaim that they had never had it so good, and that if they had known it would be so easy, they would not have gone to war in the first place. Many returned from South Africa, where they had fled, unsure of their futures as the country headed toward independence in the 1990s.

For the emergent black middle classes who entered the state at independence without a farthing to their names in most cases, accumulation and a restructuring of the relationship between Africans and private property became the most immediate imperative. They used every possible opportunity to accumulate wealth, within the state as well as in the private sector, and were faced with the deep-seated resentment and resistance of white entrepreneurs who used every trick in the book to keep black competition. In the 1990s the state opened up the banking sector and supported various indigenous business initiatives in an effort to expand the base of the black middle classes. The tensions and contestation over sources of accumulation and the control of national resources intensified as SAPS programs undercut the rural and urban base of the ruling class, and the neocolonial project began to falter—exacerbated by recurrent droughts and the impact of globalization on Zimbabwe’s agricultural production sector.
With the end of the Lancaster House Agreement moratorium on state-led acquisition of land in 1990, and as a result of the increasing pressure from a burgeoning civil society for the state to restructure its relationship with the citizenry on all counts, the Zimbabwean state went into crisis mode, and the issues of land, identity, and national consolidation became the cutting edges of a new political discourse within this society. Ten years of a stalemate on settling the land issue between the ruling class and the settler minority resulted in land invasions and an implosion of the country’s legal, economic, and political systems. As the Zimbabwean ruling class moved across its national boundaries in search of new fields of accumulation by repositioning itself militarily within the increasingly regionalizing state process (through the Southern African Development Community [SADC]), it became trapped in the conflict within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where it vied with the equally determined ruling classes of Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola over the immense wealth of that wretched country—thereby adding to the already explosive mix of unresolved national issues in Zimbabwe. The scene for a crisis-driven transition had been set.

Where and When Women Enter the Contestation over Citizenship

The dominant notion of citizenship within the Zimbabwean and African context generally is one derived largely from the colonial practice that attached the status of citizenship to whiteness, maleness, and to the ownership of property. Qualified suffrage (based on the ownership of property) was a compromise considered for certain groups—including white women and persons of mixed-race (labeled as coloreds)—while the majority of Africans (as in people of indigenous origin whose features and social status conform to tropes of racialized otherness and difference) remained outside the legal and political reality of this notion. Colonial historiography attests clearly to the systematic exclusion of Africans from even the most limited meanings of citizenship as an imagined and performed status, and the use of extra legal mechanisms to ensure that black women in particular remained confined in the privatized rural spaces of the colony was the most blatant example of these exclusionary state policies. Black men often participated in the “bounding” of black women
to the rural spaces that were defined as authentic African spaces, nominally controlled by chiefs and elder males. In the urban areas black women could only traffic publicly under the auspices of a recognized black male—as a wife—and women who could not produce a husband were labeled prostitutes and socially stigmatized. In Kenya women who fled to the cities were repatriated to villages by male relatives, where they were spat on and humiliated as traitors, a practice that clearly aimed at ensuring that young women remained within the boundaries of such communities. Nonetheless, women left for the urban spaces, expressing their resistance to patriarchal surveillance through flight.

The anticolonial struggles provided a unique opportunity for black women to become political and to embark on the path toward citizenship—to becoming autonomous subjects, with a consciousness of rights and entitlements that enables one to demand protections and obligations from the state. The engagement of women with African and European patriarchies during the struggle for independence is widely reflected in the her-storiography of the region—something that even the most radical left intellectuals (most of whom were white males) did not deem worthy of inclusion. The closest black women came to mention in most of the historical and political texts about southern African resistance was as the mothers of great men or as prostitutes. Feminist contestations and rejections of such racist, patriarchal representations have led to an increasing acknowledgement that black women were more than glorified breeders and victimized sex slaves. This is an important intellectual and political leap forward in terms of the formulation of a more inclusive left epistemology.

Nonetheless, the neocolonial state attempted to limit the entry of black women into the public—a contradictory stance given that one of the most important policy outcomes of the immediate independence period was the implementation of universal primary education, which meant that little girls could enter the public world of knowledge and begin to imagine themselves beyond the narrow patriarchal identities of motherhood and wifehood, roles that intimately tie their intellectual and social abilities to the social reproduction of families and communities. This entry of black women into the modern public spaces of neocolonial society marked a dramatic turning point in their unstoppable sojourn toward the status of citizenship and entitled individuality. Education provided black women with the possibility of crafting a new identity and of acquiring a conscious-
ness of entitlement that would impact their relationships with males at the family, community, and society levels.

Zimbabwe has one of the most educated female populations in the southern African region, and access to education became a critical wedge in the struggle for rights that women undertook across classes within the African women’s movement. The contestation over higher education and struggles over the implementation of affirmative action at the University of Zimbabwe dramatically reflected the tremendous tensions between young Zimbabweans over educational spaces and other critical social resources, and it exposed an emerging consciousness among women about the possibilities they have to become active, engaging citizens.

Expressions of patriarchal resistance to women’s occupancy of spaces of learning showed themselves in the gang rape of female students and the stripping of any young woman who dared to step outside the bounded notions of hetero-normatively defined ideas about decency—by wearing a mini skirt or refusing to conform to the expected traditional decorum of a “decent” woman—the latter being ironically an artifact of colonial (Victorian) invention. The surfacing of authenticating discourses within the Zimbabwean academy, disguised as attempts to maintain standards of an imagined national culture, controlled and determined largely by young (and older) African males, reflected the struggle over a site that had been critical in ensuring white privilege and the reproduction of a racist ideology during the period of colonial domination and that had provided important new opportunities to the emerging black male elite soon after independence. The ensuing battles on the university turf spoke volumes for women’s challenges to African patriarchy and their impact on the hegemonic political and sociocultural notion of citizenship. In the mid-1990s, when Zimbabwean women were able to make amendments to the constitution (Lancaster House Agreement) by insisting that women, as citizens, had the right to marry foreign males who should automatically accede to all the rights that accompany such marriage for Zimbabwean men, the state restructured that clause of the constitution to limit the rights of all foreign spouses, regardless of gender, rather than extend the full rights of citizenship to the spouses of Zimbabwean women.

As I will show presently, the contestation over the meanings of citizenship within Zimbabwean society reflects the deep-seated exclusionary patriarchal character of constitutions as juridical texts and as politicized
instruments within this society and across the region, as well as indicating the newer challenges that women’s activism and political consciousness are posing to the state and entrenched patriarchal cultural and social institutions.

Another benefit of the early concessions by the neocolonial state to the people as a fulfillment of pseudo-welfarist promises that had been made during the anticolonial mobilization was the provision of minimal health care access—both primary and reproductive—to women across the social spectrum. In reality this meant that increasing numbers of women could invest more of their time in the business of economic activity. They could enter waged labor and compete with males for a pool of jobs that brought in a limited but critical income, and they could compete for various social, political, and cultural resources that in turn impacted the character of family relationships and initiated a shift in the power relations between women and men at all levels of the society.

Women began to enter the middle classes in their own right as bearers of various types of property, mainly in the form of intellectual property and skills. The emergence of a women’s movement also provided a critical resource base for women’s entry into the middle classes; and while this feature of the movement has severely undermined its political viability and effectiveness as a political movement, it has nonetheless created new sources of identity for women in the public, further destabilizing the patriarchal relationships between the hetero-normative genders. Social mobility based on educational expertise enabled women to enter the public as individuals who could engage with the market, albeit constrained by cultural and social taboos and value judgments that limited their ascendency and relegated most women to lower-level professions and lower pay. Nonetheless some Zimbabwean women broke through the barriers that the colonial state has imposed on their social and physical mobility. Most significant, black women could, for the first time in known African history, confront the state as individuals who understood that they had rights and entitlements by virtue of being members of their society, regardless of their status or on the basis of ethnicity, class, or social location. The colonial state had refused to even acknowledge the existence of black women as persons, relegating them instead to the permanent custodianship and control of males within what were designated as African families.

This social restructuring of the middle (and the working) classes has
had important consequences for the character of women’s relationships with the state and for any analysis of the social character of Zimbabwean society. While one could hazard the claim that to a large extent the statuses of peasant women have been least ameliorated by the social and economic changes that occurred within Zimbabwean society as a result of the liberation struggle and the achievement of neocolonial independence, and this is largely as a result of the absence of opportunities to break out of the patriarchal stronghold of the family, for other classes of women, the first years of independence did make an important difference in their lives (as women) and in the lives of their girl children. One such expression is the continuing hegemony that the ruling party (ZANU-PF) has over rural female constituencies and the differences in voting patterns between urban and rural women in Zimbabwe today.

Middle-class women, who are at the forefront of the women’s movement all over the continent, portray the most obvious representations of a modern identity and culture within their societies. Their embrace of modernity—largely through the articulation of notions of political and human rights that invoke old traditions of bourgeois equality and liberty—has become the archetypal rejection of deeply embedded myths within Western anthropology and African nationalism about the “true” African female persona. Faced with the demands and threats of African men that they conform to an outdated notion of womanhood—on which the imaginary authentic African identity is premised—and that they not disrupt the cultural and social base of male rule—in the public and private spheres—middle-class African women are defiantly redefining themselves as citizens who make choices increasingly as individuals, based on their access to and control over critical social and material resources within their respective societies. All these tensions and contradictions coalesce around the increasing demand by middles-class (as well as other classes of) women that they have a right to own and control private property. This has become the crux of the matter in relationships between women and men and between the women’s movement and the state. Women’s demands for title and/or guaranteed state protections to their occupancy of redistributed land indicate a critical interface between notions of women’s rights and citizenship with forms of private property that has not received adequate attention in the discourses about who African women are becoming in the current period of transition. I shall return to this issue in my conclusion.
Suffice to say that as Zimbabwean (and South African) society entered the period of transitional crisis (here crisis is understood as representing a historically unique moment of opportunity to move to new places—for individuals and societies), the women’s movement also came into its own—representing a broad spectrum of women’s organizations and structures; a collective political agenda, which was continuously negotiated and contested, especially with regard to issues of sexuality and integrity/choice; and a new tradition of resistance against the state and the various institutional locations of patriarchal repression and violation. The stage seemed set for a new political culture to finally emerge. I think that in the mid-1990s, the Zimbabwean women’s movement (like women’s movements in various countries of the region and the continent—to varying degrees) was poised to lead this society into a new political future, together with other critical civic players, and the issues of full citizenship for women were positioned at the core of this new political ethos. How was this possible?

Women Contesting Notions of the Political and the Public

If we look at the past twenty-odd years of civil society activism in the region of southern Africa, in particular, it is very clear that the women’s movement had become increasingly pivotal in shaping and directing engagements with the state over the most critical issues facing all citizens in the region. In fact, there was no social movement that was as well organized and as politically and socially effective as the women’s movement in national and international terms. In Zimbabwe the women’s movement was the first expression of women’s demands for an autonomous identity, when women rejected the persistence of colonial laws that restricted their mobility, particularly in the cities, and marked them as prostitutes—interlopers who represented a real and present danger (to borrow the jargon of the extreme right—with caution). The backlash against women’s entry into the public domains—where rights are situated as the social, political, and legal outcomes of group and national struggles—was instantaneous and uncompromising in the immediate years after independence. Black men argued for the redomestication of women who had been active as combatants against the Ian Smith regime, and the battle over national culture and the subservience of women within Zimbabwean families raged then and continues to rage in the present.
As the movement separated itself from the state-sponsored initiatives of
the early 1980s, and became more autonomous in the manner that it
expressed the construction of political issues—from the safer issues of
children’s rights and empowerment for poor women to the radical demand
for the decriminalization of abortion and the provision of safe termination
with information; the insistence that women have an inalienable right to
the ownership of private property, in particular family property—the battle
over the ownership of the movement came into being. The influence of
more moderate elements within the movement in the first decade of
neocolonial rule reflected the continuing influences of nationalist ideology
and an uncritical relationship with the neocolonial state, and it meant that
the women’s movement in Zimbabwe as well as in the region remained
largely mainstream and unthreatening to the state. However, as women
became more active in regional and global women’s activities at the United
Nations (UN) level, in particular, the consciousness of such women began
to change. The UN women’s conferences were a perfect ground for the
acquisition of even more radical political perspectives. African women
acquired new strategies of engagement, heard about the struggles of other
women in the South as well as in the North, learned from the traditions of
resistance that had worked, and considered the strategies that other
women’s movements had used in their relationships with other move-
ments, the environmental movement, for example. All this had a tremen-
dous impact on the political character of women as individuals and as
leaders of the movement.

The liberation of South Africa and Namibia opened up additional
opportunities for women from Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana,
Kenya, Uganda, and Mozambique to work together at the regional level—
partly in response to the regionalizing tendencies that had begun to
emerge in the state (SADC) and partly as a consequence of the energies
that the movement was garnering from collective activist practice. By the
mid-1990s the Zimbabwean women’s movement reflected the dominance
of a radical, highly critical political tendency within it, and the movement
had shifted the manner in which women were relating to the state. The
discourse of reproductive and sexual rights was driving women’s demands
for state intervention into the crisis of HIV/AIDS and the exploding levels
of sexual violence against female children and women of all ages. The
connections between domestic violence (in the private) and structural,
state-sponsored, patriarchal violation—embedded in the maintenance of social status laws that allowed sexual impunity and misogynist practices in the name of cultural preservation—came under uncompromising challenge by women of all classes and social locations. Women demanded the amendment of clauses in the Zimbabwean constitution that protected black men from prosecution because their behavior was constructed in terms of cultural license. Women marched on the courts and demanded that magistrates who were blatantly biased and unfair in their judgments be removed from the bench and/or be sent for gender sensitization courses.

In terms of structural resources, the women’s movement undertook extensive training of women lawyers in the use of gender analysis and feminist approaches to women’s rights, and Zimbabwean women were critical in the formulation of the African Women’s Charter (within the African Human Rights Charter) and in the formulation of women’s rights as human rights at the global level. At the national and regional levels Zimbabwean women were key players in the creation of research institutes and undertook studies on women’s rights and entitlements in many of the southern African countries under the aegis of the Women and Law in Southern Africa Trust. The Unity Dow case in Botswana became a touchstone for the demands of women across the region. Women realized that their citizenship status was contingent on a fundamental restructuring of the law and the legal instruments that men were using to exclude them and/or to maintain the bifurcation of the law into traditional customary law and civil law. By positioning women outside the generalized law—which promises every individual a fair hearing and access to a jurisprudence that proclaims equality for all—women could be controlled by black males through a deployment of exclusionary cultural discourses and practices. Despite these expressions of women’s political astuteness, it remained exceptionally difficult to convince sufficient numbers of women in the movement to move beyond the rhetoric of radical feminist demands, caught as they were between the familial pressures to be wives and “decent” women—in accordance with tradition—and the view they had glimpsed through the window of opportunity that education and global activism had provided. This would have required the initiation of a more radical process of institutionalizing women’s rights and entitlements in newer and more sustainable ways that went further than the liberal pronouncements and “negotiated” settlements with the state.
Several key confrontations with the state occurred in the 1990s, related directly to women’s aspiration to the ownership of their bodily integrity and family property, which served as turning points in terms of black women’s consciousness as individuals within a resistant patriarchal neocolonial state. Besides the poor response on the part of the state to actively respond to rising rates of femicide and brutal sexual violation of women across the class spectrum, Zimbabwean women faced off with the state on the issue of inheritance of family property. The culturally approved plunder of family resources at the death of a male spouse brought women to the point where they demanded state protection of their property rights. They appealed to the state president against such unfair practices. However, in a televised statement during one of his election campaigns, President Mugabe warned women against such “culturally unacceptable demands” and reiterated that under no circumstances would the neocolonial state approve of women’s ownership of family property. If black Zimbabwean women wanted to be married women, he said, as required by custom, then they should not demand the right to own family property. After all, he reminded the women, the families of their deceased spouses would take care of them in true African tradition.

Women were flabbergasted by such outright denial of their rights as the reality of blatant state collusion in their dispossession and exclusion hit home; and while activism for the protection of women’s familial property rights continued, the state had clearly drawn its parameters of the contestation. At the end of the 1990s a notoriously conservative black judge of the supreme court of Zimbabwe assembled a rainbow bench of right-wing judges and ruled that black women could not inherit family property over their brothers, even if such women had been designated as heirs to their fathers’ wills. The unjustness of the Magaya case echoed through the silence that crushed the confidence of the women’s movement, marking a crucial turning moment when Zimbabwean women began to reach out to other critical players in the local and national political scene in order to formulate different strategies of state engagement. Based on the passage of the Private Voluntary Organizations Act (PVOA), passed in 1995, the Zimbabwean state armed itself with legislation that aimed at muting and/or crushing civil society movements that had become powerful contestants with state-based groups.

By the end of the late 1990s the Zimbabwean women’s movement had entered into what was assumed to be a politically strategic alliance with a
national movement (the National Constitutional Assembly [NCA]), which had emerged at the leadership of the struggle for democratization and social justice in the country. The key demand around which hundreds of civil society organizations and groups rallied was the creation of a new constitution through national participation. The Lancaster House Agreement would become defunct in 2000, and Zimbabweans wanted a real constitution—a text that would reflect their political and legal interests and statuses as individuals and groups. The NCA set out to do just that, and proponents challenged a parallel state-led initiative to reform the existing constitutional dispensation.

In the heat of the moment, the women’s movement formed itself into a coalition, drawing women from across the differing political ideologies that make up the movement, and they produced a women’s rights charter, which began with the statement: “We the citizens of Zimbabwe.” It was a profoundly significant moment for radical feminists, who had worked for twenty years to bring the movement to this place—where women articulated a consciousness about themselves as autonomous individuals who unabashedly claimed their rights from a position of understanding that naming themselves differently would mean a qualitatively different political and social agenda for the movement as a whole.

However, while the alliance with the NCA moved women’s politics to a more centrally visible position within Zimbabwean politics, it also revealed the fractures and underlying differences between individual women and groups making up the movement, largely in terms of their specific relationships with the state. During the constitutional reform period, the Women’s Coalition was very active in the educational work of the NCA, mainly in documenting the views of poor working people across the society in the lead up to the national referendum. The people voted resoundingly against the state-sponsored draft constitution, resulting in the reinstatement of the defunct Lancaster House Agreement (with amendments) as the constitution of Zimbabwe.

Several critical lessons came out of this moment of engagement for the women’s movement and for the larger Zimbabwean civil society. The resulting stalemate around constitutional restructuring reflected a major shift in the kinds of political leverage that civil society had been able to exert on the state and its functionaries; and while the women’s movement had gained new insights into the workings of the state by positioning itself on the side of an alternative discourse on rights and entitlements in the
larger social sense, it lost its autonomous identity and the ability to respond as a political force that was primarily concerned with women’s interests and claims.

At the end of the 2002 Zimbabwean presidential elections, the Women’s Coalition published a statement that was scathingly critical of the state’s denial of women’s and poor people’s rights to vote safely and with dignity. Among the many issues raised was the “Amendment of the Zimbabwe Citizenship Act, which dispossessed women of their right to vote because of the laborious and expensive process required to renounce either their foreign citizenship or their parent’s foreign citizenship. Most rural women had no access to information on the new laws and no access to resources.”

The Women’s Coalition continued to express a radical and often defiant stance in relation to the violation of human rights in Zimbabwe, especially with regard to the violation of girls and women in farm worker communities, which had been decimated by the land resettlements and the widespread manifestations of impunity and a disregard for human rights. The notion of human rights within Zimbabwean society became heavily contested, as white farmers claimed one definition of the notion, and black, landless, angry state-sponsored militias proclaimed a totally oppositional meaning. Caught in between these two raging masculinized camps were the millions of black women who waited for the opportunities that this battle might present to push their claims for land as the signifier of inclusion into the new Zimbabwean citizenry.

The state was fully aware of the implications of allocating land to all and sundry—for its relationship with poor people, especially women, and for ZANU-PF’s continued control over party politics. Throughout the twenty-two years of independence, the state has held on to the colonial (and precolonial) policy that enables it to claim that it holds the land in trust for the people. This has given the ruling class a powerful weapon to wield in terms of electoral politics—when rural people are warned that voting for anyone else can mean expulsion from state-owned land. More recently the Zimbabwean government has dismantled all village-level structures (public spaces where people could express their views) and has reinstated chiefs as the legitimate authorities in all the rural communities. The South African government has also institutionalized these precapitalist, feudal systems at the local and parliamentary levels, glorifying them in a lower house that plays a gatekeeper role over the claims and demands that women and poor
people try to insert into parliamentary political spaces—all in the name of reinventing South African culture. It is a dangerous farce, and the South African women’s movement will pay dearly for allowing it.

More significant for purposes of this analysis has been the impact of political alliance with the NCA for the Zimbabwean women’s movement. Besides the obvious consequence of having absorbed the immediate energies, skills, resources, and experience of the most dynamic women leaders, the NCA has systematically, and with typical chauvinistic purpose, silenced and flattened the political and ideological landscape of the Zimbabwean women’s movement over the past five years. One cannot say this was done with any kind of overt coercion—after all, the Women’s Coalition was a spontaneous and voluntarily formed structure that continues to be led by women within the NCA and its political ally—the Crisis Coalition.

However, the Women’s Coalition never really exercised any actual power within this supposedly national democratic platform; and in addition to serving as the gender-mainstreamed token of the NCA and having to deal with gender issues, it was simply swallowed up in the dominant, male-defined agenda and strategies of the NCA. Initially, a very strong woman activist served as the chair of the NCA, giving the impression that the NCA was a gender-sensitive platform. While one cannot dismiss the impact this had on women’s sense of political worth in the society generally, particularly during the period of the constitutional referendum and just after, in the longer run it has become clear that having a woman at the helm of the NCA was a brilliant move on the part of a fundamentally patriarchal, male-dominated structure to successfully mine the energies and agencies of women and of their movement.

Half a decade later the Zimbabwean women’s movement is in the doldrums—ideologically and in activist terms—and while one could interpret the silence of the movement on crucial gender issues within the society at the present time (such as the crisis facing poor women who were made homeless by the recent state-sponsored cleanup campaign) as a tactical retreat in the face of brutal and unrelenting state repression, the consequences of teaming up with male-dominated structures in the struggle for social justice at the national level must receive urgent feminist interrogation. This task can be extrapolated to women’s movements in the region and continentally, as well, given the increasing emphasis by leading
women’s organizations and campaigns on collaboration with the states and regional/continental state structures (such as the SADC and the African Union), in addition to newer social movements addressing debt, globalization, privatization, and the environment, to name a few, which are male driven and deeply reactionary on crucial issues that affect women in their public and private lives. Large numbers of experienced, skilled, and articulate gender activists are being drawn into the ranks of movements such as the social form and other wide-based movements that are repeating and reinventing the same exclusionary, hierarchical, and sexist agendas on social issues that marginalized women’s issues and hegemonized the political energies and passions of women for fundamentally male interests.

Undoubtedly Zimbabwean women and millions of African women across the continent have made the critical connection between the struggle for citizenship as a fundamental status and its significance for individuals and their communities in the drive for greater access to and control over resources of all kinds, and the imperative of changing property relations as constituted under colonial rule, because it is through the hegemony over private property and the institutions of the state that black and white men are able to wield power and subvert the notion of citizenship to serve their own sectarian interests.

The right and ability to construct an identity that is not tied to one’s father or to an ethnic legacy, and the protected entitlement to be treated as an autonomous person, with choices and preferences that might differ from those of one’s family and community, have become a critical part of the discourses of women’s movements continentally. Through active citizenship, expressed in the continued contestation over all facets of what it means to be a citizen; a life free of sexual and physical violence; the ability to travel and be identified as an autonomous being; the freedom to be registered and to be acknowledged as a rightful heir to familial and public resources; the right to have fair access to critical services such as health, education, shelter, and transportation, portable water, and a clean environment; the license to be able to engage in political practice; and the entitlement to have access to the key institutions of the society in order to restructure them in more inclusive ways are all among the many tenets of a modern citizenship that Africans want, but that they have been denied by successive regimes almost without exception.

In conclusion, the possibility of a new and different political tradition and practice, which is really only the starting point of an exciting and
becoming postcolonial tremendously important discourse for Zimbabwe and the continent as a whole, lies at the intersection of women’s and poor people’s demands and claims for full inclusion into the sites and spaces of institutionalized privilege and rights in our societies. Africans do not want to be pitied; they do not want to be studies and interrogated as victimized subjects whose agency is rarely acknowledged, let alone politically supported, at the global level. What Africans have wanted for the past half century since independence is the opportunity to craft their own futures and to define their own destinies—as women, groups, communities, and as nation-states. Cleaning up the mess of the past three hundred years of supremacist rule in the southern African region cannot be an easy or pleasant task. Political struggles for rights are always costly for those who want to hold onto privilege as well as for those who aspire to a new dispensation, and the manipulation of people’s desires for a more secure future is also often unavoidable. However, becoming postcolonial through struggles for justice and for a more equitable distribution of the social and material resources of our societies has become an unavoidable imperative for the people of the African continent. It is an opportunity that women are making the most of, a moment that is changing their lives forever.

WORKS CITED AND USED
Lancaster House Agreement

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancaster_House_Agreement

The Lancater House Agreement was the independence agreement for Rhodesia, present-day Zimbabwe. It was signed on December 21, 1979. This agreement effectively ended the white rule in Rhodesia under Ian Smith. The agreement was signed between the Patriotic Front (PF), consisting of ZAPU (Zimbabwe Africa Peoples Union) and ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) and the Rhodesian government, represented at that time by Bishop Abel Muzorewa and Ian Smith.

After the Lancaster House Agreement paved the way for majority rule, and elections were won by Robert Mugabe in late February 1980, the three-month-long Lancaster House conference nearly failed over Land issues. However, the British agreed to fund reform, on a Willing buyer, Willing seller principle, where farmers who were unwilling to stay in Zimbabwe would be bought out by funds provided by the British through the Zimbabwe government.

1981

In 1981 the British were instrumental in setting up the Zimbabwe conference on reconstruction and development. At that conference, more than £630 million of aid was pledged.

In 1981 The Communal Land Act changed the Tribal Trust Lands into Communal Areas, and shifted land authority from traditional rulers to local authorities.

1985

In 1985—The Land Acquisition Act, though drawn in the spirit of the 1979 Lancaster House “willing seller, willing buyer” clause (which could not be changed for 10 years), the Act gave the government the first right to purchase excess land for redistribution to the landless. The Act, however, had a limited impact largely because the government did not have the money to pay compensation to landowners. In addition, white farmers
mounted a vigorous opposition to the Act. Because of the “willing seller, willing buyer” clause, the government was powerless in the face of the farmers’ resistance. As a result, between 1980 and 1990 only 71,000 families out of a target of 162,000 were resettled.

1992

1992—The Land Acquisition Act was enacted to speed up the land reform process by removing the “willing seller, willing buyer” clause. The Act empowered the government to buy land compulsorily for redistribution, and a fair compensation was to be paid for land acquired. Landowners were given the right to go to court if they did not agree to the price set by the acquiring authority. Opposition by landowners increased throughout the period 1992–1997.

Thus some land was purchased by the land fund, but few peasants were resettled while hundreds of abandoned and expropriated white farms ended up in the hands of cabinet ministers, senior government officials and wealthy indigenous businessmen. The British and Americans cut their losses and money, alleging widespread corruption. To date, the elites have the land and fewer than 70,000 peasants have been resettled, most without the necessary infrastructure to work the huge commercial farms from the 12 hectare plots they have been allocated.

Britain withdrew aid to the land reform programme, accusing Mugabe of giving the land to his “cronies”. (London now claims to have contributed £44m, but Timothy Stamp, Zimbabwe’s finance minister, says £17m).

By that time, British-claimed contribution in terms of aid to Zimbabwe stood at a half billion pounds in support since independence. Furthermore, £47 million of that was specifically targeted for land reform and approximately £100 million was budgetary support which could have been used for land reform.

1997

November 1997—As part of the implementation of the 1992 Land Acquisition Act, the government published a list of 1,471 farmlands it intended to buy compulsorily for redistribution. The list came out of a nationwide land identification exercise undertaken throughout the year. Landowners were given 30 days (as the 1992 Act demanded) to submit written objections.
June 1998—The government published its “policy framework” on the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme Phase II (LRRP II) which envisaged the compulsory purchase over five years of 50,000 km² from the 112,000 km² owned by commercial farmers (both black and white), parastatal corporations, churches, NGOs and multi-national companies. Broken down, the 50,000 km² meant that every year (between 1998 and 2003), the government intended to purchase 10,000 km² for redistribution.

September 1998—The government called a donors conference in Harare on land reform (LRRP II); 48 countries and international organisations attended. The objective was to inform and involve the donor community in the programme. The donors unanimously endorsed the land programme, saying it was essential for poverty reduction, political stability and economic growth. They particularly appreciated the political imperative and urgency of the land reform, and agreed that the “inception phase” covering 24 months should start immediately.

1999

1999—The Commercial Farmers Union freely offered for sale to the government 15,000 km² for redistribution. Landowners once again dragged their feet. As frustration set in on both sides, the government drafted a new constitution with a clause to compulsorily acquire land for redistribution without paying compensation. The drafting stage of the constitution was largely boycotted by the opposition (supported by the landowners), claiming that Mugabe only wanted a new constitution to entrench himself politically.

2000

February 2000—The government organised a referendum on the new constitution. If it had been approved, the new constitution would have empowered the government to acquire land compulsorily without compensation. The country’s powerful landed gentry threw its weight and money behind the disparate opposition and human rights groups who formed a united front to fight against the new constitution. Calling themselves the
Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the united front won 55% of the votes as against the ruling Zanu-PF’s 45%. There was wild jubilation by the MDC’s local and foreign supporters, prompting “End of Mugabe” headlines in the British media.

Two weeks later, the pro-Mugabe War Veterans Association organised people of like mind (not necessarily war veterans, as many of them were too young to have fought in the Liberation War) to march on white-owned farmlands, initially with drums, song and dance. They claimed to have “seized” the farmlands. A total of 110,000 km² of land was seized.

2002

Mugabe faced Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in presidential elections in March 2002. The incumbents picked Land Reform as the basis of their campaign.

2004

June 5, 2004—Minister for Lands, Land Reform and Resettlement John Nkomo said that all land, from crop fields to wildlife conservancies, would soon become state property. Farmland deeds would be replaced with 99-year leases, while those for wildlife conservancies would be limited to 25 years. However, there have since been denials around this policy.

On July 3rd, 2004, a report adopted by the African Union executive council, which comprises foreign ministers of the 53 member states, criticised the government’s handling of the election.

Note