

Reflection on the rape culture in Zimbabwe: Women remain victims of a system that requires an overhaul

On 30 January 2019, Zimbabwe's social media was awash with hash tags such as #BlackWednesday, #iSpeakForSis where various individuals and organisations decided to stand against numerous reports on rape and sexual violence that have been reported in our country over the past two weeks.

The events saw some people losing their lives and many getting injured as the security forces battled to quell uprisings triggered by the announcement of a [150% increase in fuel prices](#) by President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Apart from the shootings and the assaults there were allegations of rape by so called 'rogue uniformed forces'. The ruling party blamed the MDC Alliance and its affiliates, human rights organisation and Non-Governmental Organisations for abusing social media platforms and using these to [instigate protest against the ruling government](#).

In separate statements by the Minister of Information and Publicity, Monica Mutsvangwa, and the Zimbabwe Republic Police spokesperson, Charity Charamba, victims of rape were encouraged [to report their cases to the police](#). Media reports reveal that only a single case has been reported in Chitungwiza.

The question that arises is whether the system is adequately equipped to deal with incidences of political rape. Is reporting to the police 'victim friendly' when allegations are against the security forces that have been helping the police quell the unrest in the country? Ideally, a victim friendly system should have a health professional where those raped can report freely. Forensic nurses are also supposed be available to confirm occurrence of rape, after the confirmation the victim has to be accompanied to the police station by a professional councillor. Our system is currently not adequately equipped to deal with issues of rape. To this end there are reports of women who go to the police stations to report rape cases only to be asked to go back home without sympathy.

Empirical research has shown that cases of rape have taken place during past disturbances and elections, and most of them are politically motivated. According to the Research and Advocacy Unit ([2011\) report on politically motivated violence](#), it takes three forms; notably extreme violence, gang rape and insertion of objects such as sticks and bottles into the woman's private parts. In a case of extreme violence, a [2010 RAU report on politically motivated violence](#) relates an ordeal of a woman who sometime in 2000 was dragged from her homestead to a riverbed where she witnessed her husband being bashed using sjamboks and baton sticks. The husband was beaten for wearing MDC regalia in a ZANU PF stronghold. He became unwell and died a month later

The 2011 report on politically motivated violence underscores that rape is often used in time of conflict as a strategy to humiliate and destroy the foe. In 2002 a study on 139 [displaced farm workers](#) revealed 4% of the women alleged rape cases, and 14% of the sample alleged to have witnessed cases of rape, during the farm invasion process. In 2006 a [Zimbabwe Human Rights](#)

[NGO Forum report](#) revealed that of a sample of 448 women 6% were raped. A study of [Zimbabwean women in exile](#) in South Africa revealed a higher rate, 15%.

In Africa, conflicts that have involved soldiers have often resulted in arbitrary rape of targeted opposition members. More often than not women are the target as either spouses of opposition activists or active members of opposition parties.

The 2011 report by RAU on *Politically Motivated Rape in Zimbabwe* revealed that, although women are not in the battlefield during conflicts, they are often both Primary and (majority) Secondary victims. Women suffer a unique woe, rape. In the Zimbabwean context rape can only be perpetrated by a male on a woman. Section 65(1) (c) and (b) of the criminal Law (codification and reform) Act chapter 9:23 defines rape as any male person who knowingly has sexual intercourse or anal sexual intercourse with a female person, and, at the time of the intercourse, the female person has not consented to it, and he knows that she has not consented to it, or realises that there is a real risk or possibility that she may not have consented to it.

Women are often on the receiving end of rape during conflicts. The 2010 report by RAU entitled *No Hiding Place: Politically Motivated Rape of Women in Zimbabwe* asserts that almost all (25) of the victims of rape, from different parts of Zimbabwe, interviewed were members of the opposition; at least half of them holding office in the MDC; and three quarters had family members in the MDC. Most of the women got infected with HIV as a result of the rape cases, according to the medical reports by the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights (ZADHR). The cases of rape were from 2001 to 2008, with 2008 recording the highest number, 24.

The year 2008 was marred by a highly contested election in which ZEC announced Morgan Tsvangirai the winner of the presidential elections by a margin necessitating a runoff. After the announcement of the run off which was set for 27 June 2008, there was widespread abuse of human rights by ZANU PF, state sponsored violence [targeting members of the opposition included, rape, torture and forced disappearance](#). Evidence has proven that rape is a strategy used to annihilate the enemy in times of political conflicts.

Whatever happens, rape remains a heinous crime that has to be condemned at all costs. Whether rape has been committed during armed conflicts, or as a crime against humanity, even when it is politically motivated, the consequences are dire for the victim who has to suffer post rape trauma, often without support from close relatives. There is no justification for rape, as some would think: evidence has shown most women are not raped based on how they are dressed but because of their vulnerability.

We must encourage victims of rape to report their cases to the police. However more can be done in terms of making the process of reporting friendly to the victim over and above the Victim Friendly Units.