

# #BeatThePot: Strategies and Discourses of Women's Protests in Zimbabwe

by Rejoice Chipuriro

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on strategies deployed by women and discourses of women's collective action in the #BeatThePot strike which took place alongside popular protests against Mugabe and the failures of ZANU-PF led government in Zimbabwe. Using Judith Butler's ideas on "bodies in alliance and the politics of the street," I theorize how women as gendered "bodies congregate, move, speak and strike together as they claim public space into political spaces" (2015, 70). I interrogate women's use of embodiment as a strategy involving the metaphor of both the "labouring mothering body" and as "bodies that strike," which demonstrates how women in Zimbabwe confronted violent political, economic, and socio-cultural limits imposed on their bodies. In this strike, women challenged the silencing of women's public political work and refused to be relegated to the invisible margins of domesticized and undervalued reproductive labour. Thus, through the #BeatThePot protest, I demonstrate how women in Zimbabwe have engaged in body work to confront violent regime and how they have borne on their bodies violent reprisal through sexual attacks, abductions, incarcerations, torture, and even loss of life. The paper concludes that the feminized body is a site of violent struggle for autonomy and that through collective action women in Zimbabwe have sought to confront and transform the repressive state.

**Keywords:** feminist strike; gendered violence; protests; reproductive labour; Zimbabwe

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## Introduction: Zimbabwean Women's Struggles for Justice from the First Chimurenga to #BeatThePot

As Fatou Sow argues, women of all backgrounds and across continents appreciate the need to enjoy more rights leading to their participation in various movements, campaigns, and projects (Sow 2021, 6). Written accounts of women's organizing and resistance to oppression in Zimbabwe historically include the First *Chimurenga Umvukelo* (resistance) of 1896–97 which Mbuya Nehanda and Queen Lozikeyi led as spiritual and military religious leaders in Mashonaland and Matabeleland, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Historian David Beach dimin-

ished Mbuya Nehanda's role in organizing the first *Chimurenga*, by claiming that she was unjustly accused of initiating the resistance and that it was somewhat more likely initiated by her co-accused, Sekuru Kaguvi, as a more influential male leader in the Eastern Salisbury District (1998). Mbuya Nehanda was tried for the murder of H.H. Pollard, an oppressive Native Commissioner, and hanged by the Rhodesian police in 1898 (Beach 1998). At her execution Mbuya Nehanda reportedly refused to convert to Christianity and claimed that her bones would rise again, and her words became the inspirational mobilizing point of the second *Chimurenga* uprising from 1964 to 1979 which led to Zimbabwe's independence (Chigumadzi 2018). The story of Queen Lozikeyi, a powerful wife of King Lobengula who

wielded political authority, ritual power, and military influence over the Ndebele nation, was largely ignored in Zimbabwe's national history (Clarke and Nyathi 2010, 64). Scholars have noted how Zimbabwe's history has largely been biased towards nationalist narratives that attempt to unify multiple ethnicities, races and struggles to form a monolithic narrative that glorifies the "founding fathers" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012,15).

Whilst women have deployed different strategies in their struggles against colonial rule and patriarchal oppression and state violence, this paper focuses on the post-2000 era as a turning point in the history of Zimbabwe, and which had important political impact on the Mugabe regime.<sup>2</sup> During this period, the country went through a hyperinflationary economy, which saw an increase in anti-ZANU-PF<sup>3</sup> protests and the emergence of its largest Opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Gaidzanwa, 2020). In this article I focus on a particular women's protest, #BeatThePot, which was organized by the MDC-Tsvangirai (MDC-T)<sup>4</sup> Women's Movement, and I draw data from online media, including newspaper reports on the incident. The paper starts with setting the context within which #BeatThePot protest took place to provide insight into the historical, social, and political drivers of the conflict. From a contextual analysis the discussion shifts into the forms of mobilizing that were deployed, before delving into the logics of the protest as articulated by participants in the strike. This leads into a discussion on the modes of organizing deployed by the MDC-T Women's Assembly in mobilizing women to participate in the protest, followed by an analysis of the social articulation and logic of the strike. The paper also explores the symbolism that women used to frame their political standpoint, the impact of the strike, and the controversies surrounding the MDC leader. The words "protest" and "strike" are used to distinguish between the action of protesting and strike as a metaphor in organizing the protest.

## Context Setting: Crisis Under Mugabe's Rule

To appreciate the role played by Zimbabwean women's movements in advancing a transformative agenda it is important to delve into the historical and contextual settings within which these struggles emerge. Zimbabwe is located within the Southern Africa region, the countries of which share similar histories of settler colonial con-

quests and white minority rule. Women fought and resisted colonial rule in all its repressive forms alongside their male compatriots in the form of nationalist liberation movements.

ZANU-PF party won the first election at independence and its leader, Mugabe, adopted colonialist practices where racism, tribalism, sexism, and violence thrived, leading to atrocities such as *Gukurahundi* (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012). *Gukurahundi*, which means "the early rain that clears the chaff after harvest," was a genocidal campaign of violence targeting Ndebele people in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces from 1982 to 1987, when ZANU-PF and ZAPU signed the Unity Accord. This Unity Accord led to the erasure of ZAPU as an outright political opponent through its co-optation into ZANU-PF (Gaidzanwa 2020). The next main Opposition political party, MDC, only emerged in 1999. MDC's inception from the workers' movement Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) followed tumultuous economic woes of the 1990s, worsened under the World Bank's Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), and Black Friday in 1997, when the Zimbabwean dollar crashed and never recovered. In 2000, the MDC defeated the ZANU-PF-led government after campaigning for a 'No' vote in the constitutional referendum, which intended to adopt a controversial policy of land appropriation without compensation (Moore 2014). This ZANU-PF loss led to a series of incidents of politically motivated violence, which has become the ruling party's legacy.

In the 2008 presidential elections, Mugabe lost to Tsvangirai in highly disputed election results which led to a run-off. In the pre-run-off period between March and June 2008, the military unleashed a war-like election campaign through *Operation Makavhotera papi* (Operation who did you vote for), and terrorized, tortured, abducted, and killed Opposition members (Masunungure 2011). Political activists, including civil society human rights actors, such as Jestina Mukoko, were forcibly abducted. Mukoko was only released following women's marches, and petitions by her formidable lawyer, Beatrice Mtetwa. Women civil society leaders approached the SADC and international community and finally also appealed to the ZANU-PF Women's League and female political leaders to intervene (Mukoko 2016). Several other women, ordinary citizens as well as political activists, were impacted by these military atrocities when their homes were burned down, and they were tortured,

arrested, sexually assaulted, abducted, and killed by state security agents and their ZANU-PF supporters.

Following the political impasse resulting from the June 2008 presidential election, Mugabe agreed to sign the Government of National Unity (GNU) agreement in February 2009. This allowed for the MDC-T, and its splinter party MDC-M, to be incorporated into government, with Tsvangirai instated as the prime minister (Masunungure 2011). This façade of unity only lasted until the next presidential election in July 2013 when both MDC factions were ousted from power-sharing with ZANU-PF. The country, which had enjoyed some relief from hyperinflation, shortages of food and basic commodities, found itself back in the economic doldrums. The post-GNU economic and political challenges led to further clashes and confrontations with Mugabe's government. Political activists and disgruntled masses protested the ruling party through performative acts of resistance, such as street and online/offline protests by different groups. These protests intensified in 2016 (Siziba, Mpofu, and Ndlovu 2021). Following state-controlled censorship against anti-Mugabe protests, a new trend of mobilizing through social media emerged, using hashtags. The most popular of these was the #ThisFlag movement, led by pastor Evan Mawarire. #ThisFlag garnered international support through breaking the mould of political party-linked protests, and harnessed the power of social media to mobilize mass stay-aways at a time when political parties were weakening (Siziba, Mpofu, and Ndlovu 2021). Other popular protests were mobilized by the #Tajamuka youth movement, which mobilized unemployed young people and informal vendors. The MDC-T's Women's Assembly then mobilized women in Bulawayo to challenge Mugabe's rule through their own #BeatThePot protest, which they intended to take across the country.

## **Representations and Framing of Female Identity in Women's Claims for Political Rights**

It is equally important to reflect on the socio-cultural context in which the Zimbabwean political and economic crisis unfolded. Zimbabwe's patriarchal society is structured through gendered hierarchies in which ostensible female inferiority frames women's claims for social, cultural, economic, and political rights (Sow 2021, 1). To demonstrate how gender intersects with politics, Hasim states that women, regardless of their race, class, eth-

nicity, are consistently defined as political outsiders or as second-class citizens (2002, 697). In Zimbabwe, disparaging comments by male political party leaders indicate how women's voices are positioned in politics. For example, in 2013, Mugabe dismissed the recommendations made by SADC mediator's South African Minister Lindiwe Zulu that the country's presidential elections should be postponed, describing her statements as a "street woman's stupid utterances" (News24 2013).

Women's political claims are often dismissed because of their inferred lower socio-economic status. Powerful patriarchal norms confine women to the kitchen, with its socially inferior status, which emanates from women's traditionally and socially prescribed gendered roles of making food (Inness 2001). Political parties have been no different in sidelining women and pushing them to the lower ranks, or into token positions, including ridiculing the hard fought for women's quota in Parliament as the "kitchen cabinet" (Mangena 2022).

In addition to active participation within political parties, women in Zimbabwe protested through civil society groups, including the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ), a national membership-based network of women's rights activists and women's organizations. Women also protested through various workers' unions which included the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ), the Zimbabwe Nurses Association (Zina) and the National Vendors Union of Zimbabwe (NAVUZ) which represents street vendors, the majority of whom are women. Women also stood against ZANU-PF and all forms of repression through their professional capacities as human rights lawyers and scholars, by advocating and lobbying for justice, whilst others, as artists, voiced their resistance through music, theatre, fiction, and non-fiction writing. However, most forms of sustained resistance by women were through the Opposition MDC's political party mobilization. ZANU-PF Women's Leagues and Youth wings were drawn upon to strike against purported regime-change opponents or for propping up their male leaders' whims, such as, ZANU-PF's anti-sanctions protests, or they were bussed in to attend rallies without any coherent articulation of struggles aligned to their cause. ZANU Women's Leagues protests were unhampered by state security, neither were they arrested or harassed, as their participation defends, rather than opposes patriarchal power.

On the other hand, MDC women political activists have been harassed, arrested, tortured, and removed from the

streets and their personhood defamed in national newspapers, while others were raped and branded as “Tsvangirai’s whores” (Thomas, Masinjila and Bere 2013, 527). To prevent women’s collective action, women who oppose the state are labelled as “loose” or “prostitutes,” and this is used to justify the forceful removal of them from public spaces by the police. The state has thus been largely implicated in criminalizing female agency (Mangena 2021, 90).

It was within this volatile political and hyperinflationary environment and in the context of Mugabe’s desperate use of state violence to shrink democratic spaces, that the MDC-T Women’s Assembly mobilized the #BeatThePot strike. In July 2016, Thokozani Khupe, deputy president of MDC-T, led approximately 2000 women who marched from the City Hall in Bulawayo wearing the red party regalia, whilst beating empty pots and pans, and carrying dolls on their backs to represent hungry children, calling for the resignation of President Mugabe on account of his failure to provide food, jobs, and democratic rule (Okay Africa, 2016).

## **New Modes of Organizing: the #Beat-ThePot Protest**

MDC-T Women’s Assembly presented what Hassim (2002, 693) defines as a “strong social movement” by articulating women’s strategic and practical needs and successfully mobilizing over 2000 women to protest in defence of their interests. These protests were followed by nationwide strikes organised by the MDC-T president in alliance with civil society, student movements, and teachers’ unions. MDC-T Women’s Assembly mobilized technical support, which included activities such as advertising the event through newspapers not controlled by the state, preparing for the march according to Public Order and Security Act (POSA) requirements, and eventually engaging their lawyers to submit letters to the High Court which successfully challenged a Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) imposed ban on their march. Thokozani Khupe held press conferences and informed the public how the protest was part of a wider struggle for women’s political participation and calls for justice through free and fair elections.

The mobilization of women in Bulawayo was strategic on several fronts, the first being that it is the city from where MDC-T’s Deputy President Khupe, who was the face of the protest, originates. In a country where ethnic

polarization persists in politics, it was a good strategy in that Khupe would amass a large number of supporters from her home area. The second strategic move is that Bulawayo is a city marred by the historical clash between ZIPRA and ZANLA forces linked to the former ZAPU and ZANU-PF nationalist parties which culminated in *Gukurahundi*, the violent military operation that took place under Mugabe’s rule (Alexander 2021, 763). Many women suffered atrocities and endured physical and emotional trauma when they lost their loved ones in these political clashes (Thomas, Masinjila and Bere 2013, 527). Drawing on the deep-rooted memory of this injustice, and on the popularity of Khupe, a campaign against the Mugabe regime was successfully launched by women in Bulawayo, harnessing their power to protest political tyranny and economic demise.

Bulawayo as a city also offered an advantage for the MDC-T whose greater voter base was in cities due to the large populace of people who were laid off work as part of ESAP, collapsing industries under a hyperinflationary economy. The rallying point for #BeatThePot was that it was promoted as protesting hunger, following what Berazneva and Lee (2013, 34) postulate—that the urban poor are easily mobilised to join food riots as they are hardest hit by rising food costs and unemployment. Nyambi theorizes Zimbabweans’ experiences of hunger post-2000 as a life-threatening form of violence which was more fearsome than xenophobia and translated as hungerphobia (Nyambi 2018). Hunger in Zimbabwe is thus conceptualized as a perpetual deadly vice embedded in the country’s social and economic crisis. Food scarcity thus became easily politicized as a mobilizing force against the failed Mugabe regime by the MDC-T Women’s Assembly, considering women’s traditionally ascribed roles of provisioning and cooking food to nurture their families.

The use of social and print media outside of state control provided an effective tool through which to reach large numbers of technologically connected groups in urban areas. Protest movements have also taken advantage of the increased ease of access to mobile phones and internet connectivity to articulate political discourses and conscientize the public about social injustice. In this way, they have countered censoring by the state-controlled media such as newspapers, television, and radio, which in the past acted as barriers to communicating political interests opposed to the state.

Due to the high number of women mobilized, #BeatThePot offered a safer space for solidarity and protest where women could exercise their agency with reduced fear of abduction and torture. Prior to this protest, many women, such as journalists, prominent political activists, and civil society leaders, were targeted and abducted from their homes (Mukoko 2016). Similar cases of women activists being arrested and denied their rights to express themselves through protests were reported in Kenya (Thomas, Masinjila and Bere 2013, 525–28). Women’s activism and political voice has thus far been decimated and silenced. It is only through continued defiance that women have persisted to protest in various, but smaller formations, as the draconian reactions by authoritarian regimes makes it difficult for women to publicly voice their dissent. However, #BeatThePot was successful in mobilizing protest which led to women’s collective action on a large scale.

Whilst #BeatThePot did not unseat Mugabe, it was one of the campaigns that played a crucial role in promoting citizen agency, in addition to the other forms of collective resistance mounted by civil society and opposition political movements. Whilst this was incremental effort, arguments are that such fragmented protests and other hashtag movements such as #Tajamuka and #ThisFlag could have been more effective if they all joined forces. This notion of mobilizing beyond the women’s movement is hinged on the idea that larger numbers in non-violent protests yield more impact in toppling authoritarian regimes as evidenced in studies conducted by Chenoweth and Stephen (2011). Another factor that impacted the outcome of #BeatThePot is that their symbolic use of kitchen utensils to ‘strike’ against Mugabe’s authoritarian regime subverted dismissive tendencies by hierarchical political structures in Zimbabwe which package women’s wings’ political engagement as “kitchen” activities (Geisler 1995 cited in Mangena 2022).

## **Social Articulation of the Logic between Marginality and Protests**

Women’s articulations of why they participated in #BeatThePot show how the state failed in its mandate, leading to a political and economic crisis which made it difficult, if not impossible, for women to fulfil societal expectations about their obligations to their families and rendered them vulnerable to violence and abuse. The strike reflected how the relationship between the state

and citizens influences their behaviour, including how they participate in civic and political affairs (Gaidzanwa 2020,25). As such, where governance and security structures are authoritarian, intolerant, or use violence as a tool for control, citizens also become confrontational as they resist repressive rule. The MDC-T Women’s Assembly epitomized the popular women’s rights’ slogan of making the political personal (Man Ling Lee 2007, 163.). For example, state security has been used as an excuse to deprive citizens of their right to protest, upholding the autocratic nature of the regime in Zimbabwe (Jafari 2003, 6). In this regard, women sought to reassert their voices in the restricted space of Zimbabwean politics. The #BeatThePot protest was initially banned following a court application by the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) citing security threats as described by Kholwani Ngwenya, an MDC-T lawyer: “The argument by the police to ban the march was that they were not given adequate time to prepare, but the judge said the Constitution supercedes the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) on which the police were basing their argument” (Kholwani Ngwenya cited by Newsday Zimbabwe, 16 July 2016, Bulawayo).

POSA regulations stipulated that Zimbabweans must seek and be granted permission first by the ZRP to lawfully protest. The ZRP hardly permitted any Opposition parties to gather or march in protest, which contradicted Section 59 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, that grants citizens the right to demonstrate (Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights 2018). In this instance the lawyers of MDC successfully challenged the ZRP ban at the High Court.

Without counter resistance and challenging of the regime via the courts, many poor people in Zimbabwe, especially women, are often unable to express their democratic right to protest without facing state brutality at the hands of the ZRP and the military. State power exercised through the abuse of the judiciary and security forces impede rather than promote delivery of justice in Zimbabwe. Police brutality is aimed at silencing dissenting voices and intimidating political opponents. Women as activists and politicians are targeted in society and silenced both in the home and public spaces, as mentioned by one elderly woman who participated in the protest in Bulawayo in 2016: “We are hungry, we need money and food, our children are not employed so we are beating the pots. Maybe they will hear us, we have nothing to cook in them” (participant cited in Okay Africa 16 July 2016, Bulawayo).

The protester here expresses how women, as a politically marginalized group, resorted to striking empty pots as a means to be heard and to articulate their concerns. This elderly woman shared how she hoped that by striking the pots, women would make enough noise until the ruling elites in ZANU-PF addressed economic issues causing hunger. Her narration also shows how women simultaneously drew on and refused their gendered roles, moving from the confines of private homes, striking utensils to make noise over their concerns, in public spaces. Their cooking utensils became weapons or tools to strike at oppression and exclusion. Khupe, who carried a baby on her back whilst leading the strike, demonstrated how women are expected to fulfil their nurturing roles of caring for babies and feeding the family and, at the same time, need to protest against the state. By striking, women were using the space to voice their burdens and the impossibility of performing these gendered roles under the hyperinflationary economy. “These pots that we are beating are no longer cooking anything at home therefore we brought them to say we no longer have anything to cook. We are starving,” said Thokozani Khupe in a radio interview (Nehanda Radio 2016)

It is part of feminist thought and practice that the “body is political” (Sow 2021, 7). The political symbolism embodied through motherhood is used extensively by women’s movements in the Global South, including Pachamama (Mother Earth) in Peru, where protestors linked the female body to the Mother Earth nurturing life and feeding the nation (Cavagnaro and Shenton 2019, 6). These bodily representations of women acquired new meanings through protests, ones that politicized the gendered roles with which women are associated (Molyneux 1985, 228). In this instance, protestors used their roles as mothers to demand a politics of care which opposes patriarchal violence and corruption. Through incorporating values based on an ethics of care, women’s movements mobilize to ensure the wellbeing of families and ultimately of the nation, as articulated by Emang Basadi, a movement from Botswana’s slogan: “Vote a Woman! Suckle the Nation!” (Van Allen cited in Tripp 2003, 251).

Politics of care gained traction through ecofeminism’s focus on women’s nurturing roles as key elements to sustenance as opposed to the exploitative nature of capitalism and patriarchy. By centring care, women draw attention to an alternative politics of interdependence. It is important to note though that this way of thinking about women’s political work can also reinforce inherently con-

servative ideas about gender and women’s roles. Whilst the politicization of motherhood was deployed during #BeatThePot, it has not been universally adopted in other women’s protests. Other women activists mobilizing in Zimbabwe have resisted being cast in limiting gendered roles, and this is at least part of the reason for the extremely violent response they have received (McFadden 2022).

Increased food costs, compounded by job losses since 2000 in Zimbabwe, left most urban dwellers vulnerable to hunger. The MDC-T Women’s Assembly took this food crisis as a political opportunity to mobilize women against the hyperinflationary economy. In so doing, the organizers managed to turn the case of social and economic injustice into a “politically effective moral outrage” (Barrington Moore cited in Serulnikov 1994, 80). Through the #BeatThePot protest women in Bulawayo were able to politically challenge the state’s inability to run an effective economic and social support system to prevent extreme hunger faced by citizens. Khupe describes the women’s protest as a strategy of adding pressure to obtain democratic spaces within Zimbabwe’s polity. In the radio interview cited above, Khupe said,

What we are saying here is we are putting more fire on a pot that is already boiling. We want that pot to boil until Mugabe goes. That is why we are saying please Mugabe you have failed, please go so that our lives can go on well. Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF must step aside and allow a government that will be ushered in through free, fair credible elections. (Nehanda Radio 2016)

Khupe’s statement challenges Zimbabwean political party hierarchies which allocates women to docile women’s leagues or women’s movements, invariably locking them in marginal political ‘kitchen’ roles where they endorse and nourish male political careers (Mangena 2022). By drawing women out of their kitchens onto the street, Khupe used the public space to articulate women’s private struggles and daily experiences of hunger. This showed how women are formidable actors within the political space, capable of expressing their agency in calling for change. In calling all women to add pressure to Mugabe’s proverbial boiling pot, Khupe used relatable symbols that her political constituency could understand, challenging the position of women as docile ‘kitchen’ members in Zimbabwe’s political party structures.

Women's organizing within their political parties sustains the pressure required to dismantle gendered oppression as women place demands on their own rights and contest the separation of concerns narrowly defined as political issues and those cast as social issues within national and party agendas (Connell 1998, 204). However, according to intersectional feminist standpoints, whilst women are marginalized in politics, not all women face oppression in the same way due to differences in race, age, ethnicity, marital status, occupation, class, and many other variables. This raises the question of how and why large numbers of women would come together in protest. The answer to that lies in movement leaders identifying what Molyneux defines as women's "practical gender interests" which ties women to nurturing duties often linked to food protests (1985, 233). The MDC-T Women's Assembly mobilized for its #BeatThePot protest by appealing to women's practical gender interests of ensuring sufficient food and good governance for economic stability, as Florence Nyika, MDC-T Bulawayo Women Assembly organising Secretary makes clear, "We intend to hold similar marches throughout the country for as long as the government is not showing commitment and sincerity to address hunger and poverty affecting women." (Nehanda Radio 2016)

Molyneux also postulates that feminist movements mobilize based on "strategic gender interests" which cut across economic class interests, such as the struggle against male violence and domination, as well as reproductive rights (1985, 232). Again, the protest #BeatThePot appealed to women's strategic gender needs when they successfully mobilized a collective political voice demanding an end to exclusionary politics, political violence, and misrule. To be effective, feminist strikes should cut across both practical gender needs, and strategic gender needs which pools together women from different races, ages, occupations, religious beliefs, and political affiliations. An early example is the Federation of South African Women (FedSAW), which united women across racial groups in opposition to apartheid in South Africa (Unterhalter 1983, 892).

## Theorising the Symbols and Strategies of Protest

To analyze the role played by the state in instituting gendered and racialised violence in Zimbabwe it is important to centre narratives of women (Smith 2005, 2). The ZANU-PF party-state embraced a *Chimurenga* ideology

rooted in African nationalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012, 2). This fostering of African nationalism by the state encultured violence and militarism in a sexist patriarchal political culture (Gaidzanwa 2020, 25). Whilst women's participation was part of wider national protests, their entry point differed from that of men and was linked to their social position, which in turn was shaped by the sexual division of labour (Molyneux 1985, 228). In #BeatThePot, women of Bulawayo, armed with their empty pots and cooking utensils, denounced the economic and governance crisis. They sang revolutionary songs in protest, demanding that Mugabe's government step down to allow for free and fair elections for a democratic transition. These noisy beatings at the #BeatThePot strike can be compared to the notion of "noisy silence" coined by Jocelyn Alexander in her article about *Gukurahundi*, in which she contrasts the "collective, imaginative response to a failure to grant recognition to a violent past" (2021, 763). The women who took part in #BeatThePot showed agency as a collective when they interjected and made the necessary "noise" across the public and private spheres, making the personal political as they defied historical *Gukurahundi* silences.

Women carried babies or dolls whilst banging empty pots, conjuring a highly gendered image associated with women's identity as mothers which became the symbol of women's opposition and protest to the government (Okay Africa 2016). Thus, by laying claims to motherhood, women are "appropriating a 'useful past' from a diversity of African pre-colonial histories" (Adesina 2010, 16). Motherhood in this regard was deployed as the basis of political and moral authority for negotiating change in the context of political movements (Tripp 2003, 249). A similar deployment of motherhood as a political tool in negotiation has been used in other contexts, such as Kenya, where, for example, in February 1992, a group of elderly rural Kikuyu women who were mothers of political prisoners travelled to Nairobi and held a hunger strike demanding the release of their sons from prison. The women strategically deployed motherhood as a political identity which appealed to most Kenyans who were poor like themselves, and invoked protests based on principles of care and justice (Tibbetts 1994, 28).

The MDC-T Women's Assembly advertised the strike through media outlets including newspapers. The concluding statement of the newspaper article calling for strike quotes the famous South African women's movement chant, '*Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo!*

(When you strike a woman, you strike a rock). This mobilizing chant symbolized the strength of a woman, equating it to that of a rock that can crush oppression in a state of resistance. This war-cry was made famous by a group of South African women when more than 20,000 women were mobilized by the leaders of four women's movements, including Lilian Ngoyi, the president of the ANC Women's League, to present their petition against inclusion of women in the pass laws to restrict their movements. (Nthongoa 2020). Thokozani Khupe, as the president of the MDC-T Women's Assembly mobilized women to march against state repression and like her predecessors, equated the strength of women in resistance to *imbokodo* (rock). In addition, #BeatThePot was a form of visual activism where women enacted in public space the pain and suffering of their domestic roles worsened by the hyperinflationary economy and exclusionary politics, which burdened their existence as wives, mothers, and citizens.

## **Thokozani Khupe's Contested Political Identity and MDC-T Struggles**

Despite the sterling mobilizing power displayed by Thokozani Khupe as she brought the MDC-T Women's Assembly to strike against Mugabe's autocratic regime, she has remained a negatively tainted politician. To assess the impact of #BeatThePot protest it is important to locate Khupe's positioning within Zimbabwe's hostile politics. Khupe, like other women politicians asserting themselves in male dominated political spaces, are often portrayed as deviant bodies challenging male-centric power and dominance. As a result of this gendered bias in politics, most women politicians, including Khupe, experienced sexist harassment online and offline during the run-up to the July 2018 elections (Ncube and Gwatisira 2020). The gendered dimension of political participation is an important defining characteristic which intersects with ethnic, racialised, and class identities negatively impacting women's claims for social, cultural, economic, and political rights (Sow 2021, 1). In this regard, it is important to note how the controversies surrounding Khupe might have impacted the protest and why this is important for women's political participation overall.

Khupe oscillated from being appointed as one of three MDC-T deputy presidents and later rising to being its controversial president following Tsvangirai's death. Her rise to MDC-T's leadership was fraught with violent ten-

sions in which she was assaulted and harassed by rival deputy Nelson Chamisa before the courts ruled in her favour (Bulawayo24, 2018). Chamisa and other former MDC factions regrouped and formed MDC Alliance to contest in the 2018 general elections (BBC News Africa 2018). However, Khupe was later instated as the leader of the Opposition in Parliament despite the MDC Alliance having more Opposition members in Parliament. Khupe subsequently received funds for the Opposition party following a court ruling in her favour, which caused her to fall out with MDC Alliance members who accused her of bedding Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa to attain judicial and political backing to destroy the Opposition. Khupe was later embroiled in bitter wrangles when she led the MDC-T in recalling members of Parliament who had defected to follow Chamisa (Big Saturday Read, 2020) MDC-T's deputy president, Senator Douglas Mwonozora, succeeded Khupe as the president at the party's national elective congress despite claims of vote rigging raised by Khupe and some Bulawayo based party members (Voice of America Zimbabwe 2020).

This power wrangling has further split the Opposition, with Khupe shouldering the weight of the accusation of being a ZANU-PF mole, which has not gone without fierce push back from Khupe herself. Her political woes follow similar struggles faced by prominent ZANU-PF politician and former deputy president, Joice Mujuru, who was ironically toppled by her opponent, and ZANU-PF Women's League-imposed leader, Grace Mugabe (Mangena, 2022). All three women were accused of going beyond their mandates and attempting to do the impossible, that is, to take on the office of their political parties' presidency and ultimately eyeing the nation's number one position—a preserve of the male political party elites. This problematic male-centric nature of Zimbabwe's politics shows a repression of diverse voices and lack of political will to see meaningful engagement of women in the country's governance (Chigumadzi 2018).

Khupe's intersecting identities as a woman from the politically marginalized Matebeleland Province presented layered challenges against the male and Shona dominated politics. Scholarship on Zimbabwe's political landscape allude to the problematic politics in this context which seeks to silence politicians from Matebeleland (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012) and domesticate women, designating their labouring bodies to their 'place,' often designated as the kitchen (Mangena 2022). Those women



who dare to leave the confines of their ascribed docile positions to disrupt male political hegemony incur the wrath and violent pushback of state and non-state actors, which includes physical torture, arbitrary arrests, and public humiliation through defamation of character. It is a common trend to have such women labelled as whores, or witches, or gold diggers who are in politics to enrich themselves (Mangena 2021, Ncube 2020, Zigomo, 2022). The physical and online verbal violence and harassment targeted at women politicians aims at enforcing subservience to the patriarchal dominance of political power (Siziba, Mpofu, and Ndlovu 2021).

Controversies have shadowed Khupe's political career, and she has shouldered vile name-calling, where she has been named a whore, a sell-out who has betrayed the Ndebele nation by toeing the line of the Shona leadership (Bulawayo24 2018). She was even labelled as Mnangagwa's lover whilst being trolled on her twitter account as a power hungry 'gogo' (old woman), all intended to reduce her political influence and participation to that of a greedy, stupid, old, morally loose, power hungry, sell-out woman (Khupe 2022). Khupe's male colleagues are not equally subjected to these forms of character assassination. Scholars point out how political violence, defamation of character and power wrangling pushes women leaders out of mainstream politics, whilst relegating the majority of women into lowly roles such as praise singers in the women's wings of their political parties (Geisler 1995, 546).

Another challenge which haunts the leadership of women's movements embedded in political parties is that they have been accused of organizing grassroots women to demand women's quotas which do not empower most women, but advance their own careers in national politics (Connell 1998, 200). Khupe met a similar fate as she was accused of using her position and power to mobilize protests for personal gain, rather than advancing women's interests. She was defamed and physically attacked for falling prey to ZANU-PF machinations of co-optation (Voice of America Zimbabwe 2018).

Whilst women leaders have been accused of abusing their leadership power for personal gain, it is the culture of organizing structures in political parties that ranks members in a hierarchy such that men and women fight for ascendancy into different levels of power. It is by linking with political elites as power brokers that women's movements strategically access the political power required to keep momentum on women's strategic

needs (Hassim 2002, 697). The downside of this tactic is risk of co-option and elitism which is exclusionary and does not radically transform power relations as required for structural change.

In the case of the MDC-T, internal leadership struggles overtook the organization and pushed out the women's agenda, and eventually the momentum gathered to push for democratic leadership fizzled out. These forms of political party power-wrangling for leadership posts discredits women's political work and agency in nation-building, including mobilizing work, such as that done under the banner of the #BeatThePot protest. Despite all the violent push back, women have continued to protest and assert their voices in the shrinking democratic spaces in Zimbabwe. Women's protests, such as #BeatThePot, offers counter-narratives to masculinized politics, and makes the important political work carried out by women in resistance movements in Zimbabwe visible.

## Conclusion

African women's activism is often overshadowed by patriarchal nationalist movements, or grand narratives of western feminist protests, which perpetuates the imagery of African women as subservient victims of patriarchy devoid of agency. This paper highlights a radical democratic charge organized by the MDC-T Women's Assembly which challenges views of women's participation in politics as tokenistic, or as illogical impersonations of western feminist ideologies to carry out a foreign agenda. The paper situated historical struggles in Zimbabwe in relation to how the #BeatThePot protest deployed mobilizing strategies that cut across women's strategic and practical needs. Through embodying motherhood as a culturally powerful identity, women harnessed the power of their ascribed role as nurturers from which they articulated gendered struggles of hunger to provoke large-scale protests. Ordinary objects that women used for the strike, such as empty pots, cooking sticks, and dolls, acquired new meanings as powerful symbols to articulate women's struggles against economic, social, and political oppression and exclusion. The #BeatThePot protest demonstrated a strong women's movement which exposed the silenced gendered, ethnic political violence, and exclusion that have marred democratic processes in Zimbabwe. However, despite the efficiently mounted #BeatThePot protest, a culmination of internal and external power struggles within the MDC-T as a political party, overshadowed women's interests, whittling away the pressure needed to challenge unequal gendered power relations.

## Endnotes

1. *Chimurenga* is term for resistance against colonial rule staged in two phases beginning with the 1896–97 Ndebele and Shona resistance against the British South Africa Company's administration of the territory. The Second *Chimurenga* began in July 1964 and ended in December 1979.
2. Robert Mugabe was elected President of Zimbabwe in 1980 and remained in office until 2017.
3. ZANU-PF means Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front and it was formed in 1963.
4. The Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai (MDC–T) political party was named after Morgan Tsvangirai who was a founding member of the MDC and former secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). In 2005 when the MDC split into factions, MDC–T remained the major opposition political party.

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