# Hashtags and spectacles: Zimbabwe's feminist activists find online avenues to tackle government's COVID-19 clampdown

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## Abstract

Feminist critiques, activism and the feminist movement have long played a key role at significant political junctures in Zimbabwe, challenging the male domination of political and public spaces, as well as entrenched masculine orientations of democracy and liberation. In 2020, with the arrival of the COVID-19 global pandemic and following a two-decade boom in internet access and digital

media, parts of the feminist movement in Zimbabwe moved online in a tactical shift that prioritised social media spectacle as a way to challenge the patriarchal state, and also publicise abuses in public healthcare and related political abuses. The creation and subsequent popularity of two hashtags, #ZimbabweLivesMatter and #ZanuPFMustGo, was bolstered by activists who zoned in on women's issues and specifically looked to overturn the notion of respectability that has been key in defining women's place in society. The abduction, arrest and torture of three female opposition activists, together with the arrest and harassment of renowned female author Tsitsi Dangarembga, provide episodes through which features of feminist responses can be explored.

# Introduction

There is little doubt that oppression in Zimbabwe is and has been of a highly gendered nature, disproportionately affecting the lives of women. As recently as September 2020, a Transparency International (2020) report found that women in Zimbabwe were being sexually extorted for access to water, among a host of other punitive measures by the government that further restricted the rights of women. Crucially, this clampdown was paired with increased restrictions on communications. In March 2020, weeks after the first COVID-19 infection was recorded in Zimbabwe, the government passed a new law, Instrument 83 of 2020 (*The Standard* 2020), that could see people spending up to 20 years in prison for spreading 'fake news' about the coronavirus. The harsh law, part of the Zimbabwean state's response to public criticism of its pandemic measures, was the latest iteration of the government's long-standing attempts to limit media freedom and public opposition, especially the kind disseminated through digital media.

# A history of state chauvinism

What is notable, but has received scant attention, is how forms of feminist protest and activity morphed to meet this mix of old and new challenges. Especially interesting is how digital mediums were used not just to oppose overt repression, but also to shift and disrupt the dominant patriarchal notions, especially ones centred on respectability – the female figure as a docile, quiet and acquiescent figure – that have long been a key facet of Zimbabwean society, from the colonial era through the liberation struggle and up to the postcolonial, contemporary times (Hungwe 2006, p. 40–41). 'The distinction made between "respectability" and "unrespectability" serves a patriarchal agenda,' writes Hungwe, tracing the change in who and what defined female respectability throughout the country's history (2006, p. 45). 'This distinction muffles and legitimates the social and political inequality between men and women that persists in the Zimbabwean polity' (Ibid).

In the political realm, female politicians and activists who have dared to criticise the state have often been labelled prostitutes or whores, in a 'grammar that is perpetually reanimated in Zimbabwean political discourse' (Rudo 2020). Rudo argues that 'likening

politicians to prostitutes, women who monetize their own sexual labour, the term reveals the extent to which the control of women's bodies, sexuality, and labour remains a key focus of the post-independence state' (Ibid). Noting the 'uneasy' but evident coherence, in grammar and in deed, between colonial and postcolonial thinking regarding the 'appropriate' place for women, Kate Law, of the University of Nottingham (UK), traces the gendered nature of the Zimbabwean regime's oppression to the early years of independence. She notes (Law 2020):

> *The grim reality of the situation was unambiguously shown just three years into independence through 'Operation CleanUp', whereby thousands of women in Zimbabwe's main cities of Harare and Bulawayo were indiscriminately detained with state machinery arguing that the women were prostitutes, vagrants and beggars.*

Musila (2009) points out that while the gendered nature of African nationalism and patriarchy is by now an 'accepted truism', we must remember that because the colonial strategy was to disempower and infantilise both men and women, the 'simplistic conflation of African assertions of manhood with patriarchal dominance' may be unviable, because liberation seen as the reassertion of 'lost manhood' continues to exclude the experiences of women and submerge female subjectivities under the master narrative of liberation. It is in this way that women are frozen in time, or as Elleke Boehmer puts it, 'women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition' (2005, p. 22).

It is the continuities – particularly evident in Zimbabwe, between African traditional paternalism, colonial paternalism and post-independence paternalism, where the state and/or the president is the father – that are the backdrop to the feminist protests of 2020. In particular, this assertion of timelessness, that *it has always been this way*, meant that any challenge to the gendered paradigm of state power had to find ways of interrupting this teleological narrative. It is here that the concept of the spectacle and digital medium worked well for the feminist activists. Mbembe (2017), in characteristically quixotic but poignant fashion, stretches the idea of the political spectacle and its application to a 21st-century Africa where 'as elsewhere in the world, life behind screens has become a fact of daily existence, including for many urban poor'.

'The interaction between humans and screens having intensified, the boundaries of perception have been stretched as people are projected from one temporal regime to another,' writes Mbembe (Ibid), proposing that the digital medium offers a new way for Africans to compose ways of being and resistance, and put a spoke in the narratives that confine them to second-class citizens. He explains (Mbembe 2017):

> *On the other hand, the continent is a fertile ground for the new digital technologies because the philosophy of those technologies and the metaphysics underpinning them are more or less in tune with key cognitive reservoirs in African historical cultures – the old ways of folding reality, ancient conceptions of the*

*relations between being and matter, the existence of a deep, almost unconscious archive of permanent transformation, mutation, conversion, metamorphosis and circulation.*

One should not understate the applicability of these notions to Zimbabwe, where the contest of truth and falsehood, history and the future, took on extreme forms. 'For Mugabe, the so-called truth was not merely "If I am right, you are lying", but something that must not be false or someone will die,' explains Mavhunga (2009, p. 163–164). 'Supposed falsehood was something that was ontologically true, but which must be false or else. To kill the mobility of falsehoods or dangerous information, the state sealed off the countryside using roadblocks,' (Mavhunga 2009, p. 165) while attempting to impose seals and blocks on the distribution of 'dangerous information' through law and violence and recourse to a grammar and language that sought to freeze the being and subjectivity of its citizens. In fact, in 2019, the Zimbabwean government went as far as to 'switch off the internet' during a large protest (*Al Jazeera* 2019). Mare observes: 'As Mbembe puts it, these governments create "a world of meanings all its own, a master code which, in the process becomes the society's primary central code"' (Mare 2020, p. 2).

# Digital politics

Recent, Africa-focused feminist literature has shown an increasing interest in the connections between popular culture and how it either reinforces or challenges social norms and structures. It has looked at how these mediums have been appropriated and refashioned to achieve feminist goals. Pumla Gqola, Stella Nyanzi, Sisonke Msimang and Grace Musila are among the prominent, Africa-based feminists writing in this vein. They have been particularly interested in the idea and image of the 'ungovernable' female figure, raging loudly against prejudice, humiliation and marginalisation. But their thinking has not been confined to this anger and rage. It has also considered the personal and communal implications, applying them to a national and international context.

In this light, this essay considers the notion of the spectacle – the use and reproduction of shocking, visceral, attention-grabbing images and events on social media, organised under hashtags, as the main development of the latest feminist activity in Zimbabwe. In its most direct sense, the idea of the spectacle is taken here in its literal sense, what William Shoki (2020) defines as the commodification and 'digitisation of political activity'.

# Mobility of words

Mavhunga, in *The Glass Fortress: Zimbabwe's Cyber-Guerilla Warfare*, argues that information technology, mainly the internet, could be to 21st-century African activists what the AK-47 was to African nationalists fighting colonial rule in the 20th century. He poses

Zimbabwe as a prime example of this supposition (2009, p. 157). 'Zimbabwe offers an example of the way ordinary citizens in Africa are using these information technologies to express and demand genuine individual freedoms,' argues Mavhunga (Ibid, p. 158). He notes (Ibid, p. 159–160):

> *Zimbabwean users have designed a new use for technologies of communication: to address the question of liberation and the tension between national freedom and personal freedom. The Internet, e-mail andradio waves have become instruments to challenge the late 20th century metanarrative of the so-called father figure who built the nation.*

At the same time though, Mavhunga cautions that activists are not alone in recognising the immense potential of the internet and information technology to 'transform the mobility of words into weapons of resistance'. 'The state has responded with control mechanisms like surveillance, interception, violence and propaganda' (Ibid, p. 159) he writes. The implication of that recognition, of the power and intensifying ubiquity of the internet and digital media, by the Zimbabwean as well as other postcolonial African states, has been that the many authoritarian governments that came after independence have developed new ways of perpetuating and enacting patriarchal structures and ideologies. And these structures of subordination and violence, material, epistemological and otherwise, have often been most keenly felt by women, resulting in their continued exclusion and side-lining from political, economic and social life.

The upshot, however, has been the emergence of various feminist figures, movements and ideologies, with a long history (Barnes and Win 1992) across the continent, contending with the lingering patriarchal nationalist ideologies and their evolving methods of suppression (Mapavu 2013, p. 265). In Zimbabwe, which won its independence in 1980, the public recognition of women's role in the liberation struggle and government promises of gender parity turned out to be mere rhetoric. Instead, the use of violence to marginalise women gained intensity as the country slipped into a political and economic crisis in the late 1990s. But alongside this increased marginalisation was the growth of feminist-orientated movements and activism, which at their heart recognised that discrimination had morphed from being race-based to primarily gendered in nature, in addition to the structural class discrimination inherent in the model of capital adopted by the new Black governments.

The proliferation of women's organisations in Zimbabwe during the late 1990s and early 2000s, matching the less-organised, informal women's groups that found life in church associations (*ruwadzano* or church mothers' unions), literary societies and rural kinship groups, gave rise to influential female figures such as Joyce Mujuru, Grace Mugabe, Thabitha Khumalo and Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga in the political space, and figures like writer Tsitsi Dangarembga. But since the turn of the decade, much of the feminist activism and organising adopted online platforms in recognition of the process that Mavhunga describes as well as in response to the technological changes afoot on the continent – chiefly, the growth of access to the internet. Shepherd Mpofu, in a study of the proliferation of blogging in Zimbabwe by female writers addressing female issues, contends that technology,

together with migration, are the 'two main developments that have influenced the way Zimbabweans have addressed the evolution in the socio-economic and political spheres' (2017, p. 2).

# Pandemic strikes

When the COVID-19 pandemic materialised in early 2020, the global implications of the highly infectious disease naturally put national issues, and not just those connected to healthcare, on the international stage. The fact that COVID-19 struck at the height of social media and the internet as the sources par excellence of information and news, greatly contributed to the increased, cross-border visibility of local struggles over healthcare and related political issues. The dominance of digital media, which has been two decades in the making, combined with the global nature of COVID-19, fundamentally influenced how various political struggles across the world, over healthcare and beyond, were waged, how they circulated, as well as how they were received. 'The digitisation of political activity means that we are more amenable to being stirred by political events when they are reported or expressed via this medium. This is a feature of the political (system) that has been the case ever since digital media was conceived' (Shoki 2020).

Globally, the number of internet users grew to an estimated 4.1 billion individual users in 2019 from just above 1 billion users in 2005. While Africa has the lowest internet usage rates of any continent, the switch in the last decade, where more people are using mobile broadband on smartphones rather than fixed-line internet access via computers, has seen that gap between Africa and the rest of the world shrink (Measuring Digital Development report 2019). On the side of the activists themselves, there was the profound recognition, acknowledged in word and in deed, that struggle and protest had to be packaged for consumption by an international, digital audience. With that, too, was the understanding that struggle had inexorably entered the digital terrain. The internet was the main battleground.

On the side of the public – here broadly conceived to include broadcast and print audiences, social media users, academics, journalists and policymakers – it was the political protests and movements with a sustained online presence that gained the most international support, while at the same time opening up pathways to solidarity with struggles elsewhere. In Zimbabwe, the struggle for human rights and against the resulting violent repression by the state over the last two decades has mostly battled to find the kind of international visibility seen in the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States, the Hong Kong protests and the Ethiopian protests of 2018. But in early 2020, as the pandemic began to make itself felt globally, activists in the Southern African nation, acting on the recognition of the increasingly online nature of political struggle, the need to craft an online spectacle and seizing the unique opportunity provided by the coronavirus pandemic to gain deeper access to a global audience, successfully put the Zimbabwean struggle for democracy on the world stage. Thus #ZimbabweanLivesMatter was born.

# Hashtags and spectacles

The alleged arrest, abduction and torture of three activists from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party in June (*BBC* 2020), on charges of contravention of lockdown regulations, provided usually scarce images of women as political agents in the Southern African nation's ongoing political crisis, which, since the late 1990s, has been marked by severe government restrictions on media freedom. President Emmerson Mnangagwa's response was to call the abduction fake and a plot against his government (*Africa News* 2020).

Activists, faced with strict restriction on movement and gathering, took the opportunity to post dozens of images on Twitter and Facebook of the badly beaten women, with the hashtag #ZimbabweLivesMatter appended to give the images wider circulation. The photos, showing a bleeding and semi-naked activist, and allegedly taken by the police, appeared on social media and were reproduced in regional and international publications. The images were not dissimilar to those from the #BlackLivesMatter circulating around the same time during anti-racism protests in the United States. They shared a similar aesthetic: the gruesome spectacle of a powerful state violently oppressing its citizens. Consciously or not, the activists drew links with their American counterparts. From a feminist perspective, the stark images disrupted the notion of a benevolent father (Mnangagwa and the ZANU-PF government) that has underpinned the patriarchal rhetoric and actions of the regime. In a similar vein, novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, embarked on 'solo protests' in July 2020 against the lack of food and water in many Zimbabwean cities. Dangarembga carefully orchestrated the protests, posting blow-by-blow images on Twitter of herself standing alone in the streets carrying placards. She would eventually be arrested by police in a heavy-handed manner, and their conduct would be caught on tape for the world to see. Her arrest was followed by a number of similar solo protests around the country by women struggling to access water, sanitary items and healthcare, with the addition of video testimonies by the women explaining their plight.

These social media posts were accompanied by the #ZimbabweLivesMatter and #ZanuPFMustGo hashtags, and with the addition of Dangarembga's international popularity, succeeded in circulating a vivid image of the violent father-state figure to a wide audience. Here, the spectacle was the very visceral sight of police brutality versus a defenseless citizenry pleading for humane treatment.

# Conclusion

The circulation on digital platforms of these events succeeded in putting pressure on the ZANU-PF government, drawing censure from international organisations like the United Nations and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Dangarembga's arrest and harassment coincided with her nomination for the international Man Booker Prize

for the third installment in a trilogy of books that over the past three decades has centred on the experiences of Zimbabwean women. Previously, ie before the pandemic, the reach of her protest would perhaps have been limited to literary and feminist circles. The global dimension of the pandemic and Dangarembga's deliberate use of social media images to link back to local issues is a compelling instance of 'feminism going online' in Zimbabwe. The abduction and torture of opposition activists, and the short space of time it took for those images, with the cooperation of the victims, to go viral, was yet another instance of how feminist issues used online images, or spectacles, to enter the public space of politics to foreground the gendered proclivities of the state.

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# About the author

Mfuneko Toyana currently works as a journalist in the Reuters News, Southern Africa bureau, writing about the economics, financial markets, climate change and politics. Before that he worked in advertising, marketing and as a freelance photographer. He is also studying for a master's degree in Journalism and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. Born and raised in Johannesburg, Mfuneko's academic interests are African history and literature, political economy, gender studies and narrative journalism. In his spare time, he writes short fiction.

# Acknowledgment

## African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19

This essay forms part of the *African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19* series. It is an output from a 2020 master's course in international communication at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), where discussions revolved around the coverage of the African dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic by international and African media. After the completion of the course, students submitted assignments in the form of essays, choosing one African country and its media or any international media outlet as the focus of analysis. The students made presentations on their essays in a workshop program and received feedback from a group of 10 African journalism and media scholars under the auspices of the African Media Salon. These essays, therefore, constitute an early contribution of knowledge on the intersection of media and international communication, drawing on concepts such as public diplomacy, soft power and the international political economy of communication.

The series is a partnership of Wits University's Journalism Department, the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) and the Africa Portal, a project of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

Photo credit: Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga (L) and a colleague, Julie Barnes, hold placards during an anti-corruption protest march along Borrowdale Road on 31 July 2020 in Harare. Zimbabwean police arrested them on that day as they enforced a ban on protests coinciding with the anniversary of President Emmerson Mnangagwa's election. (Zinyange Auntony/AFP via Getty Images)

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