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# *Liberation Armies, Women Soldiers and Martial Masculinity: Gender and Training in the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA)*

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*Scholars of southern African liberation wars have paid insufficient attention to women's military training. Training matters because it was a central aspect of women soldiers' wartime experience and the basis for their varied deployments. It also offers a revealing lens on dominant martial masculinities and their connection to liberation movements' gendered imaginaries of war and future society. As in armies the world over, the training of women in liberation militaries challenged the merging of martial ideals with those of masculinity. The article enriches wider debates on gender and militaries by illuminating liberation armies' distinctiveness, challenging scholars' assumptions drawn from conventional state forces. Using oral histories, the article takes the case of women's training in the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA), the military wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). It traces major shifts from the women 'pioneers' integrated into male guerrilla units and praised for embodying masculinist ideals, to those trained for the semi-conventional Women's Brigade, commanded by women. Although the Brigade was intended for deployment in liberated zones within Zimbabwe, in practice, members served in the 'rear front' in Zambia, itself a major combat zone in the late 1970s. The article examines the tensions between women's celebratory stories of achieving equality with men by completing the same military training, and their assertions of gendered difference, often grounded in ZAPU's idea of women as the 'seed of the nation', which emphasised their reproductive role and need for protection. A striking aspect of many ZPRA women's accounts is their pride in martial expertise, earned through military training, specialisation and rear front deployments. Training did not deliver gender equality in the army, but it provided the foundation for post-independence professional careers, and underpinned ZPRA women veterans' quest for recognition of their wartime military service.*

**Keywords:** liberation army; women soldiers; military history; martial masculinity; gender; ZPRA; ZAPU

## Introduction

In the late 1970s as Zimbabwe's liberation war intensified, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) trained a force of around 2,000 women soldiers. They constituted about ten per cent of the ranks of the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA) by the war's end.<sup>1</sup> Women combatants were trained in Zambia, Tanzania, Cuba, the Eastern bloc and elsewhere, and were deployed as soldiers, military instructors, intelligence agents and communications specialists. These deployments were within ZPRA's 'rear front' in Zambia, so-called because it was a perilous war zone. Although military training underpinned such important roles for women in ZPRA – and their counterparts in other southern African liberation armies – scholars have paid little attention to it. Indeed, training is neglected in liberation war historiography generally. But it is, we argue, central to understanding both the gendered military cultures of liberation armies and nationalist visions of future society that were shaped in exile. Furthermore, a focus specifically on women's training allows us to redress some of the misleading assumptions of wider scholarship on gender and militaries, including feminist work, which has tended to uncritically apply concepts derived from the study of conventional armies and warfare.

The article draws on our interviews with ZPRA women veterans in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, along with a host of other oral historical sources, most notably Methembe Hillary Hadebe's recent book of ZPRA women's oral histories, *Yithi Laba*.<sup>2</sup> These sources reflect the views of different generations of ZPRA women, showing their contrasting experiences of training and deployment, as well as their diverse lives after independence. ZPRA women's war stories were shaped by their current social standing as mature and respectable women, which had sometimes altered their wartime views on gender equality and on the ideal roles for women in militaries and society. ZPRA women frequently conveyed a sense of awe at their own youthful courage, militancy and capacity to challenge men's assumptions of women's inferiority by fulfilling normatively masculine martial roles. But they also recounted their bemusement at, or even disapproval of, these wartime roles. Some ZPRA women defended gendered differences and looked back favourably on policies that had separated them from men within the army and limited their deployment on grounds of their greater vulnerability and the primacy of their reproductive role as the 'seed of the nation'.

Women veterans' stories were also influenced by Zimbabwe's post-independence commemorative culture, which has been dominated by the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front), ZANU(PF). ZANU(PF) was the victor in Zimbabwe's independence elections in 1980 and was responsible for the violent repression of ZAPU and ZPRA thereafter. It celebrated its own armed wing, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), while disparaging ZPRA as ineffective, treacherous, or both.<sup>3</sup> ZPRA also

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1 On numbers, see J. Brickhill, 'Daring to Storm the Heavens: The Military Strategy of ZAPU 1976–79', in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger (eds), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (Oxford, James Currey, 1995), p. 66; Abel Mazinyane, interview by M.H. Hadebe, Bulawayo, 16 September 2025.

2 M.H. Hadebe, *Yithi Laba: Diaries of the Role of ZAPU-ZPRA Women Combatants in the Liberation Struggle of Zimbabwe* (Bulawayo, Ingwaladi Publishers, 2022). Other important sources include Mary Ndlovu's interviews held in the South African Historical Archives' Collection AL3291, ZAPU/Zenzo Nkobi Oral History Project (referred to hereafter as SAHA), and used in SAHA, *ZAPU through Zenzo Nkobi's Lens* (Johannesburg, SAHA, 2012); interviews conducted by former ZPRA commanders Nicholas Nkomo, Richard Dube and Mark Ndlovu for the Mafela Trust, a veterans' organisation dedicated to documenting war history (in the authors' possession); and the many interviews published in Zimbabwe's state and private media.

3 For an early analysis, see N. Kriger, 'The Politics of Creating National Heroes: The Search for Political Legitimacy and National Identity', in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger (eds), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (Oxford, James Currey, 1995), pp. 139–62.

has its own commemorative traditions. These sought to rectify partisan distortions but remained male-dominated. Regarding women soldiers, ZPRA commemoration focused on the hundreds killed in the Rhodesian bombing of the women's training camp at Mkushi in 1978, honouring women's sacrifice and emphasising their victimhood, not their military strength. ZPRA women's military training and roles are obscured in both these masculinist commemorative cultures. Many ZPRA women thus expressed a sense of double marginalisation in which grievances over ZANU(PF)'s distortions of liberation history were compounded by ZPRA's own neglect of women's standing and service as soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

A focus on ZPRA women's training allows us to contribute to conceptual debates on gender and militaries in general, as well as to more specific literatures on the military cultures of southern African liberation armies. Scholarship on gender and militaries generally tends to make presumptions based on conventional armies and wars that sit uncomfortably with how liberation movements trained women. There is of course no essential connection between masculinity and soldiering in any context. Feminist scholars have shed light on how military cultures reflect histories of contestation within armies and wider society over gendered ideas of bodies and emotional and moral qualities such as bravery, endurance and fortitude.<sup>5</sup> Regarding conventional state armies, historians and sociologists have cast martial masculinities as the product of the interplay between the state and dominant gender norms, stressing contestation and a plurality of ideas.<sup>6</sup> This is helpful in thinking about liberation armies' masculinist military cultures, but state-society relations were quite different in these wars to what this literature implies. Liberation armies were formed in exile and shaped by host states and multiple foreign sites of training in which gendered expectations and military cultures varied significantly.<sup>7</sup> There were also powerful influences across liberation movements: both allies and rivals offered distinctive gendered models. Debates over gender and militaries generally – and particularly in liberation armies and other unconventional militaries – need to take note of this plurality influences in order to move beyond the misleading assumptions that can flow from the idea of a singular, overweening state.

Scholarship on gender and southern African liberation armies, for its part, has tended to uncritically reproduce ideas about 'combat' derived from studies of conventional warfare, echoing implicit and often misleading assumptions about gender and the geography of the 'frontline'. It is common for studies of conventional militaries to associate masculinised 'combat' with dangerous deployments in a defined frontline territory, while feminised 'non-combat' roles are cast as forms of support distant from the frontline. In liberation armies' own military discourses, combat and the most dangerous operations are often linked to deployment inside homelands, while training and feminised non-combat roles are associated with exile. These masculinist 'battle-centric' definitions of combat tend to obscure and diminish women soldiers' roles: Siphokazi Magadla, Jacklyn Cock and Raymond Suttner

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4 Hadebe, *Yithi*, p. xvi.

5 See A. Decker, 'What Does a Feminist Curiosity Bring to African Military History?: An Analysis and an Intervention', *Journal of African Military History*, 1, 1–2 (2017), pp. 93–111; S. Dudink, K. Hagemann and J. Tosh (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004); E. Fraser, *Military Masculinity and Postwar Recovery in the Soviet Union* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019); A. Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire 1898–2001* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2012).

6 Fraser, *Military Masculinity*; R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19, 6 (2005), pp. 829–59; P. Highgate, *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (London, Praeger, 2003).

7 J. Alexander and J. McGregor, 'Adelante! Military Imaginaries, the Cold War, and Southern Africa's Liberation Armies', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 62, 3 (2020), pp. 620–1; J. Alexander and J. McGregor, 'African Soldiers in the USSR: Oral Histories of ZAPU Intelligence Cadres' Soviet Training, 1964–1979', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43, 1 (2017), pp. 48–65.

make this point in relation to Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), as well as critiquing wider feminist scholarship on militaries.<sup>8</sup> Zimbabwe's liberation movements and writing thereon have likewise associated military training and non-combat roles with exile and defined combat as deployment to battlefields inside Zimbabwe. Such notions of combat are central to debates among Zimbabwean veterans over what constitutes a 'real' soldier.<sup>9</sup> Yet in guerrilla wars, the association of combat and extreme danger with a frontline is especially misleading.<sup>10</sup> For Zimbabwean liberation movements, Rhodesian bombardment and ground assaults on rear camps and border areas in Angola, Zambia and Mozambique turned them into deadly combat zones. Indeed, in the last years of the war, ZPRA commanders considered the Zambian camps to be more dangerous than the 'semi-liberated' zones established inside Zimbabwe.<sup>11</sup> 'Combat' – and the masculinist military roles associated with it – thus needs to be disentangled from the geographical and gendered imaginaries of conventional warfare.

Notwithstanding the uncritical conception of 'combat' in much scholarship on southern African liberation wars, there is a rich body of work on women guerrillas' roles to build on. In contrast to African military history generally, where women combatants have been described as 'curiously absent',<sup>12</sup> there are studies of women in every liberation army.<sup>13</sup> This work has some common themes, including women veterans' experience of marginalisation in masculinist commemorative cultures, and their reluctance to speak about their sexual abuse by men.<sup>14</sup> Across movements, women's presence in armies also challenged masculinist military cultures. Women soldiers describe constantly having to 'prove themselves' to doubting male leaders and peers: they faced a struggle both to 'be taken seriously as soldiers' and to 'maintain feminized respectability'.<sup>15</sup> Women were often

8 S. Magadla, 'Women Combatants and the Liberation Movements in South Africa: Guerrilla Girls, Combative Mothers and the In-Betweeners', *African Security Review*, 24, 4 (2015), p. 391, and *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2023); J. Cock, *Colonels and Cadres: War and Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 165–7; R. Suttner, 'Masculinities and Femininities in the ANC-Led Liberation Movement', paper presented at the African Studies Association of Australia and the Pacific conference, 26–28 November 2004, pp. 23–4; R. Suttner, 'Women in the ANC-Led underground', in N. Gasa (ed.), *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2007), pp. 243–57.

9 For both Zimbabwean liberation movements, the combination of training outside the country and deployment within it constituted their definition of soldier and veteran. There are additional, subtle debates among male veterans over what constitutes a 'proper' soldier. See Alexander and McGregor, 'Adelante!', pp. 645–7.

10 Magadla, 'Women', p. 391; Cock, *Colonels*, pp. 165–6; T. Lyons, *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle* (Trenton, Africa World Press, 2004), pp. 123–4.

11 Alexander and McGregor, 'Adelante!', pp. 643–4.

12 See Decker, 'What Does', p. 96.

13 On MK/ANC, see, for example, Magadla, 'Women' and *Guerrillas*; Cock, *Colonels*; S. Hassim, 'Nationalism, Feminism and Autonomy: The ANC in Exile and the Question of Women', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, 3 (2004) pp. 433–56; A. Lissoni, "'Dear Comrade Chief Rep': Love, Marriage and the Family in the ANC in Exile in Tanzania", *African Studies*, 76, 1 (2017), pp. 1–21. On Frelimo, see H. West, 'Girls with Guns: Narrating the Experience of War of Frelimo's "Female detachment"', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 73, 4 (2000), pp. 180–94; J. Katto, *Women's Lived Landscapes of War and Liberation in Mozambique: Bodily Memory and the Gendered Aesthetics of Belonging* (London, Taylor and Francis, 2019); J. Katto, 'Landscapes of Belonging: Female Ex-Combatants Remembering the Liberation Struggle in Urban Maputo' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 3 (2014), pp. 539–57. On Namibia, see M. Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle* (Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014). On Zimbabwe, see J. Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2000); Lyons, *Guns*.

14 Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, Chapter 6; Lyons, *Guns*; S. Magadla, 'Women', *Guerrillas*, and 'The Lives of Women Ex-Combatants in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in J.D. Brewer and A. Wahidin (eds), *Ex-Combatants' Voices: Transitioning from War to Peace in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 179–205; Akawa, *The Gender Politics*, Chapter 6.

15 Katto 'Landscapes', pp. 543, 545. Hassim, 'Nationalism', p. 440, describes women's presence as a 'destabilising factor'.

allocated subordinate and support roles, which were ‘inglorious but necessary’,<sup>16</sup> while the role of safeguarding women was often allocated to senior nationalist women, underlining female soldiers’ ambiguous status within armies.<sup>17</sup> Some differences among liberation movements’ gendered military cultures also stand out, for example in the degree to which they explicitly promoted gender equality in political education.<sup>18</sup> The varied military demands of particular liberation wars also powerfully shaped women’s roles.

Although insightful, this work rarely dwells on women’s military training and its significance for liberation armies’ gendered martial cultures and women soldiers’ embodied military identities, notwithstanding the central place training holds in critical military studies.<sup>19</sup> The rich ethnographic work on Frelimo women veterans, for example, hardly considers training.<sup>20</sup> Martha Akawa’s study of gender in Namibia’s liberation struggle gives only a passing nod to training.<sup>21</sup> Tanya Lyons notes that work on Zimbabwe’s liberation war tends to focus on ‘women’s issues’ rather than women in military history.<sup>22</sup> In ZPRA’s case, the diverse sources of military training produced major divisions and differences across the army as a whole, including in terms of men’s martial masculinities.<sup>23</sup> By exploring how ZPRA’s military culture was shaped by women’s demands for inclusion, we show how the differently gendered military roles and identities they embodied were constituted by, and reflected in, their training.

The insights women’s training offers into the making of ZPRA’s military culture allow us to historicise changes both in how gender was militarised over the course of the war and the persistent tensions between normative ideals of femininity and soldiering. We begin with a discussion of these tensions before turning to a history of women’s military training and deployment.

## Women Soldiers, Femininity, and the ‘Seed of the nation’

Women veterans’ accounts of becoming soldiers differ from their male counterparts above all owing to the uncomfortable disjuncture they identified between ideals of femininity and womanhood and the demands and experiences of being soldiers. This disjuncture created inter-linked tensions in their stories: first, between ideas of femininity and the bodily and emotional transformation produced by military training; second, between women’s similar training to men and their more limited deployment, which was justified in terms of gendered difference, notably notions of women’s vulnerability and the primacy of their reproductive role; and, finally, between ZPRA’s prohibitions on sexual relationships and the frequent transgression of those prohibitions.

For men and women, ZPRA’s basic military training physically changed bodies and ideas about gendered capacities.<sup>24</sup> This regime was institutionalised in the late 1960s, melding

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16 T. Lyons and M. Israel, ‘Women, Resistance and the Armed Struggle in Southern Africa’, *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific: Review and Newsletter*, 21, 2 (1999), pp. 5–12, cited in Suttner, ‘Women’, p. 243.

17 On ZANLA, see Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*; on MK, see Magadla ‘Women’.

18 For contrasts between Zimbabwean movements, see Lyons, *Guns*, p. 123. On ANC/MK, see Hassim, ‘Nationalism’, p. 441; Magadla ‘Women’; Cock, *Colonels*. On Frelimo’s incorporation of ‘gender emancipation’ after 1966, see Katto, ‘Landscapes’.

19 For example, K. McSorley (ed.), *War and the Body: Militarization, Practice and Experience* (London, Routledge, 2013).

20 Katto, ‘Landscapes’, notes women’s pride in their military training but does not detail its contents; West, ‘Girls’, dwells on political, not military, education.

21 Akawa, *The Gender Politics*, p. 61.

22 Lyons, *Guns*, p. 27.

23 Alexander and McGregor, ‘Adelante!’.

24 Alexander and McGregor, ‘Adelante!’, and J. Alexander and J. McGregor, ‘The Travelling Toyi-Toyi: Soldiers and the Politics of Drill’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46, 5 (2020), pp. 923–40.

influences from Algerian and Soviet military cultures, and was intended to instil bodily discipline and endurance, control over emotions, and an unquestioning obedience. When ZPRA men and women undertook physical training together, they underwent the same demanding daily routines. For men, this experience was often described as akin to a rite of passage or initiation. It turned ‘boys’ into soldiers and resonated with dominant ideas of male adulthood and masculine roles of protection and provision, which also valued strength, fitness, courage and emotional control.<sup>25</sup> For women, the basic training clashed with dominant norms of womanhood and femininity in ways that were never fully reconciled.

Women veterans talked about this tension in different ways. Sevi Dlodlo, who served in the Zimbabwean National Army after independence, portrayed soldiering as no different from any other job: ‘[b]eing a soldier is normal like a bank teller ... It differs in that a bank teller uses a machine ... and I use the gun’.<sup>26</sup> But she also vividly remembered a new and empowering relationship with her trained body, very unlike a bank teller: ‘[i]t was good for your body to do physical training ... when I was in the army I was slim ... the brain holds your body, you become physical from what you are thinking’.<sup>27</sup> Others recounted experiencing bodily discomfort and shame. Gertrude Mpala, the commander of ZPRA’s Women’s Brigade, described her trained body as a source of embarrassment outside the military environment. She recounted how she had tried to hide her muscular arms and soldier’s gait in attempts to appear ‘normal’:

You would be so embarrassed just walking wearing dresses and short sleeves because your structure has totally altered. I remember sometimes I had to hide my arms! ... I wanted to dress up like a normal person.... But then you would stand out because of your body muscle.... And the way you walk, you are walking like really a soldier.<sup>28</sup>

All ZPRA women recounted being keenly aware that their bodies did not match global male military norms. They struggled with the ill-fitting men’s uniforms and boots received from international supporters, stuffing oversize boots with leaves or cloth and tightening waistbands or exchanging uniforms in search of a better fit. These were partly practical measures, but they were also intended to achieve a more flattering, fashionable effect – in other words, to feminise the uniform.

The second set of tensions, between training women on a par with men but deploying them differently, was remembered with ambivalence, in part owing to how women understood the motivation for it. Women veterans often attributed restrictions on their roles to the paternalism of ZAPU president Joshua Nkomo who, they held, genuinely cared for their welfare, education and future. Nkomo is pictured with the ZPRA Women’s Brigade in [Figure 1](#). ZPRA women veterans expressed a nostalgic reverence for Nkomo as *Umdala Wethu*, ‘Father Zimbabwe’, a view possibly strengthened retrospectively by their standing as mature, respectable women. ZPRA veteran Sibongile Khumalo credited Nkomo for the opportunities created by her wartime training: ‘I look up to Joshua Nkomo ... who contributed so much to my life ... He trained [women] ... from the nursery school up to ministerial level’.<sup>29</sup> Many linked Nkomo’s paternalism to his characterisation of ZPRA women as the ‘seed of the nation’, a construction that placed value on a reproductive role at odds with combat, and which went hand-in-hand with Nkomo’s insistence on banning

25 J. Alexander and J. McGregor, ‘War Stories: Guerrilla Narratives of Zimbabwe’s Liberation War’, *History Workshop Journal*, 57, 1 (2004), pp. 79–100.

26 Sevi Dlodlo, interview by J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 7 January 2022.

27 Dlodlo, interview.

28 Gertrude Mpala, interview by J. Alexander and J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 18 December 2019. Gertrude Mpala is Sibonokuhle Ngwenya’s war name. She is now widely known as Gertrude (sometimes Getrude) Ngwenya.

29 Sibongile Khumalo (pseudonym), interview by Mary Ndlovu, 5 July 2011, SAHA, AL3291\_B2.

contraception (a policy favoured by ZANLA too).<sup>30</sup> Women veterans commonly held that Nkomo's influence lay behind the initial ban on their military training as well as later decisions to segregate them from men and restrict their deployment. But even when they had themselves contested these policies, they were not unsympathetic to Nkomo's vision of women as 'seed of the nation'. As Khumalo explained: '[y]ou know he had a good policy. His thinking was ... "[w]hy waste a seed?" These women are the ones who will replace those soldiers who would have died in the front'.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the paternal and protective intentions women believed Nkomo to hold, he was not able to prevent the sexual abuse of women. Like all liberation movements, ZAPU enacted policies to regulate soldiers' relationships in exile. ZAPU's policy on marriage was that it should be postponed until the war's end. By the mid 1970s, ZAPU anticipated rapidly deploying soldiers and considered the transition to independence imminent, justifying the wait.<sup>32</sup> For rank-and-file soldiers, sexual relationships were also prohibited, but proved difficult to control. Such relationships were experienced and recounted differently by men and women. Male veterans associated training and war with a heightened sense of sexual desire, sometimes casting sex as an entitlement, and boasted of 'hunting expeditions' for women.<sup>33</sup> Women veterans, in contrast, often spoke only reluctantly about sexual relationships: as in other movements, it has remained a 'sensitive issue for many'.<sup>34</sup>

Sexual relationships were clearly widespread, notwithstanding rules and sensitivities. ZAPU's most senior woman nationalist in exile, Jane Ngwenya, warned of the potential of women's abuse from the outset of their military training: she recalled telling ZPRA's head of training, Cephas Cele, "[p]lease tell your soldiers never to abuse our female cadres". I had to be blunt'.<sup>35</sup> The large number of pregnancies among women trainees and soldiers testified to the failure to control sexual relationships. One of the very first cohort of women trainees was 'withdrawn from the training' owing to her pregnancy.<sup>36</sup> She and other pregnant soldiers were sent to Victory camp, a refugee camp largely for girls too young to train, where medical care was provided.<sup>37</sup> ZPRA's deputy medical director, Benjamin Dube, had objected to the ban on contraception in light of the number of pregnancies he encountered. As he explained, '[i]t was a big problem in the girl's camp ... the rate of pregnancies was very high' – but the policy was difficult to challenge because '[t]he old man – that is, Joshua Nkomo – was strongly against contraception'.<sup>38</sup>

These relationships existed despite sometimes harsh enforcement of the ban on sexual relationships for rank-and-file men and women. ZPRA cast relationships with civilians as a security risk and therefore a serious breach of discipline. In the last years of the war, such relationships were policed by a dedicated unit of the National Security Organisation (NSO), a combined party/military intelligence wing. Gertrude Mpala recounted how this unit 'would hear that this one womanised or went out to ... look for women – they would get punished for

30 On ZPRA, see Benjamin Dube (ZPRA's deputy medical director), interview by Mary Ndlovu, 14 October 2011, SAHA, AL3291\_B4. On ZANLA commanders' and the ZANLA Women's Affairs Department's opposition to contraception, see Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p. 52.

31 Khumalo, interview. Also see Dlodlo, interview; Mpala, interview.

32 The ANC/MK allowed marriages: see Lissoni, 'Dear Comrade'.

33 See, for example, Nicholas Nkomo, 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil', unpublished ms, 1993, p. 12; Nico Ndlovu, interview (part 2) by J. Alexander and J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 22 August 2016; I.J.K. Sibhona, *Nation Born of Violence: ZPRA's Struggle Against Rhodesia in Alliance with ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Cleveland, UK, Bubuya Publishing, 2018), p. 158, also see pp. 105–6.

34 Jane Ngwenya in *Yithi*, p. 111; Magadla, 'Women', pp. 395–6; Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p. 77.

35 Ngwenya in *Yithi*, p. 110.

36 Ngwenya in *Yithi*, p. 111.

37 Queen Maligwa, interview by J. Alexander and J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 18 December 2019; Maligwa in *Yithi*, p. 59.

38 Dube, interview.



**Figure 1.** Joshua Nkomo and the ZPRA Women's Brigade, 1979, by ZAPU photographer Zenzo Nkobi.  
(Source: Photo courtesy of SAHA, Zenzo Nkobi archive.)

it because they said it is a source of enemy infiltration'.<sup>39</sup> Relationships – including consensual liaisons – between soldiers were also severely punished. Queen Maligwa noted ZPRA's 'very strict' policy and described the case of a couple – both trainees – who were detained in 'pits', holes in the ground that served as prisons.<sup>40</sup> Towards the end of the war, tensions between male ZPRA cohorts and commanders at times placed women soldiers in danger. In the most notorious case, discussed below, a large contingent of men newly trained in Angola attacked the Women's Brigade camp, seeking to gain access to the women inside, thereby placing a militarised masculinity at the heart of a mutiny.<sup>41</sup>

The tensions that restrictions on sexual relationships fostered among men were partly due to ZPRA commanders' exemption from the ban on relationships: seniority gave access to women and sex. In stark contrast to the rank-and-file, ZPRA commanders routinely and publicly entered into relationships with women. Some of them married civilian women who lived and raised children in Lusaka, such as ZPRA's most influential commander, Nikita Mangena.<sup>42</sup> In other cases, commanders 'proposed' to women – trainees and soldiers – in camps. It was difficult to refuse such approaches, given the 'power dynamics' involved.<sup>43</sup> Grace Muchachi described such behaviour as unsurprising: '[n]aturally', she explained, any ZPRA commander 'could propose to a woman that he wants'.<sup>44</sup>

Late in the war, relationships between senior ZPRA, ZAPU and NSO men and the women who constituted the Women's Brigade at Solwezi camp were commonplace, and in some cases were held to have resulted in women's promotion or other advantages.<sup>45</sup> Grace

<sup>39</sup> Mpala, interview.

<sup>40</sup> Maligwa, interview.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Moyo, interview by Mark Ndlovu, 13 September 1995; interview, Maligwa.

<sup>42</sup> P. Nyathi, 'In Search of Freedom: Rodgers Alfred Nikita Mangena' (Bulawayo, Amagugu Publishers, 2020); M. Hadebe (ed.), *Alfred Nikita Mangena: Oral Histories of the First ZPRA Commander* (Bulawayo, Ingwaladi Publishers, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Ngwenya in *Yithi*, p. 111.

<sup>44</sup> Grace Muchachi, interview by J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 7 January 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Sithabile Ncube held that most Women's Brigade relationships started at Solwezi: interview by M.H. Hadebe, Bulawayo, 16 September 2025. On promotions linked to relationships, Alice Ncube claimed that Gertrude Mpala was appointed commander of the Women's Brigade because of her relationship with the senior nationalist Simon Khaya Moyo: Alice Ncube, interview by M.H. Hadebe, Bulawayo, 16 September 2025. According to Soneni Sibanda, other senior figures in relationships with ZPRA women included senior NSO man Patrick Mhandu, senior ZPRA commanders Tshile Nleya, Abel Mazinyane and Eddie Sigoge, and ZAPU nationalist Lazarus Nkala: Soneni Sibanda, interview by M.H. Hadebe, Bulawayo, 20 September 2025.

Muchachi held, 'it was their luck to be proposed to by these men'.<sup>46</sup> Women's accounts conveyed mixed motivations. Doreen Mathe described her relationship to Eddie Sigoge: '[w]hile we were at Solwezi I preferred to at least have a relationship with Sigoge as he kept on insisting and proposing'. In addition, she recounted how her 'friends insisted that if I agree to his proposal maybe he was going to reduce his level of strictness'.<sup>47</sup> For others, a relationship with a senior ZPRA commander was seen as protection against the demands of lower-ranking men. Sithabile Ncube argued, 'it was far better to date a high-ranking cadre in in the sense that others knew that you are now a liberated zone [and] no one else dared to propose'.<sup>48</sup> Towards the end of the war, Gertrude Mpala argued that women soldiers also sought out relationships because they had started to imagine their post-war lives as mothers, some preferring a military match that they thought would guarantee common understanding, and others preferring a route out of military life.<sup>49</sup>

Despite potential advantages and protections, women in these relationships could nonetheless feel powerless and insecure, at times fearing that male commanders would reject them or refuse responsibility for their children.<sup>50</sup> For young trainees, the results could be devastating. Jane Ngwenya recounted the story of a teenage Mkushi trainee who 'committed suicide after she discovered that a senior instructor was double-crossing her with another'.<sup>51</sup>

ZPRA women's accounts highlighted the difficulties of navigating the contradictions emanating from the never resolved disjuncture between social norms of femininity and a masculinist military regime. These tensions shaped ZPRA's gendered military culture and they can be traced through the history of women's training.

## ZPRA's Women 'Pioneers': Becoming 'Men'

Women and girls who arrived in Zambia wanting to fight were initially diverted to education. The first group to train as guerrillas comprised just nine teenagers who were integrated into a camp of many hundreds of men. These 'pioneer' women trainees transformed the attitudes of ZPRA commanders and instructors by demonstrating bodily and emotional capacities previously deemed exclusively male, thus opening the door for additional cohorts of women trainees. In this first model of training, women embodied an already established dominant martial masculinity and overrode feminine characteristics attributed to them.

ZPRA was comparatively slow to train women: it admitted the first female recruits in March 1975, almost a decade after MK and the lusophone liberation armies, and two years after ZANLA.<sup>52</sup> ZAPU had always had a Women's League but the party did not actively endorse gender equality or showcase women guerrillas in its propaganda as other movements did.<sup>53</sup> Lyons casts ZAPU as 'conservative' and 'averse to promoting the image

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46 Muchachi, interview.

47 Doreen Mathe, interview by M.H. Hadebe, Bulawayo, 20 September 2025.

48 Ncube, interview.

49 Gertrude Mpala, interview by M.H. Hadebe, Bulawayo, 19 September 2025.

50 See, for example, Jester Chivi in *Yithi*, p. 98.

51 Ngwenya in *Yithi*, p. 111.

52 On ZAPU, see Abel Mazinyane, interview by J. Alexander and J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 11 January 2022; Abel Mazinyane, 'Zimbabwean Women in the Armed Struggle', *Sunday News*, Bulawayo, 26 July 2015; Jane Ngwenya and Stanley Nleya in *Yithi*, pp. 107–12 and 132–4, respectively. On Frelimo, see West, 'Girls'; Katto, 'Landscapes'. On MK, see Cock, *Colonels*; Magadla, 'Women'; Hassim, 'Nationalism'. On ZANLA, see Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p. 23.

53 For example, in ZAPU's magazine, *Zimbabwe Review*, the sole article on female guerrillas is Thokozile Ushe, 'Girls' Role in the Struggle', *Zimbabwe Review*, 1977, p. 6. ZAPU's 1978 ideological statement had a single sentence on equal rights for women under 'social welfare' (ZAPU, 'The Ideological Programme of the ZAPU', ZAPU, Lusaka, 1978), while its 1971 'ideological concept' did not mention gender equality: JSTOR, 'Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa, Ranger Papers, ZAPU, 'Zimbabwe African People's Union: Ideological Concept', available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.ranger00121>, retrieved 15 April 2026. Compare to the ANC in Hassim, 'Nationalism', and Frelimo in Katto, 'Landscapes'.

that their women were actively involved in military actions'; in comparison to ZANU, she portrays ZAPU as more focused on women's 'education than bush fighting'.<sup>54</sup> However, in all movements there was a great gulf between propaganda and practice. Nhongo-Simbanegavi, for example, describes ZANLA statements about gender equality as 'myths', and emphasises that women soldiers were often restricted to cooking and portering.<sup>55</sup> The iconic liberation movement image of a woman holding an AK rifle with a baby slung on her back offered a deeply misleading image of how reproductive and military roles were reconciled across all liberation armies.<sup>56</sup>

As in other liberation movements, ZAPU's decision to recruit women was the product of contestation. Pressure to include women came from different quarters. A key figure was Jane Ngwenya, ZAPU's most senior woman nationalist in exile, who was responsible for 'women's affairs'. Lyons characterises her as the epitome of ZAPU conservatism, a promoter of the 'domestic capabilities of women'.<sup>57</sup> But she was considerably more than that. Ngwenya had given up her marriage and any hope of a respectable life when she joined the nationalist movement in the late 1950s. She is famous as the voice of ZAPU's radio broadcasts from Lusaka, through which she appealed to men and women to join the struggle.<sup>58</sup> In the 1970s, Jane Ngwenya sat on ZAPU's Revolutionary Council. In an interview with Methembe Hadebe, she recounted her exchange with Joshua Nkomo on the question of women soldiers:

I quickly had to tell him that if other military wings in Africa are doing that, why would ZPRA side-line women. I said it boldly as I ... wanted him to understand that while I had joined the war to fight the colonial system, I was also in the quest of fighting the cultural stereotypes.<sup>59</sup>

She credited the decision to allow women to train in part to the pressure she and other ZAPU women had put on the 'command element and other nationalists'.<sup>60</sup>

The fact that other liberation armies had already deployed women also influenced ZPRA's male commanders. According to Abel Mazinyane, they began to 'waver' and feel 'uncomfortable'.<sup>61</sup> Due to ongoing opposition, not least from Joshua Nkomo, the initial decision to admit women came with tight limits: only a small number of women would be trained to take on various roles short of battlefield combat. In Stanley Nleya's account, the Revolutionary Council 'agreed to recruit women who were girls as from 13 years ... the plan had been to recruit, train and deploy them to strategic departments like intelligence and secretarial positions among other things'.<sup>62</sup> Targeting teenage girls was likely to have been a strategy to avoid recruiting mothers, as was the case in Frelimo.<sup>63</sup> The Revolutionary Council did not deem women capable of entering ZPRA's masculinised military sphere – this possibility only emerged because of how women trainees themselves performed.

ZPRA's first intake of girls in 1975 was thus limited to nine teenagers. The Revolutionary Council deemed this a 'manageable number', and they were sent to train with a group of some 800 men at Mwembeshi camp in Zambia.<sup>64</sup> Despite their small number,

54 Lyons, *Guns*, pp. 176–8, 123.

55 Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, pp. xx–xxi.

56 Katto, 'Landscapes', p. 545.

57 Lyons, *Guns*, p. 178.

58 Mazinyane, 'Zimbabwean Women'.

59 Ngwenya in *Yithi* p. 110.

60 Ngwenya in *Yithi*, pp. 110–11.

61 Mazinyane, interview, 2022.

62 Nleya in *Yithi*, p. 134.

63 On Frelimo's targeting of teenaged girls to avoid mothers, see Katto 'Landscapes', p. 544, and West, 'Girls', p. 186.

64 Nleya in *Yithi*, pp. 132–4.

young age and ongoing efforts to divert them, these women transformed the views of ZPRA commanders. Their progress was closely monitored.<sup>65</sup> Joshua Nkomo himself visited the camp with other members of the ZPRA high command to try to persuade the girls to study, but all refused. Grace Muchachi, then just 15 years old, looked back with awe on her younger self and the group's determined resistance:

Nkomo came and requested his command structure to remove girls and assign us to go back to school as he felt that the training was not appropriate for us . . . . He tried to negotiate with us but we still insisted that we wanted to remain as soldiers. He went back and sent Dabengwa to convince us to go back to school. Dabengwa also insisted that the training was meant for [men and] not us as it required resilience, but we still insisted that we wanted to remain as soldiers.<sup>66</sup>

The nine teenagers embarked on ZPRA's notoriously arduous six-month 'semi-commando' guerrilla training, alongside men.<sup>67</sup> Male instructors insisted they treated women equally: '[t]he emphasis in our training was that it was non-discriminatory and never entertained any stereotypes that you are a man or a woman'.<sup>68</sup> The women concurred: '[w]e trained with men, there was not a single case or scenario when we were separated from men'.<sup>69</sup> Training included the daily regime of the high-kneed toyi-toyi drill and running with 20 kilogrammes of kit. It covered obstacle training, stalking, close combat fighting and raid-and-withdrawal exercises. There were also the technical demands of artillery training and map reading alongside political education. Like men, the young women were subject to the harsh discipline typical of ZPRA's training, which brooked neither complaint nor dissent.<sup>70</sup> Mwembeshi instructor Stanley Nleya recounted, 'when it meant beating them up, being rough and exercising our military power so that they understand the nature of the training we did all that'.<sup>71</sup>

When the training was only part way through, the entire group was transferred to ZANLA's Mgagao camp in Tanzania. They were to undertake joint training under the Zimbabwe People's Army (ZIPA), a disastrous effort to unite the two liberation armies overseen by the Tanzanian military. In this 'integrated' camp, as in others, there were conflicts between ZANLA and ZPRA. In this case, ZANLA gained access to arms and, with the support of Chinese instructors and the Tanzanian military, opened fire on unarmed ZPRA cadres, leading to the massacre of an estimated 50 ZPRA guerrillas. The ZPRA women survived: they evaded machine-gun fire and armed pursuit, crawled long distances, outran pursuers, threw back unexploded grenades and showed exemplary discipline – precisely the physical and emotional qualities prized in a ZPRA soldier and deemed essential for combat.<sup>72</sup> As a direct result, Stanley Nleya argued for the recruitment of more women: 'I was very impressed to see them in action fighting, a sign that made us recommend recruitment of more female combatants to the War Council as we had seen that it was feasible to train them effectively'.<sup>73</sup> Jane Ngwenya echoed Nleya:

65 Ngwenya in *Yithi*; Mazinyane, interview, 2022.

66 Muchachi in *Yithi*, p. 5. Also see Tawona in *Yithi*, p. 13; Mazinyane, interview, 2022.

67 The physical demands of this course and the extremes of ZPRA discipline were denounced by MK men subjected to them as inhumane and mindlessly cruel. See Alexander and McGregor, 'The Travelling Toyi-Toyi'.

68 Nleya in *Yithi*, p. 134.

69 Tawona in *Yithi*, p. 13.

70 See Nleya in *Yithi*, pp. 134–5; Tawona in *Yithi*, pp. 12–13; Muchachi in *Yithi*, pp. 4–5.

71 Nleya in *Yithi*, p. 134.

72 See the first-hand accounts of Muchachi and Tawona in *Yithi*, pp. 6–7 and 15–16, respectively.

73 Nleya in *Yithi*, p. 134.

after the Mbagao attack, I said that if women survived then it means they must be trained for those nine showed bravery. From that day, Nkomo marvelled at how the nine female combatants managed to come out of the obstacle and survived an attack. This prompted the massive recruitment of other female recruits for military training.<sup>74</sup>

The nine 'pioneers' went on to complete their training under ZAPU and returned to Zambia.

Two of these trained women were subsequently appointed as instructors – of men and women – at ZAPU's Mwembeshi camp in Zambia, where they would attain legendary status for their ability to embody the masculinist martial ideals of the ZPRA soldier. They were Grace Muchachi, a fitness trainer, and Bvundzai Tawona, an artillery instructor.<sup>75</sup> Both worked alongside male instructors under the camp's all-male command. Tawona, a company commander, believed she was appointed as instructor 'as an inspiration to young girls on how high up the ranks they could rise'.<sup>76</sup> Muchachi also believed she had been appointed to inspire women.<sup>77</sup> She celebrated her strength and reflected on how she and other rural girls had an advantage over urban recruits (boys and girls) as they were used to 'digging, carrying water and all that'. She recounted proving her authority to doubtful male recruits by throwing them to the ground: '[w]hen they saw that these women can lift you up and throw you there physically then they knew women can do it .... I'd have to face a man ... so that I lift him and punch him so that they see that no, this is how you do it .... Then they respected'.<sup>78</sup>

In Mwembeshi, women trainees were dispersed across companies but slept together in separate tents from the men. They developed a shared identity that built on their common backgrounds – most came from Gwanda and Plumtree districts in Matabeleland South province – as well as the martial model offered by their women instructors.<sup>79</sup> These cohorts vividly remembered their training for its revelatory message about gender equality in this most masculine of institutional contexts. Doreen Mathe recalled, 'the first time we saw [Grace Muchachi] doing all the tricks, male recruits marvelled'. Muchachi and Tawona

blended well with the male instructors. We saw no difference between them .... What made it good was the fact that in the absence of any other male instructor the two would take over and train even harder than the male instructors themselves. Grace could jump and spin in the air .... Bvundzai was responsible for artillery training. Stripping a gun and assembling it.<sup>80</sup>

Zegeu Mpofo emphasised, '[t]raining with men made me realise that what men can do could be done by women too'; the women instructors were 'men in women figures. All I'm trying to say is they were bold'. Mpofo continued, they 'instructed everyone, including men! We looked up to them and aspired to be like them as soon as we completed our training. They were so encouraging and we envied that indeed a woman can do [what] a man can do'.<sup>81</sup>

74 Ngwenya in *Yithi*, p. 111.

75 Their civilian names are Ethel Noko (Muchachi) and Toriso Moyo (Tawona). The first Mwembeshi cohort that they trained had 53 women in a group of c.500–1,000. A second group may have had 100–150 women in a group of 1,000–2,000. Estimates vary. See, for example, Hazel Ndlovu in *Yithi*, p. 22, and Zegeu Mpofo in *Yithi*, p. 30, who also notes an expanded set of women instructors for the second cohort.

76 Tawona in *Yithi*, p. 16.

77 Muchachi, interview.

78 Muchachi, interview.

79 For example, see Mpofo in *Yithi*, pp. 27–32; Sevi Dlodlo in *Yithi*, pp. 61–8; Mazinyane, 'Zimbabwean Women'. The nine 'pioneers' were from Gwanda and Beitbridge, all recruited by a Mr Vela. The group of 53 were also from Matabeleland South province, mostly from Plumtree, close to the Botswana border.

80 Doreen Mathe in *Yithi*, p. 42.

81 Mpofo in *Yithi*, p. 30.

This period of integrated training and the fighting at Mgagao powerfully challenged the view that women could not inhabit ZPRA's version of martial masculinity. But this model of integrated training in which gendered difference was rejected did not last long. The initial Revolutionary Council reluctance to commit women to combat inside Zimbabwe was never overturned, leaving even the most lauded of these pioneers to defend their accomplishments as rear front soldiers. Tawona lamented, '[i]ronically, I instructed men who ended up fighting in the war front although I did not go . . . . People think that we went to war to be singers, cooks and entertain guerrillas. [But] if singing was done, it was done as war cries in toyi-toyi exercises'.<sup>82</sup>

## **Protection, Vulnerability and the Move to Separate Training**

The shift to the separate training of women soldiers took place in 1977. It followed Joshua Nkomo's intervention in the organisation of camps as the war escalated, as ZPRA received a massive influx of young Zimbabwean recruits in Zambia and as the army shifted from guerrilla to semi-conventional warfare. These processes created new training and deployment strategies in which gender was reified as a source of immutable difference rather than as subsumable in a common martial masculinity.

ZPRA's massive expansion and military reorganisation over the course of 1977 created a very different context for new cohorts of women recruits. Joshua Nkomo moved to Lusaka in early 1977 to head ZAPU's Revolutionary Council following the assassination by parcel bomb of ZAPU's leader in exile, Jason Ziyaphapha Moyo. At the same time, the Zambian camps were overwhelmed with the many thousands of Zimbabwean arrivals: an estimated 10,000 cadres were inducted into ZPRA in 1977 alone.<sup>83</sup> These cadres were motivated by the 'spirit of war' fostered by ZAPU propaganda and associated with Jane Ngwenya's radio broadcasts as well as by direct encounters with ZPRA fighters and Rhodesian repression.

New recruits came from rural and urban areas and differed from prior cohorts because they included many children and women. Most famous was the so-called Manama group, some 1,200 in all, named after the roughly 350 Manama mission schoolchildren – both boys and girls – abducted by ZPRA soldiers en masse. They were joined by many others, not only school children and youth, but also migrant labourers and women (including senior ZAPU leaders), who gathered en route to and in Botswana. All found themselves rapidly airlifted to Zambia and transported to ZAPU's already overrun reception camp at Nampundwe.<sup>84</sup>

The arrival of so many children and women in a single group in this moment of expansion and reordering led to the creation of separate women's military and refugee camps, ushering in a new phase in the gendering of ZPRA military culture. The reordering was part of the broader remaking of ZPRA as a semi-conventional force, in which the army was functionally elaborated, specialised and compartmentalised, and its command structure reorganised. But the decision to segregate by gender had motivations that were couched in a return to earlier ideas of women's vulnerability and difference, reinforcing a consistent desire to keep women from the 'front'.

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<sup>82</sup> Tawona in *Yithi*, p. 13.

<sup>83</sup> Brickhill, 'Daring', p. 66.

<sup>84</sup> N. Bhebe, *The ZAPU and ZANU Guerilla Warfare and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1999), pp. 103, 172–4. Bhebe states (p. 172) that 500–700 were abducted from Manama mission, but only 350 continued after desertions. This number was augmented by 600 more who joined at the border at Bobonong and others who joined in Botswana. For an account of sexual assault by guerrillas during the abduction, see Jacqueline Nkala in *Yithi*, pp. 45–51. For accounts of the terrifying trip and of parents reclaiming children, see Sithabile 'KD' Muchachi and Maretha Dube in *Yithi*, pp. 84–9 and 120–4, respectively.

Joshua Nkomo and Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda visited Nampundwe reception camp at the height of its chaotic expansion, encountering a mix of young and old, men and women, alongside guerrillas returning from fighting in Zimbabwe. They responded with a patrician horror at the wretched living conditions, harsh daily regime of exercises, and the ‘inevitable’ problems of mixing men and women.<sup>85</sup> Nampundwe was intended as a place of screening and sorting, where ZPRA separated children from those old enough for military training, and tried to locate spies. Those judged to be 16 or over (not always accurately) were subjected to a physically harsh and punitive induction to military life.<sup>86</sup> Nkomo’s biography records his conclusion that camp conditions were ‘not appropriate’ for young girls, not least owing to what he saw as their unintended but inevitable effect on men: ‘[i]t was not the girls’ fault, but the presence of young women in a camp of young male soldiers caused tremendous trouble’.<sup>87</sup> His response was to call for separate women’s and girls’ camps. ZPRA commanders had other concerns too. Abel Mazinyane recalled their unease over the growing presence of women in party and army. They considered it ‘challenging’: ‘[s]ome of us were still in the process of accepting Jane Ngwenya as a female party leader and now we were receiving dozens of them’.<sup>88</sup>

Some ZPRA women veterans of this generation expressed sympathy for Nkomo’s views on the need for women’s and girls’ ‘protection’ and the importance of gender differences, diverging from the claims to – and performance of – martial equality by the ‘pioneer’ women. Queen Maligwa explained, ‘I think it was best for us . . . . If you give to men to lift this fridge up, they can lift it up, but me and you cannot lift it. So we have to agree men are men, women are women’.<sup>89</sup> Gertrude Mpala argued that women’s deployment in Zimbabwe would have created risks that training could never overcome:

I think whilst we would like to say as an individual . . . I can go and kill someone at the front, but . . . you are not equipped physically, it doesn’t matter how much training you would have done, you will not be able to withstand the fighting environment, the real engagement . . . facing the enemy. We are the fairer sex. At the end of the day, when you mature, you understand it was the right thing to do . . . . A commander can be tough to a point, he can be tough to a man and not hesitate to raise his fist if he is disobeying orders. But can that be done to a woman?<sup>90</sup>

Many women veterans also endorsed Nkomo’s desire for gender segregation. Like him, they did not believe men could be (or would be) controlled. They detailed how male instructors at Nampundwe humiliated teenaged girls. Several recounted that performing training drills while wearing school uniform dresses had bared their bodies. In Doreen Mathe’s telling, ‘[t]here was a drill which was called number 6 and one was left almost exposed I mean naked if they had worn a dress’.<sup>91</sup> Sevi Dlodlo recounted being punished for refusing the exercise out of shame: ‘they would beat me up, at times they would make you starve if you were so stubborn’.<sup>92</sup> Nkomo’s concerns in this context were described as ‘fatherly’, as primarily a response to the threats posed to girls’ ‘welfare’.<sup>93</sup> Khumalo recounted feeling ‘lucky’ to have avoided the ‘very, very rough’ regime at Nampundwe and

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85 J. Nkomo, *Nkomo: The Story of My Life* (London, Methuen, 1984), p. 164.

86 Alexander and McGregor, ‘Adelante!’, pp. 626–31.

87 Nkomo, *Nkomo*, p. 164. Also see Lyons, *Guns*, p. 176.

88 Mazinyane, interview, 2022.

89 Maligwa, interview.

90 Mpala, interview, 2019.

91 Mathe in *Yithi*, p. 41.

92 Dlodlo in *Yithi*, p. 64.

93 Mpala, interview, 2019.

praised Nkomo's decision to separate women, casting it as an expression of his paternal concern 'to really take care of the girl child'.<sup>94</sup>

Two camps were created for women in 1977, one for military trainees and the other intended for those unable to train or too young. In parallel, new specialist camps were created in Zambia for boys too young to train and for all-male conventional and officers' training.<sup>95</sup> Of the women's camps, Victory camp, located on the site of a former MPLA camp close to Lusaka, opened first. Initially it accommodated women military trainees in one section, while schoolgirls, pregnant women and those physically unable to fight owing to age or disability were in a different part of the camp. It operated as a reception and transit site for newly arrived women and girls, who were put through a process of screening, selection and segregation according to age, health and suitability for training.<sup>96</sup> Young girls went to school at Victory camp, while women who were assigned to specialist training as teachers, nurses, typists or administrators moved to other sites or trained abroad. The camp administration and daily routine was militarised and under the control of a male ZPRA commander, Cecil Banda. Women who underwent basic military training were organised into a hierarchy of companies, platoons, detachments and sections, and took on commanding roles. One of the first groups of these women went on to intelligence training in Cuba.<sup>97</sup> ZPRA also placed a major weapons armoury in Victory camp, thinking that the presence of women and girls would provide cover and protect it from attack.<sup>98</sup>

In late 1977, Victory camp was registered by the UNHCR as a refugee camp and the female military trainees were moved to the new women's camp established at Mkushi. Victory camp thereafter remained under ZAPU/ZPRA control and initially continued to provide cover for a ZPRA armoury.<sup>99</sup> Prominent ZAPU women leaders at the camp included Thenjiwe Lesabe and Mai Murohwa. The camp grew dramatically and evolved over the next years (see Figure 2). It became a 'factory' for military uniforms following a donation of sewing machines.<sup>100</sup> Elderly men and workers came in daily to sew and to maintain large vegetable gardens.<sup>101</sup> By 1978, the camp's hospital for pregnant women, the ill and injured had a laboratory, built with donor funds, and international staff.<sup>102</sup> Joshua Nkomo praised the camp for exemplifying the benefits of international solidarity and for the 'wonderful job' done by Lesabe and Mai Murohwa in providing girls with 'a better education than ... at home'.<sup>103</sup> The camp came to resemble a 'large boarding school', but it also retained elements of the disrupted gendered roles produced by war. Schoolgirls served as a pool for selecting military trainees, most notably based on their physical prowess. Fitness training and drills were taught by ZPRA women,<sup>104</sup> who also served as political commissars and guards as well as teachers and nurses.<sup>105</sup> Domestic labour was not traditionally gendered either. Cooking, for example, was organised according to a rota in

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94 Khumalo, interview.

95 The boys' camp was moved repeatedly due to Rhodesian air attacks: SAHA, *ZAPU*, p. 67.

96 SAHA, *ZAPU*, p. 67.

97 Gertrude Mpala, formerly a ZAPU activist and in her early 20s at the time, described her basic military training and command role at Victory camp before she left for training in Cuba: Mpala, interview, 2019.

98 On the armoury, see 'Commander Cde Banda Unveils Secret ZPRA Armouries, Untold Story of Victory Camp', *Sunday News*, 16 March 2025.

99 *Ibid.*

100 SAHA, *ZAPU*, p. 67.

101 Khumalo, interview; Ndlovu, interview.

102 SAHA, *ZAPU*, p. 54.

103 Nkomo, *Nkomo*, p. 164.

104 Khumalo, interview. Also see Ndlovu, interview; Dlodlo in *Yithi*, p. 62.

105 Mpofu in *Yithi*, p. 31.

which women participated, but elderly and disabled men also cooked, and many women recalled being served food by men they jokingly called ‘king killers’.<sup>106</sup>

Mkushi camp was also established in 1977. The first cohort of 1,000 women military trainees who inhabited the camp included a significant number of teenaged Manama mission schoolgirls.<sup>107</sup> They underwent a six-month training programme comparable to men’s. This included ZPRA’s demanding regime of physical fitness, toyi-toyi drill and running, and the full range of military expertise in topography, map reading, communications, intelligence, artillery, reconnaissance and political education.<sup>108</sup> Training camps for men now had exclusively male instructors, but Mkushi had a mix of male and female. The first camp commander at Mkushi was Billy Mzamo (followed by Moses Phinda). He was deputised by the Mwembeshi graduates Jane Ndlovu and Audrey.<sup>109</sup> Much as in men’s camps, members of the first cohort vividly remembered the physical toughness of their induction, a process understood as intended to militarise: ‘they would strive by all means to remove the aspect of one being a civilian’.<sup>110</sup> As in Mwembeshi, women instructors were cast as inspiringly strong, fit and skilled.

If the training regime at Mkushi did not differ markedly from that of men’s camps, women trainees’ experiences and the future ZPRA imagined for them were distinctive. The training that women were offered at Mkushi also diverged from the experience and vision of the Mwembeshi pioneers. ZPRA outlined roles for the far larger numbers of Mkushi women in a range of military support duties in the now vastly expanded and far more dangerous complex of rear bases, as well as imagining roles for them in the future Zimbabwean state. While women instructors continued to inspire trainees, they were subordinated to a masculinist martial hierarchy run by men, in which their views could be overruled and expertise dismissed. Unsurprisingly, the separation of women trainees in Mkushi did not protect them from Rhodesian attack – all camps were vulnerable in this moment – but it also did not protect them from a masculinist military, as Joshua Nkomo had hoped.

The stories about training at Mkushi echoed those of the earlier generation of women in the stress laid on hardship. While some women ‘enjoyed physical training more than anything else’, for others it was ‘torture’.<sup>111</sup> Sevi Dlodlo recalled women fainting during their ten-kilometre runs.<sup>112</sup> Trainees described injuries sustained during obstacle-crossing exercises under live fire, including an instance when an instructor mistakenly shot and killed three trainees.<sup>113</sup> Much like men, the women veterans regarded their unreliable food supplies and subjection to hunger as a deliberate practice intended to inculcate martial endurance.<sup>114</sup> Queen Maligwa described Mkushi as ‘designed in such a way that it should be difficult and match with the standard of training of other camps. We would go for days without food’.<sup>115</sup> Mealtimes were rushed to underline the dangers of gathering. Sehlule Ngwenya remembered ‘eating while standing and you would be timed’.<sup>116</sup>

But women veterans’ stories also emphasised their distinct experience of violent male hierarchies. The ZPRA instructor known as Castro, a man trained in Somalia, was much cited for

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106 Khumalo, interview.

107 Mazinyane, ‘Zimbabwean Women’; Mazinyane, interview, 2019.

108 Khumalo, interview.

109 Jane’s war name was Jane Ngwenya; her civilian name was Ratidzo Ndlovu. She is usually called Jane Ndlovu to distinguish her from the better known senior ZAPU nationalist, Jane Ngwenya. We were unable to trace further details of Audrey’s identity, beyond this single name, which is how veterans remember her.

110 Magret Cheto in *Yithi*, pp. 72–3.

111 See Muchachi, interview and Maligwa, interview.

112 Dlodlo in *Yithi*.

113 Irene Moteletso in *Yithi*, pp. 100–5.

114 Khumalo, interview.

115 Maligwa, interview.

116 Sehlule Ngwenya in *Yithi*.



**Figure 2.** Victory camp: girls relaxing, with one looking out from her defence hole, 1979, by ZAPU photographer Zenzo Nkobi. (Source: Photo courtesy of SAHA, Zenzo Nkobi archive.)

his physical harshness and for shouting ‘we are here to train ZPRA guerrillas and not females’.<sup>117</sup> Castro’s beatings left Queen Maligwa unconscious and in a ‘near death state’. She held, ‘[h]e really wanted to kill you instead of correcting you .... I won’t forget him even though he is now late, but I have forgiven him’.<sup>118</sup> Male commanders’ excessive punishments were not just about instilling the martial value of obedience, but also about controlling ZPRA women’s sexuality and affections. Mkushi camp was guarded by Zambian army soldiers, men who had greater access to consumer goods than their ZPRA counterparts. Gertrude Moyo remembered the jealousy inspired in ZPRA men by the gifts they gave to women trainees:

If seen talking to them you would be in hot soup .... As the Zambians were very kind, they used to give us some beef, Colgate and soap for bathing. The Zimbabwean instructors were very jealous .... Those ladies who fell in love with the Zambians were beaten up seriously and punished.<sup>119</sup>

Women veterans of Mkushi also elaborated the effects of training on their bodies. Some veterans recalled that the physical and emotional demands had led them to stop menstruating.<sup>120</sup> Some saw this as an appropriate adaptation to a context that required suppressing sexuality and in which there was a near total absence of sanitary towels. Women veterans remembered their male trainers insisting that menstruation was no excuse for not training. Regina Ndlovu recounted, ‘they would tell you ... what would you do if you were in the bush and the enemy was following you behind? Would you say, today I am menstruating, I will not shoot?’<sup>121</sup> For some women, uniforms stained with menstrual blood during training brought feelings of shame, but others felt there was little difference from managing periods in their rural homes: they made pads from leaves and borrowed extra underpants from friends.<sup>122</sup>

If women trainees were made to feel their feminine difference and vulnerability under Mkushi’s male-dominated hierarchy, they nonetheless took tremendous pride in their strength and military professionalism, attributes central to their identity as ZPRA soldiers.

117 Dlodlo in *Yithi*, p. 67.

118 Maligwa, interview.

119 Gertrude Moyo, interview by Mark Ndlovu, Mafela Trust, 1995.

120 Muchachi, interview.

121 Regina Ndlovu, interview by Mary Ndlovu, 6 May 2011, SAHA, AL3291\_B16; see also Dlodlo, interview.

122 Muchachi, interview.

Mastering guns was one element of this identity, but it also encompassed women's awareness of their part in ZPRA's sophisticated semi-conventional force. Queen Maligwa recalled:

I could stand on guard the whole night as a woman but ... I wasn't afraid, because I had my gun .... we were trained in a lot of guns, ... for personal use it was AK47s and Seminovs. We did Bazookas, LMG [light machine guns] ... ZGUs [anti-aircraft guns] .... The departments included artillery, signals/communications, anti-air, infantry, the ground force was there, the medics .... We had a very strong force.<sup>123</sup>

Women in the first Mkushi group vividly remembered the role ZAPU envisaged for them, elaborated at their pass-out parade in mid 1978. Joshua Nkomo addressed them and made the case – a long-held view – that while women were trained as men, they were not suited to combat inside Zimbabwe. Nkomo explained that ZAPU's policy was to deploy women soldiers in non-combat military departments and in militarised civilian administration in the rear front, as preparation for future state-making. Sevi Dlodlo recounted: 'Nkomo emphasised that the army had allowed us, women, to train ... the strategy was to have trained women taking charge of every department at the rear as we were a government-in-waiting'.<sup>124</sup> This conceptualisation of their gendered role sought to establish a feminised version of martial culture that placed Mkushi's women soldiers at the centre of Zimbabwe's future, if not in the frontline of its wartime present.

Yet, the notion of a 'frontline' did not meaningfully distinguish combat from non-combat zones in the final years of the war, as we have noted. After their pass-out parade, the first Mkushi cohort mostly stayed in the camp, overlapping with the arrival of a second cohort, also of 1,000 women, accommodated nearby in 'New Mkushi' camp. Only weeks later, the Mkushi camps – along with several other major camps<sup>125</sup> – were subject to Rhodesian bombing and ground attack, placing them on a new frontline created by the expansion of the war into Zambia.

## The Attack on Mkushi and the Formation of the Women's Brigade

Women veterans describe the Rhodesian bombing of Mkushi on 17 October 1978 as a source of enduring trauma, and the commemorations of this event primarily cast women as victims. However, there are other storylines that focus on women soldiers' deployment of their military skills. According to ZAPU reports at the time, 1,606 women and 27 men were present at Mkushi on the day of the bombing.<sup>126</sup> Estimates of the numbers killed vary, but according to the Mafela Trust the deaths were well over four hundred.<sup>127</sup> The new recruits had begun their training only a few weeks earlier. Bombing began late in the morning and continued into the night and was followed by a ground force attack. We revisit women

123 Maligwa, interview; Khumalo, interview.

124 Dlodlo in *Yithi*, pp. 61–8.

125 On the same day there were also air strikes on ZPRA headquarters at Freedom camp, where casualties were huge, and on the 'Vatican', ZPRA's intelligence headquarters in Lusaka.

126 The figure of 1,606 women trainees at Mkushi is given in 'Massacre of Defenceless Girls at Mkushi', *Zimbabwe People's Voice*, 28 October 1978, cited in Lyons, *Guns*, p. 125.

127 The Mafela Trust located 10 mass graves, one inscribed '411 lay here': See ZAPU, 'Mkushi Camp Survivors Tour ZPRA Camp', available at <https://www.facebook.com/ZimbabweAfricanPeoplesUnion/posts/mkushi-camp-survivors-tour-zpra-campa-group-of-zpra-liberation-war-veterans-rece/685551434825031>, accessed 21 July 2021. Rhodesian sources combine deaths in Mkushi and Freedom camps, claiming 1,500 'uniformed men and women' died. See 'Massive Raids Were Enormously Successful', *Focus on Rhodesia*, 3, 7 (1978); Ken Flower cites 1,600 deaths, see K. Flower, *Serving Secretly: Rhodesia's CIO Chief on Record* (Alberton, Galago, 1987), p. 214, cited in Lyons, *Guns*, p. 124.



**Figure 3.** ZPRA women commanders at Mkushi, Jane Ndlovu and Audrey, who perished in the Rhodesian bombing, 1978. (Source: Image from Grace Muchachi's personal archive, used with kind permission of the relatives of the deceased.)

veterans' accounts to show not only their victimhood, but how they deployed their military expertise under attack.

The tragic-heroic elements and horror of the attack are widely remembered. Both of the camp's senior women commanders, Jane Ndlovu and Audrey, were killed (see [Figure 3](#)). Jane was said to have been captured by Rhodesian soldiers, who instructed her to whistle to summon the trainees to the parade ground and was then ordered to shoot them; she refused and the Rhodesian soldiers shot her before massacring the 90 or so recruits who had assembled.<sup>128</sup> Many other new recruits were killed inside the individual security dugouts or 'pits' where they had been trained to take shelter. As Queen Maligwa put it, 'the pits became their graves'.<sup>129</sup> Sevi Dlodlo stressed that they had been trained to run to their pits, but had yet to acquire military skills, so did not know this would not protect them during an aerial assault: 'they had not learned anything to defend themselves ... this is what we were teaching them to do in the case of an emergency. When I think of this I cry'.<sup>130</sup> Many women had run out of the camp, pushed by Rhodesian air-fire towards a river and lands

128 'Massacre of Defenceless Girls at Mkushi', *Zimbabwe People's Voice*, 28 October 1978, cited in Lyons, *Guns*, pp. 125–6.

129 See accounts in *Yithi*, SAHA, ZAPU, p. 31, and N. Tshuma, 'Mkushi Bombings: The Women Who Lived to Tell the Tale', *The Chronicle*, Bulawayo, 21 March 2020.

130 Dlodlo in *Yithi*, p. 66.

drenched with napalm. The survivors hid for days in caves and thickets, under logs and others' bodies, or ran further. They describe the deaths of friends who were drowned in the river, attacked by crocodiles, burnt by napalm or killed by ground forces.<sup>131</sup> Others had the luck of encountering sympathetic black Rhodesian African Rifles soldiers and had followed their instructions on how to flee.<sup>132</sup>

Despite these terrible losses, the trained women veterans stressed that casualties would have been far worse if they and their women commanders had not used their military expertise to good effect. Sibongile Khumalo explained that Jane, the deputy camp commander, who had recently returned from specialist training in the Soviet Union, had altered the daily schedule due to intelligence about the coming attack:

The night before the bombardment.... We were put on high alert ... because the enemy would target you [at] ... a concentration point ... naturally the kitchen and the parade. ... Jane intercepted a signal that was coming from a command centre saying 'we are attacking Chikumbi, Chikumbi' .... So we had already changed our lunchtime.<sup>133</sup>

Women veterans described using their training to evade attacks too. Margaret Cheto recounted outmanoeuvring a pursuing helicopter gunship:

The helicopter, it spotted me and trailed me. So as part of the military lessons when an enemy is using a helicopter it becomes possible for them to shoot when you are on their right-hand side, hence one needed to run on the left side. At all cost, I was running on the left side. I remember at one point they tried to turn around and I also ... turned which made it impossible for them to shoot.<sup>134</sup>

In contrast to the positive role attributed to women's military expertise, some ZPRA women blamed male commanders' apparent lack of concern for the camp's defence – or for women's military knowledge – for exacerbating losses. Cecilia Sibanda described how Jane's attempts to act on ZPRA intelligence on Rhodesian infiltration and reconnaissance, and her strategy for strengthening camp defences, was dismissed by her male superiors.<sup>135</sup> Jester Chivi's battalion was responsible for camp security. She recalled being instructed to withdraw anti-air defences, because male commanders had overruled Jane's efforts to strengthen them:

The previous day to the bombardment ... there was a disagreement between [camp commander Moses] Phinda and Jane ... [M]ale characters had not fully accepted the fate of women in the command structures within a training camp ... There were disagreements over the withdrawal of sentries from guarding .... I was responsible for the artillery, we were instructed to withdraw anti-air machinery.<sup>136</sup>

Ntombiyakhe Ndlovu angrily noted the results: 'there was no security. We were exposed and we were not well armed – as people just had small arms like AK47 ... security at Mkushi was an embarrassment and a mockery'.<sup>137</sup> In these accounts, if women were victims, they were not victims only of the Rhodesian attack, but of ZPRA's masculinist military culture too.

131 Dlodlo in *Yithi*, pp. 66–7; Cheto in *Yithi*, p. 74; Muchachi in *Yithi*, pp. 87–8.

132 Maligwa in *Yithi*, p. 58; Khumalo, interview.

133 Khumalo, interview.

134 Cheto in *Yithi*, p. 74.

135 On prior suspicions, and ZPRA investigations, see Cecilia Sibanda in *Yithi*, pp. 33–7.

136 Jester Chivi in *Yithi*, pp. 93–9.

137 Ntombiyakhe Ndlovu, 'Mkushi Was Not Secured', *Sunday News*, 27 November 2016.

A military reorganisation followed the bombardment, with implications for the gendered imagination of military culture and future statehood. A Women's Brigade with an all-women command was formed and new roles envisaged for it. It was constituted after survivors of the Mkushi bombing were moved to Solwezi I camp, located in north-western Zambia, far from the Rhodesian border. This all-women camp formed part of a new complex that included a men's training camp (Solwezi II) and the relocated J.Z. Moyo boys' camp. The Women's Brigade comprised some 800 soldiers and was made up of four battalions and ten companies. It was commanded by Gertrude Mpala, who had received basic military training in Victory camp and then trained in intelligence in Cuba.<sup>138</sup> The fact that she had received only basic training, well short of ZPRA's notion of the requirements of a 'real' soldier or the training received by the women graduates of Mkushi, is perhaps indicative of the high command's ambivalence regarding the military status and combat role of the Brigade.

ZPRA envisaged deploying the Women's Brigade inside Zimbabwe once 'liberated areas' – areas the Rhodesian military would be unable to enter – had been established in the north of the country. ZPRA commanders cast defending and administering these zones as dependent 'on the readiness of the ZPRA Women's Brigade', which would play the key role of working with local party structures and mediating military–civilian relations.<sup>139</sup> Gertrude Mpala emphasised that the Brigade was intended to make use of its full range of expertise, and particularly its outstanding reputation in communications, to establish security and governance: '[w]e had all the departments ... what the strategists were saying was that, as the war escalates when the men go upfront, the women will remain holding the liberated areas .... The women's communications ... was one of the most reliable sources for picking up signals'.<sup>140</sup> These ambitious plans were not, however, realised before the ceasefire abruptly ended the war.

The Women's Brigade nonetheless created new opportunities for women to gain expertise, including training in conventional military skills. Sevi Dlodlo commanded D company of the Brigade, which specialised in artillery and was stationed in defensive positions around the camp perimeter. Dlodlo took great pride in her specialist training in 'artillery, in big weapons, ... Bazookas, MNGs [a medium machine gun], anti-tankers .... I managed to do that'.<sup>141</sup> When the Rhodesian Airforce bombed Solwezi's camps, women soldiers were once more placed amid combat. Gertrude Mpala explained the importance of the improved defence of the camp, including Solwezi's underground bunkers: 'Solwezi is ... a swampy area so when digging a bunker, you actually hit water ... women made beds out of bamboos underground ... each bunker was like a well, but ... they felt secure'. She also emphasised the camp's role in medical support – including for men injured in the nearby Solwezi II camp: '[t]hose who were not critical enough to go into Solwezi general hospital, they were nursed at Solwezi hospital women's camp'.<sup>142</sup>

During this period of fast-expanding war, ZPRA's masculinist military culture was able to incorporate women soldiers in novel roles, but their vulnerability to male abuse continued. The ongoing sexual exploitation of ZPRA women by male commanders and soldiers was part of life in Solwezi, particularly for trainees, notwithstanding the all-women command. A notorious instance featured in the accounts of both men and women veterans. It involved a unit of semi-conventionally trained male ZPRA soldiers who had recently arrived from Angola. The soldiers were held up in Solwezi, much to their frustration, having been

138 For the full list of female office holders, see Mpala in *Yithi*, p. 20.

139 Mazinyane, 'Women'.

140 Mpala, interview, 2019.

141 Dlodlo, interview.

142 Mpala, interview 2019.

promised immediate deployment, and were in a state of mutiny against their senior commanders. They attacked the male unit guarding the Women Brigade's camp, attempting to gain access to the women. The attack resulted in injuries and the death of a (male) ZPRA soldier. In accounts of the incident, women soldiers appeared to have been rendered, in effect, sexualised pawns who were both protected and attacked by their male counterparts.<sup>143</sup>

Sexual abuses of women at Solwezi also took more mundane, everyday forms. We have already noted the growing number of relationships between women soldiers at Solwezi and senior commanders and nationalists, and their varied motivations. The abuses of power in these relationships caused some to object. According to Queen Maligwa, she and a fellow soldier made a written complaint about male ZPRA commanders' behaviour:

A small group of us ... wrote a letter to the camp commanders expressing our displeasure .... We decided to write a letter telling the superiors and exposing the wrong doers. When they received the letter, they were offended and decided to punish me and Sibongile. However, security personnel who were meant to kill us never did .... [W]e were only disciplined.<sup>144</sup>

Maligwa felt sufficiently threatened to attempt an escape from Solwezi by faking pregnancy – a strategy that itself underlined the extent of sexual relationships:

A time came at the camp where all who thought they were pregnant had to register their names .... I had to fake pregnancy ... and run away from being killed. I was moved from Solwezi to Victory camp ... [where] they had to check us for whether we were pregnant and the doctor identified that I wasn't pregnant at all. I was taken back to Solwezi but after counselling.<sup>145</sup>

Maligwa's account has the hallmarks of many other women soldiers in ZPRA and other liberation armies in that it avoids naming abuses explicitly. Women's Brigade commander Gertrude Mpala's account did not acknowledge abuse at all, instead attributing sexual relationships to a breakdown of discipline in the face of women soldiers' own boredom: '[i]f you had a trained unit in your hand and they have nothing to do, they tend to be naughty. ... The [women at Solwezi] would go ... to town for shopping, men and naughtiness, a trained unit is the most difficult to administer, because they don't listen to you'.<sup>146</sup>

The Women's Brigade expressed a new vision of martial femininity – an all-female unit under female command with conventional capabilities – and a new, if unrealised, role was imagined for it in the liberated areas of northern Zimbabwe. In practice, the women of the Brigade remained subject to male authority and vulnerable to male abuse and, in the view of the high command, their status as soldiers was not equivalent to that of men. Alongside other trained women, the soldiers of the Women's Brigade were nonetheless deployed across key sites in ZAPU's extensive support infrastructure in Zambia and to a lesser extent in Botswana. They played prominent roles in intelligence and security, as well as taking on administrative, secretarial, medical and educational work. These roles at times drew explicitly on feminine attributes different to those that we have elaborated thus far.

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143 See Timothy Moyo, interview by Mark Ndlovu, 13 September 1995; Maligwa, interview. Security at Solwezi I included a male Strela anti-aircraft missile unit trained in Angola. On the broader tensions of this time, see Alexander and McGregor, 'Adelante!', pp. 644–8.

144 Maligwa in *Yithi*, p. 59; Maligwa, interview.

145 Maligwa, interview.

146 Mpala, interview, 2019.

## Intelligence, Administration and ‘Feminised’ Martial Roles

The scope of ZPRA women’s professional training reveals further aspects of ZAPU’s gendering of military roles and imagined future society. ZAPU’s vision of women within the army and party placed them in subordinate, constrained roles and, by the late 1970s, it had fully rejected the idea of women and men equally embodying ZPRA’s masculine martial ideals in the manner of the women ‘pioneers’. But it also gave women further specialised, professional training in a wide range of fields. This marks a contrast with Nhongo-Simbanegavi’s account of the concentration of ZANLA women’s training in ‘sewing, housewifery and home economics’ and deployment largely in cooking and portage.<sup>147</sup> The relationship of martial roles to femininity in ZPRA was multifaceted. As in many other armies, intelligence roles sought to make use of women’s femininity in a manner that assumed, and sought to exploit, male weaknesses. Other professional roles included stereotypical ‘women’s work’ such as typing and nursing, but also teaching, accountancy and policing. In all these roles, martial and specialist training was combined and deployed in the perilous, militarised context of the rear front.

ZPRA had envisaged women in intelligence roles from the start. Several women graduates of the first rounds of integrated training in Mwembeshi were deployed in intelligence after further training in Cuba, East Germany, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, all as part of predominantly male groups. Twelve studied intelligence in Cuba in 1978 under the auspices of the newly created NSO.<sup>148</sup> As we have seen, Gertrude Mpala, the Women’s Brigade commander, was sent to Cuba after basic training at Victory camp. She was part of a group of four women who stayed in Havana in a ‘secluded house’ and were trained in ‘weaponry and state security’.<sup>149</sup> Zegeu Mpofu described her Cuban training as ‘military intelligence, counter-intelligence and espionage’.<sup>150</sup> Cuban instructors were joined by (male) NSO officers, who related the training to the Zimbabwean context, particularly the plans for liberated areas and urban infiltration. As Grace Muchachi recalled, ‘the lessons of NSO [were] on how to penetrate and establish structures with civilians’.<sup>151</sup>

The ZPRA men who trained alongside women in Cuba were deployed on their return in rural and urban operations inside Zimbabwe while the women were deployed in rear-front roles. Several women, including Zegeu Mpofu, were among the senior NSO instructors who opened an intelligence training college at Kitwe in Zambia in 1978/79.<sup>152</sup> Mpofu taught two groups on six-month courses. The first included some women, while the second was an exclusively male group. After the Rhodesian bombing of Kitwe in 1979, Mpofu accompanied the wounded soldiers who were airlifted to Poland for medical treatment in the role of an undercover intelligence officer. She recounted, ‘I was to appear as someone who was also going there to receive medical treatment in disguise’.<sup>153</sup>

Women’s roles in intelligence deployed femininity in a variety of ways. Women soldiers posed as civilians while delivering sensitive information or as secretaries while undertaking security work, for example. Cuban-trained ZPRA women intelligence cadres were deployed in Lusaka at Zimbabwe House, in Kasupe at ZAPU’s planning and communications centre, and at the ‘Vatican’, ZPRA’s intelligence centre near the University of Zambia. They were chosen to carry information and documents across these institutions, on grounds that as

147 Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p. 55.

148 Mpala in *Yithi*, pp. 18–21; Hazel Ndlovu was in a group of 20, including eight women, *Yithi*, pp. 21–5.

149 Mpala, interview.

150 Mpofu in *Yithi*, pp. 28–32.

151 Muchachi in *Yithi*, pp. 1–9.

152 Zephaniah Moyo, interview by J. Alexander and J. McGregor, Bulawayo, 31 March 2022.

153 Mpofu in *Yithi*, p. 31.

women they would attract less suspicion. These were risky deployments: Hazel Ndlovu recounted the horror of arriving at the Vatican on the day it was bombed: '[m]y God, we found dead bodies of some officers that we worked with'.<sup>154</sup> The value of femininity as cover was evident too in women's deployment as security for ZAPU's top politicians. Doreen Mathe had received eight months' advanced military training in East Germany, specialising in 'close security'. She was among those assigned to Joshua Nkomo's protection unit at his home in Woodlands and in Kasupe.<sup>155</sup> The ZPRA women intelligence cadres who held administrative or secretarial roles included some who spoke Spanish (from their Cuban training) and doubled up as translators. Women's Brigade commander Gertrude Mpala described screening and vetting visitors and keeping track of meetings with Cubans and Russians:

I became instrumental in managing the office work in scheduling the programmes of high-ranking officials for international conferences, bookings, meetings and cross interactions with other party activities.... I would screen or vet whoever would want to see the senior officers.... There were Cubans and Russians ... we were the only ones who would access the place and keep ... track of those meetings.<sup>156</sup>

Her language skills were used in 'interpreting Cuban documents and co-ordinating their programmes ... of humanitarian aid ... medical training and other military works'.<sup>157</sup> The fact that these roles were deemed compatible with commanding the Women's Brigade further underlines the Brigade's ambiguous military status in the eyes of the ZPRA Command.

Other ZPRA women intelligence officers were deployed in Botswana, again under a cover that was in part provided by femininity and 'women's work'. Queen Maligwa explained that women 'gathered information ... working as nurses in those transit camps. No one knew they were trained'.<sup>158</sup> Precious Nleya was deployed to Francistown, moving up and down the border area with nurses as she gathered intelligence. She was only narrowly missed in a Rhodesian raid on Zimbabwe House in Lusaka: '[t]he fateful day when ... Zimbabwe House was raided and people kidnapped, I had spent the whole day there'.<sup>159</sup>

Aside from training in intelligence, ZPRA women were sent for courses in policing, nursing, accounting, administration and secretarial work, largely in African and Eastern bloc countries. These forms of professional training anticipated women's roles in post-independence state institutions in a manner that did not necessarily challenge feminine norms or martial masculinity. During the war, they allowed women to combine martial expertise with qualifications for a future peace-time career. Some women were sent from Victory and Mkushi camps for secretarial training in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Kenya. These ZPRA women subsequently opened and staffed a secretarial camp in Kafue, assisted by Ghanaians, and under the guidance of senior ZAPU nationalist Mai Murohwa. The formidable 'pioneer' Mwembeshi instructor, Bvundzai Tawona, once an icon of gender equality in ZPRA, served as camp commander of Kafue secretarial camp, a sign of the dramatically changed status of women soldiers.<sup>160</sup>

A significant group of ZPRA women trained as nurses in Libya and helped open a hospital in Makeni, Lusaka.<sup>161</sup> Other women trained in nursing and other professions in

154 Ndlovu in *Yithi*, p. 24.

155 Mathe in *Yithi*, p. 43.

156 Mpala, interview.

157 Mpala, interview.

158 Maligwa, interview.

159 Precious Nleya, interview by Mary Ndlovu, 16 November 2010, SAHA, AL3291\_B22.

160 Tawona in *Yithi*, p. 16.

161 Mazinyane, 'Zimbabwean Women'; Dube, interview.

Poland, Germany, India, Ethiopia, Senegal and the USA.<sup>162</sup> ZAPU established collaborative agreements with Lusaka teaching hospital and Kabwe hospital for training nurses. Many ZPRA women nurses graduated from these institutions and worked in ZAPU's Zambian medical infrastructure, which expanded dramatically from 1977. The excellence of medical treatment was a source of great pride for ZAPU: by the end of the war, its hospitals and laboratories were '[b]etter supplied than [the] host country, with medicines from all over the world!'<sup>163</sup>

ZPRA women graduates of training in the Zambian police academy at Lilayi were deployed at Victory camp and then Solwezi. Jacqueline Mathwasa trained as a police cadet with three other ZPRA women and a large cohort of men, rising to station commander, while others graduated as constables. Her group completed a further course in 'advanced police studies' in Yugoslavia, following which they returned to Solwezi and were then deployed to ZAPU headquarters at Zimbabwe House as typists.<sup>164</sup> The ZPRA women deployed here also included trained accountants. Sibongile Khumalo, a survivor of the Mkushi camp bombing, did business studies at Evelyn Hone College in Lusaka, obtaining a diploma in accountancy funded by the International University Exchange Fund. She became party cashier and had her own support workers, a ZAPU vehicle and two bodyguards for trips to town to deposit funds. As she proudly recounted, '[a]ll the monies that were donated from everywhere in the world came to these little hands'.<sup>165</sup>

Trained ZPRA women thus came to serve across ZAPU's Zambian infrastructure in artillery and defence, intelligence and security, and administrative, educational and medical roles. These were roles that required specialised, professional training. They did not gain women entry into ZPRA's masculinist military culture or protect them from abuses, but they did carve out a space for militarised professional women to play valuable roles during the war, which ZAPU imagined as essential to the making of the post-independence state.

## Conclusion

This account of ZPRA women's diverse wartime training and roles deepens understanding of the development of ZAPU's distinctive martial masculinity and its gendered imaginaries of a future state and society. It extends southern African liberation struggle historiography with a new focus on women's military training, and it adds to wider understanding of gendered militaries distinct from conventional state armies.

ZPRA women veterans' elaboration of a military identity defined by professional training spans all their roles and stands out in comparison to other liberation movements. Its lasting import for veterans is due partly to the recognition of their military training and standing by ZPRA in the assembly points where guerrilla armies were gathered at the end of the war and by the new Zimbabwean state thereafter. Many ZPRA women developed careers in the army, police, and intelligence service, as well as in civilian spheres as nurses, teachers and accountants, notwithstanding the ZANU(PF) government's persecution of ZPRA in the 1980s. The same did not hold for ZANLA: although ZANLA had many more women cadres, deployed inside Zimbabwe as well as in rear camps, Nhongo-Simbanegavi records that many were turned away from assembly points at the end of the war on the grounds that they were 'refugees', not 'combatants' – that is, their military standing as soldiers was rejected.<sup>166</sup>

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162 On Polish training, see Mpofu in *Yithi*, p. 31.

163 Dube, interview.

164 Jacqueline Mathwasa in *Yithi*, p. 50.

165 Khumalo, interview.

166 Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better*, p. xxi.

How ZAPU and ZPRA envisaged women as soldiers changed dramatically over time and was subject to heated debate among both ZAPU/ZPRA's predominantly male leaders and women combatants. ZAPU's male leaders' vision of women's roles never dropped its patriarchal, paternalist lens and male ZPRA commanders defended the army's masculinist military culture throughout. But there were nonetheless dramatic changes during the war in how feminine and martial ideals were combined. Over time, both ZPRA's top male commanders and women soldiers themselves imagined female combatants variously: as equals in endurance, strength and skill to their male counterparts, as having feminine skills that could be deployed advantageously in wartime intelligence, and as specialised professionals in a fast-expanding set of state-like services, including security and defence.

Women veterans' war stories illustrate the tensions between martial and feminine identities in the context of ZPRA's masculinist command, its physically strenuous training regime, and the divergences between policy and practice regarding sexual relationships alongside the perennial abuses of women, which characterised all liberation armies to varying extents. Nonetheless, ZPRA women veterans shared an immense pride in having completed arduous, technically demanding training courses, and having served in a vast, sophisticated military machine. The bodily, emotional and professional skills ZPRA women gained during the war provided them opportunities after independence for careers, and tempered difficulties in re-entering society for some. The expertise and opportunities their training conferred helps to explain both women's positive memories of Joshua Nkomo's wartime paternalism and their ongoing quest for recognition of their military skills and service.

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