

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-43

Rural Women in Zimbabwe Speak Out

by
Bowden Quinn

"What I understand about being a woman is that I should be free. I should be able to have my own rights."

That comment from a woman in rural Zimbabwe highlights the dual problem facing Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's two-year-old government in its goal of achieving equal opportunities for all Zimbabweans.

Not only must the government reverse the effects of the discriminatory laws of the white supremacist government that ruled this country under its former name of Rhodesia, it must also end the subjugation of women found in most traditional African societies.

The peasant woman's comment comes from a recently published report on the status of rural women by the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, a non-governmental organization that seeks to improve the condition of women in the country. The report presents rural women's views of themselves in response to questions by interviewers from the bureau.

"It's good to be a woman but I am oppressed," another woman told an interviewer. "I am always kicked, as though I am still a child, because women are not yet independent."

Discrimination against women in Zimbabwe is worse than in many other African countries because the former government gave it the force of law. The white government decreed that African women remain legal minors all their lives, depriving them of such rights as property ownership or even a say in their children's upbringing.

The white government's laws made more rigid the traditional subjugation of Zimbabwe's women. African society enforces such customs as polygyny (allowing men to have more than one wife) and the payment of bride price.

"My husband is in charge of everything that I do or can make with my hands, which is so rough and cruel," said one woman quoted in the report. "He says that the lobola (bride price) that he paid to my parents means that he bought me. So I have to follow his orders and work for him and his family."

The report is the result of a three-month survey in mid-1981 that conducted interviews with more than 2,800 women in 17 rural areas across Zimbabwe.

It concludes with seven recommendations to improve the status of rural women. Three of the recommendations seek to improve women's ability to earn money by increasing their access to land, jobs and education.

"Without (money-making skills), all talk of emancipation is a legal nicety," said Kate McCalman, the bureau's informa-

tion officer, who coordinated the survey and compiled the report. "It's only with economic liberation that women will actually be free."

Other recommendations call for improved health care for rural women and for more communication between women and those agencies, governmental and voluntary, that are active in rural development. The final two recommendations seek changes in laws that discriminate against women and an increase in women's participation in the political process.

The report points out that in recent local government elections, only 22 of 1,204 elected officials were women. To correct this imbalance, some local council seats should be reserved for women, the report suggests.

Dr. Samuel Agere, deputy secretary for community development in the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, said the recommendations are consistent with the new government's goals.

"We feel that all those discriminatory laws against women that we inherited from the previous government have to go," Agere said when asked to comment on the report. The ministry also wants "to identify those discriminatory practices that act as barriers to women's development."

The ministry has just completed its own study of women's position in society, which is due to be issued at the end of February. After lawmakers have considered its findings, the government will proceed with a mixture of educational programs and new legislation to improve conditions for women, Agere said.

Some legislation, such as the removal of laws on the permanent minority status of women, can be expected, Agere said. He was more dubious of the government heeding some other proposals in the report, such as the allocation of councillor seats for women.

"That may be one way to go," he said. "Another way is to educate women. After all, it's the women who are electing the men."

Any rural development programs will necessarily help mostly women, he added, for 80 percent of Zimbabwe's peasants are women. Many men have left the villages for jobs in cities, in the mines or on commercial farms.

Nearing the end of its second year in power, Mugabe's government has acted with deliberation in changing the old order. Some comments from the rural study indicate that women's patience may be running out.

Women made a vital contribution to the seven-year guerrilla war that brought independence to this country, from soldiering to providing supplies to acting as "the eyes and ears" of the guerrillas, in Ms. McCalman's words. They are eager to see the rewards for their sacrifices.

"I think we women in this new Zimbabwe want to progress more than men," one woman told an interviewer. "We want to show men that our heads are the same. We want to consolidate the power that we showed during the war."

Received in Hanover 2/11/82

This report was published in the Christian Science Monitor,
February 8, 1982.

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BSQ-44

February 25, 1982

A FOOTLOOSE AMERICAN FINDS HAPPINESS AS A ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLMARM

by Bowden Quinn

For 250 young Zimbabweans, many of them crippled in the seven-year guerrilla war for independence, Danhiko Secondary School is a ray of hope for a share in a peaceful future.

And for its American headmistress, 36-year-old Sharon Ladin, the school is a dream come true.

Born and raised in California, Ladin has spent much of her adult life wandering. She's taught school in England, tended bar in Ireland and worked in a sewing-machine factory in Montana. Along the way, she earned a doctorate in literature from the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Returning from a two-year trip to Southeast Asia, she visited Zimbabwe for the first time in 1980, just after the country gained independence with a democratically elected black government, after 14 years of white minority rule as the break-away colony of Rhodesia.

"I fell in love with the place," she recalled. "I only stayed two or three weeks, but I knew I'd come back. When I got back to the States, I didn't like any of the job offers I had, so I borrowed \$2,500 from friends and returned."

She was confident she could find a job, though she had no idea what she would end up doing. Two days after her arrival, she met a Zimbabwean man who was trying to organize a school for ex-guerrillas in Salisbury, the capital. Since that moment, she has so thoroughly devoted herself to the school, she's hardly seen any of the country she fell in love with.

"I've only been out of the city a few times, and then I'm so exhausted I spend most of the time sleeping in the hotels," she said.

Education is a major concern of the Zimbabwean government in its task of building an egalitarian society. Thousands of young Zimbabweans interrupted their educations to join the guerrilla armies. Thousands more had to flee with their families to refugee camps. Many of those who remained in the rural areas had their educations halted as schools were closed during the war.

The Zimbabwe government also has to correct the inequitable educational system of the former Rhodesian government, which allowed statistically only 78 of every 1,000 black children to enter secondary school, while virtually all white children received secondary education.

The task is too big for the government to handle alone.

"The government can't afford to build all the schools it needs," Ladin said. "Anybody can put up a school. If it comes up to ministry (of education) requirements, they're more than happy to approve it."

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Because the need is so great, Danhiko isn't restricted to former freedom fighters. Only 125 of the students were combatants, but 108 of those are disabled. Ladin got the idea of concentrating on the injured soldiers after a visit to a rehabilitation camp near the school. She was struck by their enthusiastic response to her invitation to attend the school.

"They were amazed. They loved the idea. There were about 90 of them who signed up that first morning."

For several reasons, the ex-combatants have difficulties in government secondary schools. Many are much older than the regular students. Some have been away from school for six or more years and have forgotten much of what they learned. After being soldiers in a vicious guerrilla war, they have trouble adjusting to the role of a student. Only through the camaraderie they gained in the bush can they adapt to the discipline of the classroom.

"They wouldn't be here if they weren't together," Ladin said.

But as a group, they are exemplary students. Their desire to learn wins praise from all their teachers.

"In the beginning there was no public transport to the school, and it was really very moving to see them walking. Some would have to leave half an hour early, some an hour early. You'd see little clumps of them along the street hobbling to the school and hobbling back. It showed a dedication that I wanted to encourage," Ladin said.

None of Danhiko's students is seriously handicapped. Other than perhaps noticing an unusual number of youths with crutches, a visitor wouldn't detect anything exceptional about the students. Many of the injuries are invisible.

"Some of them were poisoned. They could be operating on one kidney," Ladin said. She doesn't know the nature or extent of the disabilities of most of her students.

One day she got angry at a particularly listless class and told the students they should leave if they didn't want to learn. Afterwards, a young man told her he was trying, but he found it hard to concentrate on what she said because of the other noises in his head.

"He's hearing things that we're not hearing. I don't know how long it's going to take to get over that."

The Zimbabwean who started the school has gone on to other projects, so Ladin is now in charge. She admits she has had difficulties because she is a woman and a foreigner, but she seems now to have the full support of the ministry of education.

The school is housed in a long, low building that used to be a dining hall serving migrant workers who lived in the surrounding dormitory blocks. The cubicle where Ladin's desk sits used to hold an oven.

A bare minimum of renovations made the building into a schoolhouse, through funding that included \$3,200 from the U.S. Embassy's self-help fund, part of \$355,000 the embassy has distributed to small self-help projects since independence.

Plywood partitions separate six classes of about 35 students each. Makeshift rooms house two other classes, including a special primary class, again because the need was so great Ladin felt she couldn't turn the applicants away.

She still spends much of her time fundraising. She has found enough money to obtain about two-thirds of the textbooks the school needs. She has nine teachers, counting herself, including two American volunteers. None of the teachers has a government-recognized teaching certificate, and most of the Zimbabwean teachers have only high school educations themselves. They tend to stay at the school for only a short period as they go on to continue their own educations.

The school offers only seven courses at all levels: English, Shona (the local language), math, general science, history, geography and accounting-bookkeeping. Ladin hopes to offer two or three more academic courses and a workshop for vocational and artistic crafts. The school offers no special assistance to the disabled students, who receive physical therapy at the rehabilitation camp where they live.

The students have unrealistically ambitious goals. Many want to go on to the university and become doctors and lawyers, though even those who get the equivalent of a high-school diploma will be among the fortunate few in their society. The disabled students are as earnest as the rest.

"They're very determined," Ladin said. "They know they can't do exactly the same jobs as the others. They can't do the hard physical work."

Ladin, too, remains determined in the face of daily obstacles. The local community wants the building back for a neighborhood project, so the school will have to move soon. Its future and Ladin's are uncertain, but promising.

"The whole story of this school is really just reacting to situations as they come up," she said. "That's what I like about it."

BELOW: Sharon Ladin talks with some of her students.

