



Displaced Women in Harare, 1974-1980

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| Repository | Aluka |
| Collection | Chadya Interviews (Zimbabwe) |
| Author | Chadya, Joyce |
| Publisher | Aluka |
| Date | 2007-08 |
| Resource Type | Aluka Essays |
| Language | English |
| Topic | Popular Resistance Women And Resistance |
| Coverage (temporal) | 1974-1980 |
| Source | Aluka |
| Description | This collection consists of 10 oral narratives of women chronicling their flight from the countryside to the city and about the life they led once they had arrived and settled at Mbare Musika in Harare, Zimbabwe. |

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Displaced Women in Harare, 1974-1980

During the liberation war, particularly between 1974 and 1980, thousands of rural people, mostly women and children, fled from the war-torn countryside of Zimbabwe to the sanctuary of Harare (the capital city) where they lived in *zvikweshe* shelters (plastic shacks) in an open space at the Mbare Musika long-distance bus termini. Throughout that war, women found themselves squeezed between a repressive colonial government and coercive nationalist guerrilla armies. War-induced violence led to massive displacement throughout the country as rural people fled to the safety of urban centres where they lived as squatters.

Most of the interviews here were with women. Women made up the vast majority of the displaced people who settled at Mbare Musika. This situation was primarily due to the demographic composition of the rural population. Most men had left to work at urban centres, mines, and farms. Some young men were at school; many more had joined the armed forces either as government soldiers or as guerrillas. Thus, the majority of rural dwellers were women, children, and the elderly. Because the elderly were not harassed by the armed forces as much as were the younger women and also because of their wish to save young children from war-related death/violence, it was women and their children who fled to urban centres while the elderly remained behind.

There were several reasons why Harare became the place of destination for many of the displaced women. First, Harare was close to zones hardest hit by the war and thus its proximity played a part. Additionally, many women chose to go to Harare because of familial connections. Women and their children, along with the elderly, often stayed in rural areas when their husbands went to Harare to work. So women wanted to join their husbands or, for those whose husbands did not work in Harare, join kin. Women, thus, were following traditional patterns of seasonal migration whereby every winter, when the women were not busy with farming activities, they migrated to the urban centres to visit husbands and family. Also, as the capital city and the home of a large white population, Harare was viewed by people from war-torn areas as the last place the war would reach and therefore the safest.

The women's reminiscences chronicle their flight from the countryside to the city and tell about the life the women led once they had arrived and settled at Mbare Musika. Their stories reveal that gender, resistance, and the construction of meaning were central to these displaced women being the first women in the history of colonial Zimbabwe to own houses in their own right. Despite harsh policies designed by the Harare City Council to control women's urban influx and make their lives as difficult as possible, most women coped, struggling and creatively adapting to make a better life for themselves and their children.

What follows are the displaced women's lived experiences in their own words.

, August 2007