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# Learners as Activists: Secondary School Girls, Critical Consciousness, and the Liberation Struggle in Southwestern Zimbabwe, c.1966–1979

**Baldwin Hove**[1*]
**Bekithemba Dube**[2]

**AFFILIATIONS**

[1&2]Centre for Diversity in Higher Education Research, Central University of Technology, Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

**CORRESPONDENCE**

Email: hovebaldwin@gmail.com*

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a gendered analysis of the experiences of secondary school students in the fight against oppression in Rhodesia. Using case studies from mission boarding secondary schools in southwest Rhodesia, the article discusses the daily realities of secondary school girls during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle (circa 1966–1979). This analysis is framed through the lenses of Critical Pedagogy and gender analysis. Guided by Paulo Freire's concepts of critical consciousness, the study examines various forms of oppression at the school level and analyses the effects of racialised colonial educational policies and guerrilla war teachings in awakening activism among girl students. Archival records, oral histories, and secondary texts were the sources interrogated. It was discovered that while the major struggle was against colonial rule, forms of oppression also existed at the school level. Girls in secondary schools fought against such oppression through strikes, rumourmongering, and repurposing domestic skills for the war effort. The study concludes that these everyday acts of resistance, often overlooked, were central to the war's logistical and moral fabric, challenging the dominant masculinist historiography. Thus, the girls' dual identity as learners and activists tested the masculinist framing of the liberation war. Therefore, there is a need for narratives of girls to be elevated in liberation discourses, as they were not only collaborators but also active participants in the birth of a post-colonial Zimbabwe. Consequently, this study subscribes to decolonial feminist historiography, repositioning schooling as a site of the girl child's struggle for empowerment and social transformation.

***Keywords:*** Girl students, secondary schools, liberation war, Rhodesia, war memories, activism, decolonial feminism.

## 1. Introduction

The history of the fight against oppression in Rhodesia is dominated by labour movements, student activism, and war stories of the liberation struggle. In these narratives, heroic combat and auxiliary activities are presented in a muscular and male chauvinistic manner (Alexander & McGregor, 2004). This is demonstrated by the association of heroic activities of the struggle with muscular figures such as war combatants, collaborators, and nationalists. Such an approach provides a limited perspective that fails to capture the complexities of the fight against oppression in Rhodesia. Consequently, this narrative promotes the assumption that the struggle against oppression was solely against national colonial policies, thus overlooking lower institutions such as schools, where the fight against oppression mirrored those at a macro level. Existing narratives by scholars, including Bhebe & Ranger (1995) and Hodgkinson (2019), also mute the mundane activities and daily experiences of less prominent individuals, such as girl students in mission secondary schools. These girls fought oppressive systems through strikes and demonstrations. They also participated in war activities by relaying messages, providing moral support to combatants, and singing at night vigils, among many other activities that directly or indirectly challenged oppressive policies both at school and nationally.

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In an endeavour to illuminate the marginalised war memories of girl students in Rhodesia, this study begins by providing a background setting of the mission secondary schools in southwest Rhodesia. It then reviews existing texts on gender and the liberation war of Zimbabwe in order to identify gaps in the available literature. The paper subsequently uses case studies from selected mission secondary schools in southwest Rhodesia to describe and explain the daily experiences of girl students during the liberation war. The aim of the paper is to elucidate the significance of the girl students' mundane activities in the fight against oppression at both the school and national levels. In doing so, the study addresses questions relating to the role of girls in the struggle against oppression in Rhodesia. It also contributes to existing feminist narratives that seek to challenge muscular accounts of the fight against oppression in the country (see Lyons, 1999; Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000).

## 2. Decolonial Feminist Critical Pedagogy: A Theoretical Framework

This study uses the lenses of a combination of decolonial feminism and Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy to examine how Rhodesian colonial schooling systems functioned as instruments of oppression that stimulated activism among female students. In critical pedagogy, Freire posits that education is inherently political, and that oppressed learners must move from naive awareness to critical consciousness, enabling them to understand their oppression and motivating them to take corrective and transformative action (Freire, 2021). Learners are viewed as active change agents capable of transforming their society. In the concept of praxis, which in this study is interpreted as decolonial praxis, Freire (2021) explains the significance of reflection and action. He critiques the "banking model" of education, arguing that it suppresses the participation and capabilities of the learner, thus rendering them passive recipients of information. Critical pedagogy views the Eurocentric traditional schooling system as oppressive because it positions the learner as a recipient of knowledge rather than a participant in knowledge generation. This aligns with Zvobgo (1981) and Malisa and Missedja (2019), who argue that education for Africans in colonial Rhodesia was intended to create African servants for European masters. In the same vein, this study views mission boarding schools not merely as places of instruction but also as battlegrounds where racialised, gendered, and colonial ideologies were challenged. The colonial school curricula and the alien Christian religion at mission schools were designed to domesticate African schoolgirls into subordinate gender roles that reinforce racial inferiority. However, the rise of African mass nationalism, coupled with guerrilla war teachings, awakened the students' political consciousness, resulting in their questioning of the status quo. As noted by Mohamed (2020), education in Rhodesia became instrumentalised as an ideological, political, and military tool. Consequently, girls in mission secondary schools in southwest Rhodesia engaged in reflective dialogue with other students and political actors, thereby developing a heightened consciousness of their oppression. This aligns with the decolonial praxis that seeks to replace colonial systems with just, equitable, and sustainable ways of living. They thus translated awareness into activism in their day-to-day activities. This is demonstrated by the girls' mundane actions, participation in underground political messaging, mobilisation, and, in extreme cases, joining guerrilla armies as recruits. This also illustrates a gendered praxis that aligns with feminist interpretations of agency, recognising subtle, covert, and everyday acts of resistance as politically significant.

While Freire's work provides a crucial foundation for understanding conscientisation, its gender-blind tendencies require augmentation through a decolonial feminist lens (Vergès, 2018). This integrated framework allows for an analysis of how the girls' oppression and resistance were uniquely shaped by the intersecting forces of colonialism, patriarchy, and the specific gendered expectations of the mission school. Vergès (2018) argues that education should not ignore the contributions of women nor instil normative notions of gender among girls that hinder their aspirations and hopes. In line with this decolonial feminist thought, this study posits that the schoolgirl activist embodies a dual identity as learner and political subject. Her role in the fight against oppression, often eclipsed by masculinist nationalist historiographies, demonstrates that

education under colonialism unintentionally nurtured insurgent consciousness. Hence, the theoretical frameworks used in this article view schooling as a paradoxical space; that is, a site designed to sustain colonial domination yet also one that enabled the emergence of critically conscious girl students. Such students' daily activities constituted acts of resistance and contributed meaningfully to the broader project of the fight against oppression in Rhodesia.

## 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study that benefited from an interrogation of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources engaged include oral accounts and archival records concerning the experiences of girl students during the liberation war in Zimbabwe. Former students who attended mission secondary schools in southwest Rhodesia were purposively selected for oral interviews. The oral testimonies of these former students enriched the study with firsthand narratives of their school activities during the war. Such accounts were instrumental in recovering a largely neglected history of girl students' participation in the struggle against colonial oppression in Rhodesia. This aligns with Alessandro Portelli's (2017) argument that oral sources are rich in information about social groups whose history is either missing or distorted. Similarly, archival records, particularly school reports, provided raw written data that complemented and corrected the oral sources. As noted by Norrick (2005), oral sources are affected by various limitations, such as lapses of memory and bias, thus emphasising the importance of triangulating with written sources. Additionally, newspapers, published books, and journal articles that covered incidents in mission schools during the liberation war were also useful to this study. These documents complemented the oral sources and contextualised the students' activities within the major events that took place at schools. This helped to unravel both the mundane and heroic activities of mission secondary school girls during the war.

In this study, data analysis was qualitative and interpretive. Oral interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify recurring experiences and patterns relating to girl students' activities in mission secondary schools during the liberation war. For instance, issues of girls acting as messengers and engaging in sexual activities with guerrillas were recurring themes. This suggested that these were common war activities among girls. Focus was also placed on the content and meaning of the information obtained from the oral interviews. As noted by Beard (2017), this gives value to oral narratives as expressions of memory and lived experience, enabling the reader to imagine and visualise histories. Data from school documents and secondary sources, such as newspapers and published articles, were analysed alongside oral accounts to identify convergence and divergence. This triangulation enhanced credibility and enabled a nuanced reconstruction of the girls' everyday experiences at the mission school during the liberation war in Zimbabwe.

To protect participants, research clearances were sought from various departments and institutions, including the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Zimbabwe National War Veterans Association (ZNWVA). The research clearances covered issues related to informed consent from the informants, voluntary participation, protection from harm, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Therefore, cognisant of the significance of these ethics in research, participants were informed of the goals of the study and participated voluntarily, choosing whether to remain anonymous or not.

## 3. Women in Zimbabwe war historiography: A review

Extensive research has been conducted on the participation of women in the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. For instance, in a study titled "*Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe*", Chung (2006) detailed her experiences and those of other women involved in the struggle. She recounted her life in Rhodesia as a segregated student of Chinese origin, grouped closely with Africans. Chung (2006), like Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), outlined the treatment of women in Rhodesia and during the war, pointing out that women were generally treated as inferior

to men. They had limited access to education, and during the war, they were subjected to sexual exploitation by those in authority in both guerrilla camps and the Rhodesian Security Forces (Chung, 2006). Similarly, Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) observes that women's roles in the Zimbabwe liberation war were auxiliary and often romanticised. Both Chung (2006) and Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) provide rich first-hand narratives of women, including peasants, students, and combatants. Chung (2006) adds that the colonial education policies were oppressive to females, resulting in only a few girls having the opportunity to be educated. Those fortunate few used their education to improve their socio-economic mobility. This situation highlights how women employed education as a means of social change, underscoring the decolonial feminist-inspired framework of Freire's critical pedagogy. In Rhodesian society, this form of education facilitated the emergence of a middle class among non-European women.

Moreover, Chung's (2006) book highlights some common activities undertaken by girl students that contributed to the fight against oppression in Rhodesia, thus providing a starting point for this study. She described various mundane activities by female students in Catholic schools, African townships, and refugee schools where she learned and taught, as well as at the University of Rhodesia. She also points out that students, including girls, constituted a recruitment base for literate guerrillas and aides such as nurses, teachers, and engineers. However, much of her work mentions female students in war situations and refugee camps without adequately explaining the school environment as an important factor influencing the girls' activities. This may largely be due to historians sometimes fixating on spectacular, fast-paced narratives and heroic actions, rather than the slower, nuanced world of ideas.

This study directly addresses this gap by centring the mission school as the primary analytical site to understand how its unique environment shaped girls' political consciousness and modes of resistance. Therefore, unlike Chung (2006) and Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), this study examines the ordinary day-to-day activities of girl students in mission boarding secondary schools. It investigates how the war and oppressive policies intruded into the girls' domain, as well as how these female students attempted to make sense of the oppressive colonial world surrounding them.

The participation of women in the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe was also researched by Lyons (2004). In her Ph.D. thesis entitled *Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean National Liberation Struggle*, Tanya Lyons details the contributions of women in Zimbabwe's war of liberation. She adopts an uncommon, gendered approach, outlining the roles played by girl students such as Taurai in the liberation war. Lyons (2004) opines, "Other women also played significant roles in the first struggles against colonisation in Zimbabwe, but it is safe to say, 'there is not a petticoat in the whole history.'" This implies that women were marginalised in the historiography of the liberation struggle. Lyons (2004) vows to 'reveal what is under the skirts,' meaning she aims to uncover the roles and duties of women in the fight against colonial rule in Rhodesia. It cannot be overstated that Lyons's (2004) work is important to this study because it reveals the varying roles female students played in the struggle against oppression in Rhodesia. However, like Chung (2006) and Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), among other feminist scholars, Lyons (2004) focused on the war activities of girls. In contrast, this paper concentrates on both daily activities and war memories. This approach enables the paper to capture the living realities of girls in Rhodesia, with or without the war, thus filling a gap in the existing body of knowledge.

## 4. War Memories and Lived Realities of School Girls

During the war of liberation, girls in mission boarding secondary schools performed several tasks that contributed both directly and indirectly to the fight against oppression in Rhodesia, often exemplified by the liberation war from c. 1966 to 1979. Hove (2024) observed that girls acted as messengers who relayed messages and as rumour mongers who used their sexual proximity to male combatants to promote certain agendas. Data from oral interviews reveal that schoolgirls sang at

night vigils and, in extreme cases, joined guerrilla armies as recruits. However, it should be noted that not every activity was shaped by the war. The girl students also engaged in their mundane day-to-day school activities that had no direct link to the war but nonetheless contributed to the fight against oppression at the school level. For instance, the girls participated in school activism, engaged in delinquent behaviour, and took part in protests. Such were the lived realities at mission secondary boarding schools that have not been adequately addressed in the existing body of knowledge. It should also be noted that the various activities undertaken by girls at the mission schools were influenced by factors including gender stereotypes and the nature of the mission school environment, as will be explained as the paper unfolds.

## 4.1 Patriarchy and gendered roles in the struggle

Understanding gender dynamics in the liberation war and in mission boarding secondary schools of southwest Rhodesia is essential for a balanced examination of the lived realities of secondary school girls between c. 1966 and 1979. This is because, according to Ngwenya (2017) and Hove (2024), gender was a decisive force in shaping the political consciousness and wartime participation of youths and secondary school students. With a strong tradition of gendered division of labour, different African ethnic groups, such as the baKalanga, Ndebele, and Shona in southwestern Rhodesia, constructed systems of power that structured the girls' everyday lives and conditioned the way they participated in student activism (Ngwenya, 2017). As Jowi (2016) argues, gender, like religion, culture, or ethnicity, is a powerful sociological determinant in student politics. At mission schools, gender was one of the most defining characteristics that differentiated male from female students. Lyons explains that the duties of women and children in the war were considered inferior to those of men (Lyons, 2004). This was also noted earlier by Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), who challenged the gender-neutral and highly romanticised traditional scholarship on Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. The gender roles linked to African customs and the sex roles attributed to human anatomy were clearly detectable in the students' activities. Through a decolonial feminist-inspired Freirean critical pedagogy lens, these gender arrangements emerge as mechanisms of social control that limited the conscientisation of female students by scripting their contributions within narrowly defined boundaries of African tradition (Chong, 2018). However, within these constraints, mission secondary schoolgirls demonstrated agency, managing to navigate, resist, and occasionally subvert the patriarchal norms entrenched in African tradition. The girls participated in the fight against oppression in Rhodesia and in the liberation war in unique ways. Therefore, recovering such marginalised narratives challenges the nationalistic, male-centred historiography of the struggle and reframes gender as a terrain where oppression and resistance coexisted. Analysing the gender dynamics helps one to understand the wartime roles and duties of students.

The patriarchal society of southwestern Rhodesia normalised the treatment of women and children as inferior to men. Stott (1990) explains that during the liberation struggle, females were treated as children who needed extra special care. Consequently, few females were trained for combat. Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) observed that in the liberation war of Zimbabwe, women were relegated mainly to auxiliary duties because they were considered inferior for combat. This is echoed by Ngwenya's (2016) argument that the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) was at times gender-selective in its recruitment exercises. An interview between Moketsi Ndlovu, a 1976 Tegwani school student, and Christopher Ngwenya revealed that ZIPRA in the mid to late 1970s primarily recruited male students (Ngwenya, 2017). However, due to increased demand for recruits, ZIPRA changed its recruitment system. For instance, at Manama in 1977, ZIPRA abducted every student, regardless of gender. Chiratidzo Mavuwa, a 14-year-old girl student, and her sister were part of the group that was abducted, and their pleas to be excused were ignored by the ZIPRA guerrillas (Bhebe 1999). In an interview with Ngwabi Bhebe, Mavuwa stated that only the crippled and the sick were left behind (Bhebe 1999). The lists of abducted students submitted to the Church of Sweden also reflect that both male and female students aged between 14 and 20 were abducted

from Manama in January 1977 (Hove, 2024). However, a follow-up on the abducted students such as Mashavira shows that when they arrived in Zambia, where the ZIPRA bases were headquartered, some young boys and females were enrolled in schools in the refugee camps, while the more muscular individuals went for military training. This demonstrates the impact of gender as a variable in the intersection between student politics and the liberation struggle.

Even though the guerrilla armies viewed small boys and girls as inferior for military training, some mission school students resisted such gender stereotypes. In the case of Moketsi Ndlovu, he pushed for inclusion in the ZIPRA training programmes despite initially being left out. Ndlovu narrated that he was part of a group of students who were abducted by the ZIPRA guerrillas at school in 1976. He stated that the guerrillas abducted only males and that he was initially left behind in Francistown due to his small body frame. However, he insisted and was eventually enrolled for military training later in the year (Ngwenya, 2016). Nation Shoko of Musume also explained that he and his friend Rudo were barely 14 years old and had small bodies, but they pushed hard to be included in ZANLA military training in 1978, though without success. Shoko recounted that in 1978, when he was a form one student at Musume Secondary School, he and his friend developed a friendship with one of the ZANLA guerrillas. The two expressed interest in joining the liberation war, but their age and small body frames betrayed them. Many accounts exist of young boys and girls who tried to cross the borders for military training. This effort by the small boys and girls to pursue military training demonstrates critical consciousness and resistance against oppression. Such oppression was embedded in the patriarchal gender stereotypes entrenched within the guerrilla armies. Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000) explains that these stereotypes, to an extent, account for the assignment of auxiliary tasks to female recruits as a means of pushing them away from active combat participation. Gender labelling continued to be observed even among students who crossed the borders. Mashavira said that some female students and those males with small body frames were enrolled in refugee camp schools because they were considered inferior for military training. This illustrates the gendered nature of the liberation struggle, highlighting both the feminine and muscular dimensions of the struggle, which further reinforced the prevailing view of the time that politics was for men and the brave. This proves that gender influenced the students' participation in the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe.

In a demonstration of agency that resonates with decolonial feminism's challenge to patriarchal structures, female students from mission schools defied gender stereotypes and led the fight against oppression. The students' actions also embody the principles of critical pedagogy, whereby marginalised voices became conscious in resisting oppression. One such case was illustrated by the group spokesperson role assumed by the Manama head teacher's sister during the Manama students' abduction incident in 1977. Mashavira explained that although the girl was coached by the ZIPRA abductors, her oratory skills enabled her to effectively fulfil the task. She became the spokesperson for the abducted group and addressed local and international media in Botswana, expressing the voluntary participation of the students in the war. This task demonstrated the leadership position that secondary school girls assumed during the war, thus supporting the argument that girls were active participants in the fight against oppression in Rhodesia. However, it cannot be ignored that, in some cases, as observed by Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), the female leadership roles were only cosmetic, meant to advance the interests of patriarchal society. In the case of the Manama incident, the girl spokesperson's oratory skills were significant, but it is difficult to ignore the ZIPRA guerrillas' influence and abuse of the minor for political expediency. It can also be inferred that the girl's relationship to the school head enabled her to assume a leading role in the group, thus demonstrating the influence of patriarchy in shaping the activities of schoolgirls during the liberation war in Rhodesia.

The gendered nature of the liberation struggle placed females in difficult situations. For instance, female informants highlighted that it was challenging for female students to directly resist sexual

abuse. According to Sinanzeni Siziba of Inyathi, the ZIPRA guerrillas expected girls to provide them with sexual services, and it was difficult to reject a proposal from a man carrying a gun. Accounts from informants that include Nation Shoko and Nephael Moyo demonstrate that oral history is awash with stories of guerrillas demanding sexual services from female students at boarding schools. This phenomenon has also been documented by scholars such as Ngwenya (2016), Chung (2006), and Lyons (2004), who uncovered the sexual abuse of females by guerrillas during the war. Although most female respondents appeared uncomfortable discussing their relationships with the guerrillas, there remained a degree of conviction that intimate relationships did exist. Ngwenya recorded several female youths and students in the Bulilima district who revealed that ZIPRA guerrillas operating in the area demanded sexual favours from the girls (Ngwenya, 2017). One individual, Nomusa Mlalazi, explained that in 1976, the guerrillas forced them into sexual intercourse and, at times, physically assaulted them. Hove-Manzanga stated that it was difficult to ascertain whether any sexual abuse occurred during night vigils or at bases; however, some girls had known boyfriends among the guerrillas whom they might have met at home or elsewhere during holidays, or who could have been schoolmates prior to military training. The sexual relationships between female students and guerrillas were meant to be kept secret, as the guerrillas' Maoist or Leninist code of conduct prohibited such relationships and abuse (Pandya 1988). It can, therefore, be argued that the gendered nature of the war cornered female students into positions of victimhood, thereby demonstrating the effects of gender in shaping their participation in the liberation struggle. In addition to gender, the mission school environment also influenced how female students engaged in the fight against oppression in Rhodesia.

## 4.2 The mission school as a contested space

The mission school atmosphere in southwestern Rhodesia was shaped along Christian lines. As noted by Gundani (2006), Christianity served as the moral yardstick of mission school life. Consequently, the lives of girl students at the mission school were moulded within the confines of a gendered Christian framework. Summers (1996) explains that the African girl at a mission school was educated to be a model Christian wife. At mission schools such as Musume, Tegwani, and Manama, the curriculum for girls included domestic sciences such as sewing and cooking, while boys at institutions like Inyathi specialised in woodwork, carpentry, and leatherwork (Hove, 2024). This curriculum entrenched a gendered division of labour similar to that found in African culture. It meant that the schoolgirl at the mission school continued to be domesticated, thus alienating her from duties designated for males. However, within the confines of this gendered curriculum, female students were conscious and active in the fight against oppression. This exemplifies decolonial feminism's insistence on disrupting patriarchal knowledge systems and embraces critical pedagogy's emphasis on agency and transformative resistance. One informant who attended Musume mission explained that they used their experience in domestic science to mend and wash clothing for ZANLA guerrillas. The girls also utilised their cooking skills to prepare food for ZANLA guerrilla fighters, particularly those based at Gaururo near Chegato mission in the late 1970s. Chung (2006) observed that even in refugee camps, girls were assigned domestic and caregiving tasks, including cooking and cleaning. Thus, through the lens of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, these schoolgirls repurposed and utilized the domestic sciences designed to mould them into submissive wives. Instead, they harnessed this knowledge to support the liberation war goals. This demonstrates Freire's concept of reflection and action, as the female students recognised the political dimensions of their everyday educational tasks and redefined them as acts of resistance. In doing so, the girls subverted the intended ideological function of their schooling, transforming a curriculum designed to maintain patriarchal and colonial control into a powerful tool for political participation in the fight against oppression.

Strict mission school regulations, coupled with the pervasive influence of church authorities, further policed students' behaviour. The students' movements, behaviours, dress codes, and social

interactions for both males and females at the mission school were controlled and monitored. Nephael Moyo explained that in all Lutheran schools, including Musume, Manama, Chgegato, and Munene, there was a school chaplain, a boarding master, and a matron responsible for monitoring and caring for the students' social well-being. Above all, teachers had a duty roster where they took turns looking after students until study time ended, which usually occurred around 2000 to 2100 hours. Such a system confined students to a restricted environment meant to instil discipline. However, as Hove-Manzanga explained, the girls had a way of communicating with those of the opposite sex, either at school or within guerrilla base camps. The use of messengers, commonly known as postboys and post-girls, by senior girls to relay messages from students in lower forms was a common strategy used to circumvent the strict rules at the mission school. This demonstrates that the schoolgirls engaged in subtle forms of resistance, which included exchanging political messages, providing logistical support to guerrillas, and using everyday chores as opportunities for covert communication. Therefore, such experiences illustrate that mission schools functioned as contested spaces—sites of discipline and repression—where young women carved out spaces for political participation amid the wider liberation struggle.

### 4.3 Subtle resistance: Messaging, rumour, and the power of information

Being guerrilla messengers, informants, and spies was not solely a male duty, as most historians, such as Bhebe (1999), Manungo (1991), and Ranger (1985), have portrayed. Instead, during the war of liberation, messengers were both male and female. However, the types of messages sent by girls and boys differed. Girls were more engaged in informal communication (grapevine) due to the nature of their intimate relations with the guerrillas, which the school authorities were aware of but could neither approve nor disapprove. In contrast, the boys carried formal messages and instructions. Nevertheless, both roles were important in shaping the course of events, as these duties developed the personal characters of the students. For instance, spying and relaying messages provided students with a sense of agency and purpose, critical as a survival strategy in an environment with warring parties that could kill those who did not cooperate.

At mission secondary schools in southwest Rhodesia, senior girls were informants and rumour mongers who relayed messages that shaped interactions between mission school residents and the warring parties. Hove-Manzanga explained that this was particularly common in ZANLA-dominated areas such as Musume and Chegato, especially after 1978, when the ZANLA guerrillas established numerous bases in most parts of the Belingwe district. Informants indicated that some girls had access to confidential information because they sometimes had intimate relationships with guerrillas. Therefore, as girlfriends of the guerrillas, the female students were usually among the first at school to know about the arrival of a group of guerrillas, their departure, or their intended visit to the school. For instance, love letters from their combatant boyfriends containing meeting dates unintentionally revealed guerrilla schedules, thereby empowering the female students with knowledge about guerrilla movements. Zhou-Mavuwa, a former student at Masase Mission, explained that senior girls, especially Form Fours, who were in romantic relationships with guerrillas, typically had firsthand information about night vigil schedules because they communicated with their guerrilla boyfriends. This was echoed by Hove-Manzanga, a former student at Musume Mission, who explained that in 1978 and 1979, there were instances of guerrillas having girlfriends at the school, with whom they communicated through letters. According to Hove-Manzanga such girls sometimes boasted about their relationships, and apparently, other students would learn more about the guerrillas through them. This demonstrates that although the girls did not constitute a formal channel of communication between the guerrillas and the school authorities, their significance and the respect they commanded within the school cannot be overstated. This situation also highlights the role of girls in the liberation struggle, thereby situating their agency within a decolonial feminist-inspired Freirean critical consciousness framework. The closure of

Masase Mission in 1978 presents a case that illustrates the role and influence of mission schoolgirls as messengers and rumour mongers.

A series of incidents occurred at Masase Secondary School, a Lutheran Church-run secondary school located in the western part of Belingwe (Mindat.org, 2025). As stated by Zhou-Mavuwa, the burning of the school hall and Junior Certificate (J.C.) examinations in November 1978—after students had completed only two papers out of a possible 16 to 20—created a desperate and tense environment at Masase. The then school Head, Mr Shumba, explained that the situation was exacerbated by a rise in jealousy and animosity among the secondary school teachers, which eventually attracted the intervention of the guerrillas. Worse still, the presence of an unruly ZANLA group, coupled with the increasing pressure from the Rhodesian Security Forces (RSF) on the Masase community and ZANLA bases, as well as the deaths of one or two residents, further intensified the already tense atmosphere at the mission (Bhebe, 1999). After overcoming such circumstances, few would have anticipated that the school would eventually close due to rumours and gossip.

In November 1978, however, a rumour spread among the senior girls that the school was going to be attacked by guerrillas. This rumour triggered pandemonium, with students gathering their belongings and making every effort to vacate the school. Bhebe (1999) explained that on their return from the RSF base at Keyara, two girls went straight to the ZANLA guerrilla base near the school to report on the brutality of the RSF. That same evening, between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m., as the girls returned from the ZANLA base, they circulated a rumour that a battle was imminent at the school between the guerrillas and the Rhodesians. According to Zhou-Mavuwa, the rumour spread like wildfire among all the students and had an electrifying effect. No student waited to verify the truth of the rumour. The Headmaster, Mr Shumba, said:

> *I tried to stop them but it was impossible. They were just throwing their boxes all over the place and running away. Even my own relatives came and dumped their boxes at my house and disappeared (Bhebe 1999:201)*

This incident demonstrates that the Masase girls were influential messengers and rumour mongers, echoing White (2000) observation that rumour is powerful in shaping the course of history. In this case, the girls' rumour and grapevine convinced other students to act, running away from the RSF brutality and the impending battle, and even breaking away from the bureaucratic school rules that were intended to detain them at the school until the rumour had been verified. Teachers and school authorities tried to calm the situation, but to no avail, demonstrating the students' trust in the girls' role as messengers. The rumour from the senior girls, therefore, became a spark that led to the sudden flight of the Masase people from the mission, resulting in the closure and temporary relocation of the school to the Njube suburbs in Bulawayo. The girls played a role that stimulated students to act against various forms of oppression at Masase. Zhou-Mavuwa explained that fellow students could not doubt the messages from the girls because they knew that some of them had intimate relations with guerrillas and, thus, by circumstance, were privy to certain secrets about guerrilla campaigns. This proves that although the girls in this case were not official messengers, they were a trusted source of information for fellow students, and as such, they played a role in mobilising the fight against oppression, as they shaped the students' wartime activities.

### 4.4 The double-edged sword: Intimacy, sexual politics, and vulnerability

At the bases and night vigils, student duties were divided along gender lines. Boys were usually messengers, spies, and baggage carriers, while girls were expected to be active in entertainment and catering, with some at times providing sexual services. Regarding girls being intimate with guerrillas, Nation Shoko said:

> *I cannot claim that I saw any guerrillas being intimate with girls, but we knew that they did it with some girls getting pregnant. For example, in 1979, four girls in Form Three and*

> *Form Four left school after being impregnated supposedly by guerrillas. One I know reunited and married the guerrilla after independence.*

Another informant, Zenzo Tuge, claimed to have seen one girl in 1979 being intimate with a guerrilla in the bushes near a base. Additionally, Hove-Manzanga noted that they knew some girls had boyfriends among the guerrillas but could not confirm witnessing any intimacy. Zhou-Mavuwa also explained that incidents of guerrillas demanding sexual services occurred during night vigils, where female students fell victim to guerrilla sexual predators. However, it was quite difficult to actually see what was happening because the vigils were held in darkness. She also explained that consensual relationships between senior female students and the guerrillas were common. In fact, some girls would boast and take pride in being in love with guerrillas. Zhou-Mavuwa explained:

> *some senior girls were happy to have guerrilla boyfriends. They would buy their boyfriends (guerrillas) presents at the local shops such as handkerchiefs' and the Mujibha would deliver love letters. Such girls were the first to know about night vigil programmes and we will hear them telling others that tonight there will be a pungwe (night vigil)… Some relationships were known even by teachers who had little control over the affairs.*

This account shows that some female students performed unique sex and gender roles willingly and, at times, through force and fear. This aligns with Lyons (2004) argument that females in the liberation struggle were equally active participants, although they were sometimes victims of male sexual desires. The prevalence of such incidents in most mission stations indicates that the female student fought the war in a distinctive way; her body was, at times, the battleground. It is also noteworthy that female students were utilised for intelligence purposes, supplying guerrillas with information about school schedules, among other matters.

Explaining the sexual encounters between schoolgirls and guerrillas, Bhebe (1999) noted that although the guerrilla code of conduct prohibited sexual encounters with female students, some guerrillas engaged in such behaviour. For instance, in September 1978, a new group of guerrillas entered the Masase area, led by Cde. Nhamo and including fighters such as Bucks One and Jerry. The group invited several schoolgirls to their base (Bhebe, 1999). This indicates that the guerrillas had specific intentions, often of a sexual nature. Such instances demonstrate that female students were invited to the bases and night vigils primarily for their gender and sex roles. This supports Nhongo-Simbanegavi's (2000) argument that females were used as sexual objects and for auxiliary purposes in the liberation struggle. However, the abuse of women, particularly students and minors, was an offence in guerrilla armies. Ranger (1989) and Mazarire (2011) concur that such acts of indiscipline by guerrillas were uncommon before 1978. It was only in 1978 and 1979 that the behaviour of most groups deteriorated, resulting in a general 'crisis of guerrilla legitimacy.' An informant, Maedza explained that this rise in indiscipline impacted students' activities, as they were forced to cooperate with even the rebel guerrillas, such as Chapungu Chehondo, who demanded entertainment from girls at Chegato mission in 1977. Therefore, it can be argued that the students' activities were fluid, as they had to adapt to the demands of different guerrillas. All these cases illustrate the role played by female students in the liberation war, aligning with Freirean critical pedagogy's emphasis on students as change agents.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has discussed the often-overlooked role of secondary school girls in mission boarding schools during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. Through the lens of a decolonial feminist-inspired Freirean critical pedagogy, the paper explains that girl students at mission boarding secondary schools were active participants in the fight against oppression in Rhodesia. The girls' mundane and everyday activities at school intersected with the broader fight against oppression, which reached its climax with the war of liberation from c. 1966 to 1979. By situating the girls' experiences within the frameworks of Critical Pedagogy and gender analysis, it becomes clear that the mission secondary

school was not just a site of academic learning but also a space where oppression and colonialism were challenged. Evidence from oral testimonies, archival records, and secondary texts demonstrates that despite the heavy gendered inferiority label, mission secondary school girls exercised agency in ways that motivated other students to challenge local and national level oppression through school-based activism, war information dissemination, and, in extreme cases, participation as war recruits. Therefore, the girls at mission secondary boarding schools in southwest Rhodesia assumed a dual identity as learners and activists that dismantled masculinist constructs of the liberation war. This revelation affirms the need to broaden the understanding of resistance to include the subtle and everyday acts that sustained the struggle against oppression in Rhodesia. An understanding of the mission schoolgirls' war experiences, therefore, contributes to decolonial feminist historiography because it repositions the mission secondary school as an arena where the girl child negotiated, resisted, and redefined her place in the fight against injustice in society. Furthermore, recognising the war memories of the female students is a step towards recovering muted voices, thus affirming that the liberation struggle was also a story of classrooms, dormitories, and schoolyards, just as it was of battlefields. Future research could explore the post-war lives of these girl activists to understand the long-term impact of their political awakening.

## 6. Declarations

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation (B.H.); Literature review (B.H.); methodology (B.H. & B.D.); software (N/A); validation (B.H. & B.D.); formal analysis (B.D.); investigation (B.H.); data curation (B.H.); drafting and preparation (B.H.); review and editing (B.D.); supervision (B.D.); project administration (B.H. & B.D.); funding acquisition (N/A). Both authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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