

'It remains untold'. White women and gender-based violence in colonial Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Gender based violence is a socio-historical phenomenon that affected colonial Indigenous and settler societies in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa. Experiences of indigenous societies have been disproportionately studied by scholars. White settlers' experiences of violence in domestic spaces remain largely silenced. This article fills this lacuna by illuminating one unexplored dimension of white settler women's history: their lived experiences with gender-based

violence in domestic spaces of colonial Zimbabwe. It draws on archival research carried out in court records, in the form of civil, desertion and divorce cases. The paper deploys the concepts of objective and subjective violence as a prism to reconstruct violence. The article argues that despite their privileged status in the colonial state, white women were dually positioned as survivors and perpetrators of violence. It brings up another angle of perceiving colonial society, allowing for greater understanding of intersecting themes of class, gender, and whiteness.

Keywords: Gender based violence, white women, colonial Zimbabwe, subjective and objective violence.

1.0 Introduction and background

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a human rights, health and livelihoods security issue common in many parts of the world. Tanzania like other African countries, exhibits high prevalence of GBV against women. About 40 percent of all women aged between 15-49 years have experienced physical violence, while 17 percent of women have experienced sexual violence from their male partners in their lifetime.¹ Little is known about

¹ World Bank. Tanzania GBV Assessment March 2022, 23; See also Hilde Jakobsen, What's Gendered about Gender-Based Violence? An Empirically Grounded Theoretical Exploration from Tanzania, *Gender and Society*, 2014, 538.

the experiences of colonial white women in Tanzania and most African colonies.

To address this gap, this article focuses on the experiences of white women in colonial Zimbabwe as a privileged class. Such experiences resonate widely with other privileged classes in Tanzania and elsewhere where issues of gender-based violence are not publicly discussed. As a result, they have not received much scholarly attention.

Within the histories of settler-colonialism, gender-based violence remains hidden and relatively silenced in the white settlers' domestic spaces.² The silence on private issues such as gender-based violence is not a new phenomenon. Global history of violence in domestic spaces reveal similar trends. For Britain, Elizabeth Foyster's study of the history of spousal violence was not conducted until 2005.³ For colonial Zimbabwe, the subject was not fully explored in settler society for two main reasons. First, as an expression of gender inequality in metropolitan Britain, gender-based violence has

² Antoinette Burton and Dane Kennedy (eds.), 'Introduction' *How Empire Shaped Us*, (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2016), 9.

³ Martin J. Wiener, (Review) 'Marital Violence, An English Family History, 1660 -1857', *Victorian Studies* 48, no.2, (2006), 375.

been associated with poorer classes.⁴ Second, owing to racial misconceptions of the colonial period, GBV was considered as a prerogative of Africans, whereas settlers' houses were seen as exempted from violence and white women as sort of the "personification" of morality and good virtues. For Ane M. Kirkegaard, 'the European self eludes being objectified and studied because it is itself the master of objectification of others.'⁵

This article sheds light on a silent dimension of white settler women's past, their lived experiences of gender-based violence in colonial Zimbabwe, not only as victims of male violence but also as perpetrators. The paper draws on archival research conducted on court records in the form of divorce and other civil cases. Of the cases, gender-based violence is hidden in the grounds for divorce. It will therefore analyse four types of cases; desertion/economic violence; cruelty, sexual violence. The article uses the concepts of objective and subjective violence as prisms to reconstruct gender-based violence as a complex expression of unequal gender relations

⁴ A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship, Conflict in nineteenth-century married life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 19.

⁵ Ane M. Orbo Kirkegaard, 'It couldn't be anything innocent: Negotiating gender in patriarchal-racial spaces,' in Kizito Muchemwa and Robert Muponde (eds) *Manning the Nation. Father figures in Zimbabwean literature and society*, (Weaver Press, 2007), 115.

in society.⁶ The main argument is that white women have experienced gender-based violence despite their privileged status in the colonial hierarchy. With this line of reasoning, the paper contributes to a more nuanced Zimbabwean gender history. Such a story deserves significant attention and can contribute to a better understanding of the intersecting histories of violence, gender, whiteness/ race and class. Through such stories, scholars can begin to question the implications of racial or class privileges that obscure other forms of oppression, as the cases show.

Broadly speaking, the paper falls within the gender and empire historiography and contributes in part to the ‘new imperial histories’, which for Antionette Burton⁷, aim to restore visibility to white women experiences, beyond ‘recuperative history’, that aims to reinsert experiences into the historical narrative.⁸ It adopts the perspective of recent feminist historiography, which insists on the need to give gender its full weight in social analysis, and examines

⁶ Kirsten Campbell, ‘On Violence as a feminist Problem: Producing Knowledge on Sexual and Gender Based Violence’, in Zilka Spahić Šiljak Jasna Kovačević Jasmina Husanović (eds.) *Uprkos Strahu i Tišini: Univerziteti Protiv Rodno Zasnovanog Nasilja*, (Sarajevo, 2022), 31-41.

⁷ Antionette Burton, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸ Jane Haggis, ‘White Women and Colonialism: Towards a Non-Recuperative History’, in Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (eds), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 161-189, here 170.

women's experiences in light of the gender ideologies of the time.⁹ The paper goes beyond the discourse of the incorporated woman and expands the debates and questions surrounding women's experiences in the domestic gendered space and to some extent in the public sphere.¹⁰ It analyses the application of domesticity ideology and the configuration of gender in domestic spaces and how the interactions opened up possibilities for gender-based violence expressed as subjective or objective violence. In the next section, the paper provides a contextual overview of the major historical processes that have shaped gender relations and, indirectly, gender-based violence in white settler society. Of importance are the establishment of a white settler state through the emigration of white women to Southern Rhodesia and their protection through the Black Perils, ideology of domesticity in domestic and public space; Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance Law, Great Depression and Second World War.

Southern Rhodesia evolved as a white settler colony, similar to, but not homogenous with South African Natal and Kenya. These societies maintained ideological and cultural ties with metropole Britain, and expanding their civilisations.¹¹ The

⁹ Kate Law, 'Gendering the Settler State', 23.

¹⁰ Ushehwedu Kufakurinani, *Elasticity in Domesticity, white women in Rhodesian Zimbabwe, 1890-1979*, (Brill Leiden, 2019), 46.

¹¹ Dane Kennedy, Review of *The Cultural Construction of the British World* Edited by Barry Crosbie and Mark Hampton (Manchester University Press, 2016).

emigration of white women was essential in transforming a pioneer society to a successful white colonial settler society in Southern Rhodesia. From 1900 onwards, female emigration was prioritised.¹² Statistics show an estimated four hundred and seven women for every thousand men, rising to five hundred and fifteen in 1911 and seven hundred and seventy-one in 1921.¹³ This situation led to competition for available females, among the settlers, particularly in Salisbury, Umtali and the mining towns compared to Bulawayo, which had a more equitable gender ratio.¹⁴ Additionally Rhodesian settlers were overwhelmed by the numerical superiority of African men, sparking fear of African men raping white women.¹⁵ This phenomena which was referred to as Black or Sex Perils, spread within the settler societies of Natal, Southern Rhodesia and Kenya and was manipulated by both white males and females for their own interests.¹⁶ For white men, it was control of female sexuality, while white women manipulated black perils in some cases, as a strategy to hide their own sexual attraction to African men, in the face of rigid race relations.¹⁷

¹² Kate Law, 'Gendering the Settler State,' 27.

¹³ Southern Rhodesia, Report of the Director of Census, May 1926, cited in L.H Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia early days to 1934*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1965), 313.

¹⁴ Jock McCulloch, *Black Peril: White Virtue, Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia 1902-1935*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000), 88.

¹⁵ Dane Kennedy. *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia*, (Duke University Press, 1987), 268.

¹⁶ McCulloch, *Black Peril: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia*, 5-8.

¹⁷ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, (London: Michel Joseph, 1950).

While David Anderson interprets the sex perils as part of the process by which settler society was constructed and maintained to protect white cultural and social interests, the male response reveals a deep-seated control over white women.¹⁸ As in the American South, public lynching was used to demonstrate the symbolic power of white men over white women and African men.¹⁹ In line with prevailing conceptions about white women's sexual purity influenced by Victorian ideology, the state introduced legal tools to punish interracial sex against white women and African men and effectively controlling their sexuality. The Immorality Ordinances of 1904, the Immorality Suppression Ordinance of 1916, and the White Women Protection Ordinance of 1926 demonstrate the extent of government interest in safeguarding the sexual purity of white women. At the same time, colonial society showed a double standard because white men sired children with black women, hence there were many coloured children. Control of white women permeated other aspects of domestic life, where the domesticity ideology placed demands on women's submission to male authority as housewives. In the 1890s and 1920s, pioneering women tended to publicly support gender ideologies of the time, despite suffering

¹⁸ David M. Anderson, 'Sexual Threat and Settler Society: 'Black Perils' in Kenya, c. 1907-30', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, (2010), 47-74, here 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

hardship, poverty and loneliness.²⁰ Evidence from the conversations in the Women's Institute, a leading women's organisation, shows that middle class women supported conservative gender ideologies of the time. According to the chairperson of the Federation of Women's Institutes in Southern Rhodesia; 'home and family come before everything else and the greatest service a woman can give mankind is housekeeping including the care of children and their upbringing'.²¹ Reality of the workings of the domesticity ideology were contextual, as women were not homogenous, but intersected by class, nationality and location.

Male privilege permeated marriage, property and inheritance laws modelled on Roman-Dutch law imported from the Dutch to the Cape of South Africa and introduced by the pioneers in Southern Rhodesia. The divorce cases were decided in the High Courts in the two largest cities of Bulawayo and Salisbury. Such places were not easily accessible to families on the mines, farms, and smaller towns, making it difficult for women in abusive relationships to access justice. The administration of justice was conducted through an all-white male chain of judges, prosecutors, and police officers, demonstrating the gender ideologies of the time informed by contemporary beliefs about marriage, family, and justice.

²⁰ Jeannie Boggie, *Experiences of Rhodesia's Pioneer Women*. Bulawayo: (Philport & Collins, 1938).

²¹ *Home and Country*, 1/3 (1938), 5.

Before 1943, divorce laws allowed only adultery and desertion, as grounds for divorce.²² Therefore, it was difficult for women or men to get divorced because of spousal violence. A divorce required witnesses and evidence of allegations made against a spouse over a period of time. Cases lasting longer than two years were not uncommon.

2.0 Writing White Women and Gender based Violence

Writing about gender-based domestic violence in white society is inspired in part by Diana Russell's exploration of some of the violent experiences of white women in South Africa at the hands of their male partners and the widespread incestuous abuse.²³ Russell's work suggests that white women's abuse in the colonies was far more prevalent than has been acknowledged by historians and society at large. Russell's study, however, discusses white women largely as victims of abuse and rarely as perpetrators or both. It is also silent on white women's relations with their domestic servants. Relevant to this study is Elizabeth Foyster's history of marital violence in England in the mid eighteenth century. She uses court records to reconstruct husband abuse of wives.²⁴ She also makes connections between divorce and

²² H. R. Hahlo, *The South African law of husband and wife*, (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1975), 361.

²³ Diana Russel, *Behind Closed Doors in white South Africa, Incest Survivors tell their stories*, (New York: St Martins, 1997), 9.

²⁴ Elizabeth Foyster, *Marital Violence in English Family History, 1660 – 1857*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 234.

gender-based violence, as women turned to courts to free themselves from control, bullying, humiliation and intimidation by their husbands.

Although there is no direct connection between the society discussed by Foyster and white settler society in Southern Rhodesia, the book opens up the history of gender-based violence in white societies in the same period. Similarly, Manon van der Heijden analyses experiences of Dutch women as victims of violence in the form of rape, incest and spousal abuse.²⁵ Jock McCulloch and Ushehweu Kufakurinani refer anecdotally to gender-based violence, citing white women and male domestic workers as victims in different contexts.²⁶ In their separate studies, the work of former High Court Justice Bennie Goldin and Rosebund Seager provides important sources of data and statistical analysis of trends in divorce among white populations in colonial Zimbabwe.²⁷ Seager offers a legal interpretation of divorce trends. The two

²⁵ Manon van der Heijden, 'Women as Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seventeenth-Century Holland: Criminal Cases of Rape, Incest, and Maltreatment in Rotterdam and Delft', *Journal of Social History* 33, No. 3 (2000), 633.

²⁶ Jock McCulloch, 'Black Peril', 238. U. Kufakurinani, *Elasticity in Domesticity, white women in Rhodesian Zimbabwe, 1890-1979*, (Brill: Leiden, 2019), 91.

²⁷ Bennie Goldin, *The Problem in Rhodesia*. Kingston Books, 1965, 21; Seager Diana Rosamund, 'Marital Dissolution in Rhodesia: A Socio-Legal Perspective', unpublished MPhil thesis, (University of Rhodesia, Department of Sociology, 1977), 32-62.

authors do not examine or contextualize this cruelty in terms of gender-based violence, a topic this article builds on at length. The reviewed literature suggests the presence of gender-based violence in white domestic spaces, which is further elaborated by the cases discussed in this article.

The paper introduces the prism of subjective and objective violence, as a lens to analyse the range of violence experienced by white women in domestic spaces. For Cecilia Menjivar, subjective violence is a direct and visible form of violence meted out by identifiable agents.²⁸ To this end, physical forms of violence, economic neglect and sexual violence fall into this category. In colonial white society, therefore, subjective violence would include cruelty, desertion, and adultery, among other visible forms of violence that cause disruption of supposedly normal peaceful human life.²⁹ On the other hand, objective violence, also referred to as structural violence,³⁰ has no identifiable agents. It is the violence perpetrated on a social actor with his consent and normalized in everyday life, making it invisible and hidden in economic, political and ideological systems.³¹ Objective violence is embedded in the beliefs, values and systems of a particular society, which in colonial white society, included gender ideologies and beliefs

²⁸ Cecilia Menjivar, 'Violence and Women's Lives- a Conceptual Framework.' *Latin American Review* 43, No.2 (2008), 109.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 109.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 109

³¹ *Ibid*, 130.

about acceptable male and female behaviour, influenced by the Victorian domesticity. Objective violence included policies and procedures that increased gender inequality in employment and other opportunities. The paper also recognizes the interconnectedness and continuum between subjective and objective violence, which in some cases are mutually reinforcing.

3.0 Methods

As indicated above, the paper draws on primary court records, which contained transcriptions documenting the voices of both white women and men. The use of court records to uncover GBV raises difficult epistemological questions. Stacey Hynd questions how GBV students can use court records in the colonial past, before the concept of GBV was invented, when neither courts nor litigants used the term.³² In fact for Sara Ahmed, GBV was hidden and unnamed until the 1970s.³³ Despite these limitations, court records provide a window to hear the voices and experiences of women and men facing

³² Stacey Hynd, 'Fatal Families. 'Narratives of Spousal Killing and Domestic Violence in Murder Trials in Kenya and Nyasaland, c1930-56', (eds) Emily Burrill, Richard, L Roberts, and Elizabeth Thornberry, *Domestic Violence and the Law in Colonial Africa and Post-Colonial Africa*, (Ohio University Press, 2010), 18.

³³ Sara Ahmed, 'Introduction: Sexism - A Problem with a Name', *A Journal of culture/theory/politics*, Volume 86, (2015), 8.

gender-based violence.³⁴ As shown above, for Britain, Elizabeth Foyster and others have successfully used court and divorce records to demonstrate domestic violence.³⁵ Moreover, court cases can even provide clues as to the prevalence of gender-based violence compared to divorce cases. According to the 1989 United Nations report, records of divorce cases could provide a better estimate of the extent of domestic violence because gender-based violence is hidden in the grounds for divorce.³⁶ However, divorce records need to be viewed with caution as spouses tended to exaggerate their stories to divorce their partners for various reasons.

The high frequency of reports by white women of their experiences of spousal violence suggests that allegations of physical assault in the form of assaults were real. In some cases, it was easy to confirm the truthfulness of assault allegations because the defendant would eventually have been convicted of assault. Reading across the grain, one could see the realities of white society and the perceived or actual violence that women could experience or are experiencing. After a thorough study of divorce cases, Goldin, who witnessed numerous divorce cases, concluded; 'most divorces granted when the parties were married for less than three

³⁴ Koni Benson and Joyce Chadya, 'Ukhubhinya: Gender and Sexual Violence in Bulawayo, Colonial Zimbabwe, 1946-1956', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, (2005), 587-610, here 587.

³⁵ Elizabeth Foyster, 'Marital Violence', 30.

³⁶ United Nations, 'Violence Against Women in the Family', (1989) 17-19.

years [were] based on truthful evidence'.³⁷ However, court records are sometimes thin on detailed accounts of the violence suffered or committed by white women. Sometimes the records did not show the verdict of the cases and as such the divorce history would be incomplete.

Another limitation was that in some cases only the plaintiff's voice was represented, and that voice was not entirely free of bias. But such prejudices also reflect colonial society's thinking and perceptions of gender-based domestic violence. In addition, biographies, diaries, and personal memoirs provided testimony to the reconstruction of domestic violence in white society. In her biography, Amanda Parkyn presents a picture of peace and tranquillity in her marriage in Southern Rhodesia. She feared disturbing her parents, who lived far away in metropolitan Britain, and any news to the contrary would likely disturb her.³⁸ She mentions her struggle with loneliness and how she adapted to acceptable female behaviour by serving her husband and doing housework to keep the peace in their marriage. Unlike Amanda Parkyn, in Sally in Rhodesia, the young bride openly shared with her mother in Britain the loneliness and marital discord she was experiencing.³⁹ Similarly, Helen Dampier's study of the diaries of white settlers in South Africa uncovered fear, loneliness and

³⁷ B. Goldin, 'The Problem in Rhodesia', 1971, Kingstons, 64.

³⁸ Amanda Parkyn, *Roses under the Miombo Trees, An English Girl in Rhodesia*, (2012), 23.

³⁹ Sheila MacDonald, *Sally in Rhodesia*, (1926).

feigned illness in order to escape from domestic work and possibly recover from violence.⁴⁰ However, the sources remained useful in that they functioned as mirrors of both individuals and society, highlighting, among other things, perceptions and constructions of normative roles of gender in the colonial context. Newspapers and records of meetings of women's organizations provided a space to hear women's voices and popular culture. Novels published in the 1950s and 1970s also offer references to white mythology and self-image. Works by Doris Lessing revealed contradictions in colonial society and aspects of white women's experiences of objective violence.⁴¹ Personal interviews with some divorced friends and former domestic servants, point to marital tensions and violence within white domestic spaces.

4.0 Desertion and subjective violence

Findings show that within the context of marriage, desertion is considered subjective violence because it has an identifiable perpetrator. It could pose a serious burden to poor wives who depended on their husbands for their livelihoods. Such neglect is seen as an invisible form of economic violence hidden in family resource allocation systems.⁴² Cases of

⁴⁰ Helen Dampier, 'Settler Women's Experiences of fear, Illness and isolation with particular reference to the Eastern Cape frontier, 1820-1890', (unpublished MA diss., Rhodes University, 2000), 56.

⁴¹ Doris Lessing, 'The Grass is Singing'.

⁴² Judy L. Postmus, Gretchen L. Hoge, Jan Breckenridge, Nicola Sharp-Jeffs and Donna Chung, 'Economic Abuse as an Invisible form of

desertion by men, such as those experienced by women from the city of Bulawayo and the Shabani mine, have had economic consequences. In a letter of inquiry to the Registrar of the High Court in Bulawayo in 1930, Mrs Ale, reported that;

I am only earning six pounds per month and three pounds I must pay for my own room and three pounds for my son Larry. Sometimes I hardly have food to eat. My husband left her for Ndola in Zambia and never supported the family. I cannot afford a lawyer for divorce proceedings. My second two-year-old son, was taken away by the Child Welfare Society because I was incapacitated⁴³

In a slightly different case, Mrs Ale complained in court that she had no financial means to support herself and was destitute because she was dependent on the support of friends and relatives. Her husband deserted her for a period of four years. Accordingly, in 1934, the court ordered the husband to pay maintenance of six pounds per month.⁴⁴ In the case *Mu vs Mu*, a divorce was granted on 27th November, 1930, the defendant D. Mal, was asked by the High Court to pay the plaintiff, a sum of ten pounds per menses until such a time the plaintiff obtained employment.⁴⁵ In another case, a Doris

Domestic Violence: A Multicounty Review', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, (SAGE, 2018), 3.

⁴³ NAZ, S 3071/1 Civil Miscellaneous, Case no. 75, Letter from Mrs. M. to the Registrar of High Court, Bulawayo, 20 March 1930.

⁴⁴ NAZ, S581, District Courts Shabani: Civil Cases, 1934-1941

⁴⁵ NAZ, S3074/5: Civil Records Bulawayo 1930.

T. resorted to taking her child to Bothash Orphanage because her husband Peter had abandoned her, leaving her without a source of income. Besides, she had no property.⁴⁶

The above cases bring to the fore the status of women who turned to the courts, their financial deprivation, low income and inability to care for themselves and their own children in the absence of their husbands, and the role of the courts and the state in making amends for their need. In the first case, Mrs Ale lived in an urban area of Bulawayo, was employed and lived in a rented apartment, but did not have sufficient income to support her two children and the costs of divorce proceedings. She had no family support in Southern Rhodesia, a situation described in Amanda Parkyn's biography and experienced by several, but not all pioneer women.⁴⁷ Ms An of Shabani had the privilege of family support and so she could finance her claims for maintenance. In particular, the court referred to women's employment as a possible strategy for financial independence from husbands. As statistics show, few white women were employed in the 1930s. According to census reports, the number of employed white women was two thousand seven hundred and thirty-eight in 1926 and increased to three thousand one hundred and ninety-seven in 1931, representing seventeen percent of the employed

⁴⁶ NAZ, S3030: Bulawayo Civil Cases No. 11,570.

⁴⁷ Amanda Parkyn, *Roses under the Miombo trees, An English Girl in Rhodesia*, (2012), 16.

population. In 1936 it rose further to four thousand six hundred and seventy-five percent of the labour force aged fifteen and over.⁴⁸

Employed women experienced unfair labour conditions, with lower salaries than men.⁴⁹ Most were housewives dependent on their husbands because of the gendered division of labour that gave women domestic responsibilities and a breadwinner role to men, limited economic opportunities and social constraints. Examples of social pressure can be found in articles such as one written by a staff member to the *Rhodesia Herald* in 1930 challenging working women. She asked: ‘what does one get married for? I ask you, why, to keep a house, rear a family, perhaps cook the meals...the married woman has a husband to keep her that is the reason why she gets married to cease work.⁵⁰ However, this pressure was relevant for elite women who had an image to protect.

To the poor women like Mrs Ale, the need to work confirms the tension between the perception that white women’s domesticity worked and the reality that it didn’t. To deal with this inconstancy, the Rhodesian state was careful to adopt policies that protected, supported, and upheld the racial and

⁴⁸ Central Statistics of Population of Southern Rhodesia, Part VII, Industries and Occupations of the European population, 6 May 1941.

⁴⁹ NAZ A3/7/23, Civil Service: Women Clerks and typists (nd), Medical director’s Office to V. Godbolt, Acting Secretary CSWA, 4 October, 1918.

⁵⁰ Rhodesia Herald, 6 March 1930.

economic supremacy of whites while maintaining the breadwinner role of men. On the other hand, poor whites, jealously guarding their privileged position as members of the white race, turned to the courts.⁵¹ To a certain degree, the Deserted Wives and Children Protection Ordinance of 1904, together with the Maintenance Orders (Facilities for Enforcement) Ordinance of 22 July, 1921, must be appreciated in this context. The two legal provisions were adopted by the British South Africa Company from the metropole Britain in the pioneering years and revised after the First World War. The 1904 Ordinance was modelled towards ‘the prevention of destitution and to make provision for the relief of wives and families deserted and left destitute’.⁵² It defined that;

A married woman or child shall be deemed to have been deserted within the meaning of this Act when such a wife or child is living apart from her husband or father because of repeated assaults or other acts of cruelty or because he is an habitual drunkard, or because of his refusal or neglect without sufficient cause to supply such a wife or child with food and other necessities of life, when able to do so.⁵³

The Ordinance criminalised the neglect of wives by their husbands, who in such cases had to pay some allowance to the

⁵¹ Kate Law, ‘Gendering the Settler State’. 34.

⁵² Statute law of Southern Rhodesia, Deserted Wives and Children Protection Ordinance, Chapter 153, 1904.

⁵³ *Ibid*, Section 3.

wife. This ordinance and its provisions reflected the social and gender ideology of Rhodesian society, which viewed wives as dependent beings on men, deserving of men's protection and provision. For the state, this was proof of the level of civilization in white society.

In the nineteenth century, society's treatment of women was often held up as evidence of its civilisation, with rude societies cruel to their wives.⁵⁴ To some extent the state made provisions against gender-based violence by recognizing assault and other acts of cruelty, commonly referred to in current discourse as physical violence, as important considerations in desertion and maintenance of wives. However, there were contradictions in the same Ordinance. Section five provided that: 'No order for the payment of any sum by the husband shall be made in favor of a wife who is shown to have committed adultery.'⁵⁵ Husbands often resorted to this moral clause and accused their wives of adultery in order to avoid paying maintenance. Despite this clause, the ordinance offered white women and children some safety valve from financial abuse/neglect and poverty. According to I. Mhike, the state provided orphanages to protect white children from delinquency, and subsequent

⁵⁴ K. Wilson, 'Empire, Gender and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century', 15 and C. Hall, 'Of Gender and empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century, 46 in ed. Phillipa Levine, *Gender and Empire*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, Section 5. (1)

poverty, a situation that would create poor whites.⁵⁶ Deserters outside Rhodesia, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and elsewhere in the Commonwealth and neighbouring states were subject to this law on the basis of mutual agreement.⁵⁷

In the case of Rhodesia, court records are not always clear as to why husbands left their wives, and trying to understand these reasons is complicated by the fact that court records mainly reflect the voice of wives. These wives usually want to present their cases as convincingly as possible, and even if they may have contributed to the situation, that contribution has been toned down or simply not mentioned. However, there are few occasions when we get a glimpse of some of the reasons for desertion. For example, in one case the husband, when explaining his wife's neglect, remarked that 'I had left my wife because we could not come to an agreement. We quarrelled with each other. My wife has a bad temper. I therefore found it impossible to live with her. She threw a knife at me on one occasion in temper.'⁵⁸ However, in her presentation to the court, the wife had said that there had been no disagreements with her husband and that she had

⁵⁶ Ivor Mhike, 'Deviance and Colonial Power: A History of Juvenile Delinquency in Colonial Zimbabwe 1890-c.1960' (PhD Thesis, University of Free Estate, 2016), 47-52.

⁵⁷ Statute Law of Southern Rhodesia, Maintenance Orders (Facilities for Enforcement) Ordinance No. 20/1921

⁵⁸ NAZ, S581, District Courts Shabani: Civil Cases, 1934-1941

given him no reason to leave. A look at the records also suggests that men abandoned their wives when they left in search of economic opportunities. In other cases, husbands claimed their financial situation had made it difficult to support their families. Sometimes husbands moved in with new lovers and then neglected their wives. Such claims have not been considered by the courts, but show that grounds for divorce are more complex and cannot be viewed in isolation from other social forces.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was a significant historical context that exposed women to economic violence in the form of desertion and financial neglect. Some husbands left Southern Rhodesia for other colonies, while other men could not afford to support their families. The associated economic difficulties and unemployment by white man, added to domestic tensions leading to desertions. This resonates well with other studies in post-colonial Zimbabwe and elsewhere. Mary Osirim observed a close correlation between economic hardships experienced during the Economic Structural Adjustment programs (ESAP) and a spike in GBV cases in domestic spaces of Zimbabwe.⁵⁹ In recent years, scholarship

⁵⁹ Mary Johnson Osirim, 'Crisis in the State and the Family: Violence Against Women in Zimbabwe', *African Studies Quarterly* | Volume 7, (2003), 160.

suggests a similar relationship between the economic hardships caused by COVID-19 and increase in GBV.⁶⁰

5.0 Cruelty as subjective violence

Cruelty was a form of subjective violence experienced mostly by women, though some men also lodged complaints against their wives. Cases presented between the 1940s and 1950s, show various types of physical, mental and emotional violence. In the case of *Fra versus Stel*, the court heard: 'since the year 1941 the Defendant habitually has indulged in intoxicating liquor to excess, has been drunk and has assaulted and vilified the Plaintiff on numerous occasions when under the influence of liquor.'⁶¹ In this case, the plaintiff used the previous records of assault and fines paid by the husband as compelling evidence of violence. This case dragged on for a long time, and in 1952, after almost eleven years, the divorce was finally granted. In the same year, in *Florence v. Henry*, the relationship between violence/cruelty and alcohol was clearly articulated under the heading 'Particulars of the Cruelty'. It was noted that 'Since about 1942 the Defendant [had] habitually partaken to excess of intoxicating liquor and has been drunk' and had 'spent considerable sums of money on gambling' and 'such conduct

⁶⁰ Nobuhle Judy Dlamini, 'Gender-Based Violence, Twin Pandemic to COVID-19', *Critical Sociology*, 47, no.4-5 (2021), 583-5

⁶¹ NAZ, S 2276: 11556-11595, High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, No.11,581.

worried the Plaintiff and caused the Plaintiff considerable mental distress.⁶² It was also noted that: ‘The defendant whilst under the influence of liquor quarrelled violently with the Plaintiff, shouted, and swore at the Plaintiff and without any just cause accused the Plaintiff of being unduly intimate with other men, thereby causing the Plaintiff considerable mental distress and adversely affecting the Plaintiff’s health.’⁶³ In a similar case, the wife accused her husband of being in ‘the habit of indulging in alcoholic liquor to excess’ habitually using foul, abusive and threatening language.⁶⁴ In his defence, the husband agreed to using rude language; pushing her on to the bed and slapping her face, but justified his behaviour by accusing the wife of adultery.⁶⁵ In this case, the defendant denied each charge, and the final verdict was not given in the files.

The lack of data on final judgments, as in the case above, highlights one of the challenges in using court procedures in reconstructing the full cycle and dimensions of domestic violence. However, the above cases demonstrate that white men perpetrated various forms of violence against their wives,

⁶² NAZ, S2276: 11556-11595: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, No.11, 583.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ NAZ, S 2276: 11,596-11,635: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, No. 11,597.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

when they were drunk. It is not apparent whether the relationship was peaceful when they were sober. Notwithstanding, there have been several court cases that have also shown a strong link between excessive alcohol consumption and violence. It is debatable whether alcoholism was the cause for violence or simply an excuse for such. However, the records clearly demonstrate that the relationship between excessive drinking and violence is unmistakable.

Indeed, husbands were accused of perpetrating various cruel actions under the influence of alcohol which included 'hitting their wives in the face fists and other parts of her body'⁶⁶ picking unnecessary quarrels; using abusive language, calling her 'a cow', 'uneducated bastard' and 'bloody rat'⁶⁷, throwing knives and weapons, threatening to kill⁶⁸; pointing at and pressing against her body a loaded pistol.⁶⁹ To add to this figure, of the three hundred divorce cases Goldin evaluated, one hundred and sixty four resulted in physical harm, and in two cases the defendants/husbands justified their recourse to their wives' physical harm. In the three cases, two hundred

⁶⁶ NAZ, S 2276: 11,596-11,635: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, NO. 11,626.

⁶⁷ NAZ, S 2276: 11,596-11,635: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, NO. 11,627.

⁶⁸ NAZ, S 2276: 11,596-11,635: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, No. 11,627.

⁶⁹ NAZ, S 2284, Civil Records, 1953, Case no. 12021 - 64.

and fifty-six of the plaintiffs were wives; with one hundred and sixty-two alleged physical assaults by their husbands.⁷⁰ Of the cases, a notable trend from the men's responses shows their overwhelming counter-accusations of adultery to their wives. Based on prevailing notions of the purity of white female sexuality, shaped by Victorian attitudes towards sexuality, husbands used this strategy to discredit the woman of her honour and good name in the eyes of the court, which also had the desired effect to alienate her from friends and deprive her of companionship.⁷¹ For women, this was quite painful, since Southern Rhodesia was a very small community, where families were concerned about their image and feared gossip. Women equally challenged the expected social decorum expected of middleclass white gentlemen, in their presentations. Hitting women and uncontrolled drinking embarrassed him. Indeed, these levels of violence reflect settler constructions of masculinity associated with hard living and alcohol consumption that persisted in various contexts and levels of intensity throughout the colonial period.⁷²

⁷⁰Goldin, 'The Problem in Rhodesia', 68.

⁷¹ Robert L. Griswold, Law, 'Sex, Cruelty, and Divorce in Victorian America: 1840-1900', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, (1986), 274.

⁷² Jane Parpart, 'Masculinities, race and violence in the making of Zimbabwe', in Kizito Muchemwa and Robert Muponde (eds) *Manning the nation*, (Weaver Press, 2007), 105.

The link between alcohol use and domestic violence is consistent with scholarship on domestic violence.⁷³ However, alcohol was often been used as an excuse because drunk men rarely hit the neighbours, instead directing their aggression at women due to the unequal gender relations in which men wield power over women.⁷⁴ In recent years, Lori Heise has made connections between individual psychological dispositions such as alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence in her ecological framework. She identifies male dominance in the family, alcohol consumption and verbal conflict as contributing factors to domestic violence.⁷⁵ However, not all men who drink alcohol are abusive, so the roots of gender-based violence are complex and lie in a combination of factors that include systemic gender inequalities between men and women and personal use of power.

Cruelty as a form of violence and reason for divorce was introduced within the context of socio-economic developments in the 1940s. A combination of factors contributed to this. Debates about the need to improve women's position in society gained momentum around the world, while concerns arose in feminist circles about

⁷³ A. Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770-1845* (London, 1987), 49-50.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Foyster, 'Marital Violence', 65.

⁷⁵ Lori Heise, 'Ecological Framework, Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework', (SAGE, 1998), 272.

competing claims to marital stability against the odds and woman's individual autonomy. In colonial Zimbabwe, World War II increased demand for commodities in Southern Rhodesia, while male participation in the war left gaps that opened up employment opportunities for women. Subsequently, their labor participation increased by seventy two percent.⁷⁶ Women's entry into formal wage labour improved their financial capacity and economic status. This improved their ability to pay for divorce costs, which were quite prohibitive, much like nineteenth-century Britain.⁷⁷

Table 1: Female vs Male Plaintiffs in Divorce Cases, 1954-1969

Year	Female	Male
1954	171	143
1957	182	146
1958	188	189
1961	243	179
1962	230	147
1963	259	171
1964	239	158
1965	256	145
1966	303	149
1967	314	173

⁷⁶ Kufakurinani and P. Nyambara, 'Reconfiguring Domesticity? White Women and Second World War in Southern Rhodesia', *Historia*, 60/2, 132-159, here 132.

⁷⁷ E. Foyster, 'Marital Violence', 65.

1968	337	190
1969	366	172

Source: Adapted from B. Goldin, *The Problem in Rhodesia: Unhappy Marriage and Divorce* (Salisbury: Kingstons, 1971), 24-25

Table 1, shows a sharp increase in divorce cases in which women were plaintiffs from 1942 onwards. This trend suggests a close relationship between women's labor participation, economic empowerment, and their ability to file for divorce.⁷⁸ There were marked class differences in opportunities to access the courts. Urban and middle-class women could challenge potential abuse in the domestic spaces and provide for themselves through employment. This was not always available for women living in remote locations on the farms and mines. Socially, some sections of society maintained conservative gender ideologies that disapproved of married women in the workforce because they had given up their natural labour to compete with men in the labour market. A contributor to the 1959 Herald echoed these sentiments '... employment of 'working wives' should be restricted to the following classes of women: widows, extreme hardship cases and the professions such as doctors, teachers, and the like.'⁷⁹ Despite the persistence of this way of thinking, women's organizations have increasingly advocated for changes in the status of women in various fields. In their associations

⁷⁸ Kufakurinani, 'Elasticity in Domesticity', 29.

⁷⁹ Modern Times, Letter, Rhodesia Herald, September 23, 1959.

decentralised to in many outlying districts, they also urged their members to shift their mindset toward independent identity from their husbands toward self-actualisation.⁸⁰

Women's organisations put pressure on the state to reform divorce and maintenance laws and deployed various platforms and strategies. The Association of Women's Institutes engaged Parliament pushing for reforms in the Deserted Wives and Cruelty Act, for the recognition of cruelty as a condition for divorce. Previously, cruelty was recognized as a condition of maintenance for a deserted wife under the same Act.⁸¹ Surprisingly the same cruelty clause was not applied in cases where a woman filed for divorce as a plaintiff. In addition, the marriage was in community of property, with the husband having full power of disposal over the common property.⁸² Women were not entitled to any assets obtained through her husband's income, had no rights derived from the running of the marital home and was forced to bargain with her husband at the time of the divorce. It was these inconsistencies in the marriage and divorce laws that prompted the Women's Institutes to frequently lobby the Ministry of Justice to change the laws.⁸³ To their delight, cruelty was included as a ground for divorce in the 1943

⁸⁰ Shella Griffiths, 'What NHR Means to me', *NHR Newsletter*, June 1944.

⁸¹ Deserted Wives and Children Protection Ordinance, interpretation of terms.

⁸² *Ibid*, 44.

⁸³ NAZ, S824/198/2, Federation of Women's Institutes: 22 March, 1944.

Amendment to the Matrimonial Causes Act. The same amendment in section nine, provided for maintenance of the wife in the event of divorce.⁸⁴ This was a landmark victory that effectively freed women from abusive or unhappy marriages without fear of hardship. It signified a shift in definitions of gender and family relationships and autonomy of women. Subsequently divorce statistics in which women were plaintiffs rose, as indicated in Table 1.

Despite the liberating effect of the 1943 Matrimonial Causes Act, the court continued to affirm the importance of marriage stability and retained the subjectivity to satisfy itself that the plaintiff did not contribute to the divorce. The colonial justice system, administered what appeared to be gender-neutral legal provisions. However, the application, interpretation and meaning to vague statutory language of the law is largely defined as male, its language and argumentation process are based on male images of problems and damage.⁸⁵ Judges were uniquely positioned to examine domestic relationships, hear testimony, consider facts, and then grant or deny divorce. In addition, colonial legal spaces were more an expression of male power.⁸⁶ Reflecting the existing patriarchal worldview

⁸⁴ D.R. Seager, 'Marital Dissolution in Rhodesia': 54.

⁸⁵ Lucinda M. Finley, 'Breaking Women's Silence in the Law. The dilemma of the gendered nature of legal reasoning. *Hein online*, (1989), 887-888, here 887.

⁸⁶ Joanne Conaghan, 'Theorizing the Relationship between Law and Gender', <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof.oso>, (2013), 70-108.

that respected marriage and family, most law enforcement officials opted for reconciliation in cases of marital conflict. Women were expected to tolerate spousal violence, particularly forms of violence where there is no threat to life or limb. This had the unintended effect of allying with men to silence domestic violence. Through further efforts by the National Council for Women, a Commission of Inquiry into the inequalities between men and women was set up in 1956. Further amendments were made to the Matrimonial Causes Act 1959, effectively relaxing the need to prove the plaintiff's innocence in marital disputes. In addition, The Married Persons Property Act of 1959 removed the husband's absolute marital power under the old Roman Dutch law, and the Act protected a married woman's property from the fraudulent, negligent or incompetent actions of her husband.⁸⁷

These legal reforms gave women more opportunities to leave abusive husbands without the embarrassment of citing acts of cruelty. More so, the removal of the absolute power of the husband in marital property gave wives assurance of livelihood after divorce. This explains in part, the increased number of female plaintiffs who have approached the courts seeking redress against various types of conduct that have been described as cruelty. These reforms to marriage laws

⁸⁷ Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, *Rhodesians Never Die: The Impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia, c. 1970 -1980*, (Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

demonstrate two important points. First, the importance of lobbying by the feminist movement in gender equality issues. Second, the potential for legal reforms in transformative gender relations. Legally, domestic violence was not a crime in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe until the passage of the Domestic Violence Act 2007 as an achievement of mobilized and organized African women.⁸⁸

6.0 White women as perpetrators of violence

Departing from the colonial constructs and mythology of the ‘vulnerable white woman’ and the ‘predatory, ‘savage’ and lustful’ African male, this section reconstructs some of the experiences of African men as victims of sexual violence perpetrated by white women. Historically African male servants, dominated domestic service throughout the colonial period from South Africa through to Kenya. In Rhodesia, reports from 1901 to 1936, show that out of a total of six thousand nine hundred and ninety-one domestic servants, ninety percent were male.⁸⁹ On the other hand, white women spent more time in the domestic space in close proximity with their servants. Given the pendulum of power that decisively swung towards the white mistresses, their sexual torment and advances towards their domestic servants were potential cases

⁸⁸ Lene Bull Christiansen ‘In Our Culture’, How Debates about Zimbabwe’s Domestic Violence Law Became a ‘Culture Struggle’, *NORA, Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 17:3, (2009), 175-191.

⁸⁹ NAZ, SRG 4, CE 6, Census Reports 1901-1936.

of sexual violence. J C. Brundell's Report highlights several cases which demonstrate sexual torment and harassment on African men by white women. For example, 'the wife of a well-known professional man in the Territory, was in the habit, while she was naked in her bath, of calling in her male African boy aged seventeen, 'to pour water over her'.⁹⁰ Another case involved a married woman who on one day called her servant and said to him 'Come here. You do to me the same as your boss does', while 'at the same time exposing her breasts by throwing open her nightdress'. The servant immediately left and went to report the case. His rushing to report, suggests that the servant felt violated by the act and feared the potential repercussions, in case, the woman reported the case as rape.

Black men faced the death penalty for anything which constituted 'attempted rape' as defined by the Immorality Suppression Ordinance of 1903. John Pape observed that incidents of alleged sexual violence by black men against white women, so called 'black peril' led to the execution of dozens of black men.⁹¹ White women often denied any sexual intimacy with African servants, for fear of being ostracised, given the need to maintain racial distance and white honour.

⁹⁰ NAZ, S 1227/2, January 1916. Black and White Perils in Southern Rhodesia.

⁹¹ John Pape, Black and White: The 'Perils of Sex' in Colonial Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.16, 1990, 699.

Writing in 1976, Lawrence Vambe critiqued white employers both women and men who had non-consensual sexual intercourse on demand with their African servants.⁹² Vambe's observations were corroborated by oral interviews held with older male and female former domestic workers. According to Mrs L Mug, an eighty-year old former maid, 'my previous *bassa* (boss) raped his maid and she delivered a baby boy, who was taken to an orphanage. She stopped working for him' and was not supported in any way.⁹³ Information from a focus group discussion with six former domestic workers, confirmed that both male and female bosses sexually abused domestic workers. The Black Peril episode and the state response, adversely affected race relations in colonial Zimbabwe and this unfortunately continued in the postcolonial period.

Sexual violence perpetrated by white men against white women has been masked and overshadowed by the racial overtones associated with the Black Perils. African men were accused of various forms of sexual violence, even in cases where they were innocent. The Criminal Investigation Department Report by J.C Brundell, referred to a case of

⁹² Lawrence Vambe, *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, 109.

⁹³ Interviews were held in Harare September 2020. See also NAZ, S1542/M7, NC Inyanga to CNC, 16 April, 1934.

assault allegedly committed by two African domestic servants on a 6-year-old white girl. Part of the report read:

The attempt at rape by these African men resulted in the child contracting a venereal disease ... I make special reference to this case as it is one of the many offences of a similar nature although less serious. It constitutes a practical illustration of the danger attending the employment of male servants with the care and custody of children of tender age.⁹⁴

This report portrayed white women as negligent about their expected role in raising children, leaving them in the hands of male servants. A letter of advice to European women in the colonies by the East Africa Women's League, for the white women in Rhodesia, shows the interconnectedness of the settler societies and their shared fear of African male sexuality. Part of the letter read, 'During the past years there have been several cases of rape by *Africans* on European women and children of varying age, and there have been cases of venereal diseases among little white girls which have been and are being proved to be the result of contact with *African* servants.'⁹⁵ These allegations reflect colonial society's

⁹⁴ J.C Brundell, 'Black and white peril; CID, BSAP, Bulawayo, National Archives of Zimbabwe S1227/1.

⁹⁵ 'Advice to European Women' (Reprinted with acknowledgement to East Africa Women's League), *Rhodesia, Home and Country*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1938), 43.

scapegoating and fear mongering with sexual anxieties about African men and white women, the southern African equivalents of Emmitt Till, a fourteen year old black American, who was murdered for whistling at a white girl.⁹⁶ The involvement of white men in the rape of white women and children, cannot be ruled out given Russell's research, on incest in white South Africa.⁹⁷ Also, the presence of child marriages makes it plausible that white males could be potential perpetrators. In one civil case, one Mr. B. T. was accused of 'wrongfully and unlawfully' seducing and having sexual intercourse with Magdalene, a minor of about sixteen years.⁹⁸ According to the court records, Magdale 'lost her virginity and [was] (sic) injured in her good name and reputation'.⁹⁹ However, given that most of the archival records were kept by men, it is not surprising that such statistical records are scarce. In addition, racial prejudices of the time and power constellations make an objective assessment of the perpetrators difficult.

The domestic spaces have often been associated with sexual violence usually between spouses. Scholars who discuss sexual violence largely concentrate on rape which normally takes violent forms. In marriage, sexual violence took the forms of

⁹⁶ Bob Dylan, *The Death of Emmett Till, 1955*.

⁹⁷ Diana Russell, *Behind Closed Doors in white South Africa, Incest Survivors tell their stories*, (St Martins New York, 1997), 9.

⁹⁸ NAZ, S 1500, Civil Cases 1948.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

what today can be called marital rape. However, there are not many cases where spousal rape is mentioned in court reports, perhaps because patriarchal conventions of the marriage contract included conjugal rights in heterosexual relationships.¹⁰⁰ Analysis of civil cases revealed something close to marital rape. In 1953, a man, after separation from his wife, 'on several occasions had intercourse with the plaintiff against her will, well knowing that he was thereby causing mental and physical hurt to the plaintiff.'¹⁰¹

It would be an ahistorical portrayal to suggest that white women were always victims of subjective violence. White women were also perpetrators of violence in white domestic spaces. They were clearly not passive victims of the violence perpetrated against them. Various methods and tactics have been employed in the face of domestic violence. Another form of resistance, usually before a court case, was simply move out of the marriage, especially when violence took the form of physical and verbal abuse was taking place. These responses were, however, of the extreme form. In many cases resistance by white women's resistance could take subtle or more overt ways sometimes not necessarily leading to divorce. One Mrs. Edith indicated that her controlling husband demanded that she stops attending meetings at the Women's Institute and

¹⁰⁰ Adrian Williamson, 'The Law and Politics of Marital Rape in England, 1945-1994', *Women's History Review*, 26:3, (2017), 382.

¹⁰¹ NAZ, S 2284, Civil Records, 1953.

she refused to do so.¹⁰² Denying women their independent choice stemmed in part from patriarchal control in which men sought to exert their power over women and to keep them in feminine subordination and in deference to men. The independent spirit that Mrs. Edith exuded, threatened this control, and this contributed to the marital tensions that eventually led to the divorce proceedings. It is case histories like these that demonstrate women's agency in the face of abuse in the home of white settler society. Women have also been the perpetrators of physical violence in the home on several occasions. There have also been cases of wives divorced for cruelty. In the case of *Arthur vs Ann*, the husband reported that, 'During the marriage, the defendant has been habitually drunk and notwithstanding demands and requests to desist from her drunken habits. Such conduct was said to render, 'the continuance of married life insupportable.' This behavior was categorized as cruelty and can be interpreted as violence on the husband. In another case, one Cyril also filed for divorce against his wife, Sybil on grounds of cruelty, over allegations that the wife struck the Plaintiff on the back of the head with part of a wooden chair, in addition to scratching, beating, and kicking.¹⁰³

¹⁰² NAZ, S 382, Civil Cases 1934 – 35, Case No. 52/34, 11 April 1934.

¹⁰³ S2276: 11686 -11730: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, No. 11,695.

The husband was granted divorce on the basis of continued provocation by the wife. It is one of those cases which challenges the stereotypical victimhood of women in interpersonal violence. However, from the wife's perspective, her response was in retaliation of verbal provocation, to which there was no proof. In a similar case, the husband in a question-and-answer session reported, 'on one occasion I unfortunately had to suffer the indignity of being struck across the face (by the wife)'.¹⁰⁴ The husband felt humiliated because being physically hit by a wife went against normative expectations of female behaviour. Unfortunately, court records and their summaries make it very difficult to decipher some of the complexities that can help us better understand what happened between these couples. What they say with certainty is that while few cases of male abuse by their wives have been reported, their existence cannot be underestimated.

The fact that men do not report gender-based violence at home is consistent with men's fear of being ridiculed and labelled as women.¹⁰⁵ Just like men, women too deserted their husbands in search of greener pastures or they ran off with

¹⁰⁴ NAZ, S2276: 11,636 -11,685: High Court, Assistant Registrar, Bulawayo, Civil Cases, 1951-52, Case No11, 646.

¹⁰⁵ : Anant Kumar, 'Domestic Violence against Men in India: A Perspective', *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, 22:3, (2012), 290-296, DOI: 10.1080/10911359.2012.655988.

other men. In 1952, a certain Paul filed for divorce against his wife who was accused of 'wrongfully, unlawfully and maliciously' deserting her husband.¹⁰⁶ In another case, in 1953, one Mr. Douglas indicated that his wife had refused to return with him to Rhodesia after they had gone for holidays to London.¹⁰⁷ Again, one would not know why these wives left their husbands. Could these be cases of wives escaping abuse from their husbands? Certainly, the husbands would not voluntarily provide such information to the courts in their divorce petition. But again, one must be careful in pursuing this line of thinking, as it could border on denying white women agency and thus deviate from historical realities. In fact, white women had the ability to engage in violence against their spouses as well. They, too, could commit adultery and cause discomfort and psychological distress to their partners. Granted, there have been several baseless allegations against wives, but again, the existence of such practices among white women cannot be denied.

The 1960s unlike the earlier period, show a sharp increase of divorce cases from nineteen to twenty-eight divorces per one hundred marriages respectively.¹⁰⁸ Cruelty featured as the main reason in various cases.¹⁰⁹ This coincided with a number

¹⁰⁶ NAZ, S 2284, Civil Records, 1953, Case No. 12061.

¹⁰⁷ NAZ, S 2284, Civil Records, 1953, Case No. 12057.

¹⁰⁸ Seager, 'Marital Dissolution', 62

¹⁰⁹ Rhodesian Law Reports 6891/R8, 29 January 1966

of developments within and outside Rhodesia. Globally, female emancipation was spreading to the colonies and there was communication between women's organisations in the metropole and the colonies. Women's organisations like the Women's Institute and National Housewives Register, established in 1971, increasingly transformed into platforms to negotiate and resist gender inequality, advocating for women's needs, though they were not as radicalised as in Europe at that time. Public opinion in Rhodesia, also started to shift towards acceptance of global changes in the position and status of women.¹¹⁰ Even the Anglican Church, shifted from their previous conservative position and by 1969, agreed to remarry divorcees in the church.¹¹¹ For those who opted to remain unmarried after divorce, life was not easy, as society viewed single women with suspicion and as sexually available.¹¹² The Rhodesian government also made strides improving the divorce laws by setting up a Commission of Inquiry into Divorce Laws in 1976, to review and relax grounds of divorce and maintenance of spouses and dependent children.¹¹³ This relaxed the legal framework, for example, a divorce was possible after two years and a no-fault divorce was

¹¹⁰ K. Saunders and R. Evans, eds. *Gender Relations in Australia-Domination and Negotiation* (Sidney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1999)

¹¹¹ *Sunday Mail*, 7th September 1969.

¹¹² Ane M. Orbo Kirkgaard, 'It couldn't be anything innocent', 118.

¹¹³ NAZ, Report on the Commission of Inquiry into Divorce Laws 1977: Summary and Commentary.

granted. The need to state reasons for divorce was eliminated, increasing the divorce rate.

7.0 Conclusion

This article shed light on a silent dimension of white settler women's past, their lived experiences of gender-based violence in colonial Zimbabwe, demonstrating change over time. Experiences of desertion by pioneer women of the 1920s and 1930s, was quite different from the women of the 1940s, who clearly had more options to leave abusive relationships. In line with Haggis, this focus on white women as women and gender history, 'challenges mainstream history by putting conflict, ambiguity and tragedy back to the centre of historical processes'¹¹⁴ The story deserves a space in Zimbabwean and settler colonial historiography as it helps to better understand the workings of colonial society, gender ideologies and how they impact on family dynamics. The article approached white women not only as victims or survivors of male violence but also as perpetrators. Viewing women as perpetrators of violence contradicts the violence against women, narrative, but opens the domestic space for a closer look using real life experiences of gendered power dynamics between men and women, which in some cases may favour women.

¹¹⁴ Jane Haggis, 'Gendering Colonialism or Colonising Gender? Recent Women's Studies Approaches to White Women and the History of British Colonialism,' *Women Studies Forum*, (Pergamon Press, Vol. 13. No. 12. (1990), 105-115.

Nonetheless, statistics still show an overwhelming victimhood of women in cases of gender-based violence. The paper used the prism of subjective and objective violence as a lens to assess forms of violence. The cases highlight five forms of violence that fall under subjective violence: desertion as a form of economic violence; adultery as a form of emotional violence and cruelty as physical, emotional and sexual violence. The fifth form of violence is objective violence in the form of structural inequalities that were anchored in the colonial state's gender ideologies of marriage, divorce and property and wage laws.

At societal level, objective violence was associated with the ideology of domesticity, which contributed to gender norms and values that disadvantaged white women. These violent realities pierce the myth of racial superiority and racial purity propagated by the white settler state and society. It points to the need to break down class, racial and other barriers that also prevent privileged women and men from accessing services. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, most middle-class white and African women do not have access to gender equality services due to class superiority myths and prejudice that associate gender-based violence with the poorer classes. The paper also showed the connections between the economic crisis of the 1930s and the escalation of violence. History has shown that economic conditions undermine gender equality, as evidenced by the impact of ESAP and general economic crisis situations such as the impact of COVID 19. The issue of

women's economic empowerment in relation to women's ability of to exit abusive relationships is illustrated by the link between improved labour force participation and the ability to divorce. The economic boom of World War II created an environment and opportunities for women to fight gender inequalities and negotiate better relationships in the domestic space. Reducing gender-based violence requires lobbying and advocacy by a robust women's movement, as demonstrated by women's organizations campaigning for reforms in marriage, divorce and property rights. The success of the Marriage Act 1943 and the introduction of cruelty laws as grounds for divorce, the provision of spousal support after divorce, and the continued elimination of grounds for divorce, all contributed to women challenging gender-based violence in the home. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the women's movement built on the work of these white women to fight gender-based violence and campaign for the passage of the Domestic Violence Act, in 2007, twenty-seven years after independence. The role of the state in creating an enabling legal environment to protect women from violence is another issue that emerges from the paper. Through the Desertion and Maintenance laws and subsequent reforms, the patriarchal state protected women from gender-based violence in domestic spaces to protect white privilege. Post-colonial marriage, divorce and property laws have potential to change the status of women, if consistently applied. With the

evidence provided in this article, the mystery is out, violence in white domestic spaces was endemic.

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