



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe – ZWE36110 – Women – Single  
mothers

10 February 2010

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- 1 Please provide an update on the situation for women in Zimbabwe generally, and indicate whether there is any information specifically on the treatment of single mothers and single mothers without male family protection in particular.**

## **Violence against women**

The most recent US DOS human rights report released in February 2009 indicates that domestic violence and rape continue to pose a serious problem to women in Zimbabwe. Although rape is a crime, cases often went unreported and of those that were reported, the police took action only when the case was unrelated to political violence. Domestic violence was also underreported due to traditional attitudes and fear of economic consequences for the family. The police also generally consider domestic violence to be a private matter.<sup>1</sup> A report by the Social Institutions and Gender Index finds that “[i]n two-thirds of cases of violence against women, the perpetrator is the woman’s husband, partner or ex-husband; [while] half of the cases involve both physical and sexual violence”.<sup>2</sup>

Freedom House’s annual report published in 2009 similarly indicates that, despite extensive legal protections, women continue to experience societal discrimination, domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape used as a political weapon.<sup>3</sup> Both the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office annual human rights report for 2008 and the UK Home Office report on Zimbabwe dated 20 July 2009 outline politically-motivated rapes of women in militia camps and bases. In particular, it is argued that such political violence against women increased in the aftermath of the March 2008 presidential elections, when many “women were tortured and abused [by the militia] in order to force them to tell where their husbands were hiding [and] to force the males, whom they suspected to be opposition supporters, to return home”. In addition, there were reports of women and girls being abducted in order to provide sexual services to youth militia at the bases.<sup>4 5</sup>

Other human rights groups in Zimbabwe have also highlighted the use of politically-motivated violence, including rape, against women at militia camps, claiming that “the police did not accept reports of politically motivated violence in Zimbabwe and...reports of rape are usually met with suspicion, stigma and hostility towards the victim causing most victims not to report”.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a news article dated 13 November 2009 quotes a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, Jean-Philippe Chauzy, who explains that “[t]here is a lot of stigmatization within the society against people who have suffered...sexual abuses

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State 2009, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008 – Zimbabwe*, 25 February, Section 5 – Attachment 1

<sup>2</sup> Social Institutions and Gender Index (undated), ‘Gender equality and social institutions in Zimbabwe’ – Attachment 2

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House 2009, ‘Freedom in the World Country Report: Zimbabwe’, 16 July – Attachment 3

<sup>4</sup> UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2009, ‘Annual Report on Human Rights 2008’, 26 March – Attachment 4

<sup>5</sup> UK Home Office 2009, ‘Country of Origin Information Report – Zimbabwe’, 20 July, p. 102 – Attachment 5

<sup>6</sup> ‘Politically Motivated Violence against Zimbabwean Women’ 2009, *The Zimbabwean*, 7 May – Attachment 6

and...without...support,...counseling, [and] medical assistance...people will be marked for life and will be stigmatized in society, which means that their future remains very bleak”.<sup>7</sup>

### **Legal rights**

Despite legal protections for women’s rights, including the criminal code which provides punishments for sexual offences, the Domestic Violence Act of 2007 which criminalises domestic violence and provides increased protection for victims, and labour legislation which prohibits workplace sexual harassment, women remain disadvantaged in Zimbabwean society, particularly in rural areas, mainly due to traditional customary laws and practices in rural areas which undermine the civil rights of women, limit their access to education, and create economic dependency on male partners and family members.<sup>8 9</sup> In addition, although “the law recognizes women’s right to own property independently of their husbands or fathers...many women continued to be unaware of their property and inheritance rights”.<sup>10</sup> The report by Social Institutions and Gender Index cited above similarly explains that women in Zimbabwe are a vulnerable group due to traditional practices which limit their civil liberties, and their rights to inheritance, land ownership, and access to bank loans which often require a husband’s consent or guarantees that women are often unable to provide. It is argued, however, that “Zimbabwean law recognises women’s rights to have access to property other than land. All women, whether single or married, are entitled to own property, which they retain if they do marry or subsequently divorce”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Single women/mothers**

Limited information was found regarding the treatment of single mothers without male family support or protection; however, some sources indicate that single women and mothers, including widows, were significantly affected by the government’s Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order, or Drive Out Rubbish) in 2005, which involved the demolition of hundreds of thousands of illegally built homes in Zimbabwe’s shanty towns in Harare, resulting in the forced evictions of 700,000 people.<sup>12 13</sup>

A 2005 news article cites reports from both Human Rights Watch and the United Nations, which indicate that single women and widows were disproportionately affected by Operation Murambatsvina, due to the loss of livelihood experienced and the lack of family and government support available. As well as receiving little assistance from the government, single mothers, including divorcees and widows, are unable to return to rural family homes due to limited land ownership rights. In addition, “[o]ther single mothers explained how family and friends in many cases had proffered shelter at first, but later been obliged to give priority to close family members as the scale of the crisis grew”. Movement to rural areas also leaves single women vulnerable to sexual abuse, violence and harassment. Economic

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<sup>7</sup> Schlein, L. 2009, ‘Groups say sexual abuse in Zimbabwe rampant’, *Voice of America (VOA)*, 13 November – Attachment 7

<sup>8</sup> US Department of State 2009, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008 – Zimbabwe*, 25 February, Section 5 – Attachment 1

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House 2009, ‘Freedom in the World Country Report: Zimbabwe’, 16 July – Attachment 3

<sup>10</sup> US Department of State 2009, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008 – Zimbabwe*, 25 February, Section 5 – Attachment 1

<sup>11</sup> Social Institutions and Gender Index (undated), ‘Gender equality and social institutions in Zimbabwe’ – Attachment 2

<sup>12</sup> ‘Zimbabwe slum demolitions resume’ 2005, *BBC News*, 26 July <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4715635.stm> - Accessed 8 February 2010 - Attachment 8

<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group 2005, ‘Zimbabwe’s Operation Murambatsvina: The Tipping Point?’, Africa Report N°97, International Crisis Group website, 17 August <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3618> – Accessed 8 February 2010 – Attachment 9

destitution due to loss of livelihood and no land on which to create a livelihood also leaves single women vulnerable to prostitution.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, a news article dated 13 June 2009 reports the recruitment of “vulnerable people like orphans, single parents or single women between the ages of 20 and 35” in Harare into drug trafficking by a Nigerian drugs syndicate;<sup>15</sup> while an undated article indicates that single mothers in Zimbabwe are often forced “to take another man for support”.<sup>16</sup> A very dated Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada response from 1994 addresses how Zimbabwean society views single pregnant women or women with children born out of wedlock; however this response provides little information, only citing one source from 1984 which claims that “there are many women supporting children born out of wedlock. They are not severely stigmatized but are not fully accepted”.<sup>17</sup>

## Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

#### **Government Information & Reports**

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/>

#### **Non-Government Organisations**

Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

International Crisis Group <http://www.crisisgroup.org/>

Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org/>

Freedom House <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

Concern Worldwide <http://www.concern.net/>

#### **United Nations**

UNHCR Refworld <http://www.refworld.org/>

#### **International News & Politics**

Reuters <http://www.reuters.com/>

BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

#### **Region Specific Links**

AllAfrica Global Media <http://allafrica.com/>

#### **Search Engines**

Google <http://www.google.com.au/>

### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Operation Murambatsvina: single mothers and female-headed households especially vulnerable’ 2005, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website, December [http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/\(httpEnvelopes\)/8C38E76DE6184D9EC125716300531049?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/(httpEnvelopes)/8C38E76DE6184D9EC125716300531049?OpenDocument) – Accessed 5 February 2010 – Attachment 10

<sup>15</sup> Mandizvidza, S. 2009, Zimbabwe: Nigerian Drugs Syndicate Preys On Harare Women’, *AllAfrica Global Media*, source: The Standard, 13 June <http://allafrica.com/stories/200906150730.html> – Accessed 5 February 2010 – Attachment 11

<sup>16</sup> ‘A voice for women in Zimbabwe’ (undated), Concern Worldwide website <http://www.concern.net/where-we-work/africa/zimbabwe/voice-or-women-zimbabwe> - Accessed 4 February 2010 – Attachment 12

<sup>17</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1994, ZWE17108.E - Zimbabwe: Information on how society views single pregnant women or women with children born out of wedlock, UNHCR Refworld website, 1 April <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic.4565c22544.4565c25f545.3ae6ad1917.0.html> – Accessed 5 February 2010 – Attachment 13

ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)  
MRT-RRT Library Catalogue

### List of Attachments

1. US Department of State 2009, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008 – Zimbabwe*, 25 February.
2. Social Institutions and Gender Index (undated), 'Gender equality and social institutions in Zimbabwe'. (CISNET Zimbabwe CX231255)
3. Freedom House 2009, 'Freedom in the World Country Report: Zimbabwe', 16 July. (CISNET Zimbabwe CX230124)
4. UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2009, 'Annual Report on Human Rights 2008', 26 March. (CISNET Zimbabwe CX223998)
5. UK Home Office 2009, 'Country of Origin Information Report – Zimbabwe', 20 July.
6. 'Politically Motivated Violence against Zimbabwean Women' 2009, *The Zimbabwean*, 7 May. (CISNET Zimbabwe CX225889)
7. Schlein, L. 2009, 'Groups say sexual abuse in Zimbabwe rampant', *Voice of America (VOA)*, 13 November. (CISNET Zimbabwe CX236401)
8. 'Zimbabwe slum demolitions resume' 2005, *BBC News*, 26 July  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4715635.stm> - Accessed 8 February 2010.
9. International Crisis Group 2005, 'Zimbabwe's Operation Murambatsvina: The Tipping Point?', Africa Report N°97, International Crisis Group website, 17 August  
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3618> – Accessed 8 February 2010.
10. 'Operation Murambatsvina: single mothers and female-headed households especially vulnerable' 2005, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website, December  
[http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/\(httpEnvelopes\)/8C38E76DE6184D9EC125716300531049?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/(httpEnvelopes)/8C38E76DE6184D9EC125716300531049?OpenDocument) – Accessed 5 February 2010.
11. Mandizvidza, S. 2009, Zimbabwe: Nigerian Drugs Syndicate Preys On Harare Women', *AllAfrica Global Media*, source: The Standard, 13 June  
<http://allafrica.com/stories/200906150730.html> – Accessed 5 February 2010.
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<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c22544,4565c25f545,3ae6ad1917,0.html> – Accessed 5 February 2010.