



**Zimbabwe International Book Fair.** *Women and Activism: ZIBF Women Writers Conference, Harare, 29-30 July 1999.* Harare: Zimbabwe International Book Fair Trust, 2000. 160 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7974-2126-4.

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## “A Girl’s Voice Doesn’t Break: It Gets Firmer”\*

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The Zimbabwe Women Writers group has had very successful outcomes, in particular by promoting women writers and encouraging women to write in the first place. One of my Zimbabwean friends once told me that she would love to write about her experiences as a guerilla fighter in the liberation struggle but she was simply too tired at the end of the day to put pen to paper. Another woman had written her story but when her husband found it, he burnt it. A Zimbabwean publisher also pointed out that one reason why women’s literary voice is seldom heard is because “men finish a novel and submit it immediately, thinking it’s the greatest novel in the world. Women are more modest.”[1] So imagine the opportunity at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair for African women writers to come together and discuss their concerns about publishing, the obstacles they must face on a daily basis, and their success stories. In the book, Ama Ata Aidoo points out that Africa has produced a huge “family” of writers, but what is crucial is for African women’s voices to be heard. This volume speaks louder than words for their voices and success in a very challenging environment.

If we remember Spivak’s subaltern who hanged herself to be heard, but even then was misinterpreted, we must also remember the importance of documenting the lives of women, not just their activities (although important) but also their storytelling, their narration of the world and their lives and ideas in it. Unfortunately, like

many things that come out of Africa, politics and history tarnish the sheen and women cannot escape their positions. If they speak, they speak on behalf of all women (and mothers), unlike men who may speak for themselves. Women have a duty to speak out and to make sure that other women are “free to speak” as Sindiwe Mogona’s chapter explores. This book offers chapters from twenty-five members of the large African writer’s family—but just the female members. One chapter reports on the situation of African women writers in South Africa and acknowledges the lack of data available. It shows what women write about and why it is important to organise women writers groups that transcend language and political divides. The main argument throughout the volume, however, is that unless the material conditions for women change, writing will always be difficult.

>From Swaziland, Sarah Mkhonza explores the post-colonial path through discovering your being and writing your life. She writes about domestic workers telling the tale of a maid that falls in love with her employer’s son; she uses this as a literary tool to critique the Immorality Act and explore racial issues. “The woman, the writer, is a survivor who will always live to tell her society what it should know about her ... long live the African writer, the woman” (p.56).

>From Zambia, Norah Mumba looks at the impact of the social, political and economical environment of the writer, and from Mozambique there is an explana-

tion as to why there are only a few women writers: “the elites—political, economic or social—are not interested in culture. They prefer to have four houses, five cars and three lovers rather than buy books” (p. 73). The impact of globalisation on this cultural problem can be seen in schools where students read only foreign authors and not African writers. Tsitsi Dangarembga, famous for her novel *Nervous Conditions*, discusses the impact of language on development. There are chapters from nations all over Africa. In one chapter, Odaga points out that women in traditional African societies were the custodians of oral literature (p. 111) but for all of the reasons affected by colonisation, decolonisation, postcolonialism and globalisation “women are not able to disseminate and promote oral literature .... African women now need to write and record both oral narratives and creative modern literature” (p. 112).

The problems facing women writers are not exclusively African and there are comparative chapters from Scandinavia, Sweden and New Zealand. Finally, in the true sense of a global village, Vera Chirwa, who spent

twelve years in Zomba Central Prison in Malawi as a prisoner of conscience under the Banda regime, writes in chapter 24 that women’s power makes a difference. She advises those aspiring writers out there: “do not be discouraged, just forge ahead” (p. 158). This is an excellent volume of thoughts, ideas, and information about women writers in Africa. It highlights their concerns, their voices and the ability of women to organise and get active in the face of external pressures. This book should be read in all university literature courses.

#### Notes

\* Quote from Ama Ata Aidoo, p. 9.

[1]. Irene Staunton, quoted in “SADC Women Writers Coming into their Own,” <aiacan@web.net> Internet News, 1986, (960806). Flora Veit-Wild’s survey of Zimbabwean writers reveals, for example, that by 1987 only 31 women had been published as compared to 179 men by the same time; see Flora Viet-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers and Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: Baobab, 1993), p. 355.

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