



ZIMBABWE ELECTION
SUPPORT NETWORK

POLICY BRIEF:

CHALLENGES IN ATTAINING GENDER
BALANCE IN ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

February, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Women face challenges in political parties, council and parliamentary elections. The legal framework and legislation governing elections and the process of getting elected into council and parliament in Zimbabwe is described, based on the views of women from political parties. The legal, political and social obstacles encountered by women in their quest for election in councils, parliament and senate are described. The paper suggests ways of increasing women's participation in local government, parliament and senate.

BACKGROUND

The constitution of Zimbabwe, in articles 17 and 18, the state has a duty to ensure full gender balance in Zimbabwean society, the full participation of women in all spheres of society and in all institutions and agencies of government including Commissions and other elective and appointed governmental bodies established by or under the constitution or any Act of Parliament. Furthermore, Section 120 enunciates the 50/50 system for gender representation in the Senate. Section 124 allows proportional representation of six women in each of the ten provinces on the basis of votes garnered by each party. The other 210 seats are by secret ballot and are not guided by any rules relating to gender.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Women mentioned fear of violence and victimisation particularly during elections, as an impediment to their participation as candidates in the electoral process.

Women also cited their lack of education relative to the men who contested against them in elections. This eroded women's confidence from the beginning and was evident even during the research as some were reluctant to participate in discussion due to self-consciousness and fear of retribution from their parties.

Women felt intimidated by their male counterparts. For example, married women said even in church elections, they were answerable to their spouses and feigned illness rather than accept leadership posts.

Many women faced financial problems in their bid to launch political campaigns. Entrenched traditional practices and selective education in families promote male children and their advancement in comparison to females, resulting in the skewed proportion of women in government and political party structures.

Women who participated in politics were demonised as loose, coarse and lacking in the refinement expected of respectable women.

Women who participated in politics and elections are constantly subjected to sexual harassment.

Some women were conservative and preferred to elect males rather than support women politicians and candidates.

Women multi task as wives, mothers, employees and have primary responsibility for home management so cannot afford lengthy absences from home while in pursuit of political office.

Women who were successful in elections on the basis of affirmative action or quotas were labelled “bacossi” (referring to free or cheap commodities availed during the economic crisis) or zvipopi (referring to puppies with more bark than bite!)

Women suggested that some women are paid by contesting males to denigrate and undermine female candidates by spreading malicious rumours and gossip about them. These are the weapons of people who are disempowered in mainstream society.

Women suggested that funds disbursed to parties that have garnered at least 5% of the vote should be distributed transparently amongst candidates so that women candidates are not short-changed. Some party leaders did not inform candidates how much money had been disbursed by government to political parties.

Women may fail to register as candidates of parties and voters because many women are poor and are lodgers in other people's houses so cannot produce documents proving their residence. Landlords are reluctant to give lodgers their documentation for fear of political retribution and victimisation e.g. having their houses stoned or burned down.

In some instances, women voluntarily submitted to sexual exploitation in order to gain political mileage, thereby undermining their own integrity. They subsequently lost integrity and compromised themselves in the eyes of the electorate.

The media either ignored or portrayed many political women in a negative manner. Some reporters demanded sexual and monetary bribes for coverage of women who ran for political office.

Some contesting women are self-effacing and therefore are perceived a slacking confidence and unelectable.

Women candidates frequently lacked money to pay for posters, cars to transport campaign teams, food to feed people at meetings and large quantities of regalia such as T-shirts, wrappers, head gear and other accoutrements that are considered necessary as give-aways to voters.

Women had inadequate access to the electorate at some places such as beer-halls and nightclubs, shebeens and other places that are culturally viewed as male spaces and therefore unsuitable for self-respecting women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women should be encouraged to vote for women and men who are effective at representing the electorate and improving service delivery.

The political parties should publicly indicate how much money has been disbursed to them by government and how much is allocated to each candidate

Women should be encouraged to develop their income-generating capacities to support their political careers.

Women and their political parties should be educated about the opportunities presented by the proportional seats e.g. securing seats for the most capable women members of their parties. At the same time, the strongest women should be supported to run for the open seats (FPTP) to improve the chances of women's election in both open and reserved seats.

Women in political parties should educate themselves and understand the consequences, advantages and disadvantages of contesting in the FPTP and proportional representation seats. They should engage their parties about these choices and deploy their energies strategically in elections so that they maximise their chances of success.

The women in politics need to organise and improve their visibility and audibility to the electorate by articulating issues that resonate with women, the poor and marginalised sections of the populace. That will render it difficult for their political parties and the electorate to ignore them. Articulating a women's agenda around which the majority of women can be rallied is a good starting point. Social media, market places and other spaces dominated by both men and women could be deployed to this end. Once they have built a strong women's constituency, they improve their visibility and acceptability to voters, particularly women.

State and non-state actors need to conduct robust civic education to sensitise the populace about the importance of effective representation and its impact on service delivery, problem solving and the well-being of the electorate. Rural constituencies and voters in particular, need fair and unbiased civic education to expand their participation in political and electoral processes that impact their individual and collective development.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Government should join non-governmental organisations in educating the electorate to elect people on merit to improve service delivery and representation of the electorate.

Government should provide and guarantee a peaceful and secure electoral environment and deal with electoral violence fairly and expeditiously. Protection should also be provided for women to even out the electoral playing field which is unevenly tilted in favour of men.

The government, in collaboration with NGO's, needs to undertake extensive mobilisation of the populace around the constitution, explaining its provisions and its relationship to existing laws and policies in Zimbabwe.

The government, together with non-governmental organisations, must channel resources towards public education on the importance of active participation by women in politics and attaining gender equality in Zimbabwe. Women in politics and civil society must actively participate in electoral education to promote women's electoral participation and achieve gender equality.

The gender balance policy in the House of Assembly in Sections 120 and 124 is inadequate for attaining the 50/50 gender balance as required the constitution, SADC Gender Protocol, the AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women and the Beijing Action Plan. It must be revisited and more inclusive measures to attain gender equality in the House of Assembly. Such measures could include increasing the reserved seats for women in the National Assembly so that there is better gender balance between the first-past-the-post seats and the proportional representation seats.

The press should be enjoined, through consumer and watchdog organisations such as the Voluntary Media Council and other bodies, to provide balanced reporting of all political parties and candidates without demanding bribes or other benefits.

STRATEGIES FOR MOVING FORWARD WOMEN'S ELECTORAL AGENDA

Women in political parties and pressure groups must strategise around electing and appointing women in decision-making positions by sponsoring candidates for commissions, parliament, councils, and other strategic public positions and provide them support in the form of information about political, judicial, economic and social processes. That support will help such women to feel accountable to other women, perform well in their positions and push forward the women's agenda.

Since measures and legislation to attain gender balance in the House of Assembly fall short of achieving their intended goals, women's organisations and political parties must, through legal, financial and other means, mobilise the populace to test whether the constitution is being followed. This is part of the process of strengthening a culture of constitutionalism.

Political parties and pressure groups must undertake extensive public education and lobbying to educate the electorate on the need for fairness, in the electoral representation of all sectors of the populace and attain gender balance, inclusivity, and fairness in order to foster social, political and economic stability. Where there is exclusion, under-representation or marginalisation of gender, ethnic, racial and class segments, there is likely to be strife and political instability.

Women must seize the opportunities presented by International Women's Day by making women's issues visible and politicising them. In addition, women should lobby for a national Women's Day dedicated to tackling social, economic, political and other issues that are specific to Zimbabwean women. Such issues could include:

- a) Building a consensus on a five year agenda for women
- b) Collaboration with men to denounce and fight against identified negative practices such as various forms of violence against women that undermine women's participation in politics
- c) Mobilising and mentoring young women for participation in politics

- d) Lobbying for continuous and transparent voter registration
- e) Capacity building for those women already in parliament
- f) Strategising about the roles of women's organ in political parties
- g) Developing codes of conduct for men and women in their political parties and pressure groups.
- h) Political parties and pressure groups must develop leadership and mentoring programs for women as part of their commitment to building a more progressive gender and political culture in Zimbabwe.
- i) Political parties must denounce all forms of violence against women including violent, shaming and obscene language and behaviour, imposition of inequitable standards of behaviour, appearance and performance on women.
- j) Explore and institutionalise varied and flexible gender roles on men and women as a means of undermining gender stereotypes in political and voluntary organisations and the society at large.
- k) Use ICT's to disseminate information around current affairs, to speak out against the abuse of women, support other women and share ideas about improving and advancing women's lives.

CONCLUSION

The challenges relating to improvement of women's participation, performance and representation in electoral and other civic processes in Zimbabwe are multi-faceted. However, focusing on electoral issues is a good starting point for advancing women's concerns and attaining gender equality because elections at local and national levels are regular and public and they command the attention of all race, class and gender groups in Zimbabwe. Interventions around elections and electoral processes present opportunities for evaluation of successes and failures, learning lessons and improving the policies and processes involving men and women. In this way, a more equitable society can be constructed in Zimbabwe.

POLICY BRIEF



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