

*Review*

## Engendering politics and parliamentary representation in Zimbabwe

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**This paper discusses the trends and patterns regarding the participation of women and men in parliamentary politics in Zimbabwe from the first democratic elections in 1980 to the 2008 elections in the context of global and regional trends. The main objective of this paper is to review both quantitative and qualitative data concerning the progress made in the direction of promoting women's participation in politics against the background of Millennium Development Goals targets and other international targets to which Zimbabwe is a signatory. One of the targets of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium development goal is to increase the 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments'. The period of focus is between 1980 and 2013. The paper notes that the current levels of women's representation in parliament remain below the world average of 19%. The various causes of this are highlighted and discussed leading to recommendations in tackling the issue.**

**Key words:** Gender, equality, politics, Zimbabwe, democracy, parliament, participation.

### INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe is signatory to various regional and international protocols on gender equality particularly in the area of political representation. One of these key agreements is the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender and Development Declaration which stipulates that states must ensure at least 30% women in political decision-making by 2005, and 50% by 2015 (SARDC/WIDSA, 2008; ZESN, 2009). Zimbabwe is further guided by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a member of the United Nations. One of the targets of MDG 3 is to increase the 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments' (UNDP, 2010). Other commitments signed by the country include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA) (MWAGCD, 2004).

The levels of participation of women in politics and

decision making positions remains a major concern in Zimbabwe and all over the world. In spite of the fact that women constitute on average, 52% of national populations, they remain under-represented in most parliaments and political positions across the globe. This is not in tandem with the fact that they form the majority of voters and citizens of the world. Indeed, '... because of their incidence in the population, women make up at least half of the electorate in all countries. By their numbers, women have the capacity to decide on the political leadership. But women are not elected to political office and very few are put up as candidates. But why is this so?' (Nzomo, 1994:204).

It would be interesting to note that according to statistics from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2011) as late as of 30 June 2011, a total of nine countries had no women in their national parliaments at all. These countries included Palau, Micronesia, Nauru, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Oman and Belize. Yemen

had one female member out of three hundred and one members of parliament. Success in addressing the gender disparities in political representation will call for a continuous assessment of country, regional and world trends with a view to coming up with relevant strategies to address the issue. This paper examines Zimbabwe's progress in the broader context of the global picture.

The paper reviews progress in Zimbabwe concerning the participation of women in politics (focusing on the lower house of parliament) since 1980. Focus on the lower house of parliament instead of the upper house (senate) was done because the senate has not been a permanent feature of Zimbabwe's legislative system. It has been frequently adopted and abandoned since independence. Therefore focusing on the senate does not give adequate data to make sense of the trends over the years.

The current National Gender Policy for Zimbabwe among other issues aims to 'redress the numerical gender imbalances in decision making and politics by increasing the numerical representation of women to 52%' (MWAGCD, 2004:11). This paper makes a qualitative and quantitative analysis of trends over the years and suggests possible remedies to gaps in women's participation. Historical evidence shows that women in Zimbabwe have always had a keen interest in national politics since the liberation struggle which culminated in independence in 1980. The major liberation movements had thriving women's wings (ZWRCN, 2001). After the liberation struggle, major political parties continue to have women's wings, a clear sign that women are interested in being involved in the national politics of Zimbabwe. This paper interrogates progress made in that regard.

## **BUILDING A CASE FOR INCREASING THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS**

There are a number of fundamental reasons why the participation of women in politics must be fore grounded and pursued with greater energy than stakeholders have done in the past. The first reason is that '...genuine democracy cannot exist without the equal participation of men and women in politics... (IPU, 2005:1). Democracy in its true sense means that a political system should have a fair and reflective system of representation in politics and decision making for the various segments of its population. This value has been aggressively applied in terms of race and regional pictures but it has not received the requisite attention when it comes to parity between men and women in politics and decision-making. Excluding women from positions in politics and power weakens the development of democratic principles.

Women's needs, desires and expectations are not identical to those of men. 'The majority of governing institutions are dominated by men who further their own interests. Male-dominated political institutions of government do not promote women or women's issues'

(Shvedova, 2002:11). Thus, the exclusion of women in politics is necessarily an exclusion of their needs and aspirations. Gender equality must be given the same weighting as racial equality if we are to achieve true inclusive and responsive democracy. The concept of democracy recognises that men and women decide upon political processes and national legislation jointly and women are best placed to articulate their own needs and concerns (SARDC and WIDSA, 2008). It can no longer be assumed that men can speak on behalf of women and address their interests.

Indeed, it is imperative that any society that claims to be just, democratic, representative and progressive, must of necessity ensure women's significant presence and participation in the politics and public policy decision making positions. Furthermore, 'it is now generally accepted that women constitute a key national resource, whose ideas, creative solutions and concern for cohesiveness of the social fabric can help change the quality of life and society at large' (Nzomo, 1994:203). If Nzomo's proposition that women are generally more concerned about cohesiveness of the social fabric and the quality of life of society at large holds true, there is reason to anticipate a better, more peaceful, progressive and balanced world as a result of women's increased involvement in politics and public leadership positions. Further to this point, some researchers have noted that 'women MPs were less "defensive and embattled" and that women have humanised and civilised politics' (Mavin et al., 2010:558). Indeed, it can thus be argued that the lack of women's representation in politics impoverishes government democratic processes and political debate (Mavin et al., 2010:550). Commenting on Indian municipal political representation, Honour et al. (1999:3) point out that 'women had a more caring and nurturant (nurturing) style of leadership' which is further defined as 'interactive' when compared to men who operate with a 'transactional', command-and-control approach. It however remains to be seen if the involvement of women changes the culture and texture of politics. This particular element is subject for further research. It would however appear there is a case for such an argument. This view is particularly strengthened by Shvedova (2002:3) who argues that:

*Differences between men and women also appear with respect to the content and priorities of decision-making, which are determined by the interests, backgrounds and working patterns of both sexes. Women tend to give priority to societal concerns, such as social security, national health care and children's issues.*

Thus the involvement of women in more political positions would strengthen certain key development priorities which men do not rank highly in the development ladder. There is certainly an increasing realisation that the inclusion of women in politics cannot only be viewed as a

matter of social justice but also a social good because 'history has proven that the inclusion of women as key stakeholders in transitional processes results in long-term solutions that benefit the society as a whole' (Kwinjeh, 2010:23). The participation of women in politics is particularly important as it allows women to become involved in determining policy issues that affect them.

Research evidence for the 1997 United Kingdom elections shows that political parties that show a clear concern for women's issues are likely to receive more support from undecided female voters in particular. Hayes and McAllister (2001) argue that the Labour Party managed to win the elections and the Liberal Democrats managed to perform relatively well by targeting women's issues of concern such as breast cancer. For the Labour Party, 'In addition, interviews were given to women's magazines and efforts were made to modify political language and style ... so that a more feminised image of the party could be presented to voters' (Hayes and McAllister, 2001:973). Liberal democrats sought to create a more women friendly image by adopting a less confrontational and non-combative style of campaigning. This new focus on female voters and their concerns together with a deliberate push for more female candidates as party representatives managed to double the number of elected female MPs from 60 in the previous election to 120 in 1997. This demonstrates that women take a keener interest in politics when it addresses their issues. More importantly, it demonstrates that women do have issues that they would like to be dealt with by responsive representatives. Hayes and McAllister go on to argue that the Conservative Party faltered in that particular election because it sent conflicting signals on women's issues to potential female voters.

Rwanda leads the world in terms of women's political representation. As of 2010, Rwanda had 56% of its parliamentarians as women (UNSTATS, 2011). WIPSU (2010:1) claims that Rwanda's experience of gender equality in politics, where (more than) 50% of parliamentarians are women, showed that changes in women's lives can be noted, as a result of having women at the top level making decisions that affect the general women in communities. However it must be noted that no specific changes in women's lives have been empirically presented and discussed to date as a result of these political changes. Rwanda would provide a crucial starting point to study and understand possible benefits for women and society that come with such a shift in women's representation in parliament.

## **TRENDS IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN ZIMBABWE IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**

The trend in terms of women's representation over the past decade has been one of gradual but steady

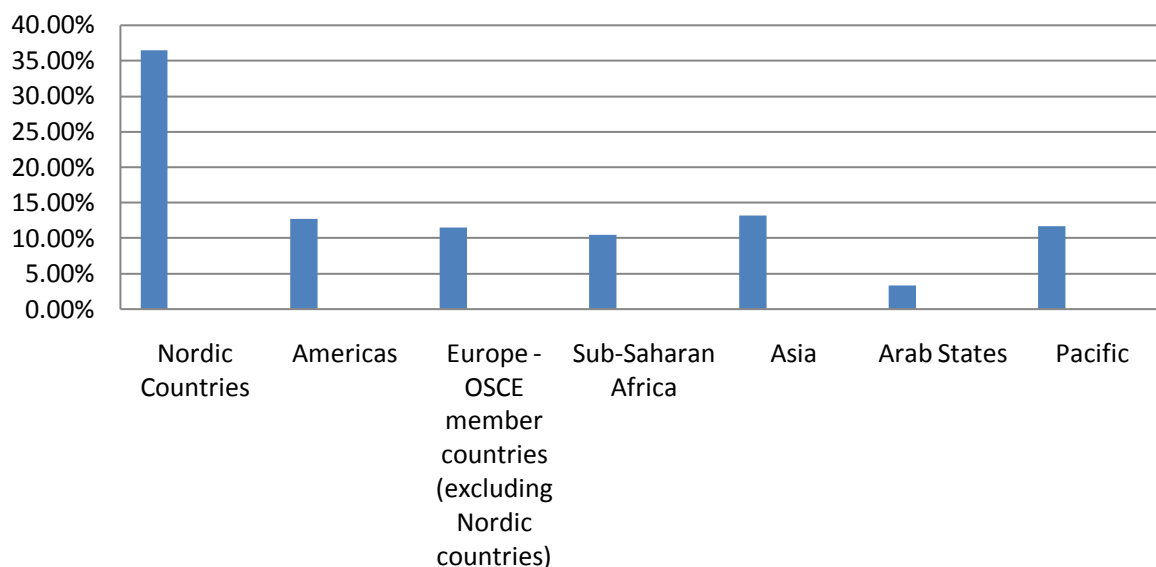
progress (IPU, 2005:2). A survey of the world trends shows that there has been a definite increase in the number of women legislators generally in the World between the years 1995 and 2005 when focusing on the lower houses of parliament. According to statistics from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2006), there was just less than 12% of women in parliament. The figure had steadily increased to approximately 16% by 2005. By February 2013 the figure had gone up to 20.8%. Although there is some progress being recorded it is clear that the progress is not occurring at the desired rate. There are many reasons why progress remains minimal in this respect. Some of them will be discussed later in this paper. Figures 1 and 2 shows the comparative progress of different regions of the world in increasing the number of women in parliament.

Figures 1 and 2 shows that for the past decade women's involvement has slowly but steadily increased globally when compared with 1997 figures. This is reflective of the trend in most countries. However, the trend in Zimbabwe is far from reflective in terms of the general steadiness of global increases of women's representation in world parliaments. In the last decade increases in women's representation have been swallowed up by losses in the years that followed. This paper will attempt to explain the losses encountered in the said period. Figures 3 illustrate the rugged nature of the trends in women's representation in Zimbabwe's lower house of parliament. Comparisons can be made with the Canadian trends as shown in Figures 4 that follows for the same period which is more representative of world trends.

In comparison with the rest of the world, the SADC region has fared well. In 2005 the average representation of women in parliaments in the region (SADC) stood at 20%, but in line with a decision by the 2005 SADC summit, member states agreed to increase the target for women representation in politics and decision making from 30% by 2005 to 50% by 2015 to align with the African Union target. (SARDC and WIDSA, 2008:61). It is evident from this analysis that SADC has progressed ahead of the average trends in the rest of the world which by 2005 was at 16%. Although this is commendable, there is still a lot to be done to reach the 50% stipulated by the African Union.

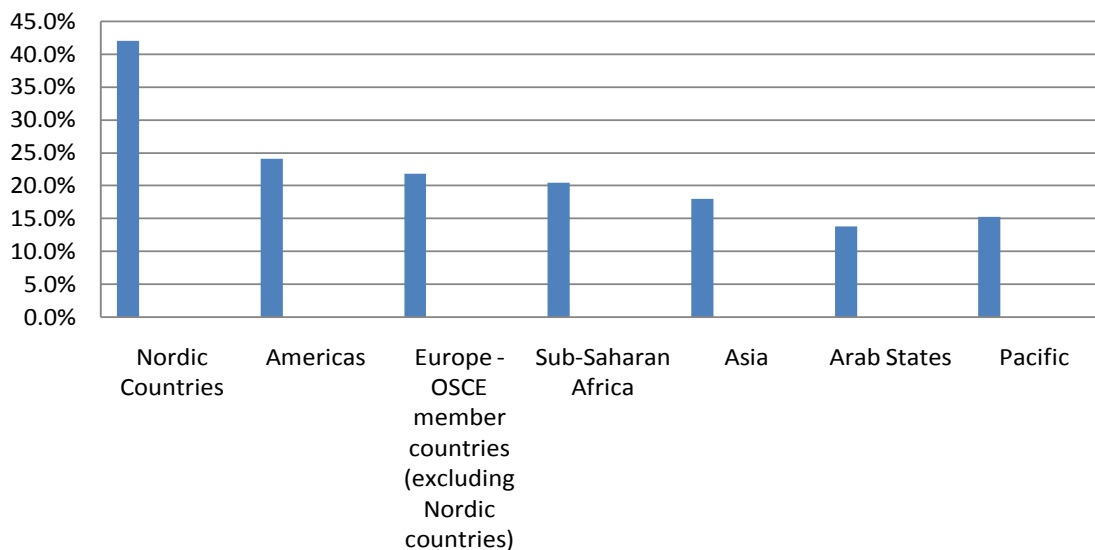
It is important to note that the countries that have generally performed well in increasing the representation of women in parliament especially in developing countries are those that have gone through political turmoil. The ending of that political turmoil and the redrafting of new constitutions have usually given an excellent opportunity to incorporate issues of gender equality into the constitution and thus allowing women greater space than they would have previously enjoyed. It is anticipated at the time of writing this paper that the process of re-writing the constitution in Zimbabwe would lead to such successes. IPU (2005:4) notes that of all the countries that have

**Chart Showing Women's Percentage Representation in Parliament by World Regions as at January 1997**



**Figure 1.** Women’s percentage representation in parliament by world regions as at January 1997. Source: Statistics were obtained from IPU (2013), Women in Parliament: World and Regional Averages, available online at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> on 01 March, 2013.

**Chart Showing Women's Percentage Representation in Parliament by World Regions as at February 2013**

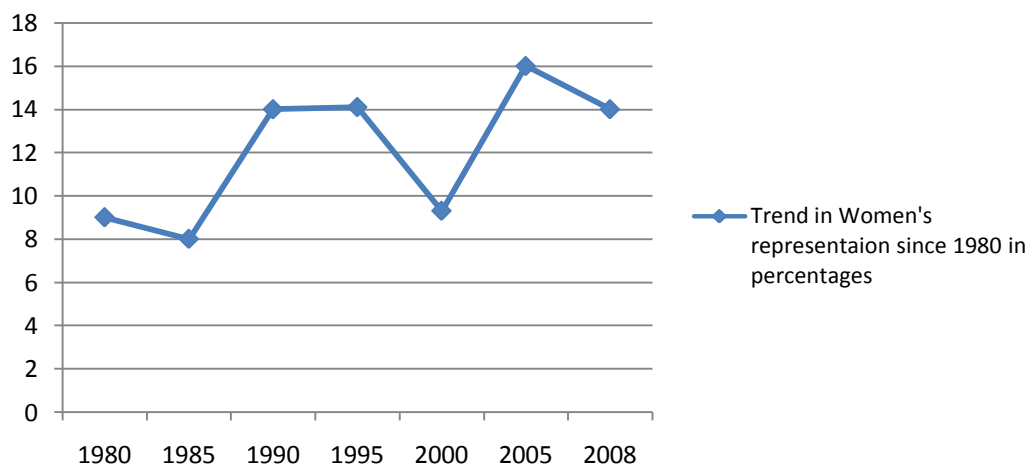


**Figure 2.** Women’s percentage representation in parliament by world regions as at February 2013. Source: Statistics were obtained from IPU (2013), Women in Parliament: World and Regional Averages, available online at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> on 01 March, 2013.

made dramatic improvements in women’s representation in the past decade or so ‘...one quarter of the countries are so called "post conflict" countries (Burundi, Iraq,

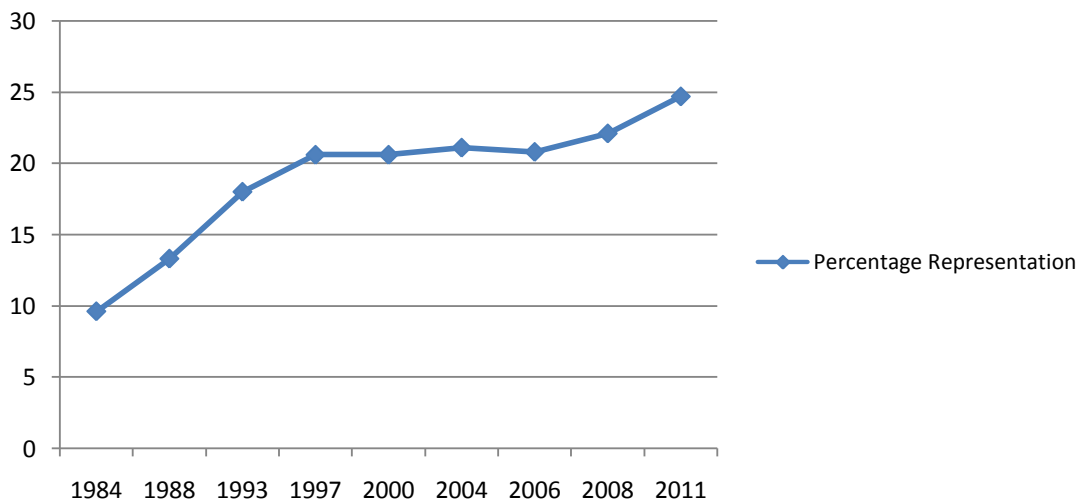
Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa).’ These countries took the opportunity at the turn of their political epochs to accommodate gender sensitive reforms. For

**Chart Showing Trends in Women's Participation in Parliament in Zimbabwe from 1980 - 2008**



**Figures 3.** Women's participate in parliament in Zimbabwe from 1980 – 2008.  
Sources: 1. Statistics for the period 1980-2005: Gaidzanwa, 2004; Parliament of Zimbabwe (n.d.); 2. Statistics for the period 2005-2008: UNDP/GoZ, 2010; Millennium Development Goals Status Report Zimbabwe, Accessed from <http://www.undp.org> on 20 June, 2011.

**Chart Showing the Percentage Representation of Women in the Canadian Parliament**



**Figures 4.** Percentage representation of women in the Canadian parliament.  
Source: Figures for this graph were obtained from: Cool (2011). Background Paper: Women in Parliament, Library of Parliament, Available (Online) from [www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca)

example it is noted that before its civil war in the early 1990s and the genocide in 1994, in Rwanda the percentage population of women never exceeded 18% of seats in the country's House of Assembly (Powley, 2005:154). However, there is danger that as Zimbabwe drafts a new constitution to bring to an end the Government of

National Unity (GNU) this opportunity may yet again be missed because the composition of the committees in the constitution making body (COPAC) is biased in favour of males. Kwinjeh (2010:29) has aptly summarised the constitution making process in terms of its bias towards males:

*The co-chairpersons of the Constitution Parliamentary Committee (COPAC) are all male representatives of the three parties, Paul Mangwana (ZANU-PF), Douglas Mwonozora (MDC-T) and Edward Mkhosi (MDC). Even the chairpersons of the thematic committees and their deputies are predominantly male; of the seven chairs from ZANU-PF, only one is a woman, the MDC-T seconded three women out of seven chairpersons, while the MDC's two chairpersons are men.*

It is evident from the foregoing evidence in that between the elections in 1995 and 2008 Zimbabwe has remained somewhat stagnant in terms of increasing women's representation. Although some gains were made in between these two periods, they were eventually lost, taking the country back to the 1995 levels of women's representation in parliament. This is against the backdrop of general increases in international trends typified by the Canadian example. It should however be noted that the increase in political representation has not translated into an increase in the actual exercise of power in the executive. Most women who make it into parliament and are selected for ministerial positions usually hold less powerful positions associated with femininity. Most of the women become appointed as ministers usually occupy the port-folio 'social affairs', which is a stereotype in itself (Nzomo, 1994:204). The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2005) findings concur with Nzomo's observation that women are generally given the 'softer' ministerial portfolios associated with being female. The findings of the IPU in 2005 were that the positions held by women in governments across the globe were distributed approximately as follows:

- Of the 858 ministerial posts, 83 women (9.7%) held portfolios related to family, children, youth, disabled, and elderly;
- 69 women (8.0%) held ministerial portfolios related to social affairs;
- 63 women (7.3%) held ministerial portfolios related to women's affairs;
- 63 women (7.3%) held ministerial portfolios related to education;
- 60 women (7%) held ministerial portfolios related to the environment and energy.
- Women were least represented in portfolios related to parliamentary affairs, population and information.
- Only 12 women held defence portfolios, 20 on finance and the budget and 25 on foreign affairs (IPU, 2005:6).

It is evident from the foregoing analysis that women do not only suffer from numerical under representation but also from sectoral segregation in terms of equal opportunities to handle particular types of ministries. The discussion that follows is an attempt to account for the

trends that can be observed in women's representation in Zimbabwean politics. This may be applicable to other countries too.

## ACCOUNTING FOR THE TRENDS IN ZIMBABWE

It may be noted from the foregoing evidence that Zimbabwe remains as of 2013 far from fulfilling the international protocols to which it is a signatory as the percentage numbers of women in political representation remain very low compared to global performances. As of June 2011, Zimbabwe was ranked at position 76 out of 135 positions in terms of achievements in allowing women political space for representation in parliament. Zimbabwe had a proportion of 15% women in parliament while the highest ranked country Rwanda had a proportion of 56.30% women in parliament, followed by Andorra with 53.30, and Sweden with 45%. This is against the world average of 19%. Zimbabwe's performance is therefore below average and there is need to urgently address the issue to move with international trends.

There are a variety of potential explanations for the stagnation that is evident in the area of women's empowerment through parliamentary representation in Zimbabwe. The first challenge that women face is that Zimbabwe, like many other states, remains a highly patriarchal society in all spheres of life including politics, religion and social life. This socio-economic structure acts as a sieving mechanism that prevents women from competing for and winning political positions. The Zimbabwe MDGs Status Report echoes these issues by highlighting that Zimbabwe society is highly patriarchal. This is especially expressed in the allocation of gender roles, 'if women are to have time to explore opportunities in politics and other sectors that are traditionally considered 'male', they must be relieved of some of the many roles they play in Zimbabwean society' (Zimbabwe MDGs Status Report, 2010:19).

The allocation of roles prevents women from participating in politics as they usually take on the role of caring for children at home. This makes it impossible to have time to take on demanding roles such as being a member of parliament. Most women cannot even think of taking on such a role in view of their work in the home. A survey carried out by Dube and Ncube (2010, unpublished) in Lupane in Matebeleland North, Zimbabwe, showed that most women were interested in participating in politics but the amount of domestic chores they had simply made this impossible. Indeed in most countries women are culturally expected to concentrate on domestic chores and leave public affairs to the men. '*It is very difficult for a woman to make up her mind to enter politics. Once she makes up her own mind, then she has to prepare her husband and her children and her family*' (Sushma Swaraj, MP India, in Shvedova, 2002:4). It is imperative

for all policies to recognise women's multiple roles with respect to production and reproduction as they impact on their capacity to participate effectively in national development (MWAGCD, 2004).

Another important barrier to women's participation in politics identified by most researchers is the socio-cultural system of beliefs and myths in many societies, Zimbabwe included. These beliefs are thoroughly engrained into both boys and girls in their socialisation process so that when they become adults they fit into traditional gender roles (Nzomo, 1994:204-205). These continue to be a challenge in Zimbabwe. There is evidence to suggest that the socio-cultural system still remains a major stumbling block to women's progress in Zimbabwe. For example, in 2009, Mabvuku Member of Parliament, Timothy Mubhawu, contributing to debate on the Domestic Violence Bill, ignited a serious stand off with women's groups in Zimbabwe after claiming in a Parliamentary Session that;

*... it is against God's principles for men and women to be equal... I stand here representing God Almighty. Women are not equal to men. It is a dangerous Bill and let it be known in Zimbabwe that the right, privilege and status of men is gone. I stand here alone and say this bill should not be passed in this House. It is a diabolic Bill. Our powers are being usurped in daylight in this House" (Gonda V., 2009:1)*

Mubhawu's argument demonstrated the simple fact that there are still men in Zimbabwe who do not believe in the cultural legitimacy, let alone the ability of women to take on political leadership positions. Mubhawu's argument shows an awareness that preventing women from entering into politics preserves the privileged status of men. In other terms, the entry of women into political positions of representation cannot happen without the proportion retreat of men from those positions. Cognisant of this reality, men like Mubhawu will endeavour to keep their positions entrenched by preventing structural changes that will increase the proportion of women in politics. Gaidzanwa (2004:19) reports that in the 2000 election in Zimbabwe '...all women candidates across party lines mentioned that in the 2000 parliamentary elections they were subjected to verbal abuse and harassment by male colleagues and the public for their political aspirations.' This observation indicates the fact that women's participation in politics remains questioned and unaccepted by a significant section of the voting population in Zimbabwe, and thus affecting the chances of women being elected in positions of political responsibility.

In line with the belief that politics is a men's responsibility, the political systems also tend to be adjusted in a masculine way leading to the sidelining of women in the process. The common perception about politics in Zimbabwe is expressed in the Zimbabwean proverb 'Politics is

a dirty game'. This expression is a legitimisation aggressive, masculine and anti-women strategies that often result in violent clashes between supporters of political parties. This philosophy of politics has been widely applied in practice in Zimbabwe in the past decade between major contending parties, ZANU PF and MDC-T. It would appear that the reversal of women's gains in politics over the past decade can be attributable to the direct increase in political violence which discourages women from participating in politics as they usually end up as victims of rape and other abuses.

Other factors that have been globally reported as a cause for the limited representation of women in politics include limited access or lack of access to adequate quality and quantity of formal education (Nzomo, 1994). Education is important as it produces informed and confident citizens who can compete at any level of social interaction. Zimbabwe has done fairly well in this area especially in primary school education. The low representation of women at high school and tertiary education levels also affects their ability to access and hold decision-making positions in politics (UNDP and GoZ, 2010; Millennium Development Goals Status Report for Zimbabwe, 2010).

Related to low levels of education are income levels of women in Zimbabwe. Many women generally tend to be poor due to a variety of socio-cultural factors. The women that may be wealthy usually have access to that wealth through their husbands. This means that they are either prevented from campaigning for political positions by poverty, or when they do have the money, they may be stopped by the husband.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that Zimbabwe still has a lot of work to do in terms of bringing to parity the political representation of women in parliament to that of men. Rwanda, South Africa and the Nordic countries have shown that this can be achieved if careful planning is done. The starting point is for policy makers and stakeholders to note and accept that 'Getting more women into politics and decision making is not something that can be left to chance, it must have strong political backing' (SARDC and WIDSA, 2008:66). The countries that have done well in this area have carefully planned and executed their plans to achieve such high levels of success as Rwanda has done at 56.30%, sitting on top of the world table as the best performer as of February 2013. Most of the top performing countries have adopted quota systems at party or national constitutional level. The SADC Plan of Action on Women in Politics and Decision Making makes it clear that all SADC countries should include unambiguous commitments to equalise gender in their constitutions (SARDC and WIDSA, 2008). In line with evidence from around the globe, it would appear prudent

to create and enforce a quota system in Zimbabwe at the national constitutional level that guarantees women a level of representation. Particular attention should also be paid to the electoral system as some electoral systems tend to disadvantage women than others.

It is important to note that from a survey of world parliaments that the steady enhancement of the number of women in parliament and politics was not a natural outcome of the liberalisation of the political playing field but instead, it has been the outcome of 'institutional and electoral engineering, such as the adoption of electoral quotas and reserved seats, political party commitment and will, sustained mobilization and the emphasis placed on achieving gender equality by the international community' (IPU, 2005:6). At the time of writing this article in 2013, there was no legislative quota for women in national political positions of representation although parties voluntarily adopted quotas for women.

While the introduction of quota systems to increase women's representation seems an attractive, progressive and helpful idea, there may be many challenges with this strategy. One of the key challenges about the quota system is that although it increases representation, '...of itself, the concept is not such that it can bear the burden of close scrutiny – there are too many caveats that have to be taken on board for it to work' (Rai, 2008:374). Equal representation does not translate to equal power exercise and control. If the socio-cultural beliefs and myths of a woman as a domestic person remain, there are chances that this may be replicated in parliamentary settings as the example by Timothy Mubhawa, the MP for Mabvuku, demonstrated. Therefore, while the quota system strategy may be implemented, there is need for urgent research to inform stakeholders about the actual impact the strategy might have in the actual exercise and control of power as the power dynamics go beyond mere numbers.

Other supportive strategies would need to be urgently employed in support of the quota system and these include incorporating gender equality in the constitution, introducing electoral reforms that accommodate more women, ensuring smooth and peaceful elections, setting aside funds for women candidates to campaign, capacity building current and potential women members of parliament to build their confidence and skills.

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