

## Gender, Politics and Development in Zimbabwe: Reflections since CEDAW

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### ABSTRACT

Although the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was instituted about three decades ago, the quest for equality of genders persists across the globe. The disparities prevail across various spheres of life and at different levels of the socio-economic and political strata. The irony is that such conditions prevail in a time where political consciousness and rhetoric are heightened. The explanation lies in structural impediments which continue to be snags on progress particularly in societies rooted in patriarchal cultures. In addition, character misrepresentations and sexualisation of female political figures persist. This paper presents an elaborate survey of the progress made in Zimbabwe since CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration. It draws from an extensive review of existing published research to summarize what has been studied and is currently known about the status of women in politics and the influence of gender on their experiences as participants within the realm of formal politics. The paper recommends increased emphasis on such policies as quota systems and affirmative action in favour of women's representation.

**Keywords:** CEDAW, Gender, Politics, Zimbabwe.

### INTRODUCTION

A common image in Zimbabwean politics -particularly in the dominant Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) - is the presence of regalia-clad women at political gatherings, functions and political public spaces. While the women are often in the company of male counterparts, they are often conspicuous due to their singing and dancing at such events. Their appearances at such events in droves gives the impression that they are very engaged in the politics of their parties and by extension, politics within Zimbabwe. Indeed, it is such public shows of presence which are either used as justification or 'proof' that women have been actively engaged in political activism since the struggle for independence. However, a glance at the numbers of women at elite representative level suggest that women's participation is not as ubiquitous as the dancing and chanting hordes suggest. Instead, they have a paltry representation ranging to not more than 20% of the upper and lower houses combined. This paucity has been well identified in documents from the Parliament of Zimbabwe whose breakdown is depicted in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Split by sex of parliamentarians in the Zimbabwean Unicameral Parliament (1990-2005)**

<b>Elections and Appointments</b>	<b>Seats</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>% of Women</b>
1990	150	133	17	11.3
1995	150	129	21	14
2000	150	136	14 <sup>1</sup>	9.3
2005	150	126	24	16

**Source: Parliament of Zimbabwe<sup>i</sup>**

The data in Figure 1 above reflects the proportions up until 2005. Since then, representation of women in Parliament and in Senate<sup>ii</sup> has generally hovered in the same range and this is reflected in current numbers. For instance, as at the time of accessing the distribution of parliamentarians from the Parliament of Zimbabwe website, 32 of the prescribed 270 members were female (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2017). This translates to 11.9% of the house. The senate which comprises of 80 seats is not well represented either with 15 females making part of the lower house, a proportion of 18.8%. Given that the 2014 Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimated the population of Zimbabwe at 13,447,286, comprising of 6,485,676 males and 6 961 610 females (ZimStat, 2016, p.1), the parliamentary representation is clearly a political travesty. The situation in Zimbabwe is inconsistent with the SADC Gender Protocol as well as at odds with some of its peers on the African continent. Rwanda for example had a 48.8% representation in its parliament during the year 2003 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2004).

There is an inherent risk in making broad strokes about gender and politics in Zimbabwe due to the diversity of the Zimbabwean populace and society. Much like many countries across the globe, there are many nuances to the ‘nation’ in Zimbabwe. Racial, cultural, ethnic, gendered and political groups are among a host of other identity formations which congeal with their own prejudices, stereotypes, codes, inhibitions and inclinations. As such, the representations, acceptance and engagement of some groups with the notion of gender and politics tend to vary. Politically active urban and rural women may share in the broad struggle against patriarchy but the level of detail in their struggle is presumably different. Presenting Zimbabwe as a country with a consistent experience of women in politics is too general an assertion. Differences are not only restricted to various parts of Zimbabwe but can be recognised between Zimbabwe and other countries particularly in the African region. This dynamism is to be borne in mind as we discuss the issues in this paper are discussed.

On the African continent, women representation has increased from the period prior to Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW is a critical point in the quest for equality and equity within the political field because it advanced the 30% affirmative action of women in political and decision-making positions by the year 2005. Governments adopted the principles in rhetoric but have unfortunately been mostly found wanting in implementation. This has been the case despite wider adoption of quota provisions, permissive electoral systems in the form of Parliamentary Representation and an egalitarian political culture, being factors, which have coalesced as factors contributing to broad shifts on the continent. Rwanda leads the way in women’s representation on the African continent and matches most developed countries. Whether the shifts in many African constituencies is the outcome of an increasingly democratized environment or not is yet subject to contestation (see: Yoon, 2001; Walsh, 2006). After all, some countries such as Swaziland and Saharawi Arab People’s Republic still maintain rigid, traditionally-steeped societal values which do not largely promote the occupation of high public office by women. In addition, many countries have nascent democracies and therefore at a stage which implies that

such contexts would have had a negative impact on women's representation (Stockemer, 2011).

The struggle to representation has been a reality in Zimbabwe where marginal improvements have been made from the immediate post-independence dispensation where 11 out of 140 members in the house of assembly were women (Kazembe, 1986). Over the years, the involvement of women in party politics at lower/local levels was compromised by popular masculine notions of public service which deemed women incapable of engaging in rigorous politics, but adept at managing domestic affairs within the home. It is within this context that the involvement and participation of women in grassroots politics is worthy of academic scrutiny. How pervasive are women political actors at grassroots level? What are their experiences traversing what often is a violent political minefield? How do they assert their agency amongst fellow male political actors? In some respects, these questions are not new in politics and gender in Zimbabwe. Scholars have considered aspects of these issues in various contexts which include the liberation movement prior to independence (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000; Ranchod-Nilsson, 2006) and women in business leadership (Makombe and Geroy, 2008; Zikhali, 2010). These lenses which assume the gender question largely from a leadership/elitist perspective have illuminated dynamics at play for women seeking high office. Yet, many more women grapple with inclusion and participation at lower levels of the political and commercial hierarchy. It is these women who grasp the attention of the discussion.

Caution in making generalisations about gender matters in Zimbabwe ought to be exercised. Such caution has been foretold by Amartya Sen as follows:

*Equality is judged by comparing some aspect of a person (such as income, or wealth, or happiness, or liberty, or opportunities, or rights, or need-fulfillments) with the same aspect of another person. Thus, the judgement and measurement of inequality is thoroughly dependent on the choice of the variable (income, wealth, happiness, etc.) in terms of which comparisons are made (Sen, 1992, p.2).*

Gender equality is an ideal over the world that has been sought in earnest. At the core of the concept is equal recognition of persons regardless of their gender. In many ways, it draws inspiration from the civil rights movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and humanist principles which all place primacy on the salience of the worth of a person not based on their bio-physical characteristics, but simply being a person. Equality, in this perspective, is justified and sought for, simply because one is a human being. In theoretical terms, gender has often been cast considering feminist theories. Yet these theories, distanced from the developing world, often miss the realities and complexities of women in such settings. On the matter of these complexities, Hirschman (1995) quotes Sen and Grown 1987:9–10 at length as follows:

*It is the experiences lived by poor women throughout the Third World in their struggles to ensure the basic survival of their families and themselves that provide the clearest lens for an understanding of development processes. And it is their aspirations and struggles for a future free of the multiple oppressions of gender, class, race, and nation that can form the basis for the new visions and strategies that the new world now needs.*

To close the gap, between theory from the developed world and reality in some parts of the developing world, a nuanced discussion of the realities is long overdue. This paper absorbs itself in such an endeavour.

Although the paucity of academic work on women in leadership is recognised by Nkomo & Ngambi (2009) an even larger body of work on grassroots women political actors is

conspicuous by its absence. Women in elite spaces often draw attention when concerns over political empowerment are scrutinised presumably because making it to the higher echelons of power is the most demonstrable outcome of empowerment. Yet, the positions which can be occupied at any given time amongst the elite are very few compared to the positions which women in grassroots spaces can assume. This simply translates to a scenario where many women who do not have the privilege of title become excluded from analyses of empowerment in politics.

### **The Problem Setting and Context**

This section presents that context and setting in which this discussion is set. Two key contextual matters are elaborated in terms of CEDAW as a broad policy as well as the status of women in Zimbabwe. Although numerous gains have been made by women in politics in places such as Africa, Europe, Asia, Australasia, Latin America (Buvinic & Roza, 2004) and North America, there remain 'glass ceilings' which have yet to be breached<sup>iii</sup>. In the United States of America, the 2016 elections' focus was on electing the first female president. In places such as Saudi Arabia, participation of women in formal politics is a very recent phenomenon. A quota system was imposed in 2013 allowing for women to be represented to a minimum of 20 percent<sup>iv</sup> in the Shura Council, which is the Saudi equivalent of a parliament. However, public positions such as ministerial positions are still beyond the reach of Saudi women partly because they are appointments made by the king. Women are therefore still excluded by male privilege, although there is room for the participation of women at higher levels of public office. In this vein, Zimbabwe has fared much better, although it has yet to appoint a female president in the realm of politics. In addition, the female representation in parliament has not reached the projected 50% mark. Instead, what has been maintained is the deployment of female actors and female bodies for political expediency among political parties, which are largely celebrated in rhetoric, but scantily embraced in representation. Women clad in political party regalia and colours are a common sight at gatherings and on campaign trails where they often canvass for votes for male contestants. Such public shows are often ignored in the discourse of women's participation in politics as grassroots actors are cast into the background when the elite politicians assume prominence. An impression is created by the political elite that gender issues are merely drawn as a form of tokenism or cheap politicking while occupying positions is still largely for men. While there are many anecdotes which illuminate this tokenism, none are more insightful than the politicisation of the femininity during Margret Dongo's quest for office election as a parliamentarian in the 1990s and the politicisation of the female body during purges -within ZANU PF- meted out on Joyce Mujuru after 2013.

The fate of the above-mentioned elite women engaged in politics is not exceptional. As Table 1 below reveals, women generally fare poorly in electoral processes due to lower nominations from their parties. The representation is particularly disconcerting when one considers the vitality and vibrant participation of women in economic and social spheres of life in Zimbabwe. Engagement in these spheres is not confined to local spaces either. Mutopo (2010) notes that Zimbabwean women engaged in transnational livelihoods which derived economic benefit for the household, whilst equally imposing gendered challenges particularly regarding household relational dynamics. The problems which are manifest in relations stem from a binary conception of public-private identities between sexes within African settings, which have been addressed head-on through CEDAW.

### **CEDAW**

The international conventions that Zimbabwe has signed and acceded to promote gender equality and equity include:

- ✓ **Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

- ✓ )
- ✓ **Convention on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR)**
- ✓ **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**
- ✓ **SADC Declaration on Gender and Development and its Addendum on the Prevention and eradication of Violence Against Women and Children**
- ✓ **African Union Protocol on the rights of women in Africa**

CEDAW is the equivalent of 'an international bill of rights for women' which defines discrimination against them and commits all states to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms. Among some of the thematic areas it attends to is the assumption of political rights and access to occupying public office without discrimination. This bill of rights leads to immense scrutiny of the women's rights in any sphere, given the fact that three decades after its inception in 1979, women continue to clamour for equal pay, equal rights and equal representation amongst a host of many other issues. In fact, the situation in politics is so tenuous that some scholars have opined that the participation of women in politics has been more of manipulation than a genuine attempt to promote gender equality and equity (Maphosa, Tshuma & Maviza, 2015). Perhaps signifying recognition of the shortcomings in practise, CEDAW has been complemented by protocols and declarations strengthening earlier commitments. One such declaration was made in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, more commonly referred to as the Beijing Declaration.

Key areas of concern in the Beijing declaration and platform for action are:

- **Education and Training of Women & The Girl -Child**
- **Women and Health**
- **Violence against Women**
- **Women and Armed Conflicts**
- **Women and the Economy**
- **Women in Power and Decision Making**
- **Human Rights of Women**
- **Women and the Media**
- **Women and the Environment**

Together, these instruments play a pivotal role in advancing the cause for women's inclusion, participation and involvement in various spheres of public life. The question however, is, have these instruments made any tangible change in real terms. To gain a snapshot of the contemporary situation in Zimbabwe, we now turn to elected public office representation by women.

### **Women and elected public office in Zimbabwe: a snapshot**

**Figure 2: Persons in Executive Office by Sex and Year**

	1990		1995		2003	
	Femal e	Male	Femal e	Male	Femal e	Male
Ministers	3	29	2	21	4	24
Deputy Ministers	6	67	4	11	1	11
Governor/Resident ministers	1	7	7	1	1	7

**Source: (Parliament of Zimbabwe)**

Since the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference for women held in Beijing in 1995, some positive developments to improve the welfare of women have taken place. The area of women’s rights has, for instance, been greatly advanced. The law on succession, for example, now gives widows the rights to guardianship of their children and to inherit their husband’s estates in intestacy, thereby helping to protect them against destitution. Huge strides have also been made in the world of work in terms of maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, non-discrimination on the grounds of sex. The education sector has also witnessed increase in the education of girls. These gains need not be over-exaggerated as sometimes they remained largely cosmetic due to gender discrimination albeit in more subtle forms.

The most recent general elections in Zimbabwe were held in 2013. According to reports produced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and available from their website, the disaggregated gender participation was largely in favour of men.

**Table 1: Local Authorities Gender Participation by Province**

<i>Province</i>	<b>Nominations</b>			<b>Results</b>	
	Total	Female	Male	Female	Male
<i>Matabeleland South</i>	485	95	390	36	131
<i>Manicaland</i>	656	96	560	35	225
<i>Mashonaland Central</i>	473	80	393	34	198
<i>Matabeleland North</i>	577	100	477	35	158
<i>Masvingo</i>	512	56	456	17	225
<i>Midlands</i>	716	132	584	53	243
<i>Bulawayo</i>	129	41	88	7	22
<i>Harare*</i>	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Mashonaland West*</i>	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Mashonaland East*</i>	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Total</i>	3548	600	2948	217	1202

\*data for these provinces is illegible as at 11/04/2018

Source: Multiple reports from Zimbabwe Electoral Commission<sup>y</sup>

### **Deconstructing gender in the developing world and in Zimbabwe**

Feminism as a concept ‘is radically problematic precisely for feminists because it is crowded with the overdeterminations of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting Other, or mediated self-reflection of a culture built on the control of female’ (Alcoff, 1998). The difficulty faced among some sections of the academia is compounded by the various shades which feminism has morphed overtime. Some feminists are liberals while others are Marxist feminists. In between these two lie a multitude of variants each with a unique ideological perspective to offer. As a result, schisms emerge which splinter efforts and conceptions of the feminists. A practical manifestation of such fractures lies in the gulf created between the western scholarship conceptions versus those in developing countries. As Nzomo (1995, p.133) observes, the counter strand of the whole scenario lies in the fact that:

*although many of the arguments raised by the postmodernist approach may be relevant to the experiences of women in Western industrialized societies, I am of the view that they do not offer immediate practical utility for women in Africa now, as*

*they struggle for the enhancement of their status in the changed context of a post-Cold War environment and economic hardships.*

In a study on resource management in rural parts of Zimbabwe, Cleaver (2000) observes that although there are systems of patriarchy and quests for domination especially from young men, the gender dynamics are much more complex than a critique citing patriarchy may suggest. People in developing countries tend to negotiate resources and roles in much more diverse ways than common generalisations seem to suggest. As such, although patriarchy plays a dominant role in people's lives, it alone does not sufficiently account for the strained role and presence of women in formal politics. The complexities have been observed among young women's engagement in sexual and reproductive health issues, where participation in local community groups enhances their chances of avoiding HIV contraction (Gregson et. al., 2004). The idea here is not merely to suggest that women are not excluded from accessing some resources and privileges because of their sex. In land distribution and ownership, numerous scholars have alluded to the fact that land as a resource tends to be distributed and managed with strong biases in favour of men (Jacobs, 1983; Jacobs, 2002). Therefore, in discussing gender relations in social, political and economic spheres, a holistic analysis is needed which breaches narrow structural causes such as patriarchy and dominant masculinities.

The structural changes and disruptions which have littered Zimbabwe's economic and political landscape in recent times have had a bearing on how gender roles and relations play out at household level. The disruptions have translated into a shrinking number of viable options for livelihoods, and the severe erosion of formerly critical activities with women seeing increases in marital discord and collapse (Goebel, 2007). This has meant that societal attitudes continue to be subjected to various pressures culminating in change. It is in this context that policy positions have been crafted and installed.

### **Gender Policy in Zimbabwe**

Analysts and critics of the Zimbabwean government's approach to gender issues, have observed a variety of problems which have at worst been conceived as blatant neglect or at least been construed as ambivalent. For instance, Ranchod-Nilsson (2006) identifies 'lacklustre' gender transformation, particularly in the areas of legal reform and developing state institutions to address women's development needs. In assuming such a perspective, the role of the state in removing barriers as well as in being an obstacle to progress has been recognized. Not only was the state fostering the advancement of women's issues but the state equally played a key role as an actor -through its various arms- entrenching retrogression. A lengthy citation from Sita Ranchod-Nilsson on the complex and ambivalent role played by the state is worth noting here:

*To the casual observer, things had once appeared quite different. African women's participation in the armed struggle, early government efforts to improve access to education and healthcare, and the passage of multiple pieces of legislation after independence to strengthen women's legal position vis-a-vis majority status, property rights and employment, all suggested a society undergoing a profound transformation in gender relations that was improving the lives of Zimbabwean women (Ranchod-Nilsson, 2006, p.51).*

Observing an earlier study, the Research and Advocacy Unit highlights that the number of women who vote is generally about 15% lower than the eligible numbers. The explanations vary from difficulty in registering, acquisition of legal documentation (Dube, 2008) and the violent tenor which characterizes election periods. This problem is not new given the culturally-centered way women's participation in public affairs within Zimbabwe has been

analyzed. Kazembe (1986) alludes to this cultural rootedness when she observes that 'very little value was placed on female participation outside the home in either the pre-colonial or colonial period of Zimbabwean history' (p.379). The general disenfranchisement of women<sup>vi</sup> in Zimbabwe from broad public affairs has also been entrenched through institutions and pronouncements by senior public officials ranging from respected judges to the president of the country.

In 1981, with the establishment of the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs (MCDWA), the government of Zimbabwe instituted a raft of policies aimed at improving social, cultural and economic conditions for women in relation to men. These were captured in such enactments as the Legal Age of Majority Act (1982)<sup>vii</sup>, Sex Disqualification Removal Act (1983), Matrimonial Causes Act (1985) and the Labour Relations Act (1985). The legal instruments did not however, capture all issue which women pressure groups and women in general were concerned about. For example, women continued to be treated with an uneven hand in land distribution and resettlement (Jacobs, 1989; Paradza, 2000/1). More importantly, women were pushed into the fringes of party political life where male actors hogged the limelight. A handful of elite female politicians were prominent currently with persons such as Teurai Ropa Nhongo<sup>viii</sup>, Victoria Chitepo and Amina Hughes. Kazembe (1986, p.400-1) has highlighted the distribution of female actors at local and national level as follows:

*At the local level, just about 10% of councillors in local governing bodies that range from district councils to municipalities are women. Among the reasons given for this small percentage is the fact (or excuse) that women do not have the time or flexibility required for civic duties because of domestic.*

Through the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, the National Gender Policy was launched and advanced. It was later revised in 2007. The policy deserves special mention as one of the efforts put forward by the Government of Zimbabwe towards the implementation of gender mainstreaming into all national policies and programmes. With regards to political participation, the policy identifies (much like the Swaziland National Gender Policy of 2010) gender, politics and decision-making as a central theme to be addressed for equality to be achieved. Among some of the strategies deployed for the achievement of parity are lobbying for 'affirmative action measures' as well as 'elimination of cultural and traditional customs that inhibit equal participation of men and women in traditional governance and other grassroots structures'. The policy on its own is inadequate to address sectorial concerns such that progressive groups have come to the fore with more nuanced agendas. For example, in June 2007, the government launched a programme known as Women in Mining Initiative (WIM) aimed at advancing the cause for women artisanal miners.

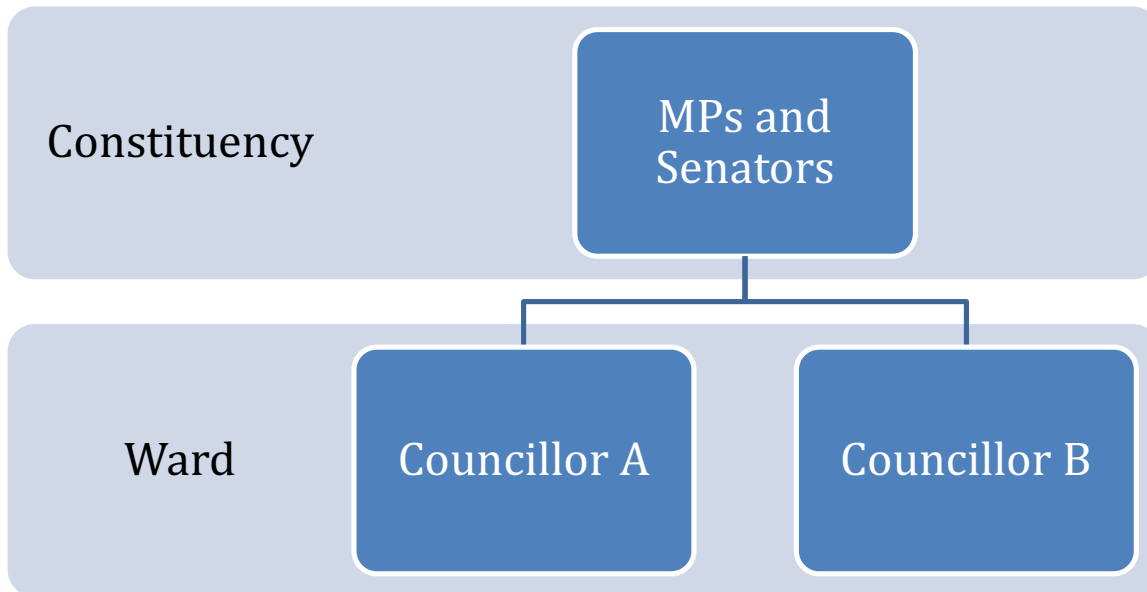
### **Grassroots Politics**

Any study which attempts to make an analysis employing scalar and spatial distinctions is subject to stringent methodological tests. Often, the distinction between one form and another is often obscure. What criteria is used to identify rural from urban in a society where the movement of persons is often fluid throughout the year? Moreover, when is a person deemed local and when is one national/sub-regional? A person may be a local politician in the sense that they represent a local constituency yet also fill the shoes of being a nationally recognized political actor through assumption of public office. As such, care has been maintained in identifying whom we refer to when we identify local women political actors, that is, women who are engaged in formal politics either as functionaries of specific political parties or in their independent right. Figure 3 below presents a schema which lays out the governance and administrative structure in the country. The term ward in the diagram below represents the lowest elected office which a public representative can hold. An elected member is called a



councillor. Although most councillors are elected, there exists a provision for a select number of councillors to be appointed to represent special interest groups.

**Figure 3: Elective Local Governance Structure in Zimbabwe**



The schema presented above illustrates the lowest levels at which public elected office is assumed. These levels are not easily assumed as has been revealed by the data in Table 1. Importantly, they have seldom been easy even in the early post-independence period when the comrades at war were still embedded in an egalitarian ethos.

### **The ebb and flow of women participation in formal politics**

To look at women involvement in politics within Zimbabwe can be a very daunting proposition due to the rich tradition of strong and sometimes enigmatic female leaders. Pre-independence Zimbabwe has figures from both the first and second *chimurenga/umvukela*/uprisings. These would require a separate text to explore their experiences and the agency which they demonstrated in shaping not only their lives but the trajectory of Zimbabwean history. Our concern here is on post-independent women political actors and their broad experiences.

In the early 1980s, women sought alternative platforms to advance their cause due to the often male-dominated terrain of formal politics. 'Lacking other alternatives professional African women have instead retreated with their grievances into the non-governmental organizations (NGO) sector where women's groups and funding from international donors abound' (Geisler, 1995, p.546). Such an approach mirrors what has in the domain on transnational politics been recognised as Informal platforms such as 'grassroots diplomatics' (Mahler, 2000). Opting to pursue political ends in this fashion was noted in Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. NGOs were ideal because they were not indebted to the state and could therefore pursue whatever agenda they sought fit. In this era, one of the most prominent NGOs to emerge in Zimbabwe was ORAP Vukuzenzele (self-help) which although espousing economic empowerment, also served as a conduit through which a feminist consciousness on broad empowerment was shared. The starting point was in tackling culture as a bastion of male domination. Indeed, culture maintains a grip on some sections of society, resulting in barriers being installed against women's progress in entrepreneurship (Chitsike, 2000) and in politics.

In 2017, out of roughly 1400 ward councillors in Zimbabwe, less than 200 were female (The Herald, 2017)<sup>ix</sup>. These numbers are inclusive of both urban and rural councillors. In addition to the paltry numbers, representation tends to reveal greater proportions amongst urban councillors compared to rural ones. As such, the presumption which may be made is that women in traditionally conservative settings are more likely to be disinclined from engaging in politics. In addition to the problem of patriarchy is the notion that politics in Zimbabwe has often taken a violent turn particularly since 1999. Resultantly, it lends itself to men more than it does to women whose femininity deems them averse to violence. This biological and gendered explanation is debatable but cannot be wholly dismissed.

### **Characters and Sexualization of Politically Active Women**

Although the broader social and cultural forces have tended to militate against the advancement of women's causes, gendered roles have been recognized as instrumental in affecting either participation or upward mobility of women in workplaces. Conviction to fulfilling family roles as well as associated stereotypes have been observed to be hindrances to the upward mobility of women in work environments. The irony of this matter is that women in elite positions appropriate the matriarchal figure of *amai/umama/mother* when seeking to amass political capital. This has been the case with Sally Mugabe, Grace Mugabe and now Auxilia Munangagwa to identify the most elite of them all. The very factor that works against women at grassroots level turns out to be a source for capital among the elite. The nurturing figure which is considered too genteel and incompatible with tough politics appears to be a malleable form depending on the level of political activism. Related to this gendered notion of political engagement are the characterizations which are tied to women in politics. In this strand, there are two overt forms of manipulation which play out in the media as well as among politicians themselves. The examples used to magnify the discourse are of elite women but equally play out among women of lesser political stature. The fact that elite women face similar assaults is indicative of how entrenched the attitudes are, such that even accomplished persons still must contend with them. The two forms of manipulation are:

- **Sexualization of female bodies**
- **Negative character portrayals of female politicians.**

Commenting on the sexualization of female bodies, Alex Magaisa notes that the commonly identified strands are that a woman needs a man for her to be sobered, a woman uses sex to extract favours from her male peers as well as the deployment of sex as a response to rise in power (Magaisa, 2017). Enjoined with the deployment of sex and sexuality is the exposure to a public moral court which in Zimbabwe portrays a woman as immoral once she is exposed as engaging in sex with many men. The men seldom attract attention as crucial characters in the narratives; it is the woman who is judged. In this assertion, we do not suggest that this attitude is a Zimbabwean problem alone seeing that Rwanda's Diane Shima Rwigara endured a similar fate in 2017. In South Africa, despite sexual scandals involving men of elite stature with obscure women, it is the women who bear the brunt of public scrutiny<sup>x</sup>. The general pattern is that women are both portrayed and described as beneficiaries of favour due to their positions as sexual partners or they manipulate their way into office using sex as a currency. It is in this vein that a popular assertion 'power is not sexually transmitted' was formed. However, some women seem to believe that sexualization can be used to assert oneself in political office because the terrain is biased against women anyway<sup>xi</sup>.

On the character portrayal of women, there appears to be a duplicitous posture which is best explained in the form of two quotes from prominent political actors in Zimbabwe. Speaking during a hosted open discussion, Themba Mliswa, a ZANU PF parliamentarian, is quoted as having said that some of the women who get into parliament are 'not aggressive enough' and

adding that 'he is distributing sanitary wear to girls, while some female MPs are doing nothing about the problem'. The language deployed to explain the character deficiencies of women is striking. It is suggested that women ought to resort to their primary, social roles to assert themselves as legitimate actors in the realm of politics. This is consistent with the stereotypical yet inverse portrayal of women who engage in politics as deviants who are not inclined to social/male control. A strong-willed woman such as Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushionga or Thokozani Khupe is regarded as difficult and too ambitious – a fate which rightly or wrongly proved to be Grace Mugabe's Achilles heel and has been the hindrance to many women at much lower levels.

The impediments which have been discussed so far, lead to the suspicion that when female leaders allude to representation in politics, it is referred to as a cosmetic exercise. The pro-women approach taken by the government and political elites has been merely tokenism wherein women are used as pawns just as much as some men are. This is not to question the non-commitment of governments from advancing the cause of women, instead, it is to point out that women are part of a largely violent, cut-throat field where male actors have deployed the tools available for their ends and not for broader 'developmental' ends. The result is that those who need development interventions and growth the most are sucked into aggressive male-dominated toxic politics or resort to political engagement through civil society. These are the fortunate ones. The many poor women are left to go by in their daily lives, attending political gatherings at the behest of largely male-led parties. It is at these settings that the women will sing, dance, chant out slogans while wearing garb emblazoned with the face of one male character or another. Almost three decades after CEDAW, their plight still evokes the title to Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 work, 'Nervous Conditions'.

### CONCLUSION

The paper has provided a discussion of women's participation and representation in political public office within Zimbabwe. This discussion has assumed a reflective mood, set within the vision and spirit of some three decades ago in the form of CEDAW. While CEDAW embodied the aspirations of many women in the world, the women in many developing countries remain exposed to various forms of exclusion. Using politics as a frame from which to understand these exclusions and dynamics, the paper has revealed that women in Zimbabwe are faced with structural, familial, cultural and personal challenges. Their aspirations are often misrepresented, assuming either personalised character attacks or sexualized discourses. Because of these various factors, the representation is still paltry. In this light, there is need for a more concerted and genuine drive for inclusion of women which goes beyond the cosmetic efforts and fudgy posturing led by male figures. The paper supports the suggestion that quota systems be enforced to ensure that women make it to higher offices in politics without gender stereotyping. This could be instituted and bolstered by a deliberate affirmative action policy aimed specifically for women and women's representation within formal political parties. This is not to be construed as an end but the beginning of a much more elaborate process of shifting attitudes and culturally-rooted mind-sets.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.parlzim.gov.zw/about-parliament/publications/download/74\\_b49023669e0a9b0ac01a17afb3dee411](http://www.parlzim.gov.zw/about-parliament/publications/download/74_b49023669e0a9b0ac01a17afb3dee411)

<sup>ii</sup> From 2005, Zimbabwe adopted a bicameral system of governance which involved Parliament as the upper house and Senate as a lower house. In practical terms, the Senate has served as a rubber-stamping platform due to the dominance of ZANU PF members who 'typically' avoid contrasting positions with their political party.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/epolls/US/P000.html>

<sup>iv</sup> [www.huffpost.com/us/entry/8812762](http://www.huffpost.com/us/entry/8812762)

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.zec.gov.zw/2015-05-12-09-57-26/local-authorities-gender-participation>

<sup>vi</sup> The Tonga ethnic group are different in this regard due to the matrilineal nature of their society.

<sup>vii</sup> The constitutionality of this act has been recently challenged with the effect that it is consistent with the legal definition of adult instead of the previously prescribed age of 16.

<sup>viii</sup> This is the name that Joyce Mujuru used as her *nom de guerre*.

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.herald.co.zw/rural-female-councillors-want-quota-system/>

<sup>x</sup> <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/1332538/the-biggest-scandals-involving-politicians-in-sa/>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2017/03/women-urged-use-femininity-advantage/>