



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Zimbabwe political space: An analysis of the barriers to women's participation in electoral processes?

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders'. Since the Beijing conference in 1995, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the 2013 Constitution. The study brings to the fore, findings to respond to 3 fundamental research questions which are: 1) what is the interlinkage between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, 2) what are the complex social inclusion factors in political spaces, and 3) what recommendations can be proffered to enhance inclusion of women in electoral processes. In answering the questions, the research draws on content analysis of reports from the Project on Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics Project (VAWP/E), face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions to offer insights and investigate the opportunities provided by various legal frameworks to increase women's engagement in electoral and political processes in Zimbabwe. The article further systematically explores other important factors and elements that impede and contribute to women's full participation in electoral processes as candidates. This study contends that the availability of excellent legal provisions does not result in increased women's participation in electoral politics as candidates unless there is political will. The study further asserts that participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates. The study recommends a wholesome approach to dismantling the complex interlinkages between cultural, social, economic, and physical spaces as obstacles affecting the inclusion of women in electoral processes as candidates. Thus, the study further recommends that existing legal instruments should be complemented by progressively dismantling the social, cultural, and physical forces prohibiting women's participation as leaders in electoral processes. Specific provisions in the Electoral Act may further be used to penalise failure by political parties to field a reasonable number of women as candidates in elections.

Key words: Electoral inclusion, political participation, institutions, accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's post-independence election processes have been predominantly male-dominated, with women relegated to the periphery as electorates or party 'cheerleaders. Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Zimbabwe enacted several laws to overcome bottlenecks that have impeded women's participation in political processes, with the 2013 Constitution serving as the ultimate template for promoting women's engagement in mainstream electoral systems. Nonetheless, women's participation as candidates or leaders in electoral processes has declined significantly since the introduction of the 2013 Constitution. Female candidates face numerous obstacles, both before and after elections, including insufficient financial support, sexual harassment, and attacks on their character and integrity. These challenges serve as discouragement and hinder the full participation and representation of women in politics. The underlying issue lies in the lack of political will to actively promote the access and substantive presence of women in politics, ensuring that their voices are truly heard and that their membership in political parties is connected to their involvement in leadership positions (Kumar, 2017; Nyawo, 2023). This paper explores the interlinkages between economic, cultural, social, and physical spaces with the electoral processes, and how the complex social inclusion factors shape the political spaces gendered narrative. From a deeper understanding of the issue, it aims to contribute to the discourse on how Zimbabwe can achieve a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all its citizens. By thoroughly studying this rhetoric, the paper aims to set a

practical Zimbabwean/ African agenda for implementing a truly inclusive democracy that maximises the potential of all citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant strides have been made globally towards advancing gender equity since 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality (UN Women, 2023), with the increase in female representation in parliaments being a key factor attributed to this progress. Maphosa, Tshuma & Maviza (2015) argue that Zimbabwe has signed and ratified several regional and international instruments that call for gender equality in various spheres of life. However, despite the existence of these supportive instruments, the country has not fared well in advancing the participation of women in politics. The adoption of gender quotas¹ has notably boosted women's presence in legislatures (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2021), as evidenced by the sharp rise observed between 1990 and 2015 (Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg 2017). Concurring with Huges, Paxton, Clayton and Zetterberg (2017), Fungurai (2024) is of the view that, women currently hold 31.9% of seats in Zimbabwe's parliament, which is an impressive increase from 14.7% in 1995. At the global level currently, only 26.9 percent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses are women, up from 11 percent in 1995 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024). However, despite the positive impact of quotas, their sustainability and effectiveness in challenging the status quo of male dominance remain under scrutiny, especially in Zimbabwe where the numbers of women representation are dwindling remarkably since 2013.

¹ The Zimbabwean quota system allows for 70 seats of 280 which is 25% of the full parliament and only 22 women i.e. (11%) were elected to parliament

Højlund Madsen, & Mtero (2023) reveals that the meagre 11% of female representation in the August 2023 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe reflects a major setback in achieving SDG 5.5b, gender equality, and the empowerment of all women and girls. In Africa, efforts have been made to promote women's participation in political leadership roles with Rwanda and South Africa having the highest representation of 56.3% (Kumar, 2017) and 53.5% respectively (Nyawo, 2023). However, disparities with men persist, reflecting deeply ingrained societal beliefs about gender roles, for example, the philosopher Aristotle asserts that men are considered superior to women. This poses a serious dent in women's quest to achieve gender equality in political spheres. Although countries like South Africa and Rwanda have seen notable increases in women's representation due to quotas, the overall representation of women in influential leadership positions on the continent remains low, Zimbabwe included. The current global scenario, where women hold only 23% of parliamentary seats (Chalaby, 2017), highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development (OECD, 2018a).

The Toxicity of the Political Playing Field – Violence and Sexual Abuse

Historical analysis demonstrates that women who have successfully navigated the political landscape since the early 1980s have typically enjoyed certain privileges (occupying

positions of political influence be it locally and nationally), such as being members of the liberation war struggle or having powerful male relatives within the ruling party who can provide protection and financial support for their political campaigns (Padare, 2020). Former vice president of Zimbabwe Joice Muguru is a typical example who enjoyed the protection of her husband Solomon Mujuru² from independence in 1980 until 2011 when he died, the events that ensued soon after his death led to the dismissal of Joice from her influential position of the vice president of the country. However, when women contest against men, they are often subjected to hate speech, portraying them as unruly and ungovernable, necessitating action to bring them 'back in line.' One common derogatory label used for women candidates is 'prostitute' or 'hure³'. Mudiwa (2022) posits that the term 'prostitute' is part of the political grammar in Zimbabwe, used to discipline women's participation in party politics. Such scathing attacks on the moral character of women represent verbal and psychological abuse, aiming to undermine their confidence and dignity when seeking leadership positions in politics.

The political landscape in Zimbabwe is unstable and predicated with violence in all its forms. It is toxic, especially for women as they are easily subjected to numerous challenges that range from sexual abuse physical abuse and recently online abuse. It is especially problematic in politics, where many male politicians utilise SGBV to tame and control women, hence, Open Democracy (2022), posits that men are weaponising online abuse and physical violence to keep women's voices

¹ Solomon Mujuru (born Solomon Tapfumaneyi Mutusva; 5 May 1945 – 15 August 2011), also known by his nom-de-guerre, Rex Nhongo, was a Zimbabwean military officer and politician who led Robert Mugabe's guerrilla forces during the Rhodesian Bush War. He was the husband of the former vice-President Joice Mujuru.

² hure is a Shona word which refers to a promiscuous woman/prostitute

out of politics. Zimbabwean society has normalised the use of violence to silence women who are deemed too politically active. The rise of social media has shown that SGBV is structural and deeply ingrained in Zimbabwean culture. When men lose arguments or fail to back up their opinions with tangible evidence and facts, they often resort to intimidation and emotional and verbal abuse online, (Open Democracy, 2022). Women who are brave enough to speak truth to power and work to close the gender gap in politics are particularly vulnerable to this type of behaviour.

Regrettably, in some instances, this violence has escalated to physical assaults, including beatings, and abductions when women express their political affiliations and challenge men in decision-making positions (Padare, 2020). Joana Mamombe, Netsai Marova, and Cecilia Chimhiri were abducted, sexually assaulted, and jailed in May 2020 for leading a demonstration against the government (Amnesty International, 2020), and disappearances such as Jestina Mukoko⁴ in December 2008. These forms of violence and sexual abuse pose significant barriers for women in Zimbabwe who aspire to actively participate in politics and assume leadership positions. Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), and Zim Fact (2023), assert that women candidates frequently face threats, intimidation tactics, and public shaming, albeit varying based on their marital status, age, and party affiliation. The harshness and intolerance against women in politics are done on purpose, ranging from sexist slurs to negative insinuations that breed the potential to discourage women's effective engagement in politics (Nyikadzino, 2023).

Women are sometimes subjected to 'sextortion'⁵, whereby they are coerced into providing sexual favours in exchange for political aggrandisement. A type of violence is semiotic violence (Hay, 2007) perpetrated through images, sexual objectification, words or symbols and is largely targeted toward female electoral candidates, characterising them as unworthy and incompetent (Krook, 2020). Male chauvinism is particularly pronounced when single women challenge men in the political sphere, as men employ tactics of misogyny to denigrate these women for their lack of husbands, thereby weakening their position in the political arena (Padare, 2020). It is important to note that the violence against women in Zimbabwe is not isolated but rather has become a structural and institutionalised phenomenon within electoral and political party systems. The 2018 elections serve as a telling example of how the exploitation and sexual harassment of women through the media, which evolved into cyber violence, resulted in a reduction in women's representation in all political structures from 34% in 2013 to 31% in 2018. Despite the existence of a quota system intended to address gender imbalances (Padare, 2020) the figure further plummeted to 11% during the 2023 elections. A total of 60 seats of the 280 are reserved for women proportional representation which is 21% of the full parliament and only 22 women thus (11%) were elected.

Electoral Contests: Voter Intimidation, Persecution, and Arbitrary Arrests

The Zimbabwean elections have a history of being violent usually characterised by voter intimidation and persecution of the

⁴ Jestina Mukoko is a Zimbabwean human rights activist and the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project

⁵ Sextortion (a portmanteau of sex and extortion) employs non-physical forms of coercion to extort sexual favours from the victim.

electorate with divergent views. Violence against women is used as a targeted and damaging strategy throughout the political cycle to discourage women from serving as election administrators, voters, or candidates (Para-Mallam, 2015). Election violence is protracted, and purposeful methods employed by politicians including incumbents and opposition parties to advance their interests or achieve certain political goals during an election (Adolfo et al. 2012). As a result, in rural areas, many politicians deploy illegal electoral techniques, such as militant youth wings, militias, or state security forces, to win elections or boost their post-election negotiating power, (Motau and Tshifhumulo, 2023).

Opposition parties have consistently accused the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front party of orchestrating these attacks (Raleigh, 2023). It is estimated that over 200 people lost their lives in 2008 amidst a wave of violence targeting opposition supporters during and after the election (Amnesty International, 2023). According to Zakari (2015), violence against women in elections can be overt or subtle. In addition to physical harm, violence can manifest in the form of gender-based hate speech, with the sinister goal of discouraging women from running for office or voting in elections. Online violent methods are now common in Zimbabwe's political space where opponents, especially women, are subjected to cyberbullying and trolling. Trolling involved sexual assault and rape threats, hate speech, reputation-related blackmailing, and sexualised insults (NDI, 2021). Opposition leader, Linda Masarira⁶ is widely trolled on social media platforms, especially on X.

The inability of some countries like Uganda and Kenya to reach the critical mass makes violence, normalised in politics, a potential reason for gender differences in political participation (Krook, 2020). Hence, electoral violence is one issue that has been identified as a barrier to women's full participation in politics and governance (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2018).

Effects of Institutionalised Party Politics

The political landscape worldwide is deeply rooted in patriarchy, hence it is male-dominated. In this regard, it leaves little room for women to freely participate without retribution either from the outside world or the political parties they represent. Ikebgu (2018) asserts that it is arguably accepted that leadership in Africa both at its traditional, religious, economic, social, and political strands is male-dominated. Before the age of modernity, political participation, and social and economic activism were the exclusive preserve of men with women scantily seen featuring in areas of minor importance. Over the years, the landscape of mainstream politics has seen a retreat of many women from taking up political posts. Those who have chosen to remain often find themselves confined to the women's wings of their respective political parties, serving as praise singers and staunch party supporters but lacking any meaningful decision-making capacity (Kumar, 2017; Højlund Madsen, & Mtero, 2023) in Zimbabwe's main political parties - Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) and Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A).

⁶ Linda Masarira, the president of Labour, Economists and African Democrats party (LEAD), has faced a barrage of online harassment and abuse on various social media platforms due to her outspoken views, particularly those critical of the opposition party Citizen Coalition for Change.

Despite Zimbabwe's constitution providing for equal representation, women's participation in politics remains alarmingly low at 11%, as highlighted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2023). While political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs dedicated to advocating for issues important to female voters, their involvement typically does not translate into real power or inclusion. The male-dominated nature of political parties poses significant challenges for women, as they are often side-lined and their importance disregarded (Maphosa et al, 2015; Kumar, 2017; Padare, 2021). The image of a powerful female leader is a 'psychic threat' (Manne, 2018) to patriarchal structures and the male-dominant political arena (Paxton, Hughes & Barnes, 2020).

Political parties frequently fail to support the political empowerment of women, denying them proper tickets (Kumar, 2017) as doubts are cast on the viability of female candidates and perpetuating the notion that women are unfit for governance and decision-making. These parties, with their entrenched patriarchal structures, lack of internal democracy, and dearth of women in decision-making positions, continue to marginalise women and maintain the existing status quo. Inactive participation and instances of sexual violence further serve as barriers to women's involvement in politics. Political parties' public declarations of commitment to gender

equality often fall short in practice. Women, when chosen for leadership positions are made to fight each other –the case of Jessie Majome⁷ and Johanna Mamombe⁸ in 2018, a similar case was witnessed earlier in 2014 when Grace Mugabe⁹ was put afore to fight and shame Joice Mujuru¹⁰. Zigomo (2022), and Højlund Madsen, & Mtero. (2023) posit that systematic obstacles such as votes of no confidence in female candidates and clashes with established, male-dominated networks at national and local levels are deliberately designed to deny women nominations and electoral success. Although political parties in Zimbabwe have women's organs aimed at advocating for female voters, their primary role has increasingly shifted towards mobilising women during election campaigns and promoting male candidates, rather than fostering the retention of power and inclusion for women in politics (Mlambo et al, 2019; Zigomo, 2022). Moreover, within political party structures, there is a lack of policies that protect candidates, particularly women, from politically motivated violence, hate speech, and sexual harassment. The way political parties are structured, with women's wings and youth wings is a form of gatekeeping that keeps women and young people away from mainstream politics (Dahlerup, 2006). These systemic issues further hinder women's participation and representation in politics.

⁷ Jessie Majome was a Member of the National Assembly of the Parliament of Zimbabwe for Harare West constituency on an MDC-T ticket elected 1st in 2008 and then in 2013 and was demoted to pave way for Johanna Mamombe

⁸ Joana Mamombe is a Zimbabwean politician, representing Harare West (Citizens Coalition for Change) who was first elected in Parliament in 2018 after the demotion of Jessie Majome

⁹ Grace Mugabe is the former first lady who was influential in the fall of Joice Mujuru

¹⁰ Joice Mujuru, Zimbabwe's first woman vice-President who was demoted and subsequently chased out of ZANU-PF after being accused of fanning factionalism within the party

Cultural and Traditional Norms

Women are also exposed to the cultural and traditional norms that hinder them from assuming positions of power in the political realm. Violence against women in electoral processes also cascades from the private unit, that is, the family up to the national level. Discrimination against women from assuming political positions in Zimbabwe extends even to their own families, where they are often expected to confine themselves to the domestic sphere (Nyawo, 2023). Men, seeking to maintain their dominance, underestimate women and limit their opportunities (Kumar, 2017). In the realm of politics, women face additional challenges as they are unable to rely on support from their families, which hinders their ability to fully represent themselves in political spheres. Thus Padare (2020) has the notion that the underrepresentation of women is deeply ingrained in a patriarchal system that spans from the pre-colonial era to the colonial and post-colonial periods. This system has become a hegemony, perpetuating gender inequality and suppressing women's voices.

According to Moagi and Mtombeni (2020), it is worth noting that in the pre-colonial era, women held positions of influence in African traditional society - they were very active in the public domain; in politics as Princesses, Queen mothers, and regents; and in religion as prophets, diviners, and rainmakers. However, the advent of colonialism introduced a new framework that defined women primarily through the institution of family and marriage, while men maintained individual identities defined by participation in public institutions (Sheldon, 2018). The problem of gender inequality begins within the confines of the home, where husbands may be uncomfortable with women engaging in the public sphere, especially

considering the levels of toxicity of the politics that prevail in Zimbabwe. Additionally, gender roles and responsibilities place a heavy burden on women's time, as they are often responsible for caregiving duties, including looking after children, sick individuals, domestic chores, and elderly family members. On average, women spend 49.7 hours per week on these tasks, compared to 26.7 hours for men (Lowe, Morna, Makamure, & Glenwright, 2018). The unpaid care work performed by women not only affects their economic productivity but also hinders national development in the country.

Economic Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics

Access to and control over resources in Zimbabwe heavily favours men, creating a significant disadvantage for women seeking recognition and respect as leaders. To gain prominence and support, leaders in Zimbabwe often need to provide resources to the people (Zigomo, 2022) which is a problem with most female politicians who usually find themselves at the horns of a dilemma as they lack the financial muscle to appease the wants of the general public during campaigns. To participate in leadership positions in elections money is a fundamental aspect, without which many women are relegated to singing praises for those with the funds to finance their campaigns. Economically deprived groups with "less access to money, including women" are disadvantaged (World Bank 2022). However, women candidates often need more resources compared to their male counterparts. While campaign finances are available to political parties through the Political Parties Finance Act, they are predominantly utilised by men rather than women (Padare, 2020) as most political parties doubt the ability of women to be good. This puts women, particularly those under

proportional representation, who mainly rely on the women's quota, in a challenging position as they have to finance themselves to be nominated at the party level. In 2018, the prevailing approach by most parties was to relegate women to the quota, with only a few women actively campaigning for representation in a constituency and receiving funding.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design using in-depth interviews was used to gather data for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with women who had contested for Local Authority, National Assembly and Presidential seats to solicit personal experiences of political violence. Fifteen in-depth interviews comprising 6 women who had contested for Local Authority seats, 8 women who had contested for National Assembly seats and 1 presidential aspirant were conducted. Six (6) FGDs with 10 participants each were conducted in Bulawayo, Harare, Matopo, Shamva, Buhera, and Lupane. The areas were chosen because of their previous history of incidences of physical violence against women in politics. The FGDs had community members, government stakeholders, aspiring members, Councillors and Members of parliament. Also, a validation meeting was conducted in which 35 women from across the country were in attendance. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study to ensure that the women who had participated in public electoral or political processes and had experience in the subject matter were recruited. The method used was effective as it gave the researcher and the participants a chance to deeply engage in the subject matter at hand. This goes into the gist of in-depth interviews which according to Rutledge and Hogg (2020) detailed information that sheds

light on an individual's perspective, experiences, feelings and the derived meaning about a particular topic or issue. During the interviews, the women were asked about the specific forms of political-related violence they had experienced, the causes of such violence, and what they thought could be done to address political violence faced by women in politics. The interviews were conducted in English language, which is one of the country's official languages. The participants consented to have the interview sessions recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

The research demonstrated that several factors are limiting the participation of women in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. These include sexual violence, physical violence, emotional or psychological violence, cultural norms and values, party politics, voter intimidation, political persecution, political violence and a general lack of financial means.

Sexual violence which manifests itself through sexualised remarks, altered pornography and rape is one of the most common types of violence experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. This is primarily because of rampant male misogyny in the political and electoral arena in Zimbabwe. Although generally sexual violence is culturally frowned upon in the country, somehow sexual violence against women in politics is not given the same societal disapproval. Possibly, this is due to a general societal assumption that women who venture into politics or electoral processes willingly expose themselves to acts of violence. Women in politics are sexually violated to intimidate and scare them from participating in electoral or political

processes. Anyone was deemed a potential perpetrator of this type of abuse, however, men in influential political party positions, state security personnel and overzealous supporters of political parties they do not support were identified as the main perpetrators of sexual violence against women in politics.

“ **As a woman in politics, I have a lot of abuse that has taken a toll on my mental health. I have experienced altered pornography online, but I cannot do much about it despite the presence of the Data Protection Act as it was sent online by a troll account. I have grown thick skin to survive this male-dominated field. (Excerpt from an in-depth interviewee)**

Despite knowing that they are being sexually violated, in some instances, women in politics tolerate sexual assault from political party gatekeepers to climb the political ladder. This form of violence was rampant due to the ‘first-pass-the-post’ (FTPT)¹¹, particularly in party primary elections since they lacked equal means to be on an equal footing to contest with their male counterparts. For example, women reported that sexual favours were rendered to secure party support to represent it in public elections or to be nominated for the women’s quota system.

“ **Men who hold powerful positions in my party are well known for demanding sexual favours from women to sign their papers to contest as party candidates for the women’s quota. Although the government meant well by making provisions for the Women’s Quota in**

the 2013 Constitution, the provision has been used to sexually assault women in my party. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)

Psychological violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes. The women reported that the most common forms of emotional violence were threats of abduction, kidnapping and disappearance. Although this form of violence is experienced by both men and women in politics, the effects and severity of the threats were reported to be direr for women than men. Given the history of the country in enforced disappearances and kidnappings, this form of violence unsettles women aspiring for public political positions.

“ **Since I joined active politics, I have received countless threats of abduction. During the first days, I used to scare away women from active politics. Politics in Zimbabwe is not child’s play! If not strong and wise, you can easily quit. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

Further, the study findings highlighted that women in politics also experienced stalking as a form of psychological violence. The women reported that they experienced stalking both online (social media trolls) and offline where unknown male characters would stalk them both in public and private spaces.

“ **Towards the March 2008 general elections, I had to dump my car at a garage and started using taxis after I noticed that someone was stalking me. I also had to vacate my lodgings and temporarily stay with a friend, as I was afraid that the stalker would harm me or kill me. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)**

¹¹ This system, also known as the "winner-takes-all" system, was introduced in 1987 after the amendment of the Electoral Act and replaced the proportional representation (PR) system that was previously used. As a result of the system, one first satisfies requirements of a political party to be seconded to represent that party in elections

Cyberbullying or online violence is another form of violence experienced by women in politics in Zimbabwe. This form of violence manifests itself in the form of catfishing, name-calling, sexist remarks and threats of physical or sexual harm. In-depth interviewees argued that the aforementioned forms of violence served to depersonalise and systematically exclude them from participating at par with their male counterparts, who although exposed to the same forms of violence have patriarchy as their shield. In addition, in-depth interviews also highlighted that cyberbullying nurtured feelings of low self-esteem, which affected women's participation in politics and electoral processes.

“ The internet has been abused to preserve male hegemony in political and electoral processes. Since the 2018 elections, there has been a steady increase in cyberbullying or online harassment of women in politics. I have been called all vile names from a home wrecker, a good-for-nothing woman, and a whore who has kids with different fathers. It's too much to bear all in the name of politics. Something has to be done to ensure the safety of women in politics and women in general online. (Excerpt from an FGD)

Notwithstanding several pieces of legislation to foster gender equality and women's empowerment in political processes, women continue to experience emotional violence through excessive moral regulation. There is a structural expectation for women in politics and electoral processes to have a high level of morality, chastity and sexual purity compared to their male counterparts. This is done to confine women to the private space where they can be good housewives, or to court potential marriage suitors. In a society

that places high regard on marriage, women's participation in politics is frowned upon by the society as the women are deemed domineering, not suitable for marriage or are classified as home wreckers.

Physical violence is another form of abuse experienced by women in politics and electoral processes in Zimbabwe. This form of abuse manifests in the form of physical beatings or assaults and kidnappings. The women reported that at times they are beaten or have their hair pulled to deter them from participating in politics. This form of abuse just like sexual violence is perpetrated at family and communal levels.

“ Although I have experienced physical violence, I have seen women in politics being beaten or kidnapped. This is horrendous and has to be stopped as it drives women away from political processes. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)

General systemic political violence, which is a normal phenomenon in Zimbabwean politics and electoral systems impacts heavily on the participation of women in politics. Women are intimidated by violence that occurs to men in politics.

“ The country's elections and political processes are heavily characterised by political violence. It takes great courage for a woman to participate in the electoral process. (Excerpt from a FGD)

The political environment in Zimbabwe is very toxic to such an extent that families and husbands would not want to let their daughters and wives participate as it is associated with some vices which are not acceptable in the communities. Participation in social, cultural, economic, and physical spaces interacts in a complex manner and

influences women's participation in Zimbabwe's electoral political processes as candidates. Because of the country's political polarisation and the impunity of perpetrators of political violence, the political arena is believed to be intimidating and discouraging, thus not ripe, for women to participate as candidates.

“ Who would want to let his wife be a politician in this country where politics is associated with everything bad? If one does not sleep her way up the ladder, she will be ridiculed in front of her family so it's better to stay as a housewife or have other professional jobs. (Excerpt from a FGD)

The cultural norms in the country are a major setback in allowing one to fully participate in politics as a society usually views women who actively take leading roles in politics as being loose and not fit for the conservative African communities. Men are given the upper hand over their female counterparts and usually feel threatened by women in leadership positions.

“ Men are not yet prepared to see women leaders, even if there is an elected woman leader during meetings her words are not considered until they get support from men. Our societies do not think women can be leaders. (Excerpt from an in-depth interview)

DISCUSSION

This is the first study to focus on violence against women candidates in politics or electoral processes in Zimbabwe. It shows that women in politics mostly experience psychological and sexual violence while fewer women experience physical violence. The findings of this study are void of statistical significance and lack generalisability due to the research design employed. Further, the study did not include experiences of political violence from other groups of women in politics or electoral processes such as election administrators, government officials, party supporters and human rights defenders. The study focused primarily on women as candidates in politics or electoral processes as its main hypothesis was that violence against female candidates was responsible for the continued decline of women participating in electoral and political processes in the country. Notwithstanding the identified limitations of this study, the findings corroborate with findings from Sanin (2018), UN Women (2019) Johnson-Myers (2021), and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) which highlight that there is a high prevalence of political violence against women in politics that is hinged on masculine hegemony and male dominance globally. The study findings highlight that women in politics experienced a wide range of violations. In particular, study participants reported that they experienced sexual violence. These findings corroborate those found in Burundi and Zimbabwe by van Baalem (2017) and the Open Democracy (2022) where women in politics experienced sexual violence.

The findings further highlight that young women, unmarried (never married, divorced or widowed) in politics were more susceptible to sexual violence compared to their married and older women in politics.

This is a shift from the literature van Baalen (2017); Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) and Krause (2020) which did not show how socio-demographic variables contributed to violence against women in politics. Party leaders, male colleagues within political parties, supporters of parties they do not belong to and state security agents, mainly perpetrate sexual violence against women in politics and electoral processes. These findings are similar to Birch, Daxecker & Hoglund (2020) on political violence against women in politics in West Africa. For sexual violence, women in politics just like women in general, Rohleder, & Flowers (2018) hardly reported cases to the police for assistance. Partly, this is so because of the general perception that violence against women in politics is a price paid by women who venture into politics or electoral processes (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). There is a need, therefore, for political parties, government, and the electoral management body (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) to produce monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that identify and address sexual violence against women in politics.

The study findings also highlight that women in politics experience sextortion and altered pornography. This study notes that for Zimbabwe, sextortion has been widely researched in other areas such as access to employment opportunities or economic opportunities and social opportunities (Mvelase, Z., & Mvuvu, T. 2021, Transparency International 2020), however, there is a dearth of literature on the subject when it relates to sextortion in political spaces. This study opines that the government and other development partners should economically empower women in politics such that they have sufficient resources to independently participate in politics.

The study also established that women in politics or electoral processes experience psychological abuse in its varied forms such as threats of abduction, rape or killing, stalking both physical and online, and cyber or online violence. All the study participants attested to having experienced this form of violence. These findings are confirmed by literature from other contexts Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), van Baalem (2017), and Krause (2020) which found that women in politics experienced higher levels of psychological violence compared to their male counterparts. The high prevalence of psychological violence calls for a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to managing the scourge. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) reports that women in politics or electoral processes are disproportionately exposed to cyber violence to discredit them as credible candidates. Given that, Zimbabwe has a youthful demography and a huge online presence.

CONCLUSION

The study noted that the adoption of gender quotas has helped boost women's presence in the legislature, however, the gender quotas have not effectively addressed gender disparities in political office representation of women as evidenced by the continued decline of women seconded by their political parties to contest as members of parliament or councillors in Zimbabwe. Despite global efforts to advance gender equity in governance and politics, women's representation in Zimbabwean elective politics remains low at 11%, as of August 2023, indicating significant gender disparities in political leadership positions. Further, subsequent recalls of elected officials in the aftermath of the 2023 elections have worsened the representation in the legislature as most of the recalled female representatives were replaced by males. Women's participation in elective politics in Zimbabwe

despite the presence of gender quotas is a result of a myriad of factors such as endemic political violence which is characterised by violence, hate speech, intimidation, sexual violence and intimidation which can be interpreted to be meant to scare away women from elective political processes. Patriarchal cultural norms, which reserve the domestic arena to females and the public arena to males, coupled with male hegemony and misogyny, lack of financial resources to compete at an equal footing with their male counterparts also hinder women's

participation in elective politics. Further, lack of a legal framework to govern the operations of political parties and to enforce equal representation of women also affects participation of women in elective political processes. There is therefore an urgent need for more comprehensive and sustainable measures to ensure women's full and effective political participation as a fundamental human right and a driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development in Zimbabwe as women are subtly forced to assume positions of less influence in the political realm.

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