



Current Debate Around Increasing Women Participation

There has been increasing consensus in the public domain that women carry a significant role in society yet their involvement in public life and politics has steadily declined. This is contrary to the positive reporting that campaigns have had a positive impact on a global scale and have resulted in increased women's political participation across Africa. Since the Beijing Declaration of 1995 for example, the number of women in the National Assembly has hovered between 18 to 28% in Zimbabwe.¹ It is only after the inclusion of a constitutional provision, S124, which guarantees 60 reserved seats for women for at least two terms that the percentage rose to an “impressive” 35%.² This is huge given the global averages in developed countries is around 22% and pits Zimbabwe as progressive in addressing the issue of gender parity. Celebrating the impact of the women’s quota in terms of numbers is however tantamount to premature celebrations as Section 124 is a sunset clause that will come to an end in 2023.

There is agreement that though efforts continue to be made in improving the plight of women and availing better opportunities which include access to education and the laws that seek to end early child marriages, government continues to pay lip service towards meeting its international obligations in ensuring gender parity and participation of women especially in decision making bodies. The consensus about the need to increase women in decision making and in politics goes as far as that. However, there is no agreement how this should be done and as a result there are multiple campaigns and sometimes even contradictory campaigns being pushed around as

¹ History of Women Parliamentarians. Parliament of Zimbabwe. <http://www.parlzim.gov.zw/about-parliament/publications/history-of-women-parlamentarians>

² “Women make up more than one third of Zimbabwe’s New Parliament.” UN Women <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/9/zimbabwe-women-mps-sworn-in>

possible options. This paper seeks to highlight the current debate around increasing women participation in Zimbabwe and give an opinion about how the campaign should go.

There are those that believe that the quota system is the only way that will guarantee increased women participation. This is evidenced by the fact that the current quota which guarantees 60 reserved seats for women increased the percentage of women in parliament from 17 to 35 %³ in 2013. This percentage puts Zimbabwe amongst the top countries in the region with a high number of female representation. Unfortunately the female quota that guarantees 60 women is a provisional clause and comes to an end in 2023. This poses the question: What next for female representation beyond the expiry of the provision in 2023?

There are those who think that the quota system is the route to take because it is enforceable. One of those suggesting this is the Minister of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development, Nyasha Chikwinya. She is proposing the amendment of the constitution for the extension of the quota beyond its expiry date in 2023.⁴ Understandably, given the deep-rooted socio-cultural hindrances women face, affirmative action policies need to be strengthened. The same school of thought is of the view that this provision must be extended to local government too where women are very active in voluntary associations and exhibit their leadership skills. However these leadership qualities have not been translated into leadership opportunities in local governance because of factors such as patriarchy, poverty, lack of access to financial resources, and illiteracy. This option is enforceable at law and will guarantee that women are always represented at both local and national level. Though we have gone four of the ten years into the current provision, they argue that 10 years is not sufficient in promoting the participation of women who still face many challenges in entering the public space which include lack of capacity, lack of resources for campaigning, negative or no media coverage. There is also still

³ "Women make up more than one third of Zimbabwe's New Parliament." UN Women
<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/9/zimbabwe-women-mps-sworn-in>

⁴ "Women Seek Proportional Representation Quota Extension" Veneranda Langa
<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2017/09/women-seek-proportional-representation-quota-extension/>

largely a negative perception and opposition to women being in the public space due to the ingrained system of patriarchy that still believes that politics is a male domain.

Whilst this is true, there is a serious problem in that the current quota was a token to appease the women's movement. It is no wonder it has received so much criticism from both male and female legislators from the main political parties, others even labeling it a waste of state resources. They insultingly accuse that there is no value for money in it. Contrary to this assertion of value for money, the current quota was in fact useful in so far as exposing how not to take a tokenism approach in addressing the issues of women participation. The mere fact that a quota outside the 210 constituencies was created is testament to the art of *politicking*, *gamesmanship* and *lip-service* played by the dominant power brokers in political parties.

There are those that are of the view that the quota system should run its course until 2023 and beyond that women should be able to challenge male counterparts in contesting seats. They argue that the purpose of the two terms under which the current quota is running was to give women the opportunity to build capacity by their exposure in the National Assembly. The quota was meant to be a training ground for women, ensure that their presence was felt and help change the perception that representation was mainly for men.

One of the key challenges facing the current female MPs under the quota system has been the difficulty to exist in the context of having to deal with elected MPs in the same geographical locations.⁵ Simply put, these female MPs have not been accepted and have earned a "*Baccossi*" tag that is weighing down heavily on them which needs to be addressed. The suggestion here is to get rid of the additional seats and incorporate them within the 210 constituency seats. That way those who put in an economic argument are appeased, and the women are also treated on the same footing as other MPs.

⁵ "Participation But No Voice; A Preliminary Report on Proportional Representation." 2016. RAU <http://researchandadvocacyunit.org/publication/activism-62>

Another suggestion being fronted is for the implementation and adherence to constitutional provisions which guarantee gender parity. Section 17 for example compels the State to :

“...take all measures, including legislative measures needed to ensure that

- (i) both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of government at every level; and
- (ii) Women constitute at least half the membership of all Commissions and other elective and appointed governmental bodies established by or under this Constitution or any Act of Parliament. ⁶

This provision is informing the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Gender and Community Development’s campaign and many other organisations, that representation should be achieved in a manner directed in the Constitution. The current gender campaigns are calling for the alignment of the Electoral Act to section 17 to ensure that 50% of electoral candidates will be male and 50% candidates will be female. Some have gone a step further on the dimension of the 50/50 representation by suggesting sub-dividing constituencies into two – male and female which will be contested separately over a period of time. After a defined period the constituencies could then be swapped on gender lines. This system will involve women contesting each other thereby eliminating the challenges of an uneven playing field that women face when contesting with men.

A glaring problem with this school of thought ...

There are young women who are of the view that the female quotas should be done away with and that they should also be afforded equal opportunity to contest for seats through the first past the post. Perhaps with a few professional young women coming on the political scene as “activists” young people feel they can challenge the status quo and get a seat at the table. Whether this is an option or they will be co-opted is a story for another day.

⁶ Constitution of Zimbabwe. Section 17 (1) (b) (ii)

Conclusion

It is important to understand the Zimbabwean society and the direction it takes. Radical approaches are sometimes necessary, but there is a danger of just having people whose worth is questionable. Achieving a 50/50 representation in public institutions for example is good for statistics and portrays a picture of progress. Agreed, women participation and representation are key features in building a strong democracy. However, there is always the danger in assuming that the mere presence of women in representative positions guarantees female participation. There is also the risk of putting a ceiling on the number of women in public spaces whereas this can actually be more.

Having highlighted the current debate, quotas should be considered strongly as a means to an end but they are not a solution for every situation, nor are they guaranteed to increase women's meaningful and effective participation in governance. What is good for Rwanda or any other country may not necessarily work for Zimbabwe. Society must embrace change, and recognize women and their role and what should be acceptable is evidence and commitment that sees a gradual increase in their involvement. Prescribing a 50/50 whilst very attractive, and seemingly the trend, sounds like an emotional decision because we never live in a utopian world. What if at some point men disconnect and get disinterested should we still force them to be a part of the 50/50?