



Devolution and Women Empowerment in Zimbabwe: An Opportunity for Young Women to Stand Up For Substantive Representation

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Women have been grossly marginalized in organs of decision-making and governance structures in Zimbabwe despite the Constitution's attempt to bridge this gap by providing both women and men the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres. Gender equality is yet to be achieved and women are still lagging in terms of decision making processes. A considerable number of young women participated in the 2018 harmonised elections. However their participation in governance issues, particularly how to take advantage of devolution mechanisms to articulate their concerns, remains an issue, which they should explore if they are to receive the benefits of such a process.

Devolution of power refers to a process where the government transfers the administrative, and economic powers to a local level paving way for a down top approach in terms of decision making and exercising powers of the state. The meaning of devolution is highly contested. However, people generally envisage a situation where the tiers of government have autonomy to make policies. In Zimbabwe, the 2013 constitution maintains a unitary form of [government which signifies some form of aggregated power at the national centre.](#) Given that our government has not made considerable effort in embracing devolution of power, chances are that young women will not fully benefit from the perceived merits of devolution.

Women are the majority in terms of population in many countries in the world, Zimbabwe is no exception. Despite this, however, gender equality has not been achieved and women are still lagging in terms of decision making processes especially in matters affecting their development. This has been due to under representation in decision making organs. Although women are the ones who turn out in large numbers during the elections, their substantive representation in elective positions remains poor.

Young women have been, over the years, excluded from self-governance due to a myriad of challenges. A 2019 RAU report points out that political violence and fear of political violence is a major [factor inhibiting the participation of women in politics](#). This affects women in general and young women in particular as they face challenges that are unique to them. Although the 2018 harmonised elections were not marred by overt political violence as the previous elections in terms of gender representation it showed no difference from the 2013 elections. There is no change between the 2013 and 2018 elections in terms of the [number of women directly elected into parliament](#). If the young women are to realise independence Zimbabwean local authorities have to enjoy fiscal autonomy, which entails the ability [to raise, spend money and be self-funding](#). This might prove to be a tall order as the people who control resources in the central government are unlikely to give up their monopoly easily and share with the general populace. Our constitution provides for a 50/50 gender representation, sections 3 (g), 17, 56 (2) and 80 (1) of the constitution stipulate that there should be gender equality in political, economic, cultural and social spheres. Young women have to demand nothing less than what the constitution stipulates.

The number of young women elected into parliament is even less, than women in general, as such young women need an avenue to express their needs and devolution of power to local government is one indispensable opportunity. A goal which is unattainable unless young women are well informed on the provisions of the constitutions on devolution of power. The devolution of government powers and responsibilities in chapter 14 section 264 of the 2013 constitution gives power of local governance to the people, enables them to participate powers of the state and [gives them power in making decisions on matters that affect them](#). Of course this includes young women. There were 7564 candidates contesting for local government seats, and 12% of these were independents and 17% overall were women. If women comprised 54% of the registered voters, total. This reflects that the desire for participation in elections among women, young women included is not complemented by information on participation in general. If the decision making process is transparent this will encourage a lot of young women to be involved. Given that women formed the [majority of registered voters in 2018, 54 %](#) it is possible for young women to take advantage of their numbers and make decisions at a local level that will feed into the national policy. The challenge young woman are likely to face is

the central government will not give up power easily for them to exercise autonomy. They are likely to maintain their grip through appointing [Provincial and District Administrators, and Provincial Governors, whose loyalty lies with the ruling government than needs of local young women](#). The executive is also retain power to appoint councillors and traditional leaders. Women have to demand their right to not only take part in governance but to become Provincial and District Administrators as well as become traditional leaders who understand how women have been excluded in the ownership and control of natural resources.

In this regard section 264 of the constitution ensures [equitable sharing of local and national resources](#). Young women face economic challenges which are peculiar to them. These involve lack of capital to access modern needs such as smart phone to remain at par with the events. Devolution affords young women to access resources that would be under the current government be arduous to get. A 2019 RAU study relates that among the issues women prioritise from the government are the [resuscitation of the economy, increase in wages, solving of high unemployment and aversion of draught](#). Young women can express their views at a local level without barriers that intercept or block their grievances through participating in freedoms that are guaranteed by devolution of power in the 2013 constitution.

Young women are also bombarded by patriarchal sentiments left right and centre. This is mostly a remnant of the colonial era which divided men and women on gender basis. The men would go to towns in search of jobs [while women were mandated to remain home and take care of the children](#). Back then, all the women could hope for was getting married and survive at the mercy of her husband enduring abuse in some cases just to have roofs over their heads. This has remains a challenge especially for the rural women who have a higher social capital but have [lower access to information and services as compared to their urban counterparts](#). Rural and urban women alike have to take advantage of the relatively high social capital, effective women to women campaigns and devolution of power to take part in governance. Devolution of power provides an opportunity for women to counter patriarchal believes. According to the RAU 2018 gender audit men generally believe in gender equality but the notion that men are [better political leaders than women reveals a minimal change among men](#). To this end devolution of power will make sure women take part in their own governance, it will bring the power of decision making at their hands.

The president promised to [devolve power during the 2018 campaign](#). Young women opinion leaders should take advantage of devolution of power to amplify their voices beyond obstacles

they face. The devolution of power is a governance policy young women should embrace and take advantage of if they are to articulate their rights. Young women should take advantage of their numbers, and amplify their voices through participating actively in matters that affect them at a local level, as provided for by devolution of power in our constitution. [Rural women have shown willingness to work together collectively](#), they vote in numbers participate in elections but over and above that they have to speak to the councillor and also contest for decision making positions. While their urban counterparts have access to media they reflect a higher degree of political fear however, women have to take bold steps and take the bull by the horns when it comes to articulating their issues. Women have to fight for their rights which have elevated them to equality with men in all aspects of life, they have to demand those entitlements. This will ensure their democratic participation in issues that affect them.