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Fostering Equality in Representation

Executive Summary

The 2018 elections were a slap in the face for women. No more women elected to the House of Assembly than in 2013, and even fewer elected to local government than in 2013. This occurred despite the requirement in the Constitution for gender equality as well as sustained efforts to persuade the government and the political parties to increase the numbers of women. This was more painful given the enthusiasm that women in Zimbabwe showed for participating in the elections, with even more women registering as voters than in 2013. Something is obviously wrong, and there is a strong need for a re-think by the women of Zimbabwe in how they are going to solve this problem.

Introduction

In Zimbabwe, generally, women's representation in governance cannot be separated from women's participation in social and political life. Women's agency is continuously constrained by patriarchy, no matter what the Constitution might require. Whilst women are certainly the major source of [social capital](#) in Zimbabwean society, more so in the rural areas, their influence in political life is largely indirect. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, there is a general feeling that women might not be suited for political office. According to the [Afrobarometer Round 7 \(2017\)](#) survey, despite the fact that Zimbabweans as a whole believe that men and women are equal, more men than women believe that men are better suited to political office.

Secondly, this view is reinforced by the sidelining of women from the mainstream of political party power. At face value, the tradition of creating "women's leagues" appears to 'honour' the importance of women, but it also sidelines women into a subsidiary life. For many political parties the role of [women's leagues](#) is simple and two-fold: firstly to support the main party, and, secondly, to mobilise women to vote for the party. However, the issue of political violence against women is also crucial, and is yet another factor inhibiting the full participation of women in politics generally, and certainly in coming forward as candidates.

Key Findings

These two points are reflected in the [findings of the 2018 elections](#).

The 2018 elections in Zimbabwe indicate the near-total failure of determined efforts by women to ensure an increase in the number of women directly elected to the National Assembly and local government. Despite women being in an increased majority as registered voters, no more women were elected to the National Assembly than in 2013, and the number of women elected to local councils actually dropped. Even more distressing was the number of votes cast for women candidates in the National Assembly: women candidates received a paltry 11% of the total votes cast.

It was also evident that there were markedly few women candidates overall, the poll for the Presidency apart. Women were only 15% of the candidates for the National Assembly and 17% of the candidates for local government. Clearly there was not much choice for women voters, but it does demonstrate how far Zimbabwe is from giving effect to the Constitutional requirement for gender equity.

However, these findings do not reflect the aspirations of Zimbabwean women, and young women in particular. [A study](#) conducted with the Institute for Young Women's Development (IYWD) provided clear evidence both of the interest in young women participating in politics and the value of working woman-to-woman. But one worrying finding was the large number of young women (58%) that felt that there was poor solidarity amongst women – the 'Pull her Down' (PhD) syndrome – and also the very large number (60%) that felt older women were doing little or nothing to foster young women.

In the aftermath of the all the preceding political turbulence of the past few years, the result may not be surprising to many. It is probable that women candidates (and voters) were the victims of the very seriously polarized political space, and the overwhelming contest between the two major political parties, ZANU-PF and the MDC Alliance.

It does seem that the views of the young IYWD members that a lack of solidarity amongst women may also be an explanation for the extremely poor support for women candidates. The lack of support for younger women may also be reflected in the observation that older women in political parties tended to opt for proportional representation seats rather than face the hurly-burly of campaigning for directly elected seats.

Whatever the reasons, it seems evident that the Women's Movement needs to give serious attention to how to solve the problem, and clearly appealing to men and political parties' better natures has not borne much fruit in 2018. So what might be the way forward for 2023?

Conclusions

The short conclusion for the women's movement in the aftermath of the 2018 elections seems to be back to the drawing board. Neither the determined campaigns of *Simuka* in 2013 nor the Women's Manifesto (the 50/50) campaign in 2018 has borne any fruit in respect of the constitutional obligation for gender equity.

There was choice for the female voter with female candidates both from political parties and women standing as independent candidates, the latter (and many of the former) were ignored by the voters, both male AND female. So, any attempt to get the equal representation demanded by the constitution will have to think beyond merely trying to persuade the voters and the political parties.

Dealing with the seriously polarized political space and the deep roots of patriarchy (and possibly matriarchal support for patriarchy) may need a more political approach than the slow drip of trying to change political and social cultures. Perhaps the solution will lie more in the direction of electoral reform than cultural change, and the problem that really needs addressing is the current electoral system of First-Past-The-Post (FPTP). This is not merely a

problem for women, and can be seen in the fact that the current government gets two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly with little more than half the votes.

Recommendations

We suggest that there are two sets of actions needed to address the problem of the lack of representation for women.

Short-term actions

The focus in the short term should be working to ensure that provisions in the Constitution's (Section 17) is complied with. This should involve pushing for an amendment to the Electoral Act to ensure compliance with the Constitution, with the requirement that there is a 50/50 split in candidates, and forcing compliance from the political parties. It may not be realistic in the short-term to demand a 50/50 split in actual representation, but it may be possible to ensure this for choosing candidates.

Medium-term actions

The medium-term is in aiming beyond the 2023 elections, with the demise of the previous proportional representation mechanism. The most realistic option for women, and one that has been favoured by many Zimbabweans in the past constitutional development processes, is to replace FPTP as the electoral system with full Proportional Representation (PR) for the National Assembly. Here political parties will submit list of candidates for the seats available in the Assembly, a system commonly used around the world, and it is obvious that an insistence on 50% of the list being female will meet the constitutional requirement.

It is not suggested that PR is the system for local government and FPTP is obviously necessary in order that citizens and policy makers at the local ward and council level be as intimate in contact with each other as possible.

The PR system may not be immediately attractive to the two main political parties, but will find favour with smaller parties, and, as far as we can see, is the only strategy that will address women's the access to political power.

Long-term actions

In the long term, the major objective must be to increase women's agency, both as voice and participation. Voting is all very well, but we need to take seriously the findings about a lack of solidarity amongst and take a more critical view of the virtues of patriarchy. 70% of Zimbabwe's population is under the age of 35, and more than half of this group are young women, who may be amongst the most marginalised of the Zimbabwean citizenry. Building young women's agency so that they become major participants in the socio-economic life of the country must become a priority.

Secondly, we need to take very seriously the rural-urban divide for women, and question the endless focus upon young rural women. This is not to claim that young rural women are unimportant as a focus, but rather to say that development and empowerment initiatives too frequently leave out young urban women. Women are not a "lump" and no one shoe fits all: we need to see the diversity and develop strategies to address the diversity. A good starting point will be to do the obvious, talk to young women and find out what works and what doesn't.