



# **Women's Political Leagues<sup>1</sup>**

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## Introduction

Women's leagues have existed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the common purpose of increasing the visibility and participation of women in the political arena. While women have the right to participate in political life, discriminatory practices that confine women to the private space have made it difficult for women to do so. The numbers of women in leadership positions in political parties, and at the national government, continues to dwindle. Women's leagues, formed within political parties, seek to redress this situation. Political parties have been described as the key to women's political participation because they are responsible for recruiting and selecting candidates for elections that determine a country's political future hence the formation of women's leagues within political parties. The importance of this can be gauged by the evidence that, on current trends, parity in representative bodies across the globe will only be achieved by the beginning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century.<sup>2</sup>

Establishing women's leagues that are incorporated in the political party has provided women with the space to focus on interests and policies that are designed to help women within the political party as well as externally. In Zimbabwe, the two major political parties, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T) have adopted constitutions that not only allow the existence of a women's league/wing but are also governed by rules and regulations that govern the party as a whole, providing legitimacy to the structure and organization of the women's league.

This paper, a first in the series on women's political leagues, is a literature review paper, providing an overview of the information on women's political leagues and wings that exists already. It explores the organization, structure and role women's leagues play in increasing the political participation of women. It also examines the challenges women's leagues face, hindering the progress of both their agenda and those of the women in the political environment. Closer to home, the paper will examine the two major political parties in Zimbabwe and the functionality of their women's wings. The words women's leagues and women's wings are used interchangeably in this paper as different political parties have chosen to use either of the two names.

## Background information

The earliest political parties that established women's leagues did so in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. In 1912, the Social Democratic Worker's Party in Norway founded its women's wing followed by the Social Democratic Party in Sweden, which formed its women's wing in 1920<sup>3</sup>. These wings, which were part of the political party, were formed during the early days of women's suffrage with the aim of uniting women members of the party and to galvanize their political participation. Now, in Africa, women's wings are a feature in almost all political parties. However, in the beginning, political parties did not care for women's involvement in politics. The African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, which was established in 1912, did not accept women as members until 1943<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, (2000) *Cultural Barriers to Women's Leadership: A Worldwide Comparison*. Quebec City: International Political Science Association World Congress, Cited in Cornwall, A, & Goertz, A. M (2005), *Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives*, Democratization, Vol.12, No.5, December 2005, pp.783–800

<sup>3</sup> International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics. “*Consolidated Response on Establishing Women's Party Sections*”

<sup>4</sup> ANC Women's League Executive Manual. 1997

For a long time, the role women played in the global development was largely ignored by development theorists<sup>5</sup>. It was argued women would simply catch up once the development agenda kicked off, and, therefore, there was no need to create mechanisms that would allow women to benefit despite the systemic discrimination they had faced for years. This did not happen, and, as a result, women did not benefit from any of the political, social, cultural or economic benefits others received. In the political space, women's voices were absent from the decision-making institutions and processes. Their access to political leadership opportunities and resources was lacking and they continued to face difficulties in attaining influential positions in politics.

Women's political participation is critical especially in a democratic society where the participation of all citizens is essential in strengthening the quality of democracy. For example, the World Bank now sees the agency and voice of women as fundamental to development, and obviously representation must be crucial component of development.<sup>6</sup> While it is also a demand for justice, women's participation is necessary for women's interests to be taken into account<sup>7</sup>. One of the effective strategies that has been used to increase women's political participation especially within political parties has been to form a women's wing. Creating a group within a political party that focuses on various issues or demographics such as the youth, and, in this case, women have been proven to provide a space that identifies political issues and policies specific to that group. Without this particular attention to a specific group, there is the danger of ignoring their needs or creating umbrella solutions that might not necessarily solve women's issues.

More and more, political parties are realizing the importance of involving the membership and leadership of women, but research has shown the difficulty and resistance women over the years faced in forming women's wings within the political party. Politics being a male-dominated space, the male leadership was hesitant to allow women to participate. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) stated that, for women to gain credibility to start a women's league, they had to demonstrate a mass interest from women for the platform<sup>8</sup>. They also had to gain support from party officials. By including the support of party officials, it is argued that this dispels fears of threatening the existing party's leadership. However, the formation of women's wings within a party does not guarantee the immediate implementation of the wings' objective. Women were only accepted in the ANC when the party realized women's mobilization was necessary to strengthen the organization. Despite this, they still showed a limited understanding of women's participation in the political party<sup>9</sup>.

### **The organization and structure of women's leagues within a party**

In a society where women constitute more than half the population size, women are an important electoral constituency that cannot be ignored. Political parties understand this and have established women's wings to enhance the engagement of women in the political party.

The structure and organization of newly-established sections in a political party is important in legitimizing the wing. The establishment of a new structure should be included in the internal rules and regulations of the party, as well as have its own legal framework. The

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<sup>5</sup> Andrea Martinez. Gender and Development: The Struggles of Women in the Global South

<sup>6</sup> Jeni Klugman, Lucia Hanmer, Sarah Twigg, Tazeen Hasan, Jennifer McCleary-Sills, Julieth Santamaria, (2014), *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*. World Bank Group.

<sup>7</sup> Best Practices used by Political Parties to Promote Women in Politics

<sup>8</sup> National Democratic Party. "Political Party Women's Wings Fact Sheet".

<sup>9</sup> Women and the ANC. *Women were used to mobilize and support the party's aims and objectives while their own opinions were suppressed.*

framework should detail the internal and external roles of the women's league as well as the selection of the leadership of the wing. The structure of women's wings differs and depends with the political party. Some leagues have a centralized structure while others are decentralized, with a number of branches countrywide assisting in reaching more members. However, women's leagues should be structured in a way that allows them to reach women members and voters, and to influence the party platform and policies.

The Women's League of the ANC, which was formed in 1948, decades after the political party had been in existence, is "*well-established and autonomous while also well integrated into party structures*"<sup>10</sup>. The ANC's Women's League has its own leadership and decision making process, while at the same time it is integrated into all the ANC leadership structures. The league has argued this arrangement helps them achieve their goals which are to "*galvanize women behind the ANC's vision and to work towards the full emancipation of women*"<sup>11</sup>. In Nigeria, most parties do not have institutionalized women's wings. However, woman leaders sit on decision making bodies and mobilize and organize women for the party<sup>12</sup>. Such an arrangement for women's participation might be ineffective depending on what the women seek to achieve on a larger scale.

ZANU PF and MDC-T, the two major political parties in Zimbabwe have established women's leagues that have been included in the parties' constitutions. In addition to being governed overall by the party's constitution, the constitution of the Women's League of ZANU PF contains their aims, objectives, membership and the roles of the various organs, structures and leadership. Membership, an important aspect of the leagues, is defined in different ways by different political parties. To be a member of the ZANU PF Women's League, one has to be above the age of 18 and be a member of the political party. Further payment of membership dues entitles one to a membership card from the Women's League<sup>13</sup>. This means a woman cannot be a member of the league without being a member of the party itself. In this case, ZANU PF Women's League, like the Women's League of ANC, is fully integrated within the party's structure.

Under the MDC-T Constitution, a National Assembly of Women exists with a primary function of mobilizing and organizing women to join and actively participate in the party<sup>14</sup>. The MDC-T Constitution does not define who can be a member of the women's national assembly. However, perhaps it should follow that a female member of the political party can be a member of the women's league.

Upon examination, the two constitutions are very clear and precise on the mandates of the women's wings within the party. This follows that one has to be allegiant to the party first before being a member of the women's wings. As a result, the structure and organization of the women's league should show a firm understanding of women's needs and a support to advance the status of women within the party and society as a whole. There is need for further research to explore whether the writings in the constitution translate to reality on the ground for women members in these two parties.

### **The role of women and women's leagues in political parties**

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<sup>10</sup> <https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/maximising-opportunities-political-parties-womens-wings-and-the-gender-agenda-in-africas-developing-democracies/>

<sup>11</sup> ANC Women's League Executive Manual. 1997

<sup>12</sup> Wilson Center. "Maximising Opportunities: Political Parties, Women's Wings and the Gender Agenda in Africa's Developing Democracies"

<sup>13</sup> ZANU PF Constitution. Article 17

<sup>14</sup> MDC Constitution. Article 7.

The common functions of women's wings across the globe include the following:

- recruiting and retaining members;
- identifying issues and developing policy;
- and identifying funding options for the league and for female candidates.

The league itself can serve as a forum for discussing women's challenges to political participation within and outside the party. They also organize activities to educate women about their political rights.

At the top of the many roles women's leagues have, is the mobilization of women voters in support of the party's mandate. The leadership of the league is tasked with reaching out to the women who can support the party and its candidates during an election. While the wing mobilizes women voters in an attempt to enlarge the party base, it has to be done in a strategic way that simultaneously promotes women's interests.

Researchers have extensively reported on the important role of identifying funding options for the league and its candidates. As stated below, women have difficulties funding their campaigns and as a result few women get elected into decision making institutions. Women's leagues should be able to identify ways to raise money for their league. The Conservative Women's Organization, the women's wing for the UK's Conservative Party, is a self-funded group who have identified effective strategies in fundraising such as soliciting donations from the party's supporters<sup>15</sup>.

Overall, women's leagues are formed to increase women's political participation. If the male leadership in the political parties is not sensitized on gender issues and the importance of a diverse political leadership, achieving this mandate proves insurmountable. Women's wings should be able to transform power relations within the party by reaching out and training party members about gender equality.

### **Challenges and Limitations of Women's Wings**

In 1975, the male leadership of Zambia's United National Independence Party (UNIP) formed the Women's League whose primary role was to mobilize and politically educate women to "*support male politicians without challenging the predominance of males in decision-making structures of the party and government.*"<sup>16</sup> In this case, the UNIP's women's league have rarely made any significant change towards the rigid undemocratic structures and leadership of the party that many have pointed exists within the institutions. In fact, the league did little for the women members of the UNIP, acting against women's empowerment and the ideals the league was meant for<sup>17</sup>. UNIP in Zambia is not the first party to act against the aims women's leagues are created to achieve. Having mentioned already the existence of women's leagues in a most political parties across Africa, it appears many still have to live up to the aims and objectives they were formed for.

The example of UNIP also brings to the light the issue of tokenism within the party and the league. Depending on the methods used to recruit members, political parties can recruit members of certain demographics who can support the male leadership of the party without questioning whether this advances their interests as women. As a result, a women's league, instead of centering around women and their interests, marginalizes and relegates women to lesser important ranks.

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<sup>15</sup> NDI. Women's Wings Fact Sheet

<sup>16</sup> Women's Role in Post-Independence Zambian Politics

<sup>17</sup> Women's Role in Post-Independence Zambian Politics

In the structure and organization of women's leagues, most exist within the regulations of the party itself. While this provides legitimacy to the league, there is the danger of limiting the degree of autonomy of the league such that members are uncomfortable to carrying out their roles; for example, creating a safe and secure platform where female members raise their concerns and formulate policies to solve problems.

The funding and allocation of financial resources also plays a key part in the efficiency or lack thereof of a women's league. One of the challenges which contribute to the lack of female candidates who run for office is the difficulty of raising funds for campaigns<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, unless the women's league is capable of raising and maintaining their own budget and accounts they are likely to depend on the party which might choose a male candidate instead of rallying behind a female candidate. This is the case with the ZANU PF Women's League whose finances are subject to the rules and regulations of the party.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusions**

A variety of case studies have suggested that political parties have increased their support base and gained electorally after adopting reforms to promote women's empowerment. One of these reforms being the formation of women's leagues. Women's leagues have the opportunity to advance women's issues within the party and outside. They are important in this regard. However, the ability of the league to spearhead those issues depends on the organization and structure of the league and its proximity to the party itself. If a league has the support of the party, and is able to influence the party's agenda on women and establish itself as a key champion of women's issues, then it is very likely that it is also able to influence change at national level.

Further research on this topic will include the origins and history of the women's leagues of Zimbabwe's major political parties and how they have fared in terms of implementing their mandates. What kind of resistance did they face in establishing the league? What are some of the achievements they have made through the course of the league's existence? Are the women's leagues necessary given Zimbabwe's context? Have they been effective in promoting the participation of women within and outside the party? Over the last 5 years, new political parties have been established, do they have women's leagues, what was the rationale for having them or not? What are the challenges for women in these political parties, how different are they from the main ones? Besides the constitutions of the major political parties, there is not much information available and research that has been done on the women's leagues in Zimbabwe. This presents an opportunity for Research and Advocacy Unit to create literature on the women's political leagues in Zimbabwe as well as add to the African literature that already exists.

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<sup>18</sup> RAU. "Participation but No Voice: A Preliminary Report on Proportional Representation". 2016

<sup>19</sup> ZANU PF Constitution