



Women's wings in Zimbabwe in 2017:

Are they necessary?*

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Introduction

Women's wings¹ have existed since the early 20th century with the common purpose of increasing the visibility and participation of women in the political arena. Women were traditionally not engaged in politics as this was seen as a domain for men. Even though 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 women stated that patriarchy², some have gone as far as saying misogyny³, is the root cause of the lack of women in politics. Without addressing this, it is unlikely that women in leadership will increase regardless of the Constitutional provisions, sections 17 and 56 as evidenced by President E.D. Mnangagwa's cabinet,⁴ sworn in on the 4th of December 2017.

Women leadership in political parties, and at the national government, continues to dwindle, attitudes and treatment of women⁵ in these positions has dissuaded women to the extent that they do not want to get involved at any level. Women's wings, formed within political parties, seek to redress this situation but it is an uphill battle as there is little confidence in political parties, especially among the urban under-35s⁶. 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. 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 22nd Century.⁷

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 Southern Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) has the oldest women's league⁸, being formed in 1943, thirty-one years after the formation of the party, and still going strong. Women's representation is largely attributable to the voluntary quota enacted by the ANC, which was initially 30% in 2002 and later increased to 50% in 2009, largely through the actions of the women's league. Increased educational opportunities in South Africa have given rise to a larger pool of women situated

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¹ The terms wings and leagues will be used interchangeably in this report

² RAU(2017) *Women and Active Citizenship in Zimbabwe* April 2017 RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

³ <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2017/03/women-urged-use-femininity-advantage/>

⁴ <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2017/12/new-cabinet-negates-women-participation/>

⁵ RAU(2014) *Does encouraging women to register and vote make a difference? A Preliminary Report on Women's Experiences with the 2013 Elections* March 2014 RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

⁶ RAU(2017) *Will young women make a difference in the 2018 elections? Findings from an online survey*, June 2017, RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

⁷ 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

⁸ <http://womensleague.anc.org.za>

for political power.⁹ 20 years after Independence, three women are vying for the ANC Presidency¹⁰, and these women are part of the women's league.

In Zimbabwe, the two major political parties, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriot Front (ZANU PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), have adopted constitutions that not only allow the existence of a women's league but are also governed by rules and regulations that govern the party as a whole, providing legitimacy to the structure and organisation of the women's league. There is however very little in the public domain on the history of these leagues. The trend of setting up women's leagues continues with the newly formed political parties, but it is not clear whether it is because they value the roles that women play in politics or is a case of following a model.

This report examines women's political wings in Zimbabwe, and is a follow up to a previous report produced in June 2017.¹¹ Women's wings are common in any political party, but the question is, in the era of seeking gender equality, are they necessary and relevant? It has been said that they are a critical player in any political matrix. However, outside of popularity politics one wonders if they are still necessary; in fact, what is the key mandate of these wings and is this mandate being fulfilled?

This report will explore the role of various political party women's wings from an insider's view as well as an outsider's view.

Background

Zimbabwean politics has evolved over time, more interestingly recently. The role of women has also evolved over time from being in the background to taking the forefront. Women's wings are present in all political parties and they play a critical role. In fact, repeatedly we read about the role of the women's wings in the party and their role in recruiting and organising people within the party structures. They have existed for a long time and a Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) report¹² noted *the earliest political parties that established women's leagues did so in the early 20th 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. 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.*¹³

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,

⁹ Aili Mari Tripp, Women and Politics in Africa Today, available <http://democracyinafrica.org/women-politics-africa-today/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2017-10-31-another-woman-in-the-running-for-anc-presidency-but-its-not-who-you-expect/>

¹¹ This report is a second part to a first report done by Research and Advocacy Unit entitled [Women's Political Leagues](#) looking at the history of women's leagues In Africa.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid.

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. 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. 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.¹⁴

Although women are the majority, 52%, in local government only 16% are women, 34% women in the National Assembly as a result of the quota, but, without the quota, the figure drops to 18%, and in cabinet we only have 26% women¹⁵. These figures show that there is an interest in politics and leadership positions, and it is crucial to understand the role the women's wing play within the party in mobilising and voting.

The RAU report concluded that '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.

Methodology

This research used a phenomenological theory; the findings of this report are the experiences of the participants and are not a reflection of political parties in their entirety. The research was carried out using key informant's interviews of members of political parties, as well as those that work in close proximity with political parties. The research also used a desktop review to enhance the findings from the interviews. Whilst the interviews did not cover every political party, they are a reflection of the experiences of women within political parties and those in civil society.

Despite the fact that the key informants were to be anonymised, it was extremely difficult to secure interviews especially within ZANU PF. This research was carried out during the height of a sustained factional conflict within the party, and their members were hesitant to speak about their women's league as it was headed by Grace Mugabe, who was one of the central figures in the factional fighting¹⁶.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ RAU(2017) *Feminisation of the Electoral Process in Zimbabwe*, March 2017, RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT AND WOMEN IN POLITICS INCUBATOR OF ZIMBABWE, HARARE

¹⁶ RAU (2015) *COUP DE GRÂCE? Plots and Purges: Mugabe and ZANU PF's 6th People's Congress* July 2015 RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

Findings

Women leagues have existed since early 1920s in Eastern Europe and were emphasised at platforms like the Beijing conference,¹⁷ where the idea that women needed a space to participate fully in leadership. The key informants in this research stated that women's wings were important spaces for women and it was important to understand why the participants thought women's wings were necessary and relevant in 2017. Their responses varied. *Women's wings are a platform to empower each other, discuss issues, which are important to women, and it is a safe space to just be women.* Another interviewee said *it is important to have women's wings considering the ratio of women to men in the main wing, women are underrepresented so this space is necessary.*

However, it is not without challenges; for some it seems women's wings are spaces to relegate women and their issues into another space which is not in the main wing¹⁸ of the political party. The challenge many have is that once one is in the league leadership there is a glass ceiling to get to the main wing. One of the interviewees said that *the argument that most men use to keep women not of the main wing is 'women have their own space so why do you want to be greedy and take power in all spaces.'* The reality though is that, although women's leagues have their own structures, they are still subject to the main wing. The league is just but another arm of the party, which needs ultimate authority from the main wing. In spite of existence of the wings, there is still a serious under-representation of women within the main wing leadership and political leadership in general in Zimbabwe. So are wings useful?

Membership & governing laws

Of the political parties mentioned, the women's wing is not joined *per se*, but it includes every woman in the party. One only has to be a member of the political party to be a member of the women's wing. In all the political parties researched, the women's wing does not have stand-alone constitution, but they do have specific clauses within the party constitution to which they have to adhere.

Women's wings set their own agenda. According to the interviewees, their activities include educating women and helping to boost their confidence to participate in the political arena. They deal with everyday issues that affect women and help them to be self-sufficient. This includes organising women to start *mukando*¹⁹ clubs and helping them earn money. They also carry out empowerment programmes as well as leadership and training workshops. These include engaging in projects such as soap making, potato sack planting and learning to make various commodities e.g. juices. They encourage women to be financially independent. They also mobilise people from all spheres, churches, and their communities to take part in various activities like voting or participating in nation processes. The women's wings are tasked to campaign for their various political parties and are strong advocates for women's rights.

As we are preparing for the elections the Women's Assembly has started working from the grassroots level. For instance, I come from Bulawayo and I am working with the people in my local branch which is... so as to ensure that people at the grassroots have the correct

¹⁷ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/declar.htm>

¹⁸ Synonymous with men wing

¹⁹ Mukando is a form of savings club where participants put money together to either start a project or buy something.

information. We are now busy doing door to door campaigns so that everyone gets information on the changes in the electoral system.

Successes and Challenges

The interviewees stated that if they did not have the women's wings Section 124 of the Constitution would not exist. Women's wings lobbied to have the quota system that has increased the number of women in parliament²⁰. They also believe they have taken strides in generally grooming women to participate actively in politics that has brought about the numbers of women in parliament and councils that we have today²¹. Although the numbers are equal to men as stated in the Constitution (Section 17), they celebrate the few successes and hope that in 2018 more women will be in parliament and councils.

The key informants stated that they also have had some challenges like any other organisation. According to the party constitutions, the women's wings are supposed to get funds from the party but it does not always happen this way. This means that their activities are underfunded and this mainly affects women in communities as they operate from the grassroots with no financial support base. The political terrain is also not friendly or accommodating for women:

Sometimes as a member of parliament, the constituency assumes that you always have money. So to be able to have women's wings meetings as directed by the party constitution the leadership need funds and most of the time they will come to you the MP to say we are mobilising for you, so help us with bus fair to attend a provincial meeting for example. If you have, the money then you can give them because they are your support base but the problem comes in when one does not have money as a woman and maybe a man who is also campaigning starts funding them, he will get their support. Therefore, the funding of activities within the women's league is a big challenge.

A key factor affecting women's leagues is the funding and allocation of financial resources. One of the challenges that contribute to the lack of female candidates who run for office is the difficulty of raising funds for campaigns²². This is an area for which the women's wings could push in support of their 50/50 campaign. Therefore, unless the women's league is capable of raising and maintaining their own budget and accounts, they are likely to continue depending on the party that will more likely choose a male candidate instead of supporting a female candidate, even less likely a young woman.

Sometimes the challenges come from the men in the party:

Basically as a politician you face a number of challenges. Men do not accept the participation of women in the political arena until you have proved your worth. Usually when you go out to speak in public the audience does not pay as much attention as it pays when it is a man speaking but

²⁰ RAU(2016) *Participation but No Voice: A Preliminary Report on the Proportional Representation* December 2016, RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

²¹ GenderLinks (2015) *SADC Gender Barometer*

²² RAU(2016) *Participation but No Voice: A Preliminary Report on Proportional Representation* December 2016 RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT HARARE

personally I have made a resolution that I will continue to stand my ground whether there is someone cheering or not. I have noticed that women are sometimes downtrodden but the moment you show that you have done adequate research on what you are presenting people start-paying attention.

Do they have Power?

The issue of whether women's wings have power remains subjective. Some felt that they do not have power because they are still subject to the main wing, whilst others felt wings have ultimate power. One example was within ZANU PF, where the interviewee felt the league had the numbers, since the majority of the party's supporters are women, and hence nothing could really be done without the blessing of the women and the youth. The interviewee also felt that they are in the process of advocating for a constitutional amendment to have a female vice president and that had made them realise they have power to effect change at a national level. However, she did also contend that one of the challenges is that the men had infiltrated the league in that they had worked behind the scenes to have certain women whom they could influence. In some cases, they had failed to achieve their goals, but the interviewee still felt that the league had power to make significant changes. Some of their power was minimised by the fact that they were outnumbered in the main wing leadership, and hence their own resolutions do not always sail through.

Another interviewee felt that the women's wing has power because they sit in the standing committee of the party and they could adequately represent the position of women.

One of the greatest challenges for any wing is the fact that their decisions are still subject to review by the main wing and can be vetoed by a few people. They also cannot make decisions that affect the whole party without these being approved by the executive leadership. This then raises questions: do they have power at all, and if so how much and how are they using it? Depending on where one stands, the answers to these questions will differ as some women felt that they have power just in their numbers whilst others acknowledged that they were relatively powerless.

Going forward

The interviewees felt it would be better if they have more space in the management committees of the parties and not the little representation they have. Having more women sit in the committee will help so that issues raised in the women's wing are addressed adequately :

I think women needed that space because there are some issues that women feel more comfortable to discuss in their own space. Men dominate in the main body because women look down upon themselves and they lack the initiative, which is why I am saying women need to be capacitated. Women are born leaders but they just do not take the initiative. They always give men room to manoeuvre and I say no to that. Women should be able to manoeuvre. Men learn the ropes when they are already elected and women should do the same. They should try to be as initiative as men.

However, some felt that women's wings were not necessary anymore in 2017.

Women's wings are not necessary because they are a parallel structure that is ineffective. They were created as a means of side-lining women because the political arena is male dominated. The top positions are occupied by men so they created the Women's wing in order to side-line and silence women. All decisions made by the Women's wing can either be approved or disapproved by men. The key leadership appointments are made by men and some of the appointments are strategic in the sense that they are done for the benefit of men. They appoint women whom they can easily influence even to oppress other women. Hence because of this when some women are elevated into the main wing leadership they start to behave like men and forget about the women's issues in a way to protect their positions and this hinders the autonomy of women. Those women who occupy top positions in the main wing are easily thrown out once they fall out of favour with those who helped them get there.

Another interviewee said:

The women's league is similar to the traditional structure in which women are said to belong in the kitchen so the leagues were created to ensure that women are kept occupied and not interfere with the decision making process in the Main Wing. Most women who are in the Women's League leadership are content with their positions and they do not aspire to be in the Main Wing. A lot of party support comes from the Women's league and the Youth League respectively. The Women's League represents the party at grassroots level because those in the party leadership rarely go to the grassroots. They require the Women's league to do all the groundwork yet they are not involved in the decision making processes. For me, the Women's League is insignificant.

The political domain is dominated by men and it is difficult for women to break through this glass ceiling. The issue more complex than women just being appointed into power as even after appointment they are still subject to men in leadership.

The face, voice and attitude of politics is male which is why most women who make it to the top end up behaving like men. There is a lot of inequality. When women want to raise some points even in parliament they need to have the support of influential men in order for them to be heard. The problem lies with the political environment which dictates that all decisions have to be approved by men.

If the women's wings were such a noble idea, then why don't we have men's wings where they can discuss their issues as men because they do have their issues just like women?

The reason why there is no men's league is that men's issues are considered to be so important that they are discussed in the Main Wing while women's problems are considered to be minor.

For women's leagues to be more effective there is need to have equal representation in decision making. Until there is 50/50 parity, women's voices will remain a whisper in a

rowdy room full of men who are not willing to listen. The leagues need to evolve in 2017 from the original conception and utilise the Constitution, a more powerful document than their parties constitutions, that requires parity between men and women and which will give them the leverage to achieve what they want.

There seems to be two schools of thought when it comes to the women's wings. One that seems to say they are relevant because they are a space to discuss women's issues, capacity build other women and thereby increase women's political participation as there are still low numbers of women taking part in politics. Whilst others view them as irrelevant as they have been a way of relegating women's issues from the main wing and they view them as unnecessary in today's politics. Regardless of the view that is taken, one has to understand the concept of women's political participation.

It is common knowledge that women are the majority in Zimbabwe, but they are not the majority in political leadership and their participation in politics remains low.²³ Post-2013 elections women made an outcry as to the few women in cabinet and the Chronicle responded as quoted below:

*...with due respect to those who wanted more women to be part of Cabinet, the fact is that those few women who were appointed are a clear representation of what is on the ground. Few women are actively participating in politics and for most of them their participation is through attending rallies only where they will be supporting men and whom they again vote for. Surprisingly, women will then come and call for their voice to be heard at all decision making stages. For this Parliament, women should thank the proportional representation and the zebra system which was for the Lower House and Upper House respectively. Without that, fewer women would be in both houses.*²⁴

This same cry was echoed by the women's movement when President Mnangagwa appointed his cabinet, but it is as if no one is listening.

The writer of the article failed to interrogate a critical question why women in Zimbabwe do not participate in politics at leadership level. Perhaps that is what will answer the question why we have fewer women in politics today than we did before. One of the key hindrances for women is the nature of Zimbabwean elections has been violent and women tend to shun away from this. It has been noted that "*polarisation along political lines, and the greatest obstacle to participation for most citizens in both rural and urban areas as well as women and youth is the nature and structure of the state institution of the local government.*"²⁵ The political terrain in Zimbabwe will have to change eliminate violence, ensure equal opportunities of funding for men and women and deal with patriarchal tendencies that are seen even in politics.²⁶

²³ <http://www.chronicle.co.zw/womens-participation-in-politics-remains-marginal/> November 2 2013

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ RAU(2016) Exploring obstacles for women and youth participation at local government level, February 2016, RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

²⁶ RAU (2010) Preying on the Weaker Sex: Political Violence Against Women in Zimbabwe, November 2010 IDASA [An African Democracy Institute], the International Center for Transitional Justice [ICTJ] and the Research and Advocacy Unit [RAU] HARARE

Perhaps increasing women's political participation in Zimbabwe will have to happen outside the strict political party divide. As more and more women shun party politics maybe it is time the women's wings not only recruit women for their parties but encourage political participation from a parliamentary caucus point of women. With the disillusionment of many women with party politics perhaps it is time to move from merely encouraging to women participate from a leadership point of view and increase women in parliament. In as much as Zimbabweans vote along party lines, voter apathy is also increasing and women's wings will have to address these, and evolve to achieve their mandates. It is important to include the young women who are a huge voting constituency but feel they do not belong and their issues are not valued or respected in governance issues²⁷.

Conclusion

Until recently, when the former First Lady of Zimbabwe, Grace Mugabe came to the helm of the ZANU PF women's league leadership, the nation knew very little about any women's wing and had little interest. Since her ascendance Zanu-PF women's league has dominated the news.²⁸ This gave Zimbabweans an insight into the 'power' of the secretary of the Zanu PF women's league. Her fall, however, showed that she only had the power because she was Grace Mugabe, the wife of the President. We are now looking forward to the newly selected secretary: what will be the flagship of her tenure? Time will tell. The same questions could be asked about the other parties: what do we know about the MDC-T, MDC, ZAPU, PDP or any of the other parties women's wing chairs?

Women's wings are something that has been existent in politics for a long time, and, to a huge extent, they play a significant role in any political setting. They serve the role of recruitment for the party and are the key constituent vote. However, there are issues, with under representation being the biggest one, that could speak to their success or failure. If they command as much power they as purport to, they are failing to realise and use it to their advantage. This is a weakness of the women's wings. The party constitutions are not cast in stone as is evident with Zanu PF advocating for a clause to have a female vice president in their constitution. It is evident then that they can all lobby for 50/50 within their constitutions. Without them, most of the parties would not function effectively, and hence women's league are not fully utilising their potential power. Their methods remain the same and perhaps there lies their challenge. In their current form, justification of their existence could be difficult as they have not quite achieved their mandate: however, if they are forceful and advance women's causes across the political divide, they can be a force to reckon with.

It is most unlikely that these wings will be dismantled soon, as they are serving a purpose to the parties. Until and unless the women in these wings decide that they want to challenge the status quo, we will have women's leagues as a permanent fixture in our politics.

²⁷ RAU(2017) *Will young women make a difference in the 2018 elections? Findings from an online survey*, June 2017, RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY UNIT, HARARE

²⁸ See <http://www.chronicle.co.zw/zanu-pf-womens-league-makes-new-appointments>
<http://www.zbc.co.zw/2017/07/27/live-updates-zanu-pf-womens-league-national-assembly/>
<http://www.herald.co.zw/league-resolves-to-fire-sandi-moyo-mahoka-%E2%80%A2-case-to-be-referred-to-ndc-%E2%80%A2-kasukuwere-called-to-order/>
<http://www.herald.co.zw/first-lady-rolls-out-poultry-projects/>