



Research & Advocacy Unit (RAU)
7, Sudbury Avenue, Monavale, Harare,
Zimbabwe

Email: admin@rau.co.zw
Phone: +263 (4) 302 764
Mobile: +263 772 353 975
URL: www.researchandadvocacyunit.org

Policy Brief No.2/17

Increasing women's political participation

Executive Summary

New research by the Research & Advocacy Unit documents the experiences of women legislators under proportional representation and the perceptions other MPs have on the special measure to increase women representation.¹ This report explores what challenges and opportunities the current MPs under PR have and what the next steps should be after the expiry of Section 124 in 2023. Learning from the shortcomings of the current quota system, the report further seeks to explore how women should utilise the current quota and what is the strategy beyond 2023 to ensure that gender parity is realised.

Introduction

It is fact that most male-dominated political and government institutions advance the interests of men rather than those of women and thus compromise on their needs and aspirations. Prior to 2013, Zimbabwe had a largely ad hoc approach to the issue of female representation. It was mostly driven by moral considerations within political parties in response to the pressures applied by the women's constituency within those parties.

This pressure was given added impetus by Zimbabwe's participation in the Beijing Conference in 1995, leading to considerable pressure being mounted during the constitutional process in the late 1990s for greater enforcement of women's rights. This was aborted when the constitution was rejected in the 2000 referendum, but most of the concerns were revived in the constitutional process from 2009 to 2013, and have been included in the amended 2013 Constitution.

Section 17(1)(b)(ii) of Zimbabwe's new Constitution that came into effect in 2013 states that: *"The State must promote full gender balance in Zimbabwean society and in particular ...must... take all measures including legislative measures needed to ensure women constitute at least half*

¹ RAU (2016), *Participation but no Voice: A Preliminary Report on Proportional Representation in Zimbabwe's Legislature*. December 2016. Harare : Research & Advocacy Unit.

of the membership of all commissions and all elective and appointed governmental bodies established by or under this Constitution or any Act of Parliament.”

To fast-track the increase in the number of women representation in the National Assembly, S124b provides as follows;

For the life of the first two Parliaments after the effective date, an additional sixty women members, six from each of the provinces into which Zimbabwe is divided, elected through a system of proportional representation based on the votes cast for candidates representing political parties in a general election for constituency members in the provinces.

Whilst this might be the case, the real consequences have far-reaching impact. In the last (Seventh) Parliament, representation by women was 16% in the National Assembly and 25% in the Senate. The percentage of women in the Eighth Parliament increased to 35% in the National Assembly and 48% of the Senate, but this masks an actual decline in the number of women directly elected, as the increase only occurs courtesy of the quota system. The number of directly elected women representing constituencies decreased from 34 in 2008 to 26 in 2013.²

Key Findings

The new study by RAU identified a number of issues of concern as regards the proportional representation of women:

- Whilst MPs have three basic functions -law making, representation and oversight of the executive arm - the representation function appears not to have been well considered by the political parties. This is because Members of Parliament under PR find it difficult to organize meetings in the constituencies that are supposed to be under their supervision as they clash with elected MPs. The lack of understanding of what proportional representation (PR) MPs are there for also cascades down to the elected MPs, and, as a result, the latter tend to give them less respect. It was stated that they do not represent the people but rather the party, and are called derogatory names such as *Bacossi* or *Kadoma*. This clear distinction is also made in the house when the issue of Constituency Development Funds (CDF) was discussed: the PR MPs were not entitled to the funding as they were deemed to not have any constituency to represent.
- Capacity issues have been raised that the new members to the National Assembly continuously need to work on to effectively discharge their Parliamentary roles. This is not new and should not be considered as a problem in the short term. The challenge is to get women on board first and continuously build their capacity. To suggest that women need to have their capacity developed outside and then come on board is an attempt to derail the increase in the number of women. The reserved quota is supposed to help changing attitudes

² RAU (2015, *Occasional Visitors Re-Visited: Attendance in the First Session of the 8th Parliament of Zimbabwe*. April 2015. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit.

about women in politics and motivate other women to take up political positions in future.

- The challenge of addressing gender parity issues emanate from political parties that have not shown willingness to do so. As much as Zimbabwe is bound by the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, political parties have not embraced it fully and continue to pay lip-service to the issue of increasing women participation. The party structures are designed to serve the interests of a few and they reward the women based on patronage and to window dress. This window dressing in political parties will continue to relegate women to pawns in a game played by men.
- The media was identified as failing to promote understanding on the roles of Members of Parliament under Proportional Representation and that of women in general. Instead of capturing the issues that are being generated by women in Parliament and in their respective Portfolio Committees, it has instead focused on negative stories about the personal lives of the MPs and their educational background. The reporting environment is skewed in favour of the male voice and trivialising women issues.

Why Gender equality?

RAU shares the view that full participation of citizens is at the cornerstone of democracy and this can never be achieved if one dominant section of the population continues to speak on behalf of others. Therefore having equal representation of women is a rights issue and should be treated as such, recognising that:

- Women account for more than half the population and therefore, have a right to be represented at all levels of decision making: the continued existence of election-related violence scares women away from participating in electoral processes;
- More women in positions of power can influence policies and strategies for enhancing women's economic opportunities;
- Women's experiences are different from men's and they do things differently, and, therefore, they need to be represented in discussions that involve policy making and policy implementation;
- Women and men's interests are different and conflicting sometimes and hence the need for women in representative institutions so that they can articulate the interests of women.

Recommendations

The increased proportion of women in the current setup is not really a route to achieving the critical mass as envisaged by the women's movement, but seems rather a system of window-dressing. The real battle for equality thus lies outside parliament, in the political parties and the value they place upon women's participation. Political parties have to show their commitment to

gender equality and accept that women not only have the right to be represented in public bodies such as councils and parliament. We therefore make recommendations as follows;

1. At the expiry of S124 of the constitution, which guarantees an additional 60 women members from political parties from the 10 provinces based on proportional representation for two terms, it should be noted that there are still difficulties and resistance to integrating women in mainstream politics. The challenges demonstrate the need for continued existence of quotas to ensure increased women participation. This will ensure continued integration of women in all spheres including at the local government level.
2. However, while the quota system is still important in increasing women participation, legislation including the Electoral Act should be amended in such a way that it is explicit about implementing the spirit of Section 17 of the constitution to the letter. For example, the provision in the legislation should read “*Out of the 210 Constituencies set out in the Constitution that will constitute the National Assembly, 105 seats shall be reserved for women*”. Whether this is through direct election or through proportional representation will be subject for further debate. Without these explicit provisions, political parties will continue to play lip-service to the issues of women participation.
3. The advantage of the quota system is that it is implementable and enforceable and this can easily cascade down to internal political party processes and make sure they are in compliance with the law before presenting their candidates list for elections.