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**Challenges Faced By Aspiring Women Parliamentarians in Zimbabwe: The
Case of 2005 Parliamentary Elections.**

By

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Challenges Faced By Aspiring Women Parliamentarians in Zimbabwe: The Case of 2005 Parliamentary Elections.

Abstract

The marginalization of women is not unique to Zimbabwe; neither is it only an African curse, it is indeed a global development challenge. Women are marginalized and greatly under represented in all important decision making processes, be it economic, social, political and even religion, right from the local level to the national to the international level. Today it is generally accepted and agreed that gender equity is one of the strategies that can go long in the development of communities. In line with this realization, numerous international and national forums have been (and are being) held to map out strategies for women empowerment. Using the 2005 Zimbabwean parliamentary elections as a case study, this paper expose and discuss, through women's voices themselves, the challenges that women continue to face in their quest for equal political participation and representation in spite of the numerous international and regional protocols to increase their quota.

Introduction

This paper is based on a research carried out by the authors in 2006 to assess the challenges that aspiring women parliamentarians had faced in the previous two elections, 2000 and 2005. These two parliamentary elections in the country attracted so much international attention. The major reason was the participation in these elections by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) seen by many as capable of dislodging the ZANU PF government. On the domestic scene there was an unparalleled increase in the number of females who wanted to participate as candidates in these elections as government tried to honour various regional and international treaties that promote woman emancipation which it is signatory to. These include CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, SADC Gender policy (to achieve 30% of women in decision making positions by 2005) and the Millennium Development Goals. It was in this vein that the ruling party introduced a quota system where certain constituencies were reserved for women candidates. Other contesting parties also followed suit giving a sizeable number of female candidates a chance to represent their parties. Today, the Zimbabwean parliament has 17, 3% women about 12, 7% short of the targeted figure (ZESN Report on the 2005 elections). This is despite the fact that women can represent development and gender concerns more effectively because of their particular experiences and interests. They can also bring a more constructive and less adversarial style to politics. However, only a small proportion managed to make it to the August house (Parliament) despite the efforts and the fact that women make up more than half of the country's population. It is against this background that this research paper investigates the challenges faced by aspiring women parliamentarians in the 2005 parliamentary elections with a view to present the global community with insights into the political empowerment process of women.

Research Procedure

This research was qualitative and relied on open ended questionnaires. The target group were those women who took part in the 2005 elections as candidates at both the primary level in their respective parties and in the national elections. This choice was deliberate in order to hear challenges that women face from those who actually participated in them as candidates and experienced what exactly it is to be a woman running for high political offices. However, because of the subject of investigation and tight schedules of these people it was not easy to reach out to as many candidates as we had wished to. Further, many of those who were actually interviewed also requested anonymity, thus only the names of those who felt comfortable would be mentioned in this paper. It is the feeling of the researchers that this did not in any way compromise the authenticity of the findings. The findings have been grouped into themes under which they are presented, these are political, economic, cultural, the delimitation commission as well as the legislative framework.

Political Challenges

During Zimbabwe's 2005 parliamentary election, aspiring women candidates faced greatest challenges within their own political parties. There was widespread and continuous manipulation of the nomination processes to frustrate women candidates. Data gathered from the respondents indicates that the nomination process within the political parties was being manipulated to disenfranchise women. Such manipulation included unclear and gender blind selection criteria processes, re-run of the primary elections, inconsistent procedures in coming up with candidates and parties imposing candidates.

Within the MDC and ZANU PF, for example, for one to be a candidate in the primary elections she should be related or have close connections with the senior party officials. A candidate who lost the primary elections in Makoni west noted that initially she had the intentions of contesting in Mutasa South but senior officials told her to withdraw in favour of a more senior candidate. She was then told to contest in Makoni East but a day before the primary elections, the same senior party officials told her that she was supposed to contest in Makoni West again against two party heavy weights (interview August 2006). This was a challenge to her since she could hardly campaign overnight and win the support of the people. To her this clearly indicated that male senior party officials were not interested in seeing women getting into parliament. However, this problem is not peculiar to ZANU PF alone. MDC women candidates also complained of being relegated to rural constituencies which were ZANU PF's strongholds.

Although ZANU Pf eventually reached a decision to raise the proportion of its women election candidates to 30% reminiscent to the SADC target for women, this was done in a haphazard way. Women candidates were contesting in constituencies that were generally difficult to win. They were placed in constituencies, which the parties knew or had indications that it was unlikely to win. One losing candidate in Mutare North noted that the ZANU PF really knew from the 2000 elections where it lost virtually all urban seats that it had no strong support in the urban areas but proceeded to field the majority of its women candidates in urban constituencies (interview August 2006). As a result, in Harare all the six ZANU PF contesting

women candidates failed. The same applied to the MDC. It fielded a greater number of its women candidates in the rural areas where it knew that it had no strong support. Twelve out of the 18 women fielded by the MDC contested in rural areas where there was very little chances of winning. Evelyn Masaiti a losing candidate for Mutasa North concurred that it was extremely difficult for a women from the opposition party to contest and win in a rural consistency (interview August 2006). This view is corroborated by Galloy (1999) in his observations of obstacles facing women participation in politics in Congo. He noted that, women candidates are often fielded in constituencies where they have very slim chances of winning. Besides, in constituencies where they enjoy a comfortable position, women always risk being discarded for male candidates unless they are protected by the community on the grounds of their personal qualities

Senior party officials also had a tendency of imposing the campaign teams for women candidates. In Mutare North, for instance, senior party officials imposed the campaign team for the woman candidate some of whom she did not even know. She noted that instead of campaigning for her, the campaign team used her resources to de-campaign her (interview 2006). Tsitsi Matekaire, Women In Politics Support Unit (WIPSU) Deputy Director, observed that the fliers and posters for this particular candidate were put only a day before the elections (interview Tsitsi Matekaire 2006). According to her, this reflects resistance amongst male politicians to increase the number of women in politics. Respondents argued that it was only fair for women candidates to be given the opportunity to choose their own campaign teams, which will make them choose the people they know to really support them.

The structures and agendas of political parties also emerged as a factor of consideration to women's political participation. Karam (1999), posits that many political parties, reflecting the more general conditions in the rest of society, do not easily accept or promote many women into their echelons, let lone women's occupation of important positions within these parties. In her studies of women participation in party politics in Tanzania, Shayo (2005) also noted this glaring absence of women from influential political positions. She found out that all national leadership positions in all political parties were held by men except for one party.

Women's dismal fairing during the elections was also influenced by what McGlen and O'Connor (1995) called the "incumbent factor". This is basically a political system that tends to favour the previous holder of the office or constituency. In ZANU PF's political jargon, there is what they call *mafikezolo*, meaning a late or new comer. This term is usually used during contests for political office where the incumbent tries to discredit his or her rivals on the basis of being "newcomers". The ZANU PF Makoni west-Mutasa South-Makoni east-Makoni west shifting of one woman candidate is a case in point. This approach has worked effectively for quite a long period for some people within the party. There are several politicians within ZANU Pf who have been members of parliament and in government since the attainment of independence in 1980. These have doubtless, benefited from the "incumbent factor" strategy.

Economic Challenges

Lack of resources emerged as another challenge for women candidates in the 2005 elections.

Money is the lodestone of a successful campaign but it is this very critical resource that many aspiring women parliamentarians lack and fail to mobilize making it difficult for them to campaign and get appointed. This makes the situation a catch-22 situation where women find it hard to mobilise heavy contributions because they seem less likely to win than male opponents, and they are less likely to win because they cannot raise big money (McGlen and O'Connor 1995). In that vein Karam (1999) observes that,

'Poverty is a major impediment largely because women are, or become more concerned with earning their daily living than following any specific political development... the impact of this can be felt primarily when financing electoral campaigns as well as the ability of women to undertake certain initiatives'.

Aspiring women parliamentarians said that they had little or no resources to channel towards their campaigns both within their parties and in the national elections. Trudy Stevenson said that because of lack of enough resources, she could not carry out door – to – door campaigns because teams needed food and transport. She also could not hold as many rallies as she had wished in order to enhance her publicity (interview T Stevenson August 2006).

One issue of major concern that also emerged was voter manipulation through vote buying. Some senior party officials within the ZANU PF party were accused of misusing public resources to obtain votes from the people. A losing candidate for the Manyame constituency noted that her opponent used Grain Marketing Board trucks to ferry people to and from rallies. She further alleged that the same candidate was distributing maize seed and fertilizers in the constituency as a way of obtaining people's support. She said this contributed to her failure in the elections (ibid). Thus the use of state resources to sway voters is clearly an advantage that is not open to the opposition parties especially for those candidates who will be contesting in the rural areas.

The use of power and state resources to woo voters was a rampant practice in the run up to the elections. It has been alleged that some candidates were giving out maize or making it available for sale at lower prices to its supporters during the campaigning period. A ZANU Ndonga candidate who lost the 2005 election in Mutare Central noted that the people in her constituency were given permission to purchase maize after they had produced ZANU PF cards and those suspected to be supporting the opposition party were not given the maize (Interview August 2006). This became a great challenge to the candidate since some of her supporters switched off from her to support ZANU PF in order to get maize for survival. The Zimbabwe Electoral Supervisory Network (ZESN) report on the 2005 elections noted that 72 000 tones of maize were distributed in Gutu and Dangamvura during the campaign period.

It has been noted that the issuing of computers in the rural areas in the run up to the elections was also a political gimmick than a developmental gesture. The president used the computers as campaign material for ZANU PF candidates. At every occasion where computers were donated, the president clearly urged the people in that area to vote for ZANU PF. This was a great challenge not only to women but all candidates from the opposition since their parties had no access to state resources that could be used during the campaign period. Without doubt, this contributed immensely to ZANU PF's resounding victory in the rural areas than in urban areas.

The other challenge was that women candidates especially from the opposition party were pitted against “heavy weights” from other parties which made their chances of winning slim. The male candidates especially from the ruling party as already highlighted had a lot of resources and they sometimes used their authority to frighten people.

The high nomination fee imposed by the Nomination Court was another challenge to aspiring women candidates. All the candidates were given a period of only one week to pay their nomination fee to the Nomination Court. The fee was increased from \$100 000 in the 2000 election to \$2 000 000 in the 2005 election. This amount was too big then despite the inflation factor. As a result of this large amount of money, some women candidates especially those from small political parties ended up withdrawing their candidatures since neither themselves nor their parties could raise such an amount in one week. Silvia Tsatsa a candidate who lost the election in Mutare Central said that her party, ZANU Ndonga, failed to field all its women candidates because of the hefty nomination fee and the relatively high costs of campaigning. She urged political parties to provide their candidates with full information on the requirements of the Nomination court long before the court sits (interview 2006). In her situation, party officials responsible for overseeing the process were inactive and candidates were not assisted in this regard.

Failure to get access to the Voters Roll was also brought out as a major challenge that was faced by both female and male candidates from the opposition. Star Mathe an independent candidate who lost the 2005 elections in Pumula- Luveve noted that access to copies of the voters roll was very difficult because they were prohibitively expensive. A copy for a constituency’s voters roll was costing \$2 000 000. This was too expensive for her as an independent since she had to meet all her expenses from her own coffers and had no party to sponsor her (interview 2006)

Cultural Challenges

Obstacles in this field mainly stem from the way societies are organized. Most societies and countries are organized along patriarchal lines where male physical, social and economic power over women is institutionalized (Revees and Baden, 2000). This philosophy is the one exploited by male politicians through both overt and covert manoeuvres of the political system, particularly the electoral process to discriminate, disadvantage as well as exclude women from influential political positions. According to Karam (1999), culture encompasses particular lifestyles derived from history as well as perceived traditions. These are the ones usually used to validate all manners, politics included, not all of which may be acceptable to all concerned.

Prevailing customs and social values relegate women to a position and role subservient to those of men because of Zimbabwe’s patriarchal society. Social perceptions regarding the traditional division of labour where women are seen as bound to certain roles only, are also an important barrier that many women face. This idea is closely connected with a definition and understanding of space as dichotomized between the public and the private spheres, where women belong to the latter as child bearers, producers of food and other domestic needs in servitudes to their husbands as heads of households. These notions are persistent, and are at the basis of much of the difficulties women face not only in entering politics, but also gaining

credibility and impacting from within it.

It is therefore extremely difficult for women to fully participate in political life when they spend much of their time trying to fulfil the basic needs of their families. Evelyn Masaiti who lost the 2005 election in Mutasa North constituency noted that one of her challenges was to combine both her social and political responsibilities. In her case as a single parent, she had to look after the family as well as organize some rallies (interview 2006). The same sentiments were also echoed by Trudy Stevenson when she noted that “ When I was young, I felt pressure to care for the family and have a proper career for safe financial life, only when I was older did I feel safe enough to take risk of going into politics.” This challenge is not only faced in the political arena, it is also responsible for the smaller numbers of women, compared to men in the labour market particularly in the developing world.

Culturally, women entering public life are considered to have stepped outside their traditional gender roles. People, especially those in the rural areas of Zimbabwe endeavour to privatize political space as belonging to one gender, men. The few brave women who dare to challenge the status quo in order to claim their space in politics have paid dearly. They have come face to face with both physical and psychological violence. Some have had their property destroyed and families targeted. When no political excuses that warrant attack are found on such women, personal attacks are made. Attacks will be, for instance, on how one dress, her marital or childbearing status. One woman candidate complained that supporters of her opponent told people that they should not vote for a woman of loose morals. As a result most of her elderly supporters stopped supporting her (interview 2006).

Traditional leaders who are considered the custodians of our culture were also a big challenge to some women candidates in the 2005 elections, particularly those from the opposition parties. There were allegations that some traditional leaders threatened their subjects with eviction if they failed to vote for the ruling party. Women interviewed noted that traditional leaders called several meetings where they told their subjects that they did not like women leadership in their areas. Most of the traditional leadership was openly supporting the ruling party. In some areas the traditional leaders were actually the ones selling party cards to their subjects (interview 2006). Thus the Common wealth Secretariat, in attempting to address women’s unequal representation in political decision making, advocates the changing of cultural attitudes on women’s natural role in socio- economic development (Shayo 2005)

The legislative Framework

Although the 2005 elections were generally peaceful, the environment in which it was conducted was one in which repressive laws, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and the Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) were extensively used. The laws rendered the election political field very uneven and hostile to all opposition candidates. These laws are at variance with the SADC principles and guidelines that stress that member states should take measures to ensure that all citizens enjoy freedom of movement, association and expression in the run up to an election (ZESN 2006). The Laws were not conducive for all this and they had draconian provisions that severely limit political freedoms and space.

The police deliberately misinterpreted POSA to mean that opposition parties required permission to hold meetings and rallies, which is not what the law says. The Act made it extremely difficult for women candidates from the opposition parties to hold meetings and rallies. All opposition candidates had to initially apply for a clearance letter before they could hold a rally. In some circumstances it took almost a week for the clearance to be granted or denied. Police officers also sometimes disrupted rallies in progress notwithstanding the availability of a clearance.

In an attempt to survive under these repressive Laws, some of the women candidates resorted to “evening prayers” with women in their constituencies. Paurina Mpariwa for Mufakose constituency said that her campaign team called for “evening prayer” meetings. During these “prayers” she would encourage people to vote for her in the elections. In Harare North constituency the campaign teams also formed some “prayer groups” which moved from place to place preaching the “vote for a women gospel” while they were carrying their bibles in their hands. However, this strategy was not very effective because it was time consuming, expensive and very few people attended this evening “prayer meetings”. Police officers also moved from place to place hunting for these meetings.

The Access to information and Protection of Privacy Act was also a threat to the aspiring women candidates. The Act imposes severe penalties to journalists who published “false information” but it does not define what amounts to false information. This affected the citizens’ right to information as journalists found it difficult to report on election related issues and matters which could be interpreted as false. Cases of violence and intimidation of women candidates were not fully publicized in the press because of the fear of AIPPA.

The Delimitation Commission

The Delimitation Commission was also found to be a hindrance to the aspiring women candidates in the 2005 elections. The commission scrapped a number of constituencies in some provinces and created new ones in other provinces. The process inevitably drew the charge of possible gerrymandering in favour of one of the contesting parties. The Delimitation Commission report that came out in December 2004 was not well publicized. The map outlining the boundaries of the constituencies was unavailable even in Harare (interview 2006). Candidates were not fully aware of the new areas that were incorporated into their constituencies or those that were removed. Some of the voters even reached the voting period without knowing their real constituencies and this may explain the relatively high number of people (about 130 000) who were turned away from the polling stations on the basis that they were in the wrong constituencies (ZESN report on 2005 elections)

Further, some of the sitting women MPs lost their strong hold areas where they had the greatest support and got other areas where they did not have any support. Evelyn Masaiti of the MDC party complained that she was greatly affected by the Delimitation Commission. Initially she was the sitting MP for Mutasa South but after there were some changes in the constituency boundaries she realized that most of her supporters were in Mutasa North, (interview 2006). Because of the changes she was forced to contest in this constituency which she lost. The same applied to Hilda Mafudze who lost the 2005 elections in Manyame constituency. Initially she was sitting MP in Mhondoro constituency but after the Delimitation

commission, she realized that most of her supporters were moved to the newly formed Manyame constituency. She then moved to contest in Manyame constituency but it was difficult for her to campaign in that constituency. She argued that the delimitation process should have been done earlier to give candidates enough time to campaign in the new areas incorporated in their constituencies.

Conclusion

Although the Zimbabwean government is a signatory to regional and international conventions that support women's emancipation and has signed on to the SADC Principles and Guidelines on Democratic Elections and was also the first country to organize its elections around them, it still has a long way to meet its criteria fully. This paper has exposed the challenges and shortfalls that require to be addressed if the country's electoral structures and process are to tally with both the "letter" and spirit' of the principles and guidelines provide a useful framework in which to manage electoral reform to ensure democratic election and an increase in the numbers of women in politics. It would be cynical for any government to take a minimalist approach to the Principles and Guidelines simply in order to "get off the hook". A sincere and more consistent effort is required to develop them into a framework for sustainable development, which will in turn increase the numbers of women in parliament and decision –making.

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