




Research paper

Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Zimbabwe: Analysing Structural Challenges and Pathways to Gender Equality between 2013 and 2023

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ABSTRACT

The article examines barriers and challenges women face in active political participation within major political parties in Zimbabwe, focusing on the policies and mechanisms that inhibit their involvement while offering recommendations for improvement. Data was collected through interviews and focus groups with 20 purposively and conveniently sampled participants from Harare and Bulawayo, along with critical documentary analysis. The data was analysed methodically using qualitative exploratory and descriptive methods, employing thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. Grounded in intersectionality theory, this research highlights the varied identities and experiences of women, challenging the notion of a homogeneous group. The findings reveal entrenched patriarchal policies and a first past-the-post electoral system that collectively disadvantages women, particularly in decision-making roles. Although proportional representation offers potential benefits for increasing women's political representation, the study shows that systemic barriers such as discriminatory laws, gender stereotypes, and cultural norms continue to undermine these opportunities. Women candidates often face intense scrutiny and discrimination based on their marital status, further complicating their political engagement. This article calls on governments and political parties to promote women's participation and implement more robust gender-sensitive policies, alongside supporting women's economic empowerment, to enable independent decision-making and foster genuine political involvement.

Keywords: political participation, intersectionality, women and political representation in Zimbabwe

The second half of the 20th century has witnessed heightened attention to the participation and equal representation of women in public life. This was more pronounced upon the formation of the United Nations, which advanced development and democratisation processes and increased emphasis on issues of justice, human rights, non-discrimination, and inclusiveness in its Member States (Gouvêa et al., 2023; Mwenifumbo & Fuentes Furuya, 2016; Volpe, 2020). The U. N. doctrines of human rights and governance are premised on the notion of equality of opportunity and participation by all citizens in any country. This justifies the significance of equal access, meaningful representation, and participation of women in all facets of governance. It is concerning to note that despite constituting over half of the global population, women remain peripheral in many countries regarding their participation in governance and electoral processes where major decisions regarding their lives are made (Teele,

2023). In Southern Africa, women are considered to have played critical roles in the transition period from colonial rule to independence, yet they have been and continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, as noted by various scholars (Cherepashchuk, 2022; Nedziwe & Tella, 2023; Prokopenko, 2022).

Zimbabwe is no different in this global trend. The country is a signatory to several declarations aimed at increasing women's leadership and decision-making. These include, among others, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the African Women's Rights Protocol (2003), and the SADC Gender Protocol (Manyonganise et al., 2023; Mwandayi, 2023; Zvingowanisei, 2023). This culminated in the adoption of section 17(b) of the Zimbabwean Constitution (2013), which mandates the state to take the necessary legislative measures to ensure that 'both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of government at every level.' The constitution, which came into effect in 2013, sets aside a quota of 60 seats for women in terms of proportional representation in Parliament. This has managed to increase the number of women in Parliament from a 2008 position of 16% to 34% by 2018, which signifies a positive development counterbalancing the allotted shares from the constituency-based electoral system (ZIMFACT, 2022). However, the quota system was set to expire in 2013, reflecting another 'sugarcoated' policy that masked the true principles of the aforesaid legislative frameworks. In terms of the application of international law, Zimbabwe as a country is set back by its adoption of a dualist approach, which implies that all international treaties ratified or acceded to do not get automatically incorporated into local laws until they are domesticated by approval through an Act of Parliament, after which they can become binding (Madenga, 2022; Phooko, 2018; Zvobgo & Dziva, 2017).

Despite constitutional advancements, significant structural barriers continue to impede women's political participation in Zimbabwe. Entrenched patriarchal norms persist, shaping societal attitudes and expectations that discourage women from engaging in political life. These norms often manifest in cultural practices and beliefs that prioritise male authority, thereby sidelining women in decision-making roles (Agbalajobi, 2010; Enloe, 2000; Duerst-Lahti, 2002; Mtero et al., 2023). Political parties frequently exhibit a bias towards male candidates, reflecting broader societal preferences that favour men in leadership positions. Research indicates that women candidates struggle to secure electoral nominations and face challenges in gaining visibility within political spaces, as evidenced by Mautsi et al. (2024), who argue that party dynamics systematically disadvantage female aspirants. Additionally, limited access to financial resources for campaigning exacerbates these barriers, as women often lack the necessary funding to mount competitive campaigns (Cleton & Meier, 2023; Madenga, 2022). Financial constraints hinder their ability to engage in essential campaign activities, such as outreach and constituency engagement, which are critical for building a political base. The pervasive violence against women in politics further complicates their participation, creating an environment of fear and intimidation that discourages many from entering the political arena (Musendekwa, 2024; Venganai & Dube, 2022). Socialisation processes within communities reinforce traditional gender roles, instilling beliefs that women should prioritise domestic responsibilities over political ambitions. The absence of mentorship and support networks for aspiring female politicians underscores these challenges, leaving many women feeling isolated and unsupported. The lack of structured programmes to empower women in politics, as noted by Butale (2022), contributes to low levels of political engagement among women, revealing a systemic failure to cultivate female leadership.

The persistent barriers to women's political participation in Zimbabwe highlight the limitations of critical mass theory, which posits that increasing the number of women in political positions will naturally lead to more significant gender equity (Enloe, 2000; Jacobs & George, 2023; Litchfield et al., 2024). This perspective often overemphasises statistical representation without adequately addressing the qualitative aspects of women's experiences and the systemic obstacles they face. While the introduction of quotas and proportional representation has resulted in a measurable increase in the number of women in Parliament, this numerical growth does not necessarily translate into meaningful influence or decision-making power (Chitando & Mlambo, 2024). Many women in political office still encounter significant challenges due to entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to resources, and pervasive violence, which undermine their ability to enact change. Furthermore, the first past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, in which the candidate with the most votes wins without the need for a majority (Teele, 2023), is used in Zimbabwe and often exacerbates these issues by favouring established political parties that prioritise male candidates, thereby sidelining women and reinforcing existing power structures. In contrast, electoral systems that incorporate proportional representation or coalition governments, as seen in various contexts globally, tend to foster more equitable political environments where diverse voices can be heard (Mwenifumbo & Fuentes Furuya, 2016; Tinner et al., 2023; Omoniyi, 2025). Gender mainstreaming initiatives, aimed at integrating gender perspectives into all levels of governance and policy-making, have also struggled to gain traction in Zimbabwe, often falling short of effecting real change (Gaidzanwa, 2020; Liu & Estampador-Hughson, 2023; Moyo, 2020). The lack of comprehensive gender-sensitive policies further perpetuates the cycle of exclusion, as women continue to navigate a political landscape that does not fully recognise or address their unique needs and

experiences. This context necessitates a deeper examination of the mechanisms through which women can achieve genuine political empowerment, beyond mere numerical representation, to ensure that their voices are not only present but influential in shaping policy and governance.

Statement of the problem

Women's political participation is both a fundamental human right and a critical driver of democracy and sustainable development. Achieving strong and peaceful democracies requires equal opportunities and active involvement of women in the public sphere (Le et al., 2025). Despite Zimbabwe's commitment to global and regional gender equality standards, progress has been slow. At the current pace, it will take another century to close the gender gap within the country's major political parties. The selection of the years 2013 and 2023 in this study is significant as it encompasses a decade marked by crucial legislative and political transformations in Zimbabwe. The 2013 Constitution introduced gender quotas and other strategies aimed at advancing gender parity. This timeframe enables the research to assess the efficacy of these measures and the progress made, or lack thereof, over ten years. It provides comprehensive insight into the persistent or emerging structural and procedural obstacles, facilitating a thorough analysis and well-informed recommendations. In contrast, countries like Rwanda have made significant strides, with 61.3% of women in the lower house and 38.5% in the upper house (Eruteya, 2024). However, a prevailing misconception persists in both political and academic circles. This fallacy assumes that merely increasing the number of women in leadership positions (the 'critical mass theory') will automatically improve their participation. Unfortunately, this oversimplification misdirects efforts and offers ineffective solutions. The men occupying top positions are the visible outcome, but their ascent is facilitated by gatekeepers within the lower party structures. Active engagement with the political party's structure and processes is essential for women to ascend to leadership roles, as these represent the true obstacles to their participation. To shed light on the underlying complexities, the study adopts a maximalist approach to identify intervening variables that impact women's active political participation and inform their intentions.

Research Objectives:

1. Investigate the current status of women within political parties, focusing on their political empowerment and the efforts they have made to enhance it.
2. Examine the structures and processes within Zimbabwe's political parties that hinder women's active participation.
3. Compare how these structures and processes differ between Zimbabwe's ruling party and opposition political parties, specifically regarding their impact on women's participation.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This article draws upon intersectionality theory, a term originally coined in 1986 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a United States-based Black feminist who emphasised the differences among women of colour (Agbalajobi, 2010; Lawless and Fox, 2010). Intersectionality theorists challenge the notion of women as a homogeneous and universal category (Grewe, 2025). Instead of viewing women as having a single, uniform identity, they recognise that women's experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including race, age, class, ethnicity, religion, and education (Moffitt et al., 2023; Tinner et al., 2023; Deiri & Burkhard, 2025). The current study observes similarities in the plight of women within two major political parties, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), formerly known as the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A). However, these similarities mask important differences due to varying intersections within each party. This underscores the applicability of intersectionality theory, which advocates for acknowledging the heterogeneity of challenges faced by women. Rather than limiting gender analysis to the social construction of differences between men and women, this study extends its focus to analysing differences within the category of women itself.

Within this category, diverse conceptions of a 'real woman' exist, often deviating from prescribed gendered cultural norms. The study pays attention to how women candidates in Zimbabwe's political landscape are framed as either 'natural' or 'rejects,' based on cultural motivations rooted in patriarchal beliefs. Importantly, gender refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with being male or female (Enloe, 2000). Intersectionality theory emphasises that understanding women's experiences in politics requires looking beyond gender. These experiences are shaped by intersecting axes of discrimination, as highlighted by scholars such as Cleton and Meier (2023) and Liu and Estampador-Hughson (2023). Historical contexts, such as the South African political climate in the 1990s, were influenced by race, location, age, and ethnicity (Jacobs & George, 2023). Similarly, divergent views on the experiences of women in the Pacific Islands reflect the impact of intersecting identities (Bekker et al., 2022). In the context of Zimbabwe, young female politicians often face unfair discrediting

based on accusations of promiscuity, illustrating how intersecting identities and societal expectations compound the challenges they encounter. These issues will be explored in detail throughout our study, providing a holistic understanding of how intersectionality shapes women's political experiences and the barriers they face.

Conceptual issues

In this context, 'politics' refers to the activities, principles, and structures that govern relationships between people, organisations, and governments. It encompasses decision-making processes that impact society, including resource distribution, law enactment and enforcement, and power allocation (Moffitt et al., 2023). Within the scope of this study, politics pertains to endeavours, strategies, and actions aimed at acquiring and maintaining authority in governance or influencing governing bodies. This term encompasses activities within political entities such as state or local governments, including the cabinet, legislative chambers, government departments, political parties, and institutions like courts, police, and the military.

In contrast, civil society includes institutions such as family, community-based groups, trade unions, and clubs, falling into the private domain. Nedziwe and Tella (2023) define civil society as a wide array of organisations, including community groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organisations, and foundations. The question of whether civil society falls within the realm of politics can be addressed by referring to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The CEDAW General Recommendations for Women's Political Participation (2012) recognise the right to participate in non-governmental organisations and associations concerned with public and political life, positioning civil society as a space where political engagement occurs. Additionally, Marxist perspectives view 'politics' as both a state apparatus and a class struggle, considering civil society as central to political dynamics due to its class-based nature (Douglass, 2022). This study aims to explore how party politics and processes hinder women's active political participation, revealing the interconnectedness of civil society and political structures.

Political participation is dependent on the standard of measure used, but it simply encompasses the art of citizen involvement in political systems. Musendekwa (2024) posits that political participation is a practice in which individuals engage in the political life of their society, contributing to decisions regarding common goals and means of achieving them. According to Liu and Estampador-Hughson (2023), political participation includes various activities, most notably voting in elections and running for political office. Litchfield et al. (2024) emphasise that engagement occurs on two levels: citizen and leadership. Teele (2023) notes that men are the major determinants of political actions and inactions, generally concerned with perpetuating state power. When women compete with men for access to political power, they do so on terms already established by men for competition among themselves. The success of women in politics, like that of any group, cannot be achieved within a system without displacing or replacing the existing elite. A change in values cannot occur independently of socio-economic and political relations, without the clear involvement of women in the political process through holding various offices and making their ambitions known through conscious and effective participation in the political scene. If this involvement is absent, the political elite, dominated by men, will remain unchanged.

The perpetuity of male dominance in the political arena has habituated the environment at the peril of the female competitor. There is a need to alert women to the real abstruse cause inhibiting their active participation to necessitate a freer environment. Duerst-Lahti (2002, p.372) submits that '...the fact of women's under-representation if made known to the public, could shape political behaviour'. In this study, political participation is differentiated from political representation, which refers to the number of elective offices held by women relative to other representations. For example, a rise in the percentage of votes cast by women in an election may indicate increased participation yet still reveal under-representation in politics. Alternatively, it could reflect high levels of women's representation in politics coupled with low levels of active engagement.

For the current study political participation implies a complex and antagonistic relationship between the involvement of women and the entrenched patriarchal structures within Zimbabwean political parties (Bunch, 2016; Enloe, 2000). It suggests that despite being adversaries, there may be an underlying interdependence or mutually reinforcing dynamics between women's participation and the patriarchal norms and power structures within these political entities (Enloe, 2000; Zvingowanisei, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted in Harare and Bulawayo, the two major cities in Zimbabwe. Qualitative data gathering allowed researchers to tape-record and transcribe collected interview data. The study is exploratory and partly descriptive, incorporating various aspects. The data for this study was gathered through a multi-pronged approach, including conducting interviews, observational fieldwork, and analysing a range of written sources such as academic journals, government websites, and election databases. Twenty female participants were selected from

both the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (now CCC) and ZANU-PF in Harare and Bulawayo. Of these, eight held positions of authority like committee members, councillors, and members of parliament, while the remaining 12 were individuals with political affiliations from diverse backgrounds. The criteria for participant selection were based on gender, parliamentary positions, age, and political party membership. Convenient and purposive sampling allowed the researchers to select a diverse range of participants relevant to the research objectives. These sampling techniques allowed the researchers to intentionally target and include individuals and groups who were likely to provide valuable insights, while also accommodating practical limitations in reaching certain populations. The use of snowball sampling was particularly beneficial for facilitating focus group discussions (FGDs) with participants from affluent suburbs such as Borrowdale and Mt Hampden (Harare), as well as Hillside and Mahatshula (Bulawayo), who often reside behind locked gates. The researchers were then able to leverage existing connections and networks to gain entry and engage with hard-to-reach participants, who were likely to offer unique perspectives on the research topic based on their socioeconomic status and living circumstances.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the qualitative data. This method allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the data, highlighting the barriers women face in political participation and how these barriers intersect with factors such as class and ethnicity. This approach aligns with similar studies, such as those by Manyonganise et al. (2023) and Mutizwa et al. (2024), which successfully utilised qualitative methodologies to explore women's political experiences. All respondents were above the age of majority, which is 18 years in line with section 15 (1) of the General Law Amendment Act Chapter 8:07 (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2006). Ethical guidelines were strictly observed, with participants informed about the study objectives and their right to withdraw at any stage. Interviews and group discussions were recorded with verbal consent, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity through the use of code numbers and pseudonyms known only to the researchers. Data collection tools included an unstructured interview guide and a questionnaire titled 'Hindrances of Women's Active Political Participation.' Additionally, a Focus Group Guide on Politics was utilised to elicit participants' perceptions and involvement in political activities, enhancing the study's engagement with women's voices and experiences.

FINDINGS

Challenges in political participation faced by women

Women's participation in politics in Zimbabwe has remained low from local government to national level although some measures have been put into place to address such inequalities. The 2023 Gender Observatory Report observed women's political participation and decision-making to be below 50% benchmark in Zimbabwe and this is due to a number of reasons that need to be addressed (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2023). This next section will explore the multifaceted challenges that women face within the country's political landscape.

Patriarchal landscape of the FPTP system

Zimbabwe employs a FPTP electoral system, which is a plurality-majority or winner-takes-all approach. This system encourages competition, as the candidate with the highest number of votes wins, even if they do not achieve an absolute majority. Critics have singled out this 'law of the jungle' approach for being unfair to women aspiring to occupy political positions, as they will be directly competing with men or other male-backed women. This places their reputations on the line as voters are more likely to focus on the traits of specific candidates. Mautsi et al. (2024) argue that because of a thriving patriarchal landscape in Zimbabwe, stereotypes against women are rampant with voters more likely to prefer male candidates over female candidates. The 2018 election season saw women's private lives subjected to public scrutiny and demeanour, as sexism and misogyny seized the spotlight. To illustrate, young, unmarried women like MDC-Tsvangirayi (MDC-T) aspiring Member of Parliament (MP) candidate Linda Masarira and independent candidate Fadzayi Mahere experienced largely male-based sexist critiques about their eligibility for public office (Chitando & Mlambo, 2024; Manyonganise et al., 2023). This related to their unmarried status, which saw them being labelled as promiscuous and thereby discredited from the political arena. The experience of a female candidate who participated in the 2018 harmonised elections is illustrative in this respect when she stated:

I'm divorced. So, being divorced, I had a guy say to me ... well he asked me 'Are you married?' Then I said no. Then I was like 'I'm divorced'. Then he was like 'Oh well, if you cannot run the affairs of your home then what makes you think that you can run council?' ... But I've got other colleagues who've also gone through a lot of harassment on social media about being a woman, you know, someone actually said to Dudu the other girl 'Are you married?' And she said yes, happily, then he was like 'Ah okay definitely you now have my vote because if you're single or divorced it means you've failed in life' (Zigomo, 2022, p.14)

The strong patriarchal practices in our society have significantly hindered meaningful political participation by women, as traditional gender roles and stereotypes contribute to their social exclusion from decision-making processes. Women who pursue political ambitions often face intense scrutiny regarding their character and morals, particularly in the absence of male guardianship. They are viewed as resilient, and capable of withstanding harsh criticism and pressure. Drawing parallels with electoral systems in other countries, such as South Africa and the United States (U.S.A.), highlights these challenges further. For example, South Africa's proportional representation system is specifically designed to enhance women's participation, resulting in higher female representation (Moyo, 2020; Volpe, 2019). In the U.S.A., the debates surrounding college voting illustrate how young voters can influence elections – a strategy that was notably absent in Zimbabwe during the 2008 elections. Although the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) secured a parliamentary majority, they were denied the presidency, underscoring the profound impact of electoral systems on political participation and representation. The challenges faced by women in Zimbabwe are stark, as evidenced by a mere 11% female representation in the August 2023 elections (Mtero et al., 2023). One female political participant from Harare related her experiences in the political arena as a difficult venture and stated that:

I have remained in politics because I have a very strong personality; I stand for what I believe in. My husband verbally and emotionally abused me over my political stance and even engaged family members to encourage me to stop this involvement, citing that they feared for my life as I stood against powerful men within the party who also wanted to be recognised. This strained our marriage and relationship with family members.

The emphasis on being mere placeholders in a process designed to maintain the status quo reflects a broader issue within political structures that perpetuates male dominance. This dynamic affects women in the public sphere and seeps into their private lives, as evidenced by the personal sacrifices they make in their pursuit of political engagement, highlighting the pervasive nature of patriarchy. In this painful landscape, class divisions are also prominent, as revealed by study participants who pointed out that only women from wealthy, particularly urban-based backgrounds, manage to escape an imprisoning patriarchal society. Those from poorer backgrounds and rural areas tend to watch from the sidelines.

Electoral abuse and online violence

Another widely discussed painful experience encountered by women in the political journey is exposure to intimidation and harassment. The triumph of women as candidates in elections is characterised by the strenuous process which is defined by peculiar challenges that they have to overcome before transitioning to the next stage. Venganai and Dube (2022) explain that for women to get into parliament, they have to pass through three crucial phases; firstly, they need to select themselves to stand for office, secondly, they will have to get selected as candidates by the party, and thirdly, they need to be selected by the voters. In 2013 and 2018, primary elections for both ZANU-PF and the MDC-Alliance were marred by irregularities and reports of some male candidates who intimidated women, in addition to some male candidates who disappeared with ballot boxes (Manyonganise et al., 2023). During focus group discussions, female respondents painted a vivid picture of the climate of fear that permeated the political landscape. All participants were registered voters, and 100% of the female politician respondents had cast their votes in the 2018 harmonised elections. However, 30% refrained from standing as candidates due to the violent situations that characterised the party primaries. One participant from ZANU-PF shared her experience: 'I wanted to run, but during the primaries, I was threatened by a male candidate who said he would ruin my reputation if I challenged him. That fear kept me from standing up.'

Additionally, 5% reported how their names were missing from candidate lists, which reflects systemic barriers to participation (Halpern et al., 2025). Generally, more than 70% of the participants reported having no access to either the national constitution or their party constitutions, though they displayed knowledge of the sections advocating for gender parity.

The presence of male 'gatekeepers' further complicates women's entry into politics, as men often define the rules of engagement. This dynamic leads many women to either reject male-dominated political practices or withdraw entirely. In some instances, women feel pressured to form alliances with male leaders even if it implies occasionally providing male leaders with sexual favours. One female candidate who also contested the 2018 elections was only 21 years old when she decided to leave the MDC and ran as an independent candidate. When asked about her reasons for the move, she recounted a traumatic experience of near misses of predatory male political figures who were after her 'forbidden fruit' saying:

I had several encounters where I was almost raped. I think it's four or five times by different men in MDC ... When they see young women, when they see girls dealing in politics and it's actually a very sad thing that is happening in Zimbabwean politics; they don't see you as someone who is wanting change as well, they don't see you as someone capable of bringing about change ... When they see you, they will actually be fighting over you to see who can sleep with you first... And actually, a lot of girls in political parties, are objects. I know of certain women, girls actually, who slept with the whole Standing Committee- these are the ones who pull the strings (Zigomo, 2022, p.15).

These experiences highlight the urgent need for a more nuanced understanding of the structural barriers women encounter, extending beyond mere statistics to encompass the multifaceted realities of their lives. Foregrounding these narratives enables the study to provide a richer, intersectional analysis that considers factors such as age, class, and location, ultimately strengthening the overall argument regarding women's political participation in Zimbabwe. The intimidation and harassment women face in politics are direct manifestations of the patriarchal landscape that discourages their participation (Zhang, 2025). The fear and violence experienced during the primaries exemplify the systemic barriers that women encounter, echoing the sentiments expressed about being sidelined in decision-making processes.

Cultural issues and masculinist norms

The culture of male domination can be traced back to the days of the liberation struggle. Gaidzanwa (2020) mentions that women used to contribute by playing gendered roles like cooking, washing, fetching firewood, singing praise songs for male heroes, and as sexual entertainers. This seemingly speaks much into the politics of the modern day, where women do not occupy key political positions, but rather as docile voices playing similar roles to those of the liberation heydays. Such responsibilities have transcended to the present day, with society appearing to believe that the best place where women are capable of contributing positively is the home – as housewives in reproduction, caregiving, socialising children, working in the fields, and doing other house chores. The electoral environment is no different, as exemplified by many female politicians in ZANU-PF, MDC-Alliance, and MDC-T, including those interviewed for this study, who complained of a prejudiced and hostile environment where gender-based invectives, abuse, and slur campaigns were common. For instance, in 2018, demonstrators strongly verbally abused Thokozani Khuphe during her leadership wrangle with Nelson Chamisa over the control of the MDC-T. She reflected on this experience, saying: 'It felt like my entire gender was being attacked, not just my position in the party. They see us as threats to their power, and they won't hesitate to demean us' (Musendekwa, 2024).

This worked against a high optimism for women in politics in the 2018 presidential race where there were four candidates, namely Khuphe of MDC-T, Joice Mujuru of the People's Rainbow Coalition (PRC), Melba Dzapasi of the 1980 Freedom Movement Party, and Violet Mariyacha of the United Democracy Movement (UDM). Thus, when the electoral environment is prejudiced and patriarchal, women are automatically marginalised. As one female candidate lamented: 'We can have women running for office, but if the culture doesn't change, we'll always be fighting an uphill battle. It's like we're expected to play roles that were defined decades ago'.

This historical context continues to influence contemporary politics, wherein women frequently find themselves relegated to subordinate positions. One female politician articulated this sentiment, stating: 'Even today, many people believe that a woman's place is in the home, not in politics. I am often told, "Why don't you focus on raising your children instead?"'

The societal expectation that women contribute primarily as housewives persists, as they are often seen as responsible for reproduction, caregiving, and managing household chores. This cultural perspective is evident in the electoral environment, where female politicians from ZANU-PF, MDC-Alliance, and MDC-T have reported encountering a prejudiced and hostile atmosphere. One participant noted: 'Every time I speak out, I face backlash. It's exhausting to deal with insults that attack my gender rather than my policies'.

The foregoing narratives reflect the need to address the deeply entrenched cultural norms that continue to stifle women's political participation, accentuating the importance of fostering an environment conducive to gender equality in politics. The cultural expectations surrounding women's roles further entrench the patriarchal barriers discussed earlier. As women navigate the political landscape, they are simultaneously confronted with societal norms that dictate their capabilities and contributions, which can exacerbate the abuse and intimidation they face.

Constitutional issues

Since the adoption of the 2013 Constitution, women's participation has fluctuated (Musendekwa, 2024). Initially, the application of the new quota system led to increased representation, but by 2018, these numbers declined. In the National Assembly, women constituted only 31%, despite the quota. Women's involvement at the local government level dropped from 30.7% in 2013 to 29.3% in 2023. Lack of affirmative actions, such as the quota or zebra system, limits their participation.

It should be noted that the data provided in [Table 1](#) above does not include the Senatorial seats, as those positions are allocated through a 'zebra system' that alternates between male and female candidates. The number of female candidates participating in parliamentary elections across Zimbabwe's ten provinces has generally been lower than that of male candidates. This disparity affects their chances of winning elections. Existing literature suggests that male hostility toward women and incidents of political violence discourage women from actively

engaging in politics (Chitando & Mlambo, 2024; Litchfield et al., 2024; Mautsi et al., 2024). Those who decide to participate often face challenges and are more likely to lose when competing against male candidates.

Table 1

Gender Representation in Zimbabwe's government institutions over time

Elections & Appointments	Women in Parliament	% of women in Parliament	Women Ministers	% of Women Ministers	Women Deputy Ministers	% of Deputy Women Ministers
1980	9/100	9	1/20	5	2/14	14.3
1985	9/100	9	2/26	7.7	2/11	18.2
1990	17/150	11.3	3/29	10.3	6/14	42.9
1995	21/150	14	1/22	4.5	4/16	25
2000	14/150	9.3	6/30	20	3/14	21.4
2005	24/150	16	3/20	15	2/20	10
2008	30/210	14.3	5/36	13.8	-	-
2013	86/280 ^a	30.7%	3/26	11.5%	5/24	21%
2018	85/280 ^a	30.4%	11/35 ^b	31.4%	4/18	22.2%
2023	82/280 ^a	29.3%	11/36 ^b	30.6%	5/14	35.7%

(Source: Musendekewa, 2024)

^a The National Assembly (Parliament) is the lower house consisting of 280 members. Of these, 210 are elected from single-member constituencies, while the remaining 70 seats are reserved for women's (60) and youth (10) quotas introduced in 2013. This provision was supposed to end in 2023 but has since been extended after Constitutional Amendment Number Two sailed through Parliament.

^b This figure includes Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, and Ministers of State for Provincial Affairs

According to Yeshaneh (2023), several countries, including Zimbabwe, have embraced measures like quotas, affirmative action, and other provisions to intensify women's representation in parliament. While the quota system has increased the number of women in Parliament, it single-handedly cannot fully address the deep-rooted political and socioeconomic factors contributing to women's marginalisation in electoral politics. The hope is to find solutions to the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions that start within the political parties and aided with the gatekeeping processes. Despite constitutional provisions that reserve 60 seats for women, Zimbabwe continues to grapple with gender disparities in leadership roles. This study showed that systemic discrimination persists, hindering women's enjoyment of social, economic, and political rights.

Policymakers must consider the drivers and impacts of women's participation. Zimbabwe's recent 2023 elections have revealed significant weaknesses in the country's gender policies, both at the political party and governmental levels. Despite women making up over half of Zimbabwe's 6.5 million registered voters, they were largely sidelined during the electoral process. In the National Assembly elections, only 22 women were ultimately elected out of the 210 total seats. This represents just 10.5% of the National Assembly, despite 70 women contesting the 637 available seats.

Compared to the previous 2018 election, the number of women candidates for the National Assembly dropped from 14% of total candidates to just 11% in 2023. Zimbabwe Final 2023 Elections (2023) observed that for the 2023 elections, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) disallowed the registration of two prospective women candidates for presidential office due to their failure to pay the US\$20,000 nomination fee. However, one candidate from the United Zimbabwe Alliance (UZA), Elizabeth Valerio, challenged the rejection in court and was ultimately permitted to run for office. In 2018, four women candidates ran for president, as this legislation was not in place. The introduction of the Political Parties Finance Act Chapter 2:11, which mandates substantial nomination fees and prohibits foreign funding, has created significant barriers for most women candidates, who often lack access to necessary financial resources. These figures suggest that Zimbabwe's political system and electoral processes continue to disadvantage women's political participation and representation, despite their numerical majority within the electorate. The outcomes of the 2023 elections have exposed significant gaps in Zimbabwe's gender equality policies and practices that will need to be addressed going forward.

While the legal frameworks, such as the quota system, are designed to promote women's participation, they often fall short when confronted with deeply rooted cultural and patriarchal challenges. The fluctuating representation in government illustrates how legal measures alone cannot dismantle the systemic barriers women face.

Gender inequalities in political representation in Zimbabwe

Gender inequalities in political representation in Zimbabwe remain deeply entrenched despite legislative reforms and international commitments aimed at promoting women's participation. Zimbabwe's political arena continues to be predominantly male dominated, with women often relegated to peripheral roles rather than being

recognised as equal participants in decision-making processes. Although Zimbabwe ratified several international instruments and adopted a gender quota system that increased women's parliamentary representation from 14% in 1995 to 29.3% in recent years (Musendekwa, 2024), participation by women as candidates or leaders has significantly declined since the 2013 Constitution. This decline is linked to multiple intersecting barriers, including cultural, social, economic, and physical challenges that hinder women's electoral engagement. Women face financial constraints, sexual harassment, attacks on their character, and a lack of political will, which discourage their full participation in politics.

The political environment is described as intimidating and violent, disproportionately affecting women through verbal abuse, online harassment, and physical assaults, tactics used by male politicians to suppress women's voices and leadership ambitions (Demir, 2025). Societal beliefs about male superiority and the sidelining of women's contributions further compound this toxicity, often limiting women to symbolic roles without substantive influence. Focus group studies highlight that many women perceive their involvement as tokenistic and feel sidelined by entrenched patriarchal power structures. Additionally, studies find that women show lower political consciousness and engagement beyond voting compared to men. These social, cultural, economic, and physical factors interact in complex ways to shape the persistent underrepresentation and marginalisation of women in Zimbabwe's electoral politics (Mutizwa et al., 2024).

The study revealed that participants perceived themselves as not being meaningfully involved in decision-making processes. Many described their experiences as mere proxy participation, where decisions they believed they were part of were ultimately subject to approval by the Politburo in ZANU-PF and the Standing Committee in MDC. One ZANU-PF member articulated this sentiment, stating:

We're told we are part of the decision-making, but when it comes down to it, our ideas are often sidelined. It feels like we're just filling a seat. The real decisions are made elsewhere, and we're left to carry out orders.

This perspective highlights a pervasive disillusionment among members regarding the authenticity of their involvement. The emphasis on being mere placeholders in a process designed to maintain the status quo reflects a broader issue within political structures that perpetuates male dominance and excludes genuine female engagement.

In contrast, MDC members were more vocal about their disenfranchisement. One participant shared:

We don't really have a say in the party. Our opinions are often ignored, or we're asked to rubber-stamp decisions that have already been made. It's disheartening to feel that my voice doesn't matter. It's as if we're just there to make up the numbers, not to contribute meaningfully.

This commentary underscores the frustration felt among MDC members, revealing a stark contrast in the perceived power dynamics within their party. The feeling of being marginalised is exacerbated by the expectation that women should simply conform to existing power structures rather than challenge them.

Furthermore, 70% of respondents from both political parties expressed a lack of confidence in their political leadership, labelling them as corrupt, selfish, and lacking honesty and transparency. A female participant expressed her frustration, saying:

I used to believe in the leaders of my party, but now I see them as just out for themselves. They don't represent us; they represent their own interests. We need leaders who genuinely care about the people, not just their own pockets.

This sentiment reflects a broader crisis of trust in political leadership, particularly among women who feel excluded from decision-making processes. The perception of leadership as self-serving perpetuates the cycle of disenfranchisement, making it difficult for women to envision themselves as active participants in governance.

The data from the focus group discussions also indicated that 80% of male participants were more politically conscious compared to only 40% of female participants. One male participant noted: 'It's important for us to understand the dynamics of our political environment. We need to engage beyond just voting. We can't afford to sit back and let others decide for us.'

In contrast, only 30% of female participants acknowledged that active political participation encompasses more than just voting, emphasising the need for meaningful decision-making. As one female participant stated: 'We need to do more than just play social roles. Our contributions should be valued in shaping policies, not just seen as support from the sidelines. If we want change, we have to be part of the conversation.'

The narratives from participants illuminate the pervasive disenfranchisement that women face, tying back to the cultural, legal, and patriarchal challenges previously outlined, underscoring the need for systemic change to ensure that women have a genuine voice in decision-making processes. The contrast between male and female political consciousness further suggests that enhancing women's engagement requires both increased opportunities and a fundamental shift in how their contributions are perceived and valued. This systemic exclusion affects individual experiences and perpetuates a cycle of underrepresentation and disillusionment in political processes.

DISCUSSION

The active political participation of women in both Zimbabwe's major political parties is predominantly limited to the rather condescending sphere of the women's wing, relegating them to roles such as clapping, dancing, and

cooking for the men at political rallies and party meetings. This dynamic reflects a broader societal value that views political activities as masculine, exacerbating the challenges women face in occupying critical political spaces. Familial pressures compound internal resistance from male party members, as husbands often ban their wives from participating in politics, perceiving it as an arena for immoral behaviour. This aligns with liberal feminist perspectives, which argue that women's plight is rooted in prejudice, sexism, and socialisation (Enloe, 2000; Jacobs & George, 2023). Political parties, rather than serving as incubators for women's political aspirations, often act as gatekeepers. They subtly ignore feminist calls for fairness, justice, and equal participation, thereby perpetuating male dominance. Men have effectively employed critical mass theory to their advantage, ensuring perpetual dominance by controlling key political positions while pushing women to the quantitative margins. For instance, Joyce Mujuru's elevation to the ceremonial post of Second Vice President was initially celebrated; however, her subsequent removal in December 2014 amidst ZANU-PF factionalism underscores the fragility of women's positions in male-dominated structures (Gaidzanwa, 2020; Musendekwa, 2024). This demonstrates how even women who attain high office often do so at the benevolence of men, creating a façade of female empowerment.

The study exposes the significant economic barriers that hinder women's political participation in Zimbabwe, particularly the lack of financial resources required for effective campaigning and engagement. While affluent women may possess the means to fund their political ambitions, the majority are economically disadvantaged due to historical discrimination and entrenched patriarchal norms. Butale (2022) highlights how gendered economic disparities limit women's access to resources, relegating many to subordinate roles within political parties. This is compounded by societal biases favouring male candidates, as financiers and sponsors often perceive them as more viable contenders (Cleton & Meier, 2023). Despite constitutional provisions for gender parity, such as Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution, political parties fail to implement sustainable gender policies. For instance, ZANU-PF's provincial quota system, while ostensibly aimed at increasing female representation, has been criticised for its lack of robust enforcement and reliance on male leaders' goodwill (Gouvêa et al., 2023; Madenga, 2022). Similarly, MDC-A's rhetoric on gender equity often falls short in practice, sidelining women in favour of power-driven agendas (Manyonganise et al., 2023). The pervasive influence of patriarchal structures within civil society further exacerbates these challenges, as advocacy organisations struggle to effectively champion women's rights amidst systemic constraints (Douglass, 2022; Lie et al., 2023; Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2025). This intersection of economic and cultural barriers creates a political environment where women's participation remains tokenistic rather than transformative.

The application of intersectionality theory provides a nuanced lens to examine the compounded challenges faced by women in Zimbabwean politics. Crenshaw's framework emphasises the interplay of multiple axes of oppression – such as class, location, and ethnicity – that shape women's experiences uniquely (Agbalajobi, 2010). For instance, rural women face pronounced exclusion due to limited access to resources and political networks compared to their urban counterparts (Lawless & Fox, 2010; Zigomo, 2022). Electoral systems like FPTP further entrench these inequalities by prioritising competitive candidates who are predominantly male (Chitando and Mlambo, 2024). While proportional representation has been proposed as a solution to enhance women's representation, scholars like Mwandayi (2023) argue that it does not inherently address deeper structural issues such as patriarchal norms and electoral violence. Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWIE) is a critical yet underexplored factor that significantly deters female candidates from pursuing political careers. CEDAW's review reveals that women face psychosocial violence, harassment, and attacks on their moral integrity from both opponents and members of their own parties (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2012). These findings align with fieldwork data showing that MDC-A (now CCC) women candidates often feel marginalised and threatened within party structures and society at large. Addressing these intersecting barriers requires an approach that integrates economic empowerment with legal protections against harassment and violence while fostering inclusive political cultures through civil society advocacy.

The experiences of women in ZANU-PF and MDC-A reveal distinct yet equally challenging barriers to political participation, reflecting the complex interplay of patriarchal norms, factional politics, and limited civil society support. In ZANU-PF, entrenched patriarchal structures and loyalty-based leadership create an environment where women struggle for visibility and influence (Gaidzanwa, 2020). The party's male-dominated hierarchy often prioritises allegiance over merit, severely limiting opportunities for women's meaningful participation (Moyo, 2020). This dynamic is exacerbated by a constrained civil society landscape, which, despite advocating for women's rights, operates under significant political restrictions (Mtero et al., 2023). The result is a political ecosystem where women face systemic barriers to advancement, with limited external support to challenge these structures. Mautsi et al. (2024) argue that the political will to address gender inequality in Zimbabwe has diminished rapidly since independence, replaced by intensified patriarchal control. This trend is particularly evident in ZANU-PF, where women's political gains are often contingent upon male leaders' goodwill rather than institutional commitments to gender equity (Venganai & Dube, 2022).

The MDC-A, while espousing democratic norms and gender parity in its rhetoric, presents a different set of challenges for women's political engagement. Despite public commitments to equality, women within the MDC-A frequently find themselves marginalised in decision-making processes (Zvingowanisei, 2023). The party's focus on unseating ZANU-PF often overshadows efforts to establish a more inclusive political environment, resulting in the sidelining of gender equity issues (Nedziwe & Tella, 2023). This marginalisation is compounded by the limited capacity of civil society organisations to effectively advocate for women's political empowerment, as they too are constrained by prevailing patriarchal norms (Chitando & Mlambo, 2024; Manyonganise et al., 2023). Madenga (2022) highlights that political parties in Zimbabwe, including the MDC-A, often function as 'old-boy networks,' maintaining firm control over candidate selection and viewing the inclusion of women as a threat to established power structures. The lack of robust civil society advocacy creates critical gaps in support for women's political aspirations, leaving female politicians in both parties to navigate a hostile political landscape with inadequate external support (Venganai & Dube, 2022). Consequently, while both ZANU-PF and MDC-A ostensibly offer platforms for women's participation, structural inequalities and insufficient support networks significantly hinder the realisation of women's political ambitions and engagement (Moyo, 2020; Teele, 2023).

Limitations of the study

This study recognises certain limitations that may impact the findings. One significant limitation is the relatively small sample size of twenty women from only two major cities, Harare and Bulawayo. This narrow focus may not fully capture the diverse experiences of women across Zimbabwe, particularly those in rural areas who may face different political challenges. To address this, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select participants with relevant experiences, providing depth to the data collected. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which can introduce bias as participants might present socially desirable responses. To enhance validity, the researchers ensured confidentiality and anonymity, encouraging participants to share their genuine experiences. Additionally, while the study focused on structural barriers to women's political participation, it did not deeply investigate the intersectionality of identities such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity. This focus, while necessary for clarity, may overlook the complexities of women's experiences. However, the use of thematic analysis helped identify various layers of barriers as reported by participants, enriching the understanding of the issues at hand. Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the structural challenges women face in Zimbabwean politics, laying the groundwork for future research to explore these themes more comprehensively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women have a low level of active political participation in Zimbabwe, and the political party processes and structures have been used to ensure that women do not actively participate in the political arena. This study illuminated the true abstruse that hinders women's active political participation. Zimbabwean political parties are characterised by prejudice and sexism, with serious disregard for fairness, justice, equal opportunity, and equal participation on the part of women politicians. Because of these entrenched unfair political processes, cultures of violence, intimidation, manipulation, bootlicking, sentiments, money politics, ignorance, corruption, deception, and apathy become the order of the day in these political parties. There is next to no involvement of Zimbabwean women in the political process; if there is any, it is to rubber-stamp male decisions. There is no democratic and responsible governance in Zimbabwean political parties. While proportional representation theoretically offers a pathway for increasing women's representation, our findings suggest that its effectiveness is severely undermined by the same systemic barriers women face, including discriminatory laws and gender stereotypes. Consequently, even where proportional representation exists, it often fails to translate into genuine political power for women, as they remain marginalised and unable to influence decision-making processes effectively.

The article highlights the urgent need for political parties to transform into institutional vehicles that actively facilitate women's participation in politics. This requires implementing internal policies that mandate women's inclusion in decision-making processes, leadership positions, and candidate selection, moving beyond tokenistic representation. Quotas for women candidates and leadership roles should be adopted to institutionalise gender parity, while mechanisms to protect women from politically motivated violence and harassment within party structures must be introduced. Awareness campaigns and educational initiatives are equally important to inform women about the significance of political participation and to equip them with the skills and confidence needed to engage in politics. Mentorship programmes, leadership academies, and the promotion of visible role models can inspire women to pursue political careers. These efforts should also target society at large to challenge entrenched gender biases and reshape public perceptions of women's leadership capabilities.

The article further recommends that governments take proactive measures to address systemic barriers hindering women's political engagement. Increased funding for independent female politicians and political parties

with significant female representation is essential. Reviewing the Political Parties Finance Act, which prohibits foreign funding for political parties and regulates the distribution of state funds to parties that receive at least 5% of the vote in general elections, to allocate a specific percentage of funds for women candidates, along with implementing Temporary Special Measures, can help institutionalise gender balance in leadership. Expanding affirmative action policies and scaling up economic empowerment programmes tailored to women would address financial constraints that often deter their political ambitions. Moreover, governments must enforce robust human rights protections to combat Violence Against Women in Politics, including cyberbullying and online harassment. Creating safe spaces for women to share experiences and strategies is vital for fostering resilience against structural challenges. Engaging traditional and religious leaders in advocacy efforts can further promote inclusive political participation by challenging patriarchal norms embedded in cultural practices.

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Ethical statement

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Midlands State University Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, prior to data collection (Ref No. 1v, dated 16/04/2024). Ethical guidelines were strictly observed throughout the study. All participants provided verbal informed consent after being informed of the study objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with explicit verbal consent. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of code numbers and pseudonyms known only to the researchers. All respondents were adults above the age of 18 years, in accordance with Section 15(1) of the General Law Amendment Act Chapter 8:07 (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2006).

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

TPS conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, collected the data, conducted formal analysis, wrote the original draft, and managed project administration. JTM conducted the investigation, curated the data, reviewed and edited the manuscript. VSN provided resources, handled visualization, reviewed and edited the manuscript, and offered supervision. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the sensitive nature of the qualitative data involving personal political experiences, participant identities, and potential risks in Zimbabwe's political context, the full transcripts are not publicly available but can be accessed under controlled conditions with ethical safeguards.

AI disclosure

No artificial intelligence tools were used in the writing, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

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