

THE MARGINALISED MAJORITY

Zimbabwe's Women in Rural Local Government

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about gender and the involvement of women in politics, and convention upon convention has been written to address gender inequalities. But hitherto, in Africa, it has all been much ado about nothing. In Zimbabwe, and indeed many other countries, local government elections are open for all to vote and be voted into office, but the superstructure militates against the free participation of women in these elections. This article examines the limited participation of women in local government elections and decision making, as evidenced by the fact that only 2.76% of councillors elected in 1998 were women and 13.25% in the 2008 local council elections. Sadly, the upper echelons of political power have remained a remarkably resilient bastion of male exclusivity and efforts undertaken to redress the gender imbalance have been superficial. This article juxtaposes these efforts with Zimbabwe's Rural District Councils Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP), which used a holistic approach to institutional development but failed to address the unequal gender relations in the rural district councils (RDCs). As the major targets of RDC policies, women were coerced into submission. The article argues that where women constitute more than half of the voting population it is in the interests of democratic and egalitarian principles that they should be represented in proportion to their numbers (that is, descriptive representation). Women have a stake and an interest in politics. The political violence seen during the elections strongly militates against the free participation of women. Using the case of Zimbabwe's RDCs I argue that peaceful elections and the unequal gender relations should be at the heart of any capacity-building effort for meaningful and sustainable institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

If a country can eliminate the tsetsefly, it can get an equal number of men and women on its politburo.

Molyneux 1985

Women's entry into positions of power within formal institutional politics has everywhere been fraught with difficulty (Molyneux 1998). Gender inequalities surround us in most of our daily activities (Plowman 2003; Kabeer 1994). Local authorities have a mandate to make decisions about how public resources will be spent on a broad range of local services. Women, who are the majority and, indeed, the major consumers of local authority policies, are relatively under-represented in decision-making bodies and concomitant processes. The relatively low number of women in politics and in local government, whether in terms of problems of recruitment or under representation, has been apparent throughout the 20th century, not only in Zimbabwe but throughout the world.² In Africa the mean percentage of seats occupied by women parliamentarians was 12.8 in 2002, giving weight to arguments about women's invisibility in post-colonial African politics (Lindberg 2004).

While numbers have been increasing, a variety of explanations, though debatable, have been suggested for this state of affairs, including, among others, discrimination by voters, failure on the part of women to present themselves for election and the barriers that discourage women from standing for election (Bochel & Bochel 2000; *Mid-Week Sun* 2008). Because of this limited participation in elections women lost out, 'as only those who sat at the table would get a slice of the cake' (Bochel & Bochel 2000). Sadly, the upper echelons of political power have remained a remarkably resilient bastion of male exclusivity (Molyneux 1998).

Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980 after a protracted liberation struggle in which women participated alongside men. At independence the fruits of the struggle, in the form of leadership positions, were not equally shared between men and women. Men dominated all positions, even at local government level, which is closest to women's daily activities.

Over the years the political and economic situation has declined progressively, leading to what is now dubbed 'the Zimbabwe crisis'. Elections – the hallmark of any democracy – have increasingly been characterised by serious violence and, as a result, women have backed away from standing. Amid the 'head bashing', political parties have been reluctant to promote women candidates because they

2 *Mid-Week Sun* (2008) cites Festus Mogae, a former president of Botswana, speaking at a ceremony in Gaborone at which he received the Taylor and Francis Award in July 2008. He expressed disappointment in the inability of women to vote each other into public office, even though they are the majority.

cannot afford them the security and assurance they need to take up leadership positions – a strong deterrent to women’s participation in elections and in politics in general.

This article examines the limited participation of women in local government decision making, as evidenced by the election of a mere 2.76% of women councillors in 1998 and 13.25% councillors in 2008. The article argues that participation in elections and political institutions should be viewed as a smokescreen shielding arrangements which were, in themselves, repressive.

EARLY DEBATES ON WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

The worldwide calls for increased women’s participation in public life have a long history. Conferences on women, organised by the United Nations, have been held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi 1985 and Beijing in 1995 (IULA 1998; Stubbs 2001). At regional and national levels, local government representatives have worked together to implement resolutions passed at these world conferences on women. IULA (1998, p 8) cites related legal instruments also intended to increase the participation of women in local government, like the 1997 Declaration on Democracy and Equality between Women and Men, based on the 1986 Resolution of the Committee for Equality between Women and Men of the Council of Europe on Women’s Participation in Local and Regional Democratic Life. Such legal instruments still exist, but with little or no increase in the number of women participating in local government.

Women still need to be involved; they cannot be mere bystanders in the governance process. As political actors, women bring to their struggles practices, strategies and certain gender-specific qualities of their location as carers responsible for the domestic sphere and social reproduction (Molyneux 1998). Ntseane & Sentsho (2005) argue that where women constitute more than half of the voting population it is in the interests of democratic and egalitarian principles that they should be represented in proportion to their numbers. Women have a stake and interest in politics. Maxine Molyneux (1998; 1985) acknowledges and persuasively engages gender interests in politics and decision making, conceptualising ‘practical gender interests’ and ‘strategic interests’. ‘Practical gender interests’ based on the satisfaction of needs arising from women’s placement within the sexual division of labour and ‘strategic interests’ involve claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women’s position and to secure a more lasting repositioning of women within the gender order and within society at large.

Tong (1998, p 2) contends that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints blocking women’s entrance to and success in the public world. Following a similar line of enquiry, Plowman (2003, p 108)

confirms the unequal relations rooted in the different roles and responsibilities society prescribes for men and women. She cites Caroline Moser's 24-hour-day exercise,³ developed as step one of a gender-planning framework. These disparities can also be mirrored in the external context. Within this scenario, the 1970s saw the formulation of the women in development (WID) approach, which viewed women as an untapped resource in the economy and targeted this aspect of their lives for change, but as an 'add on' to already existing projects.

Plowman (2003, p 107) argues that this analytical framework does nothing to shift the position of women in relation to men. Thus, in response to the limitations of WID, there was a conceptual shift to gender and development (GAD). Plowman (2003, p 107) contends that in order really to empower women their position must be understood in relation to that of men. Thus, the GAD framework engages the power structure so as to promote the redistribution of power in the hope of eradicating gender inequality. The GAD approach was first used in relation to development planning premised on the notion that the major issue is one of the subordination and inequality of indigenous populations and women.

From a gender perspective local government is the level of government that is closest and most accessible to women, particularly since it traditionally provides services utilised by individual households, such as water, schools, clinics and other social services (IULA 1998).⁴ Roche (1998, p 176) argues that gender is a vehicle for understanding the two-way relationship between an organisation and the society in which it is embedded. Roche adds that this explains how one set of interests (in this case male interests) is institutionalised. Plowman (2003, p 105) contends that a gender analysis of an organisation's organogram would look at where women were in relation to men in terms of access to information, decision making and power. It is also a stubborn fact that these inequalities are not natural but are constructed and perpetuated by society. Plowman (2003, p 105) attributes this construction to powerful forces like culture, tradition and religion.

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND DECISION MAKING IN ZIMBABWE

In a captivating study on the involvement of women in the liberation war in Zimbabwe, Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000, p152) succinctly refuted the misconception that women were involved in the liberation struggle as equals with men and argued that 'the sex based prejudices of the pre-war period survived the war'. She argues that women were a useful campaigning tool and that the

3 The exercise entails analysing what a wife and husband do in the course of 24 hours and, in the process, the stark differences between the roles and responsibilities of men and women are exposed.

4 Roche (1998, p 176) and Anne Marie Goetz (1996) advise that it is often simpler to start by identifying the outcomes or products of an organisation and how these affect men and women differently.

top administrative structures of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) during the war largely excluded women. Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000, p 133) looked back at the independence scenario (1980) during which time only five of 57 Zanu-PF parliamentary seats were held by women, a mere 8% of parliamentarians, though women comprise 52% of the total population of Zimbabwe. Of these women members of Parliament (MPs), three were given Cabinet posts, though Zanu-PF appointed six men to the senate to qualify them for Cabinet posts (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000, p 103) but failed to do the same for women.

Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000, p 103) analyses Teurai Ropa's⁵ appointment to the first Cabinet as Minister of Youth, Sport and Recreation, describing the appointment as 'contrived', placing her as it did in what Zanu-PF leaders viewed as women's area of specialisation – child care – and reflecting the fact that women did not share the spoils of the war (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000, p 152). Chronicling some of the superficial legislative changes that have been made, she argues that much has still to be done.

Even two decades after independence, at the National Workshop on Political Empowerment of Women in Local Governance (28 April 1998) the then Minister of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives, the late Tenjiwe Lesabe, confirmed that Zimbabwe had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Lesabe noted that Article 7 of CEDAW prohibited discrimination against women in political and public life and outlined the facts about Zimbabwe shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Composition of public organisations in Zimbabwe

Organisation	No of women	No of men	Total
Zanu-PF politburo	4	21	25
Zanu-PF central committee	30	155	185
Parliament	21	129	150
Cabinet	3	21	24
Permanent secretary	2	21	23
Mayor	0	16	16
Rural district councillors	38	1 339	1 377
Total	98	1 702	1 800

Source: Adapted from Tenjiwe Lesabe's speech at the National Workshop on Political Empowerment of Women in Local Governance (28 April 1998).

5 *Nom de guerre* of Joyce Mujuru, one of the vice-presidents of Zimbabwe since 2002.

Table 1 shows clearly the skewed distribution of women in influential political positions. For example, 100% of all mayors were male and women constituted a paltry 2.84% of members of rural district councils (RDCs). In the total number of organisations examined women constituted a mere 5.4%. The March 2008 harmonised general and council elections showed a similarly disappointing trend, with only 13.25% of women councillors elected. One would think that the first sector women should break into would be local government and politics since they are closest to them in terms of policies and service consumption.

This position resonates with the sentiments of Solomon Chikate, the then chief executive officer of the Association of Rural District Councils (ARDC), when he reiterated, in an address to delegates to the same workshop, the government's proposal at a Zanu-PF National Consultative Assembly that the RDC Act should be amended to accommodate a quota system for women (Chikate 1996). The ARDC developed a gender framework to chart the course of women's participation in RDCs, thereby aiming to increase the number of women in councils by 2000 (Mozhenty, Tsanga & Mashingaidze 1998).

As part of this gender framework the ARDC introduced a Gender Awareness and Mainstreaming Programme, which operated from 2001 to 2003 but ended due to lack of funding. However, this programme was only put in place after the Rural District Councils Capacity Building Programme (RDCCBP) had officially closed down in 2001 in the wake of the political, governance and economic crisis dubbed 'Zimbabwe's plunge'.

International media attention and political utterances all point to the dismal socio-economic and political situation in Zimbabwe under which the country's local authorities have been reeling (Wallechinsky 2002; www.news.zimbabwe.com 2005; 2009). The year 2000 was a turning point for the politicisation of the local state.

SYNOPSIS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ZIMBABWE

Until independence in 1980 local government in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) was divided racially in terms of a 'separate development' policy, a Rhodesian formulation of apartheid, which benefited whites to the detriment of blacks. The pre-independence local government units (LGUs) were harmonised and amalgamated into RDCs in 1988.

Datta (1987, p 29) divides the local authority system into 'detached' and 'attached'. In terms of the 'detached' system there were different types of urban councils, all with differing levels of autonomy. Datta (1987, p 30) argues that under the 'attached' system there were district councils in communal areas. She contended that district councils were, in fact, school districts for the communal

areas and that the most vital local functions in these areas, like road maintenance, water supply, and cattle-dipping, were provided directly by a central organisation called the District Development Fund (DDF), set up by the central government.

The district councils, which were attached to central field administration in an organic sense, were weak, fragmented and politically discredited. The white commercial farmers who had managed to settle in the remote/rural areas had separate administrative arrangements called rural councils, which were given considerable power and had access to all the necessary basic infrastructure and essential services such as roads, clean water and habitable climatic conditions.

Efforts to eliminate this dual system included transforming the 220 African councils into 55 district councils in 1980 and combining all local government under the jurisdiction of one parent ministry, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development. Continued moves towards this process culminated in the formal merging in July 1993 of the rural and district councils, creating RDCs.

The transition to the new dispensation was fraught with considerable resistance from the contenders and haggling among the members of staff. Musekiwa (2001) posits that amalgamation was a political decision intended to remove one of the last vestiges of colonial rule; what Munro (1998) and McGregor (2002) called de-racialisation of local government. In my view, amalgamation resulted in a (forced) marriage of convenience between the former foes.

Another initiative by the government was the introduction of RDC capacity building programmes (CBPs) to improve the ability of RDCs to take up the new challenges. In propagating the capacity building programmes RDCs were found to lack the skills and resources required to shoulder these added responsibilities. The challenge for the Zimbabwe government was thus to link and tailor capacity building to access to resources in order to establish the strategic areas on which a responsible programme of decentralisation should focus. In turn, these efforts at the local level would feed into the national consensus-building process in order for the transfer of central responsibilities and resources to be carried out in a way that would lead to more equitable and sustained development.

Mandiyani (2006) contends that another, unstated, reason for implementing RDCCBP was the pressure generated by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) on which the government had embarked in 1991. Because ESAP demanded less government intervention it enabled the government to 'hive off' responsibility to local authorities, thus RDCCBP was a 'face-saver'.⁶

The objective of the RDCCBP was to develop the abilities of all RDCs to plan, implement and manage their own district development programmes and

6 The government could live with a clear conscience, having prepared the RDCs to take over the added responsibilities.

the sustainable delivery of essential services. To achieve this, the CB programme was three pronged: institutional development, capital development and human resources development (HRD). Gender was a crosscutting theme. Within the human resources development component there was an aspect of civic participation where women were to be trained to engage in RDC activities as councillors and as an engaged citizenry.

ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Elections for both rural and urban councils in Zimbabwe were, until 2008, when they were harmonised, held separately from the national parliamentary and presidential elections. Before harmonisation council elections were held every four years, with intermittent by-elections to fill vacancies as and when they occurred. Presidential elections were held every six years and parliamentary elections every five years.

The Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA 2008) observed that in the past, four different bodies had been involved in running and managing the electoral process in Zimbabwe. These were the Delimitation Commission, the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC), the Election Directorate and the Registrar General. EISA (2008) noted that this situation undermined the effective and efficient management of elections and that power and authority with regard to election management were dispersed among all these institutions and it was not clear where the buck stopped. In a bid to correct this anomalous situation, the above institutions were abolished with the establishment of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Under the enabling legislation, everyone is free to vote or be voted into office in Zimbabwe's local government elections if they meet the eligibility criteria. In terms of the Electoral Act, chapter 2:13, s 119(1): 'Any person who is a citizen of Zimbabwe; has attained the age of twenty-one years; is enrolled on the voters roll for the council area concerned; and is not disqualified in terms of subsection (2)⁷ is qualified to be elected as a councillor. The first-past-the-post system is used. Once the council has been elected the councillors choose office bearers (council chairperson and members of committees) from among their members.

⁷ There are a number of grounds for disqualification, *inter alia*, default with the payment of any levy, rate, charge or tax due and payable to the council concerned; conviction of an offence involving dishonesty; holding an office of profit under the state and being a member of Parliament or a member of another local authority

The Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) (2011) advised that when choosing the electoral system of representation people should first decide what criteria the system should fulfil. ZESN (2011) identified the common system as creating a representative assembly and holding the elected members accountable to the voters. In this case, gender representation and representation of other groups is of primary interest. However, the Rural District Councils Act and the Electoral Act are silent on this. ZESN contends that politicians tend to support a system of representation which they believe will benefit their party. However, such tactical considerations are legitimate, but myopic. There is always the temptation to trust that the system that once brought a party to power will magically repeat itself. Instead, there can be a number of shocking surprises.

ZESN (2011) advocated an electoral system that can represent the voters along gender or ethnic lines and can represent minorities. ZESN acknowledged that since a party may need only a few percent more voters to gain an extra seat every vote counts.

Within any democratic polity cardinal features like participation and contestations are indispensable. ZESN (2011) states that contestation presumes the legitimacy of opposition, the right to challenge incumbents and their ideological predispositions and socio-economic policies as well as guaranteeing the twin freedoms of expression and association. It also involves engagement in free and fair elections. In a similar vein, ZESN contends that participation, which forms the pinnacle of this article, captures the idea of popular sovereignty and the protection of the right to vote as well as the right to be voted for. It is critical at this stage to highlight that the explanations given for both contestation and participation are apparently gender neutral in that they assume that there are equal opportunities for both men and women to participate in democratic processes and take part in contests for seats in governing bodies (ZESN 2011).

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SELECTED RDCS, 1993 TO 2003

In the sections above I chronicled the general history of women's involvement in local government and politics in general. In this section I discuss the involvement of Zimbabwe's women in local government elections during three terms of office (see Table 2). The figures are drawn from case studies of eight selected RDCs.⁸

⁸ To make findings that can be generalised, Zimbabwe was divided into four quadrants, with two RDCs selected from each quadrant.

Table 2
Women Councillors in the Sampled RDCs: 1993 to 2003

RDC	Total no of councillors	Women councillors in Term 1	Women councillors in Term 2	Women councillors in Term 3
Mazowe	29	2	3	2
Bindura	18	0	1	0
Mutasa	27	1	1	3
Makoni	35	6	6	7
Gwanda	23	2	2	2
Umzingwane	18	2	2	4
Chirumhanzi	19	0	0	4
Gokwe South	30	1	1	3
Total	199	14	16	25

Source: Mandiyanike (2006)

In Table 2, Term 1 refers to the term of the first full council (after amalgamation), from July 1993 to August 1998.⁹ Term 2 refers to the term of the second full council, from September 1998 to September 2002. Term 3 pertains to the term of the full council from October 2002 to October 2007. The total number of women councillors may not vary over the three terms because in some RDCs certain women councillors held office for more than one term with some having 'alderwoman'¹⁰ status conferred on them. For example, in the Gokwe South RDC one woman councillor had been in office since the 1980s. Hence the total number of women councillors there (five) includes the same councillor in all three terms.

The longevity in office of women councillors can be explained in terms of the individual's idiosyncrasies and ability to withstand a hostile political environment. Most of these long-term women councillors are local notables. For example, they run successful businesses and command a lot of political respect. It was a sad reality that no woman chaired an RDC during the period, although a few served as committee chairpersons. In the eight selected councils there was a total of 14 women (7.03%) in term 1; 16 (8.04%) in term 2 and 25 (12.56%) in term 3.

9 The councillors' terms were supposed to be four years, but in some cases the Minister of Local Government delayed calling for new elections.

10 An alderman (alderwoman) is a councillor who has served more than two terms consecutively. This is significant in that it is an honorary status for seniority within council.

There was no woman chief executive officer in any RDC, although there were a number of women executive officers, assistant executive officers and clerks.¹¹

As indicated above, the general and council elections of March 2008 did not change the picture in any way. Chakaipa (2010) observed that during the harmonised general and council elections of 2008, 1 958 wards were contested in all the RDCs. The Kubatana website¹² contained the names of all the councillors elected to the respective RDCs in 1 497 wards (due to a paucity of data at the time the Kubatana website did not include the names of all councillors in Matebeleland South).

Chakaipa (2010) gives the results by political party affiliation and does not show the gender disparity in the composition of the councils. This paper fills this gap by providing a gender disaggregated data¹³ analysis drawn from the councillors' names on the Kubatana website. My gender disaggregated data analysis showed that only 174 women were elected as councillors while there were 1 313 men. Women comprised only 13.25%.

Councillors are the policy makers, while the executive officers are salaried and manage the day-to-day business of the council and, although they are not elected, contribute significantly to the policy-making process. Examination of the involvement of women in managerial positions in the RDCs, however, shows that they have limited input into decision making, although when political violence flares up, women are equally affected.

During field research I had the opportunity to interact with members of staff at the Makoni RDC. At lunchtime the women members of staff cooked the food, served it to their male counterparts and cleared the dishes. This scenario indicates clearly that even women at administrative / professional levels are expected to do their usual domestic chores. Table 3 shows the position of heads of department (HoDs) in the sampled RDCs.

11 Ofei-Aboagye (2000, p 4) observes the similarly discomfiting nature of gender relations in local government in Ghana. She cites startling figures showing that of 110 CEOs only 12 were women, while women constituted 32% of the entire civil service, 24% of them in local government, mostly in secretarial and clerical positions. Among the efforts to include women in local government was a directive that reserved 30% of the appointed positions in assemblies for women, building the capacity of women to aspire to positions of influence and encouraging stakeholder institutions to provide appropriate support to women's concerns, creating an enabling environment for their participation.

12 An NGO network alliance project that provides online community support for Zimbabwean activists. The website seeks to improve the accessibility of human rights and civic information in Zimbabwe.

13 Essentially entails classifying information on the basis of gender. This will provide vital indicators of gender needs.

Table 3
Women HoDs in the sampled RDCs in Term 3¹⁴

RDC	EO admin	EO finance	EO projects	EO CS	Internal audit	Total
Mazowe	0	0	0	1(a)*	0	1
Bindura	0	1	0	0	1	2
Makoni	1	0	0	1	0	2
Mutasa	1	0	0	0	0	1
Gwanda	0	0	0	1	0	1
Umzingwane	0	1	0	1	0	2
Chirumhanzi	1	0	0	0	0	1
Gokwe South	0	0	0	1	1	2

Source: D Mandiyanike (2006)

* (a) Denotes acting capacity

As can be seen from Table 3, four of the RDCs had two women HoDs, the other four had one each. The position in Mazowe was even more disconcerting, with one woman HoD, who was in an acting capacity and was not assured of securing the position substantively. This is even more revealing in the light of the fact that of the 29 councillors in Mazowe only three (at most) were women at any point during the period studied.

THE AGONY OF WOMEN'S LOW PARTICIPATION

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show a very worrying picture of women's participation in politics and public office in Zimbabwe in general and in RDCs in particular. Plowman (2003, p 104) queries this anomalous situation, asking how one can develop an organisational change process that has gender inequality at its heart. Plowman argues that organisational change has traditionally been 'gender blind'. In a discussion, the ARDC Gender Officer (November 2003) spoke of a number of barriers women face in their quest for public life. Among these were:¹⁵

14 As alluded to above, it was difficult to trace the position of the different officeholders over the ten-year period. I thus give the most recent position.

15 IULA (1998, p 10) and Ofei-Aboagye (2000, p 4) refer to similar problems in various political systems, depending on the country and culture.

A weak and undeveloped democracy at the local level, the nature of the electoral system, lack of legislative equality, outright discrimination *by the men folk* [own emphasis], reluctance, poor support / assistance from political parties,¹⁶ the existence of discriminatory informal networks – the ‘old boy network’ that excludes women’s participation, male domineering [sic] and sexist behaviour from male colleagues and the exhausting triple workday – with multiple roles as wives, mothers, daughters, community workers and income generators.

In the case of Zimbabwe I would add another barrier (the mainstay of this paper) that has gained increasing prominence – entrenched violence in the political system. Bochel & Bochel (2000) also point to the aggression and ‘head-banging’ which mainstream parties accept as a routine way to treat politicians both in other parties and in their own.

Several writers and organisations in Zimbabwe allude to the deliberately orchestrated violence carried out at the behest of the state and its agencies (Alexander, McGregor & Ranger 2000; Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum 2002 and 2003; Makumbe & Compagnon 2000; Hammar & Rouftopolous 2003). In a discussion a council official in Gwanda intimated that in view of the rampant political violence, the political playing field, hitherto uneven, had become so violent and ‘macho’ that women were scared off and found it difficult to participate in local politics.

The 2008 elections, which were harmonised for the first time so that the elections for the president, Parliament and local authorities were held simultaneously, were severely marred by violence. The presidential election was closely fought between Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai and the results showed that there was no outright winner. A second election, a ‘run-off’, was held in June 2008. For Mugabe and his party this was an election that had to be won at all costs. Several reports have been compiled on the electoral violence. It is notable that ss 133 and 134 of the Electoral Act set out penalties for intimidatory practices, corruption, preventing a political party or candidate from campaigning and exerting undue influence on voters. However, these are just rhetorical legal provisions wrapped in fine legal jargon. The following paragraph chronicles some of the blatant transgressions of these provisions.

Makombe (2008) relates the case of Rosemary White, who admitted that ‘I didn’t know this election would be so difficult, but I won’t go backwards’. Ms White campaigned using her own money and with support from the ‘Women Can

16 Ofei-Aboagye (2000, p 3) posits that women have been constrained from entering local level politics by a lack of finance for campaigning, time constraints and the widely held perception that politics is a ‘dirty’ game and is not for decent women.

Do It' campaign. After she was threatened with violence by Zanu-PF supporters she was forced to flee her home, leaving behind her husband and children, and sought refuge at the rural homestead of her grandmother. The Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP 2008, p 1) reported that

since 2 May 2008, there has been a phenomenal escalation of election violence with May recording 6 288 cases up from April's 4 375. By end of May, the record of murder cases had almost doubled to 47 from the April level of 26. By 20 June, 35 new murder cases had been recorded. Cases of harassment shot up to 4 288, a figure that is almost four times the April recording of 1 484.

The ZPP (2008, p 4) said that while cases of involvement by the Movement for Democratic Change in acts of violence had also increased, the main perpetrators came from the ruling party, with many cases allegedly involving war veterans, Zanu-PF youth, militia, Zanu-PF councillors and traditional leaders. There were also 4 288 cases of harassment, 704 cases of assault, 670 cases of displacement, 214 cases of malicious damage to property, and 85 cases of kidnappings/abductions recorded – a pattern that was largely consistent with the April trends.

There were bizarre incidents in which victims were allegedly beaten with logs and axes, hard pipes, sjamboks with diamond wire; beaten under the feet; beaten on the buttocks; handcuffed; made to roll in gravel; attacked with bicycle chains on their hands; burnt with hot plastics on the legs, mouth and body; forced to denounce their parties and assaulted with fists and booted feet. The ZPP carried out a Gender Victims-Perpetrator Analysis in which they established that the number of MDC female victims was three times higher than that of Zanu-PF male victims and eight times higher than that of Zanu-PF female victims.

Idasa (2010) states that political violence against women is common in Zimbabwe. The perpetrators are usually non-state agents, reported to be Zanu-PF supporters, Zanu-PF youth, and war veterans, but there are also large numbers of reports involving state agents such as the Zimbabwe Republic Police and the Zimbabwe National Army. According to Idasa it is well documented that violence in Zimbabwe increases during election years and that rural women are more likely than urban women to report the destruction of property, displacement, politically-motivated rape¹⁷ and torture, while urban women more frequently report assault, unlawful detention and death threats. The victims indicated that

17 The term 'politically-motivated rape' was used to mean rape that involved some political element such as an indication that the rape was committed as a punishment for a party political affiliation, the affiliation of a spouse or family member, or occurred at a 'base' or political meeting (Idasa 2010).

they did not report the violations to the police because of the fear of reprisals and because the police were frequently involved in the violence.

Thus, evidence from Zimbabwe's RDCs has shown that women have been excluded from participating in the public domain for various reasons. Stubbs (2001, p 348) alerts us to the fact that these stumbling blocks are insurmountable. Plowman (2003, p 106) argues that 'just as society has constructed gender inequalities, so they can also be dismantled, they are not set in stone and they can be changed'.

CONCLUSION

The Zimbabwe government, like most other governments, has ratified conventions and international treaties on women's rights. These have, however, not been translated into concrete deliverables for local government participation and representation. Political violence, the reluctance of political parties to promote women candidates, cultural stereotyping, patriarchal attitudes and practices and male networks from which women are excluded continue to frustrate the movement of women from what Clarke & Brunell (1995) aptly call 'masculinised institutions'. Indeed, the upper echelons of political power have remained a remarkably resilient bastion of male exclusivity.

The RDCCBP opened a window of opportunity that could have made a significant difference in supporting the leadership positions of women but the Zimbabwean government 'hived off' responsibility to local authorities and the RDCCBP merely became a 'face-saver' – the government could live with a clear conscience that it had prepared the RDCs to take over the additional responsibilities.

As an institutional development tool the RDCCBP did not address gender inequalities or pave the way for women to play a meaningful role in development. It was 'gender blind' and did not incorporate gender as a critical variable in strengthening RDCs. Capacity building does not lie merely in training people or strengthening organisations, it also deals with complex, somewhat intangible aspects, among them political participation, women's involvement, norms, values, political culture, social capital and incentives for change (Mandiyanike 2006). This article has explored the discomfiting nature of local government elections, gender relations and political violence.

The results have revealed how, despite being in the majority, few women made it into RDC offices. Those who were elected councillors were backbenchers and those who were employed in executive positions were all below the level of CEO. Equally damning is the realisation that some women members of staff in RDCs were expected to engage in cooking and related chores to service men.

This points strongly to the fact that even when women reach high positions, mechanisms are found to keep them 'in their place'.

It is a sad reality that Zimbabwe's women remain marginalised and continue to face discrimination at all levels. The harsh political climate militates against efforts to incorporate them in decision making through the ballot box.

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