



Women, Civic Engagement & Participation in the Context of COVID-19: Negation, Navigation and Negotiation of Women's Rights in Zimbabwe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The emergence of the raging COVID-19 pandemic into the global arena, has in very strong ways, sought to threaten the small gains, on gender equality, women's representation and participation in democratic processes. This paper therefore considers COVID-19 and its impact on women's representation and participation in civic and governance processes. These settings are discussed together with opportunities which have since emerged which may re-shape the political landscape in regards to women participation. Lastly, it provides recommendations upon which women can recover the COVID-19 shocks and explore to strengthen their representation and participation at all levels of decision-making in Zimbabwe. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness on the extent at which women participation in Civic Engagement and democratic processes was impacted by COVID-19 in 2020. It also intends to assist women's rights advocates and stakeholders designing advocacy programming which targets to address the identified constraints and barriers to women participation in civic engagement and democratic processes.

CONTEXT

Preliminary research and reporting of the effects of COVID-19 on the Zimbabwean population indicate that inequitable gendered practices negatively impact women in the political discourse, general economy, the workplace, and the home. Gender analysis demonstrates that the COVID 19 pandemic is laying bare structural injustices and inequalities deeply ingrained in the Zimbabwe society and systems that thrive on exclusion, of the most marginalized and politically disenfranchised.

Women's rights organizations and activists in Zimbabwe and the world over, have been at the forefront of challenging the gender-blindness of many government interventions and responses to the pandemic. At the same time, it has not been an easy road, as women's rights advocates and activists have had to adjust to new realities, creatively re-thinking how to continue their advocacy initiative, maintaining contact with grassroots women constituencies, while also having to come up with strategies to deal with the pandemic. This has been particularly challenging given the limited access to the Internet, proper work and living spaces and privacy.

THE NEGATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

1. Equality and Participation in COVID-19 decision-making positions

Research in Zimbabwe and the world over, has underscored the fact that although women have been on the frontlines of COVID-19 as first responders, health providers, primary caregivers and engagements with grassroots, their meaningful representation in policy development and decision making on COVID-19 has remained limited. In March 2020, as part of the COVID-19 National Preparedness and Response Plan, the Government of Zimbabwe established a National COVID-19 Response taskforce. The taskforce system was cascaded to Provincial and District levels in order to ensure enhanced response at lower levels. However, survey findings and WCoZ Situation Monitoring reports reveal a big structural gender imbalance problem within the taskforce structures. Statistics indicate that very few women have been included in the emergency response leadership structures. Following under is an illustration of the findings of a Rapid Gender Analysis on the composition of some of the COVID-19 Provincial and District Task-forces:

Province/ District	Number of Females	Number of Males
Chiredzi	2	15
Mwenezi	4	15
Mberengwa	0	12
Bikita	1	9
Zvishavane	3	13

CARE Rapid Gender Analysis 2020

It can be argued that the effects of poor women's representation in the COVID-19 Response

teams, have manifested in Government's and decision-makers' failure to adequately respond to the specific needs of women and girls during COVID-19, e.g in Quarantine and isolation centres. Moreover, this has also led to the failure by decision makers in the Taskforces to collect sex- disaggregated data, in order to inform policies and gender sensitive Regulations on COVID-19.

2. Competing interests: Livelihoods and Governance

The loss of livelihoods and harsh economic conditions under COVID-19, have by and large, exacerbated existing gender inequalities in financial power, access to resources and time availability that often prevent women from engaging in governance and civic processes. Women have had to grapple with the increase of the burden of unpaid care-work, home-based care and assuming the role of primary care-givers. This has left women without the time and economic currency to focus on governance, or civic processes. The pandemic is simply reinforcing these barriers to women's participation at various levels of the Zimbabwe society. Rural women and women from less privileged backgrounds have proved to be at heightened risk getting left behind.

The already existing equality gap in Zimbabwe has been widened and further exacerbated by the establishment of COVID-19 containment measures which included a 9 month lockdown which enforced in the country. It is imperative to note that women in Zimbabwe constitute 60% of the informal sector, through their involvement in cross-border business, selling of clothes, domestic piece jobs among other things. A larger portion of this sector has not been in operation for the rest of the year since March.

3. Democratic governance and elections

The year 2020, although very slow, saw the unfolding of a number of democratic events, such as Constitution Amendment Bill (2) process, Political Party Elections, and certain developments on By-Elections. Overwhelming evidence reveals that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, enable informal rules and institutions to flourish at the

expense of democracy and constitutionalism—and these tend to favour the already dominant group. In September 2020, the Minister of Health and Child-Care, issued a statutory instrument, indefinitely suspending the holding of by-elections to fill casual vacancies in Parliament and local authorities for as long as COVID-19 remains a formidable epidemic. This has imposed a negative impact on the already very low level of representation of women in Parliament and local authorities. In the absence of elections to fill vacant position both in Parliament and local government, women will continue to be under-represented in Parliament through-out the whole pandemic era.

Further to that, the disruptions in normal Political party primaries have resulted in male gatekeepers to place in power their male counterparts. Between August and November 2020, 2 major political parties in the country conducted numerous Primary Elections to fill in vacancies which had risen within the parties, albeit with very few women contesting in the Elections. The lasting impacts of this will be to literally and politically, turn back the clock on gender equality and women's political empowerment. Over focus on the COVID -19 pandemic and juggling of the increased unpaid care-work and home-based care-work, could also have negatively impacted on women's participation in this democratic process.

4. Access to information and the digitalisation of COVID-19

The impacts of the digitalization of COVID-19 were strongly felt by women as a serious threat to aspiring women political leaders in 2020, who may have wanted to participate in elections, particularly the Primary elections. Restrictions on movement due to the lockdown which were put in place by Government in March 2020, also meant that aspiring political party candidates would have to heavily rely on online campaigning and voter engagement. This created a new challenge for female voters and candidates. Research shows that globally, women on average have less access to and familiarity with online platforms and social media tools. For candidates, the shift from in-person meetings to remote campaigning benefits those with more established profiles and networks, and in most cases men. The cost of data bundles itself, and poor connectivity have been a formidable enemy for the women constituency, thus negatively

impacting on women's fundamental freedoms of expression, the freedom of media and access to information.

COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown restrictions in Zimbabwe, have seen countless communications and opportunities migrating to the internet and social media platforms. Business and communities in general, have, for example learnt how to utilise applications such as ZOOM, Skype, Twitter for access to information. The Ministry of Health and Child-Care has also heavily relied on platforms such as Twitter to disseminate information and statistics on COVID-19. As much as these platforms are convenient modes of communication, it is a settled position that the platforms are not easily accessible to the majority of women and girls in the urban, peri-urban and rural communities throughout Zimbabwe. To that end, various grassroots women networks, have revealed how the digitalisation of the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated their lack of capacity to contribute to political and democratic proc

THE NAVIGATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the opening up of opportunities for online Parliamentary processes, such as Public Hearings, attendance to open Committee meetings and consultations. By and large, this has proved to be a blessing and a curse at the same time. A blessing, given the fact that women with adequate resources and capacities, have been able to engage in online Parliamentary processes, from the comfort of their own homes, despite the restrictions in movement and gatherings. On the other hand, this approach which has been viewed by others, as elitist, has meant that a greater population of women in remote areas, with no access to resources to engage on online platforms, have been excluded from the process, altogether.

To mitigate these challenges, Women's rights organisations in Zimbabwe have been stepping in to provide information, support, resources and services to women facing numerous challenges during COVID-19. Women's Rights Organizations such as WCoZ have also supported women in participating in governance processes such as

National Budget Consultations and the Constitution Amendment Bill (2) process. WCoZ has also opened up platforms and mobilized women to participate in civic engagement process to hold solution accountable to women's rights and gender equality. These efforts have ensured that women's voices do not remain scarce nor stifled during the pandemic.

Women's rights advocates have also pushed for a very engaging and more dynamic discussion on ensuring that Gender Equality and women's rights remain essential for recovering from the pandemic and building a better future for women and girls. Women's engagement in civic engagement therefore remains critical in ensuring comprehensive advocacy strategies which prioritize a gender lens approach to all COVID-19 preparedness, response and recovery efforts by Government, Parliament, Decision-makers, local authorities and other stakeholders.

THE NEGOTIATION

To systematically navigate emerging challenges, and negotiate on opportunities, it is of paramount importance to bring out a better picture of how the pandemic is reshaping women's political participation. This therefore requires investing in data collection, gender analyses especially on how increased financial precarity, technological illiteracy, caregiving responsibilities, and disruptions in democratic and political-governance processes differently impact women and men ability to engage and influence change at various levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Women Centred Community-based response

The pandemic has exposed community engagement and community-centered approaches as important components of health emergency preparedness and response. This action must

ensure that women groups, community based and civil society organizations are included in decision-making and budget resources. Gender experts should also be prioritised in response teams. Duty-bearers should work on building a culture of solidarity, trust, and kindness. Women participation matters as they can best identify solutions for their respective communities and lived experience.

ii. Equal representation

Implementation of Constitutional provisions, particularly, sections 17, 56 and 80, which speak to gender balance, and equality in representation in all spheres of the Zimbabwe society. This includes COVID-19 Taskforce and Response groups at all levels. This action should be supported by the publicization of analysed sex and age disaggregated data by Government on the composition of the COVID-19 taskforce teams throughout the country.

iii. New approaches towards Governance

The pandemic provides an opening to reimagine existing governance paradigms, as well as the gender norms that underpin them. It offers unique opportunities both to highlight the relationship between gendered roles in society and women's political participation and leverage this linkage to promote electoral reforms that address issues historically viewed as non-political. The COVID-19 crisis, should thus be exploited by women rights advocates and policy-makers as a period of rebuilding and strategizing for more women participation in the delayed By-elections, and the fast-approaching General elections. This should be an opportunity for pushing for the overhaul of electoral law system to pave way for effective gender-mainstreaming in the Electoral arena. In addition, at local government level, authorities should consider augmenting participation of women through extending governance processes to online platforms. This should include processes such as Budget consultative meetings.

iv. Safety nets and economic reliefs

Urgently prioritize women's access to social safety nets offset economic impacts for COVID19. Women facing the biggest impacts in food security, income loss, and caregiving burdens, often have to

choose between participating in governance processes and income generating activities. Stakeholders including CSOs must strategize on means to integrate livelihoods and governance initiatives and programming.

Setting up and ensuring fully resourced community Information centres in rural and remote areas specifically for women and other vulnerable groups.

v. Bridging the digital literacy and access.

End

To mitigate the digital divide by investing in community centred programs that build women's digital literacy skills and access to the internet.

End Notes and References

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