



***Making the Case for
Proportional Representation:
Challenges and Opportunities
for Increasing Women
Participation in Zimbabwe***

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 **HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**

Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	3
A motivation for the Female Quota in Zimbabwe	6
Experiences of Women during 2018 Harmonised Elections as they sought public office.	7
Why Electoral Systems Matter in Advancing Women Participation.....	9
Achieving Gender Parity through Proportional Representation?	10
Conclusion	12
References.....	13

Abstract

This research paper focuses on women’s participation in politics and decision making in Zimbabwe. It draws from experiences shared by women who have contested in the electoral processes as well as highlight the gap between the women at the grassroots and the elites pushing for changes in the electoral system. It is informed by failed campaigns by the women’s movement in Zimbabwe to achieve gender parity in spite of constitutional provisions that guarantee these. The paper identifies the challenges that women encounter in politics which results in low participation and ultimately poor representation in key decision making positions. It also identifies structural factors that hinder women from participating in electoral processes which impact on the quest for a 50/50 representation in Zimbabwe. A political contextual analysis is required to inform any strategy to increase women’s representation, supported by the constitution and various international, regional and national instruments.

Keywords: Participation, Politics, Proportional Representation, Equality, Constitutionalism

Introduction*

There is emerging consensus that women play an integral role in societies' upliftment and their continued exclusion from key decision making platforms will impact negatively on the attainment of SDGs. Moreover, this is a contravention the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which calls for reducing gender inequalities. The World Bank for example, acknowledges that the quest to end poverty will not be achieved without working towards achieving gender equality and committing resources to that effect. Furthermore, the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) provide political opportunities to push the agenda on women's political power and leadership. Through the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the UN urges *Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict*¹.

The argument justifying addressing exclusion of women globally and in Zimbabwe specifically should be viewed in the context of justice and democracy, where women constitute 52%² of the population and 54% of the voting population in 2008. Owing to the nature of our patriarchal societies, it has proved a daunting task to achieve greater women participation in decision making through traditional routes. Since the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, there has been an increase in campaigns across the globe to lobby for more females into leadership positions. Zimbabwe has not been spared, with the Women's feminist movement taking a lead in pushing for a gender sensitive constitution that was adopted in 2013. The adoption of a gender sensitive constitution appeared to be progressive and in sync with governments' conviction that "*Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace...*"³.

Moreover, in line with SDG 5 and 10 on Gender equality and reduced inequalities, women in Zimbabwe celebrated the inclusion of provisions on gender equality and women's rights in the supreme law of the land as enshrined in the 2013 constitution. For example, Section 17 seeks to promote gender balance and ensure equal representation⁴, while Section 56 guarantees equality and non-discrimination⁵. However, despite these constitutional guarantees, the progress has been static with various campaigns yielding very little. In fact, there is a danger of losing the gains that have been made thus far if no drastic action is taken. Since Beijing 1995 the elected women in the National Assembly continue to reflect less than 25%. It is only after the adoption of the 2013 constitution, and courtesy of Section 116 of the Constitution that the percentage of women increased. This provision guarantees for additional 60 seats of the 210 Constituency Seats, bringing the total to 270 seats increasing the percentage to nearly 34%.

*Paper was written by Lloyd Pswarayi, Senior Research, Research & Advocacy Unit (RAU)

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¹UNSC Resolution 1325

²Zim Stats

³ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Adopted at the 16th plenary meeting, on 15 September 1995

⁴ S17 Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013

⁵ S56 Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013

These seats are more of symbolic representation than substantive representation of gender. They are just to add numbers and not value to what the quota system is supposed to achieve. Other efforts by the women's movement in Zimbabwe have flattered to deceive with insignificant increases reflective of the efforts. For example since Beijing and the rise of the feminist movement in Zimbabwe, the numbers of female representation have remained static (see below) as politicians continue to pay lip service to issues of gender parity and equality.

A number of factors have contributed to the condition of women with historical marginalization resulting in limited confidence and capacity to effectively contest for leadership positions and participate in governance and decision making. Whilst patriarchy has been highlighted as the major reason for few women participating in politics, violence against women is one single most dominant factor resulting in women shunning direct involvement in political activities. Women are directly targeted. As a result of violence, because they often become the targets of violent leadership contestations, both between and within political parties.

A Review of the Women's Quota in Zimbabwe: 2013 – 2018

The current quota system in Zimbabwe is a product of extensive lobbying by the women's movement in its bid to attain gender parity and attain equal representation in decision making leadership positions. The primary focus has been to ensure that female representation in the National Assembly achieve 50% of the allocated constituencies. It is also important to understand the context of the current female quota as a product of political gamesmanship between political parties as the partners in the Global Political Agreement placed women's rights as one of the key issues⁶.

This understanding also helps to explain why the female quota system in its current format will continue to undermine efforts towards female representation and not necessarily present a shift in the political thinking. This paper argues that whilst the adoption of the Women's quota was celebrated as a step in the right direction towards attainment of equal representation, presenting Zimbabwe as respectable in terms of the global trends, it also marked a political own-goal for the women's movement. Questions arise whether the quota system is the best method to increase women participation and representation given that there is no increase of directly elected women in 2018, and a decrease from 2008⁷.

Firstly, the Women's Movement accepted half-baked measures which were determined by internal political party processes subjected to party structures that are controlled by men as opposed to women, yet there is ample evidence suggesting that political parties have taken a tokenistic approach to issues of women, in most cases relegating them to a sub-structure with no decision-making powers. This is called the Women's League or the Women's Assembly. Despite Zimbabwe being a signatory of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, there is evidence to suggest that there is no political will and the gender gaps will be very difficult to narrow. With time lapse, one of the challenges is that the women's movement has become politically compromised and rather than to serve a principled position it now serves

⁶ Tshuma D. (2018), Looking beyond 2023: What next after the Zimbabwe parliamentary Quota System?

⁷ Quotas or Proportional Representation? Selective Review of evidence, RAU: 2020

political party agendas⁸. The question that becomes pertinent is who the movement is serving the respondents from field work are disconnected from the campaigns that are said to be women driven⁹.

Table below shows the percentage female representation in Zimbabwe

	Last election	Next elections	Electoral system	No of seats/ candidates/ appointments	No of women	% Women
Local government	2018	2023	FPTP	1959	274	14%
House of Assembly	2018	2023	MIXED	270	86	32%
Senate	2018	2023	PR	80	35	44%
Both houses				350	121	35%
Presidential elections	2018	2023		23	4	17%
Cabinet	2019			24	7	29%

Source: Gender Links

It is not uncommon for countries to adopt statutory provisions to attain gender parity through introduction of gender quotas in parliament. According to Dahlerup (Dahlerup. 2006), a quota system in politics is an affirmative measure established to fix a percentage or number for the nomination or representation of a specific group that is under represented. The justification has been based on a rights and democracy argument, that it cannot be democracy when a large section of society are excluded from playing a part in determining the course and direction of the politics of the land. The Declaration and Platform for Action affirm that equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice. It is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. This is a departure from the status quo where males have played a dominant role to the extent of defining politics as a men's world.

The idea of the Women's Quota was viewed as providing a learning ground for women in politics, and also contributes towards changing societal attitudes about women in politics. The reasoning was that by seeing many women in such platforms as the National Assembly

⁸ Many of the women in the forefront for pushing for women's issues have been seconded into political parties assuming key positions. The challenge has remained that many activists work with the hope of attaining a political position in the party and civil society has provided base for recruitment of party personnel.

⁹ This paper draws from experiences of rural and urban women engaged through individual interviews and Focus Group discussions with support from Heinrich Boll Stiftung

or the Senate, it would encourage other women to join in, especially the younger professional women. This was supposed to be achieved in the two terms provided through the constitutional provision. However, this was not the case as the Women's Movement failed to build up on the gains to an extent that there is no agreed position to consolidate the marginal gains post-2023 when the provision comes to an end.

Secondly, and most importantly, the participation of women in politics is still mired with the same challenges that have kept women from politics and very little has been done to address them. Whilst women continue to attribute their lack of participation to the pull her down (PHD) syndrome, stereotypes as well as patriarchal ideological perceptions, Violence against Women (VAW) remains at the core of the Zimbabwe electoral system and this is mainly as a result of political polarisation and negative attitudes towards women in politics. The violence manifests itself as actual violence, threats of violence, abductions, scare tactics and in some worst circumstances cases, politically motivated rape has been reported¹⁰. Hamandishe (Hamandishe. 2018) notes that during the 2018 elections the private lives of female candidates were publicly scrutinised and insults were hurled at them through social media platforms.

A motivation for the Female Quota in Zimbabwe

The current quota is established in Section 124 (b) of the constitution and guarantees sixty (60) seats for women for two terms since the adoption of the constitution. This provision expires in 2023, thereafter reverting to the first-past-the-post system where women will contest for nomination within their respective political parties. Whilst the PR seats indicate an increase in the number of women in politics, it masks the fact that women directly elected have remained static. This is supported by the thinking that the instituted provisions may actually hinder women's access to formal political power (Kathleen M. Fallon, 2012). The female quota was put in place to achieve numerical numbers in the first instance and create a learning platform for more women to enter into politics. This decision of the quota system, based on Proportional Representation, that can never be divorced from the political context, accounts for its failure to excite more women to join politics.

This political context also explains why clamouring for more quotas or their extension does not guarantee greater political representation for women. Women who come under quotas according to Dahlerup (Dahlerup. 2006) are dependent on their political party or powerful leader for their selection before and after their election. As opposed to serving the interests of the women, these may not necessarily be on the political agenda. However, the failure of quotas is largely attributed to weak political systems to the extent that the increased presence of women is sometimes meaningless (Creevy, 2006). This is situation obtained as a result of the quota system used to achieve quantitative symbolism and to patronise the female voters in the party.

The quota system does not effectively address the significant issue of qualitative outcomes for women. By and large, the women's quota in its present form has dismally failed to inspire more women, especially the younger women, to join politics. Rather, it has benefited the older generation of female politicians who were in privileged positions within organised

¹⁰ No Hiding Place: Politically Motivated Rape of Women in Zimbabwe, RAU (2010)

political parties, deepening the “*Handiende syndrome*”¹¹. It has alienated the younger women in politics to the extent that they are now challenging the status quo and demanding a fair share in the quota. The current Women’s Quota is enshrined in Section 124 (b) of the constitution. It states that;

*For the life of the first two Parliaments after the effective date, an additional sixty women members, six from each of the provinces into which Zimbabwe is divided, elected through a system of proportional representation based on the votes cast for candidates representing political parties in a general election for constituency members in the provinces ...*¹²

The impact was instant as it achieved the quantitative objective by guaranteeing an additional 60 seats in the National Assembly reflecting a 32% representation, a significant percentage increase from the previous Parliamentary seating. In 2018 elections, the figure remained at 34% in the National Assembly and the percentages compare favourably with other countries in the region. However, the percentages mask the slow progress that PR has brought to attain equal representation and full participation as well as complications that were associated with.

One of the key objectives of the female quotas remains addressing the obstacles to women’s active participation in all spheres of public and private life through ensuring women a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. Drawing from experiences of women who contested in the 2018 elections, it is evident that participation of women in politics is still associated with voter registration and voting as seen by the high number of females who voted in the 2018 elections (RAU. 2018).¹³ However, the culture of violence makes it difficult for women to mount campaigns for political office. There was high voter registration and turnout. The discussion below highlights the experiences of women in politics.

Other challenges linked to the introduction of the women’s quota related to the mandate which was misconstrued by elected Members of Parliament as imposition and interference from the parties. They were perceived as ‘worthless’ by society and fellow MPs and a waste of taxpayers’ money, in the process earning themselves derogative names like “BACOSSA”, a term popularised during the reign of former reserve Bank Governor, Gideon Gono, associated with freebies in an era of shortages. The fact that the 60 seats were in addition to the 210 elected seats resulted in a bloated Parliament in an already struggling economy. Any assessment of the impact of this quota would not escape this financial impact on the national fiscus. The discussion below highlights the experiences of women in politics.

Experiences of Women during 2018 Harmonised Elections as they sought public office.

The majority women registered to vote during the 2018 harmonised elections. While this is an appreciable achievement it blurs women’s progress in taking leadership positions and for

¹¹ The “Handiende Syndrome” is an expression coined after former President Robert Mugabe refused to listen to calls for him to vacate office and give room for younger blood. This was probably a decade before the coup of November 17, 2017

¹² S 124b, Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013

¹³ According to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), a total of 2,945,541 women registered to vote. However, only 513,099 (11%)of women voted for a female candidate.

the first time turns the tables in a male dominated political machinery. Most women who contested for local government posts still suffer a myriad of setbacks compared to their male counterparts. The discussions also corroborated the fact that women are prohibited from contesting in elections because they fear political violence which characterise Zimbabwean politics where blackmail, intimidations, extortions, assaults are used to cow members of opposition. A number of women reported that they were elbowed from contesting for nomination within their own political party. This was possible because they lacked the physical and coercive power, and resources, to mete out violence on male contestants in response. As a result they are excluded from contesting in politics on that basis. Para-Mallam (Para-Mallam. 2015) notes that VAW is a targeted and disruptive tool to dissuade women from participating in elections or work related to elections. Male contestants use intimidatory tactics to elbow women out from the political race, leaving only a few women eligible. Mlambo (Mlambo. 2019) for example, observes that whilst both men and women are victims of violence which is mostly tied to the electoral cycle, the violence presents particular barriers to women engagement and participation in politics. This leads some women, especially in the rural areas, to participate in political activities such as campaign rallies to ensure their safety and that of their families. This also extends to the actual voting for specific political parties which may be influenced by structural set-ups that threaten to unleash violence or threaten livelihood. The violence could be overt or subtle, or purely gender based violence manifesting as hate speech with the motive of deterring female candidates¹⁴.

While patriarchy and other socio cultural dynamics remain a major factor accounting for less women in politics, the *Pull Her Down* (PHD) syndrome amongst women seems to be a cancer that is affecting the ascendance of women to leadership positions. One of the participants who contested in the 2018 elections noted;

Most of us (women) are afraid to contest, they fear how other women look down upon them, labelling them as women of loose morals. Most women therefore leave politics to men¹⁵.

Women who contest in elections are regarded as a threat to fellow women, this follows that campaigns require them to liaise with married men, most women frown upon such interactions. The situation becomes worse if the candidate is a single mother, by holding such suspicions women tend to avoid supporting each other. In general there are stereotypes imposed on women who engage in politics to an extent that they feel looked down upon. Women who are in leadership positions have ironically played a major role in discouraging fellow women from contesting their positions. This they have done by failing to groom or mentor young women and refusing to pave way for young women to enter into politics. This has cause a friction between young women and their older counterparts, and other women felt that their interests have not been represented. There was particular concern about female MPs who came through the PR system;

The handpicking of female MPs for the proportional representation seats handicaps them as they view themselves accountable to the party rather than to other women. This position was confirmed by other women who felt that these PR MPs pay allegiance to senior party members who appoint them. More often than not, they serve the interest of men who dominate influential

¹⁴ Zakari (2015), Halting Violence Against Women in Nigeria's electoral process, <https://guardian.ng/features/halting-violence-against-women-in-nigerias-electoral-process/>

¹⁵ Female participant, 21 November, 2019, Gweru

positions in the party structures. Those who ascended to power via Proportional Representation are normally imposed hence they are foreign to the electorate¹⁶.

There are also financial constraints which act as a barrier to women participation in politics. The campaign process requires high maintenance especially with regards to convincing supporters to vote for a candidate, in rural areas where vote buying is a welcome process. Some women argued that young men who are usually used in the campaign team demand alcoholic drinks and drugs upfront before they can campaign for a candidate. A female candidate for the local government elections reflected on how she failed to get resources to finance her campaign which required moving from one point to the other even though she felt people were ready to vote her into office.

Some women blamed the lack of participation among young women on the patriarchal society which looks down upon women from the earliest stages of human development: patriarchal institutions, such as family, school favour males. To these women there can be no increase in the number of female leaders without the participation of women. Most men are not prepared to support their spouses who get involved in political activities. This emanates from commonly held patriarchal beliefs which manifest in perceptions that participating in politics is associated with loose morals when it comes to women. Some women observed that in a patriarchal society which tends to scrutinise women more than men, women are expected to showcase high moral standards before they can be voted into power. This is especially true for rural women given the fact that rural women tend to trust patriarchal institutions more than urban women. Women are also expected to fulfil societal expectations, such as behaving in a submissive and gullible manner, being seen at church rather than fighting for power.

One of the driving factors contributing to fewer women in politics is through the institution of political parties where the emphasis is on winning an election. The recommendations in the past have been a proposition to penalise political parties that do not adopt measures to increase women in their structures, especially presenting more women as party candidates. It is important to note that political parties will play a central role in the quest to increase female representation and participation in politics, not only in Zimbabwe, but in Africa in general. This is because politics in Africa is political party based to the extent that there is a conflation between the party and the state. Since politics is about the struggle for power to determine 'who gets what, when and how', the role of any ruling party is to ensure that it wins the next elections, and, if possible, ensure the extinction of the opposition political parties. The role of the opposition is to present a viable alternative to unseat the ruling party in order to improve the livelihood of the citizens. Whilst various recommendations that political parties need to be forced to increase women's representation, the reality is that political parties cannot reform themselves out of power nor adopt reforms that weaken their chances to either acquire power or retain power.

Why Electoral Systems Matter in Advancing Women Participation

The need to embrace democracy throughout Africa has resulted in the conduct of periodic elections as a benchmark, leading in most cases equating democracy to elections. This has birthed a culture of elections that is specific to each country and determined the system of

¹⁶ Female participant, 21 November, 2019, Gweru

democracy. According to Sartori, (Sartori. 2001) electoral systems are concerned with both the voting method and the method used in translation of votes into Parliamentary seats¹⁷. It is these institutions that result in the process that determine whether democracy, including full representation are practiced. For the full realisation of the democratic constitution that was adopted in 2013 which recognises equality and equity, perhaps there is need for deliberate electoral system reforms that aim to promote the very core of democratic governance - the constitution. Mathlosa (Mathlosa. 1990) argues that the main players that are supposed to ensure constitutionalism in the electoral process are the Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), the government, political parties and civil society organisations. Whereas elections simply provide every citizen the opportunity to vote a candidate of choice, the choice of an electoral system is crucial in as far as it addresses issues of women representation and that of other minority groups in society. It is important to note that electoral systems also help to ease or exacerbate conflict, especially conflict associated with elections¹⁸.

Achieving Gender Parity through Proportional Representation?

This section presents Proportional Representation (PR) as a possible alternative that will address gender parity, and, at the same time, address inter-party violence. This is in no way suggesting that PR system is not without its weaknesses compared to other models such as the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), or Quota Systems. Proffering PR as an alternative does not exaggerate what it can do lest it will provide critics a platform to document the gaps between what it promises and what it actually does. However, the other two models have proved otherwise and have been slow or inappropriate in achieving equal representation and full participation of women in politics¹⁹. Evidently, the two systems have shown to be conservative and likely to preserve the status quo where women's participation in politics has been limited to sloganeering and voting. The gatekeepers in the political context have used the quotas that are meant to benefit women to firm up their power, but in the process marginalising them. The quotas, even though they have achieved the numerical objective, have further marginalised women, creating deep patronage within political parties especially between the younger generation of women and their older counterparts.

There is consensus that more needs to be done to improve the status of women, to the extent that the Women's Movement in Zimbabwe's campaign is hinged on a 50/50 representation at the expiry of the reserved women's quota in 2023. It is the manner in which this will be attainable that is debatable with the political context being an overriding aspect. The government is adamant that the quota system works and is the best opportunity to have an increase in women playing some role in politics²⁰. One of the modalities to attain the 50/50 has been a proposal to divide the country into two broad constituencies one with female representatives and the other male representative for say, two terms, and then swap afterwards. This appears radical but short of one critical element in democracy – ability to choose. This proposal will likely be faced with many legal hurdles. It is also not uncommon on women's platforms that women should vote for other women and support each other along

¹⁷ cited in Lindberg S. (2018), Consequences of Electoral Systems in Africa: a preliminary Inquiry

¹⁸ Menocal A.R. () , Why electoral Systems Matter: An analysis of their incentives and effects on key areas of governance

¹⁹ Tremblay M. (2007), Democracy, Representation and Women: A comparative Analysis

²⁰ Government through Constitutional Amendment Bill has tabled one bill which proposes 27 amendments to the constitution including the proposal to extend by further two terms Section 124(1) and further proposing an additional youth quota under party list by way of PR.

the political process since they have the majority. This view assumes women are less competent and need favours from other women.

The question becomes then ‘how best can Zimbabwe achieve gender parity given the slow pace of progress since Beijing in 1995’? While no single electoral system is perfect, Proportional Representation (PR) is said to provide some immediate solution especially as it relates to attaining the desired 50% representation as well as addressing VAW in politics. PR makes good the promise of democratic equality which might otherwise suffer at the hands of other electoral systems such as the FPTP. Proportional representation (PR) systems attempt to correlate the number of seats won by a political party with the number of votes cast for that party. Legislators are selected by moving down the party list, in order, until all seats are filled. The argument is that during elections the concentration is for members to campaign for the party to gain as many votes as possible. This in the process eliminates intra-party violence against women especially as it relates to securing nomination as party candidate. Zimbabwe adopted a hybrid system incorporating a gender quota based on PR where the larger constituencies are contested on FPTP. The chances of success are lesser for women. The argument for PR in Zimbabwe and how this works is demonstrated by the adoption of a Zebra system in the Senate achieving a near equal representation. The argument thrown is that this can be replicated at the National Assembly level and also that a clear affirmative decision at the local government level needs to be taken. More so, reference is also made to the South African context where there is a larger number of women owing to the adoption of PR.

Every political system is shaped by its history and as much as lessons can be drawn from other systems it is important to do this context analysis. The South African electoral system which is celebrated as guaranteeing the presence of women in political processes is a product of political negotiation²¹ and the outcome must be understood as such. By understanding this context, strategies for increasing women participation in politics and decision making can be drawn. What is not acceptable in society is failure to demonstrate the progression of women in society and wherever possible address it. Whilst the ideal situation is to see gender parity in society, the tendency is also to forget that this situation is informed by idealism. A reasonable outcome would be to see the progressive increase in the number of women in decision making over time, but this might not necessarily reflect 50/50 parity. The 34% women in Zimbabwe’s representative bodies, the Senate and the National Assembly, are products of a political context and opportunities obtaining during the constitutional making process which was adopted in 2013. There is no magic formula except to understand the underlying political power dynamics and what the gatekeepers deem important at a particular time in history and what they stand to gain or lose. In the case of South Africa, PR passed as the electoral system of choice because the African National Congress (ANC) projected that it could still control parliament and remain the majority party²².

For as long as politics in Africa is political party based, the issues of addressing gender parity will likely remain compromised. Despite a constitution that is deemed progressive which recognises equality of all and guarantees equal participation the contestations between ZANU PF and MDC, the two biggest rival political parties, are about consolidating power. In addition, negotiating an electoral system which will be viewed to weaken the position of the ruling party is unlikely to find any takers. This is the case for PR as an alternative, which in

²¹ Mattes R. & Southall R. (2004)

²² *ibid*

this current political context where the legitimacy question was settled at the Constitutional Court. PR will favour the opposition political parties and challenges the very core of politics – power. This is the political context in which women’s lobbyists find themselves in and any proposals that are suspected to alter the power dynamics and suspected to favour the opposition will be interpreted as regime change agenda. It therefore is no surprise that the Government through Constitutional Amendment Bill Number 2 among other provision seek to extend the female quota for a further two terms.

Conclusion

While this paper has been exploring experiences of women in politics and the challenges they face to achieve participation and representation, there is need to come up with comprehensive mechanisms that reduce factors such as political violence which hinder women from politics. In addition, there is need for an affirmative action law and other supporting legislation to support women in their fight against discrimination in the political space. There is also need to ensure that women are sustainably incorporated in the developmental processes in a sustainable manner as opposed to the tokenistic approach that has been adopted over the years. This calls for a fundamental shift of the politics of the country to ensure that institutions, including political parties are accountable to the constitution. However, for this to happen and satisfy the progressive element of advancing women in representation and participation, a careful study of the politics of quotas and the dynamics of the politics of the country is critical. Furthermore, since patriarchal norms are also a major impediment, mechanism should be put in place to address this. Failure to do so will classify these legitimate concerns to an attack on the state.

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