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## ***Policy Brief No.1/2020***

### **Proportional Representation: Fifty-Fifty for Women**

#### **Executive Summary**

#### **Introduction**

The proposal to amend the Constitution and extend the quota system for women has been received with adverse comment by the women's movement. This will extend the current quota system through the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> sessions of parliament, as well as adding a party list for youth for proportional representatives, one from each Province.

The proposed amendment has taken little account of the views being developed by the women's movement ([WALPE. 2019](#)). There have been numerous discussions since the 2018 elections concerning the value of the quota system, especially in the light of the disastrous performance of women in that election.

The issues around quotas, proportional representation and the effective participation of women in governance require deep and serious consultation, and considerably in advance of the precipitate manner in which the government has approached the matter. This has been made more urgent with the government's proposal to amend the constitution and extend the quota system for a further ten years.

Since the Constitution in Section 17 is prescriptive about the equality of women, and the general status of women in Zimbabwe is wholly dependent upon constructive and affirmative legislation and policies, there can be no precipitate action here. This current policy brief therefore summarizes the literature on women's representation, both nationally and internationally, and makes recommendations on the way forward. It summarizes the findings from two recent reports by the Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU).

#### **Key Findings from the international literature**

It is evident that equality in representation internationally is growing very slowly, only 24% worldwide in 2019, up from 17% in 2017. However, the proportions vary widely:

## Percentage of Women Parliamentarians across the world by Region

[Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union & UNWomen.2019]

<b>Country</b>	
Nordic	42.5%
Americas	30.6%
Europe (including Nordic countries)	28.6%
Sub-Saharan Africa	23.9%
Asia	19.8%
Arab States	19%
Pacific states	16.3%

The reasons behind this variation are highly complex, including the electoral system, ideologies (culture and patriarchy), enmeshment, economic development, and policies that are affirmative to women.

Zimbabwe is a country in crisis, and a country in which elections and the electoral system generally draws critical comment. It is also a country amongst the front-runners in achieving a “critical mass” with slightly more than 30% of the legislature being female. The deep question is whether this critical mass results in women having both real political power or increasing women’s agency more generally. There were three questions that were examined:

- Firstly, in the light of the dismal performance of women candidates and voters in the 2018 elections, and the aftermath of creating a gender quota, is the current electoral system, FPTP and a gender quota (reserved seats), the most favourable way for women to make real the requirements of the constitution for real gender equality?
- Secondly, are quotas the best route to increasing women’s real political power, their ability to influence the national agenda beyond being able to ensure a better deal on “women’s issues”?
- Thirdly, is it just the choice of electoral system that matters for women, or do the broader contextual factors, structural, economic, social and cultural, play as important a role?

### ***Current practices worldwide:***

What does analysis of the international position on women’s representation suggest for Zimbabwe? There are a broad number of questions to answer, and here we have selectively examined the international literature. It is necessarily selective because the literature is very large, and not all is relevant for Zimbabwe.

It is evident from the international literature that proportional representation, of any kind, is the most favourable electoral system for increasing women’s representation. Whilst “first-past-the-post” (FPTP) systems are not necessarily disadvantageous for women, they depend on a wide

range of factors, structural, economic, social and cultural (ideological), that are not easy to change in the short-term. Nonetheless, it is clear that PR results in greater numbers of women. There is some disagreement over the range of factors also to take into account, but, on balance, PR, in some of its forms, is the most beneficial electoral system for women.

This is also the case for countries from sub-Saharan countries. This further supported by data from SADC, where all the countries that have adopted PR reach at least the 20% threshold, and some, Mozambique, Seychelles and South Africa, even exceed the 30% threshold.

**In short, and noting that there are many issues around the adoption of PR, it seems the clear answer to the first question is that proportional representation should be the electoral system of choice for Zimbabwe, certainly for increasing women's participation.**

However, in dealing with the second question, Zimbabwe has a reserved seat system for a quota and this has resulted in the country achieving the 30% threshold. On face value, why change something that seems to be working? It is clear that the attempt to get voluntary party quotas does not seem to work, as the parties chose very few women as candidates. Had the parties selected more women as candidates, as was the purpose behind the 50/50 campaign, and operated under a placement mandate where women had the possibility of contesting for winnable seats, then it is highly probable that the critical mass might have been considerably higher. **Marrying the two ideas, PR and a quota that reflects the constitutional requirement for gender equality, might not this result in a true 50/50 balance in representation? However, would this not be achieved through PR alone?**

The structural, economic, social and cultural barriers cannot, however, be discounted as these clearly affect the supply and demand relationships in finding female candidates.

It is evident from the Scandinavian countries that increased representation and changes in structural, economic, social and cultural factors are synergistic. However, it is not axiomatic that increased representation leads to women-friendly public policy, and can happen in the absence of "sheer numbers", or a critical mass. A strategic view for women is that there needs to be investment in both increased representation and women-friendly public policy that changes the structural, economic, social and cultural factors that impede representation and public participation across all sectors.

There is also a "chicken-and-egg" problem. Does increased representation lead to women friendly public policy, or does women-friendly public policy drive increased representation? For example, in the US that there have been marked gains for women in academic achievement paralleled with increases in percentages of women in parliament, admittedly mostly in the Democratic Party, but facilitating access to education for women, and enhancing their meaningful participation in the labour force can take decades before this might pay off in the area of representation. It is a frequent comment by male politicians in Zimbabwe that there are too few "competent" women for any real changes made to the current system, a claim that does not hold up when the strides that women are taking in the wider society are examined. This argument seems based on prejudice and patriarchy, and **the real problem seems to be that**

**women find Zimbabwe's violent politics unattractive. It is not that there are no competent women, rather Zimbabwean politics dries up the supply.**

This can only be the beginning of a much larger debate, but it does appear that proportional representation alone will increase the number of women in parliament. If supplemented with a legislated quota, which the Constitution suggests must be 50%, an enormous change will have taken place. This undoubtedly would lead to women-friendly public policy, and thereafter alterations in all the inhibitory factors – structural, economic, social and cultural – will begin to be overcome. This all sounds a dream, even a fantasy, but a **powerful, autonomous women's movement seems to make a big difference, especially where there is PR and a quota.** Is this the missing ingredient in Zimbabwe: a women's movement autonomous of the political parties?

### ***Zimbabwe and the quota system:***

The Proportional Representation Quota did have an effect. However, the effects were minimal beyond showing greater attendance in parliament, but, without a constituency, the women elected to parliament in this manner had no other role. They might have been deputed to Parliamentary Portfolio Committees or delegated other party duties, but the lack of a constituency, the ability to interact with communities and citizens, and the opportunity to be active citizens themselves in their constituencies are severe limitations. This is an important point because women are frequently concerned about participating in political life for a variety of reasons, and often the women who decide to do this are already leaders within their communities, and especially women-affiliated groups.

This leadership role is critical for developing strong engaged citizenry of women, and providing the base upon which women-friendly policies can be crafted, but, more importantly, demanded. The future for women cannot be dependent upon the largesse of the males, and not restricted through being outside the doors behind which policy is made, by women through consulting women and with all women fully participant.

### ***The effects of the Quota on women's participation***

It is obvious that the purpose of increasing women's representation is to improve the lot of women generally, and hence to produce women friendly policies. The structural, economic, social and cultural factors that inhibit the wider participation of women in the socio-political life of a country are changed by policies in the main. Giving women a more powerful voice in producing policies is therefore critical to overcoming these inhibitory factors.

Since representation by women has been markedly increased by the quota system in 2013, it is interesting to examine the effects of the quota: both on participation within parliament and also on women generally. A small desk study, comparing participation prior to the quota and subsequent, as well as examining changes in women's views and attitudes between 2014 and 2017, revealed some interesting findings. There was also data from 2019 that could be compared in some respects. The major findings were as follows:

- There has been a decline since 2014 in women's belief in *Gender Equality*, so it would not appear that having more women in parliament outweighs other factors;

- An important factor has been the increase hardship, measured as *Lived Poverty*, since 2014, with things having got dramatically worse in 2019, at least as far as the WCoZ women see things;
- This increased hardship is corroborated by the findings on *Access to Information* and *Ownership*, both of which have worsened since 2014;
- *Political Trust* remains low, and unchanged, for virtually every state official or body, but is hugely worse in the views of the WCoZ women, and is also an urban phenomenon as seen in Figure 1;
- *Political Participation*, apart from voting, remains low. There was a decline in the number of women voting in 2017, but remedied in 2018 in the large turnout by women to register and vote. Urban women show less *Political Participation*;
- *Social Participation* has improved since 2014, but this is probably due to rural rather than urban women;
- *Political Fear* is significantly higher in urban women, and the WCoZ women show a very marked increase in fears about local security. It is important to stress the high increase in women reporting theft and physical attack.

## Conclusions

It is, therefore, difficult to argue that the introduction of the quota system had any great benefits other than having more women in parliament, which is devoid of gender equity. Whilst women were better attendees, and probably because the absence of having constituents limited their major activity to attending, there is little evidence that they were able to influence the policy making process. Undoubtedly, the deeply polarized political environment restricted their influence even more.

As for the effects of a greater public presence for women, and more evident women leaders, this too seems to have limited effects on the ordinary women. The structural, economic, social and cultural sources of inhibition were largely unaltered over the period during which the quota operated: in fact, things got much worse in every way for women, and all the key indicators for greater agency – political trust, political participation and lack of political fear – remained negative, even worsened in some respects. The women that were trying to be active in the cause of women saw things even more negatively than the general female population.

This is a highly discouraging picture.

## Recommendations

1. *In order to influence the general lot of women, there must be sustained and assertive policies of a women-friendly kind;*
2. *In order to generate such women-friendly policies, women must be in a strong position to direct policy making;*
3. *In order to direct policy making, women must have equality in representation, as required by the Constitution, and not dependent on the grace or favour of men or political parties;*

4. *In order to overcome the negative attitudes towards women's representation, the only reliable method for ensuring that these do not apply is for the country to adopt a full Proportional Representation electoral system, with the requirement that all parties adopt a 50/50 list of men and women candidates.*