

Women and the Civic Space in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe: Constraints and Counter-constraints

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Abstract

Civic space constitutes the substratum for women to be able to organise, communicate and participate in democratic processes, including claiming their rights, as well as influencing the trajectory of the political and socio-economic structures around them. With the proliferation of the recognition and participation of women in political processes, their attempts to occupy the civic space have also intensified. While the civic space is theoretically open for women's civic participation, structural violence and cyber-violence have militated against women's civic space visibility. This has culminated in the shrinking of the civic space for women's articulation of political and socio-economic issues; especially in the African context. Against this backdrop, the objective of this paper is to examine the constraints women in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe experience in operating in these spaces and the strategies they deploy to deal with these constrictions. Having said this, the paper intends to examine the manner in which physical, cyber and structural violence against Namibian, South African and Zimbabwean women manifests and affects their participation in civic spaces. Moreover, it

explores the strategies deployed by women to counter the various forms of violence and other stumbling blocks inherent in the civic space. Data for this paper were generated from both primary and secondary sources and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Keywords: women, civic space, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The trajectory of women's presence, as well as access to the civic space in Africa, remains a contentious issue five decades after the resolution on gender equality in political affairs. With reference to selected cases in Africa, this paper examines the constraints to women's access to the civic space and subsequent strategies their agency deploys to counter and resist these obstacles. Using Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe as cases of reference, the paper provides insights into the factors constraining women's participation in the civic space and counter-strategies thereof. While these Southern African states have inherent differences with regard to the dynamics of their political systems and political cultures, with Zimbabwe falling in the category of the less democratic states, they also have governance-related similarities by virtue of being members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The SADC Treaty contains guidelines for the recognition of women in political affairs and their access to civic space.

Furthermore, the three states have hybrid legal systems, with Roman civil law, English common law and the African indigenous law traditions dominating their legal systems. Subsequently, the ways in which they have tailored their politics in response to international and regional standards for gender equality in politics are similar. With this said, the paper answers the following questions. How does physical, cyber and structural violence against women manifest and affect their participation in civic spaces in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe? What strategies are deployed by Namibian, South African and Zimbabwean women to counter various forms of violence inherent in the civic space? Is the civic space shrinking for Namibian, South African and Zimbabwean women? If so, in what ways is the civic space shrinking for women in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe? What institutional safeguards are in place to prevent violence

against women and enhance their civic participation? Before examining the dynamics of the constraints and counter-constraints manifesting in civic participation for women in the case countries, it suffices to explore the position of women in politics in Southern Africa in the next section.

Methodological and Research Parameters

This paper makes use of qualitative research methods. The desire to gather rich insights into women's participation in civic spaces influenced the choice of the interpretivist philosophy (Saunders & Tosey 2012). Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered from both women participants as well as observers of the social phenomena. There is a contributor based in each of the three countries selected for this study and each contributor was responsible for the primary research. Primary data collection involved in-depth interviews with women active in civic organisations as well as the observers or analysts who were approached based on their expert knowledge on the subject matter. Sampling involved taking a purposively selected sample from which detailed data were gathered. Mapping the changing patterns of women participation in civic organisations over the years implies that the study was longitudinal by nature (Kumar 2014). This time horizon was chosen because the writers were interested in capturing and explaining trends in women's participation in civic organisations. The use of both primary and secondary data represented data triangulation and that was done to enhance the reliability of the research findings. Data analysis involved grouping together particular themes emerging from the data and then expanding on the themes through detailed descriptions. Research ethics such as confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation were upheld during the course of the study.

The Dynamics of Women and Politics in Southern Africa

The Treaty of SADC stipulates the benchmarks and guidelines on the recognition and participation of women in politics in the member states. Due to the influence of the SADC Framework for Achieving Gender Parity in Political Decision Making Positions by 2015 and the Protocol on Gender and Development, the region has made considerable strides in spearheading the representation of women in political and decision-making processes.

According to Article 12 of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008), all “state parties shall endeavour that, by 2015, at least 50% of decision-making positions in the public and private sector are held by women”. Article 5 of the same Protocol provides for the use of affirmative action measures to achieve gender parity in political affairs in Southern Africa. Even though the 50% representation threshold had not been reached by 2015, the participation of Southern African women in politics has improved considerably.

Article 13 of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development stipulates the specific goals for women participation that culminates in gender parity in the electoral processes. As illustrated in the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer (2011), women have outnumbered men as voters. The SADC Gender Protocol Barometer was established by the Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance to illustrate annual progression in the implementation of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development by Southern African states. Having the barometer alone is a clear indication of the commitment to pursue gender equality in the political realm in Southern Africa.

Subsequently, many Southern African states, including Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Tanzania have more than 30% women’s representation in both their lower and upper houses of parliaments (SADC, n.d.). In the case of Lesotho, 58% of local government positions are occupied by women (International Labour Organisation, 2015). With 42,7% of the parliamentary seats occupied by women. South Africa is one of the countries with the largest proportion of women representation in parliament (Lorenc, 2019). Furthermore, all Southern African states have promulgated legislation on minimum quotas for women representation in parliaments (Yoon, 2004; Sadie, 2005). The quota systems for women representation in parliament have culminated in a significant increase in the number of women in parliament (Deen, 2019). In a clear indication of the magnitude of women representation in Southern African politics, Mrs Joyce Banda made political history in 2014 as the first woman president in Malawi and the first female head of state in the entire Southern Africa sub-region. In the Zimbabwean context, Joyce Mujuru became the first woman vice president of Zimbabwe in 2004.

While the above portrays a positive image of the trajectory of Southern African women’s participation in politics, challenges still exist that

continue to militate against the visibility of women in politics. Firstly, it is important to indicate that women's participation in political affairs is yet to reach the 50-50 threshold stipulated by Article 9 of the African Women's Rights Protocol. According to Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), some of the factors militating against the achievement of the 50-50 representation of women and men in politics include institutional and normative inadequacies as well as lack of political will to effectively implement affirmative action measures. Furthermore, the brutal nature of politics and the influence of traditional norms as well as religion have also contributed immensely towards the negated articulation of women's interests in politics in Southern Africa (Danfulani, 2016). Indeed, while institutional frameworks provide for women's equal participation in politics, traditional belief systems including confining women to domestic roles as mothers and wives continue to limit their political participation, especially at levels of decision-making and holding senior political positions.

Theorising the Dynamics of Women and Civic Engagement

The paper is theoretically premised on liberal feminism. Liberal feminism focuses on political and legal reforms aimed at according women equal rights and opportunities in the political arena. The theory maintains that challenges to women's entrance and participation in politics are rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that require reforms (Tong, 1992). By pursuing equality through social, legal and political reforms within a liberal democratic framework, the theory is premised on the view that the practices that are discriminatory towards women's integration into the public world, including civic activities, will be eliminated. Furthermore, the theory asserts that women's rights and their ability to participate in public life through suffrage and articulation of issues of public interests depend on men instead of legal and political frameworks (Wolff, 2007; Ackerly, 2001). This theory has been selected to inform the arguments advanced in this paper largely because of its inclination to the view on the need for political and legal reforms to provide women with space and opportunities to participate in public life.

This is against the background that, while efforts have been made since the last quarter of the 19th century to recognise gender equality in the political space, challenges and problems militating against women's

occupation of and participation in the civic space persist in the Southern African context. While these challenges are not peculiar to Southern Africa alone, this paper focuses on this sub-region with a specific focus on Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Despite the introduction of legal and policy frameworks such as the minimum quotas for female representation in parliament among others, women continue to face challenges that militate against their visibility in the civic space. It can be argued that the bulk of the factors have more to do with traditional belief systems and customary frameworks that relegate women to the periphery of the civic space. That being the case, the next sections delve into the dynamics of women and civic space in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Women and the Civic space in Namibia

Namibia has achieved a milestone by creating a conducive environment that allows women to fully participate in the civic space through the creation of enabling policy frameworks. Discriminatory practices against women have been abolished; however, complete elimination of violence against women remains a daunting task in Namibia. Nonetheless, participation in the civic space by Namibian women has gained remarkable momentum and is improving. Namibia has prioritised gender equality in her responses to the promotion and realisation of fundamental human rights, particularly the right to freedom of expression and information. The government of Namibia has formally supported civic space for women since independence and has made progress with respect to the formulation of gender-related policies and programmes, including the ratification of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW of 1992), the CEDAW Optional Protocol of 2000, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action, the African Regional Platform for Action of 1997 and the African Charter on Women's Rights of 2004.

The participation of women in the civic space in Namibia has increased significantly in the past 30 years, taking into account that before independence, civic space for women was almost non-existent, as women were discriminated against in virtually all aspects of the civic space. In Namibia, women freely participate in the civic space to influence the trajectory of the political, legislative, social and economic landscapes. Thus,

the civic space in Namibia has enabled women to come together, share their interests and concerns, and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policy-making without restrictions. However, various social structural factors constrain women from unfettered use, ownership and control of the means of production such as land and property. Moreover, women are, in part, constrained by civil and customary laws, that deprive them of opportunities to access property in their own right. These constraints limit women's economic choices and cause women to be economically dependent on men and subject them to physical, cyber and structural violence that limit their participation in the civic space.

Physical violence is a persistent problem in Namibia, in particular, intimate-partner violence against women and sexual violence by non-partners and femicide (*Aljazeera News*, 2020). Reports earlier this year (2021) indicate that police were receiving at least 200 reports of cases of domestic violence monthly, while more than 1 600 cases of rape were reported during the 18 months ending in June 2020 (*Aljazeera News*, 2020). The killing of women continued to take place unabated as recent as 24 November 2020, when two women were killed by their partners (*Namibian Sun*, 2020). Physical violence in Namibia manifests itself through domestic violence in the forms of rape, physical assault and murder. Such violence deters women from participating in the civic space. Lack of moral education, broken family structures, the lack of male role models for young men and economic disparity could be some of the causes of gender-based violence (GBV). There may be a need to address the role of the father, the model of manhood, looking at the role of the male child in the family. It should be noted that GBV is deeply rooted in discriminatory cultural beliefs and practices that perpetuate inequality against women. Women living in poverty are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation in Namibia.

Namibia is ranked as the country with the greatest press freedom in Africa (Southern Africa Litigation Centre, 2018). Thus, women in Namibia are free to air their views within the civic space without any restrictions and or discrimination. Facebook, Google and Twitter have become the primary means by which women in Namibia advocate their interests, search for and receive news and information via cyberspace. Women who have internet access easily write essays, apply for jobs and/or advocate any other actions that enhance their participation in Namibia's civic space. However, women in remote areas have unreliable connectivity and many have no access at all

due to the lack of basic infrastructure thus their participation in the civic space is limited. Cyber violence is a new form of violence that encompasses hate speech and threats carried out online by men against women, to suppress women's views on discriminatory social issues so as to limit their participation in the civic space. Major social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become essential spaces for women to participate in civic space in Namibia, particularly for women journalists, women activists and women human rights defenders. While these very channels provide women with access to audiences and information that would otherwise be out of reach, they have also become spaces for gender-based online harassment and abuse to proliferate. However, in Namibia, cases of cyber violence have not yet taken root.

Generally, structural violence is built into the fabric of a society's political and economic setup. Structural violence creates and maintains inequalities between men and women. It is invisible and manifests itself indirectly in complex political, social, historic and economic processes, and is expressed in unemployment, unequal access to goods and services, and exploitation. In Namibia, the primary economic sectors (i.e. mining, commercial agriculture and fishing) are heavily orientated towards the employment of men, with women working only in support industries such as fish processing. Women, therefore, have fewer employment opportunities. The status quo disadvantages women's participation in the civic space of the aforesaid sectors. Although gender restrictive laws have been repealed, cultural beliefs and practices continue to disadvantage women's access to and control over productive resources. Moreover, lack of employment alternatives in primary and manufacturing industries mean that women in Namibia cannot use such resources for employment and income generation. This lack of access is closely linked to cultural norms of ownership which disadvantage women.

Women in Namibia have adopted a strategy of conducting awareness campaigns through various mediums such as Facebook, Google and Twitter, as demonstrated by Namibian youth (mainly women) who joined hands with the International Peace Youth Group (*Namibia Daily News*, 2020) in creating a virtual platform to unpack sexual gender-based violence in the wake of 16 days of activism against GBV. Demonstrations are another strategy adopted by women to protest against the continuous curtailing of women's participation in the civic space. Demonstrations have been taking place

periodically in Windhoek, the capital city, and several other towns, with hundreds of women supported by their male counterparts taking to the streets in protest of sexual GBV and femicide during the course of 2020, despite COVID 19-induced restrictions (*Namibia Daily News*, 2020). These protests also took place in previous years.

The Namibian Constitution, adopted at independence in 1990, safeguards equality between men and women and has committed Namibia to the elimination of all discriminatory practices (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, 1990). Thus, men and women's equality is enshrined in the Constitution. Additionally, the Namibian Constitution recognises the previously disadvantaged position of women and encourages the implementation of affirmative action policies (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, 1990) to advance women's social status. Through the Constitution, equal power relations and treatment of women and men in all spheres of social, legal and economic life are advocated. The Married Persons Equality Act was passed to address inequality between married men and women (Married Persons Equality Act, 1996) however, while the Act is progressive, it applies only to civil marriages and excludes customary marriages.

While the new laws should override customary law, in practice, this is still not always the case. In addition, the Affirmative Action (Employment Act) of 1998, Combating of Rape Act of 2000, Maintenance Act of 2003, and the Combating of Domestic Violence Act of 2003 have been promulgated to address the whole spectrum of GBV. Problems, however, still exist with regard to the implementation and monitoring of these acts. The Ministry of Gender and Equality, which was created to specifically address issues that disadvantaged women in Namibia's civic space serves as an institutional guard to deal with the GBV. Furthermore, national women's organisations and networks such as the Namibian National Women's Organisation (NANAWO) and Women's Action for Development (WAD) enhance women's participation in all spheres of economic and social life by empowering women and conducting awareness campaigns and self-help initiatives. In addition, the law enforcement agency plays an important role in arresting those guilty of committing GBV, while the courts prosecute perpetrators of GBV to serve as deterrence.

The social media space has also provided a leitmotiv for women to be able to access and utilise their services and platforms safely and securely

to enhance their participation in the civic space. This is vital given that most political and social interactions require access to support services. As power-holders with influence over the online environment, technology companies can counter misogyny and support women in dismantling patriarchy online and offline. In this regard, the law enforcement agency is instrumental in investigating the incidence of cyber-attacks (in the forms of online harassment and abuse) against women and bringing to book the perpetrators of this form of GBV. Furthermore, the Government of Namibia plays a crucial role in promoting a digital space that is free, open and inclusive, including legal frameworks that protect internet rights and digital freedoms of all people, as argued by Carothers and Brechenmacher (2019).

Women and the Civic Space in South Africa

Mlambo and Pillay (2012) and Inga (2018) espouse that, in the global exercise of their right to participate in civic spaces, women continue to face a lot of discrimination. The argument is that women face a myriad of obstacles in decision-making due to a failure to access power at all levels, despite women constituting half of the world's total population (IDEA, 2013). This study explores how civil society contributes to society, by fostering inclusive communities through creating a collective spirit and promoting the role of women in the civic space. The civic space is important, because some, if not most, African leaders are increasingly adopting a culture of intolerance and impunity towards civic society. Resultantly, civil society organisations (CSOs) are finding it increasingly difficult to play their role in defending human rights and the rule of law, as evidenced by their declining presence in civic spaces. This stems from the fact that women are often excluded from being involved in the fair share of social and economic opportunities in both the public and private sectors.

Hence, you find women and girls are exposed to all sorts of violence and harassment, including sexual violence and odious crimes. In the same manner, quite often in Africa, women are traditionally oppressed and they face some of the highest levels of ignorance. Pontes, Henn and Griffiths (2018) argue that in South Africa it is worse, because defending the rights of women is hard work. Women face difficulties in discussing these problems, especially those working in LGBTQ+ communities. There are often targets and it is not clear whether they are targeted because they are women known

as LGBTIs or because they are transgender, bisexual, inter-sexual or fall within the broader scope. Sometimes these populations require greater support, otherwise, they will continue to suffer in silence from the scourge of religion, physical abuse, sexual violence, sexism, patriarchy, and lack of legal security, without strict legislation and effective systems of compliance that protect the civic space they work in.

The Ramaphosa Administration in the 2018 annual State of the Nation Address, recognised the importance of civil society and the need to respect the rule of law, with perpetrators of human rights abuses made to take responsibility for their actions (Stats SA, 2018). Nevertheless, despite these continuous confirmations in annual addresses, most African governments like South Africa are not only shrinking the space for civic activism but are also destroying the backbone of democracy and inclusive growth. This is because there is a rise in the number of governments in sub-Saharan Africa that are now curtailing the progress of human rights organisations (Matanock, 2017). Presently, South Africa outshines its partners in the BRICS economic bloc in that it provides women with an active civic space.

However, during the COVID-19 lockdown, a worrying trend emerged in South Africa, with data indicating that the safety of women was increasingly under threat during this period. The Stats SA (2019) report revealed that economic slumps, natural disasters, and outbreaks of disease have enormous consequences for women who are typically the worst affected. Since post-apartheid, women in South Africa had largely focused on strategies to address the impact of decisions taken by the post-independent government on women (Hassim & Gouws, 1998), but the COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear to society that the role of women in civic societies during pandemics is essential. As a result, it becomes obvious how South Africa, as a rainbow nation, should continue supporting women who work in these spaces, because they are a strong force for protecting the rights of women in a democratic and stable state.

Smidt (2020) notes that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is essentially an Agenda for the people and by the people whose successful implementation requires the participation and involvement of all stakeholders and global development partners including civil society. The Sustainable Development Goals, as set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, outline the critical role of women in various aspects of sustainable development. It is, therefore, necessary for women to

not only participate, but also to be allowed to participate in the resolution processes, which are primarily relevant to achieving sustainable development in developing economies. This study, as described earlier, reveals that the role of women in civil societies is steadily shrinking as women's rights are violated, with the civic monitor regarding the civil work in 106 other nations as Obstructed, Narrowed, Repressing or Locked (CIVICUS, 2018). South Africa is classified by the civic monitor as Narrowed and the reason for this is that while in principle the government provides for civil society to exercise freedom of association, freedom of speech and peaceful assembly, in practice these rights are violated (CIVICUS, 2018). For South African, a narrowed civic society implies that although women can form groups to carry out their work in the region, barriers still exist that hinder them from fully exercising their rights.

Hassim and Gouws (1998) assert that despite South Africa in 1996 ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which seeks to eliminate all forms of gender-based prejudice against women and girls and enhance their representation, this has not been realised and the South African government still needs to do more as women continue to be subjected to various human rights abuses. The South African Constitution 108 of 1996 also recognises and provides for the protection of human, political-economic, social and cultural rights of all people including women. However, despite these constitutional provisions, violations against women continue to be prevalent. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) (Stats SA, 2019) reports an increase in the number of complaints received annually in respect of human and political rights violations against women.

This annual increase in violations reported by the SAHRC is of grave concern and demonstrates that despite the official recognition and protection of the rights of women working in the civil space by the South African Constitution, a lot of barriers and implementation gaps still exist. Moreover, the alarming figures reported by the SAHRC, point to the need to delineate the policy structures in South Africa to ensure that women's civic space does not diminish quickly, which would make it almost impossible for this democratic country to track and measure progress with regards to defending women's rights.

This study clearly shows how women in leadership positions in the public, private, and civil sectors as well as in communities remain

underrepresented at a global level. Thus, it becomes very evident that “civil society should be free to work because it enables lively debate, freedom of thinking and opinion and popular participation in politics” (Smidt, 2020).

Women and the Civic Space in Zimbabwe

Women’s contestations for civic space in Zimbabwe have been going on for a long time and date back to the colonial period although their recognition and documentation took long. The women’s movement in Zimbabwe has been reconfiguring itself around a number of issues and in different forms over the years but with very little recognition. It was not until the landmark studies in the urban colonial history of Harare that the presence of women in civic spaces began to be acknowledged. Works by Barnes (1995), Scarnecchia (1993; 2008), Bhebe (1989) and Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni (2001) can be regarded as pioneering studies in acknowledging the contestations for civic space by women in Zimbabwe. Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni (2001), for example, point out women’s participation in the City Youth League (CYL) in the mid-1950s when colonialism was still deeply entrenched in the country. Prior to that women had largely been absent in urban areas and literature because capital and patriarchy had an alliance to consign women to rural areas, each for its own reasons (Barnes 1995). While patriarchy wanted women to remain in the rural areas so that it would perpetuate its traditional hegemony over them, capital wanted women to remain in the rural areas so that it would avoid the overhead costs for labour reproduction. It did not want to build pre-schools, houses and toilets for workers’ children. The likes of Mrs Musodzi in Mbare, Harare defied the odds and became successful in her own right. So, showing agency as they have always done, women defied that and their presence in the urban space continued to grow over the years.

Gaidzanwa (2001) also did some ground-breaking work in bringing to the fore the various roles that women have played in contesting for civic space in Zimbabwe. Without these pioneering studies, the participation of women in civil spaces could have continued to be treated as some kind of back matter. Through these early studies, it has been clearly put on record that though the odds were stacked against them women negotiated their way into these spaces through both force and sometimes collaboration with men. Women’s Action group (WAG), Indigenous Business Women’s

Organisation (IBWO), Pamusasa and others were some of the earliest organisations through which women voiced/expressed their arrival and domination of civic spaces in Zimbabwe. However, the major limitation suffered by these early organisations representing and championing women presence in civic spaces was that these organisations were seen as elitist in nature and therefore selective in their representation of the womenfolk. The major issues around the early years seemed around bread-and-butter issues, economic issues and not much political advocacy for the sake of it (Van Eerdewijk & Mugadza 2015). They were also seen as being anti-family stability and anti-rural women especially in so far as they championed women's rights in marriages. Most of the resistance emanated from the portrayal of women civil society leaders who were seen as being anti-marriage. "We were regarded as a bad influence to the other women because a number of the women who led the early women groups were not married." (Respondent A, 20/10/20) This was the testimony of one of the pioneers in the women's movement in Zimbabwe.

Women were also on the margins for a long time because of a lack of control over resources. There were also discriminatory attitudes and perceptions against women. This discrimination against women was entrenched by systems of political patronage and participation in informal local-level politics (Mudege 2013). Such politics has empowered individuals and not women as a collective. To be empowering there should be a transformative political agenda that seeks to challenge social relations that impede women participation in civil society organisations and those that perpetuate inequality between men and women. However, despite the resistance to women's emancipation from some quarters, women continued to contest for recognition and equality in civic spaces.

A major paradigm shift towards widespread acceptance of women participation in, and occupation of, civic spaces occurred in the 1990s and at the turn of the current millennium. The human rights discourse that had become pervasive can be attributed to the neo-liberal agenda that came in with the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1990. Gaidzanwa (2001) discusses how University of Zimbabwe authorities capitulated to the affirmative action policy in the middle of the nineteen nineties (mid-990s) after years of male resistance to the policy. That paradigm shift towards an embrace of affirmative action policy that deliberately swung the pendulum in favour of female entry into university

can be explained by several factors. Some female academics pushed for the policy and on their part, the university administrators were faced with violent male students. They needed to neutralise this growing number of male students who were largely around 75% of total enrolment. The Association of African Universities was also pushing for more female entry into universities. So all the factors combined and the result was the acceptance of affirmative action policy in the 1990s (Gaidzanwa 2001).

Also, a significant turning point towards widespread acceptance of women in civic spaces was provided by the Beijing International (Women's) Conference, in 1995. Enjoined by the resolutions of the Beijing International Conference, the Zimbabwe Parliament also began to talk in narratives that accommodated women participation in civic spaces. A certain quota was to be reserved specifically for women in civic as well as political spaces. It gave tremendous impetus to women empowerment lobby groups. Women leadership and presence in civic spaces became more widespread. Betty Makoni's Girl Child Network (GCN), Zimbabwe Crisis Coalition (ZCC) and others began to champion increased women's contestation of civic spaces. With the university graduates taking up employment and leadership positions in local and international civil society organisations (CSOs) more recognition of women leadership became entrenched.

Despite these inroads that were made by women championing an increased presence of women in the corridors of power of civic and political organisation, resistance from a regime increasingly fitting the authoritarian characterisation continued. The period immediately after 2000 proved very difficult for women in CSOs because the state increasingly felt threatened since its power was at stake from the formidable Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party. Indeed, CSOs of the 1990s had played midwife to the birth of the MDC party (Masunungure n.d.). Repressive legislation like the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) made the success of women in CSOs very difficult due to the heavy-handedness of the state in enforcing these laws. However, despite the suffocating operating environment young women coalesced around a common theme of women advancement and so in 2008, they formed Zimbabwe's Young Women Network for Peace Building (ZYWNP). This women's advocacy group had leadership from across the political divide in Tendai Wenyika-Gava from ZANU-PF and Maureen Kadamaunga from the MDC party.

The common agenda was to give support to each other as women endeavouring to occupy civic and political leadership positions irrespective of political party affiliation (Van Eerdwijk & Mugadza 2015). One woman indicated that they had resolved not only to continue supporting any and every woman who wanted to run for public office but also to conduct training workshops on women empowerment. In her own words, she said, “We want to make sure that those women who have made it send the escalator down so that it fetches other women desirous of occupying higher public offices.” (Interviewee with a Female Head of NPO, 18/10/20) Suffice to say, the CSOs of this era were largely preoccupied with governance matters (Masunungure n.d.) and that worried the state. State response did not relent. The Mugabe regime became very critical of CSOs, which it accused of working with the opposition MDC to dislodge it from power. The likes of Jestina Mukoko, leader of the Zimbabwe Peace Project and Joana Mamombe and others, have suffered immensely at the hands of the Robert Mugabe and Emmerson Mnangagwa regimes, respectively. The stifling of civic space by the New Dispensation in Zimbabwe has led to its characterisation by some (e.g. Duri, Marongwe & Mawere 2019) as “Mugabeism after Mugabe”. When the majority of African states feel threatened they react in a brutal manner, and the Zimbabwean state is no exception in that regard. It is a given fact that politicians seek, and want to maintain, power.

Women’s contestation and participation in civic spaces in Zimbabwe have gained so much traction and the government needs to accept that a positive and transformative revolution is unfolding. Modernisation levers or spaces are contested by many stakeholders, and it is time that the other stakeholders including patriarchy realised and accepted that fact. Over the years women have exhibited agency and continue to do so, even in the face of adversity. They realise that they owe it to no-one but themselves to struggle and occupy civic spaces in the country. Women have taken it upon themselves to advance their own emancipatory project. Democratisation engenders plurality and that plurality inadvertently includes the women who, in the case of Zimbabwe, are approximately 53% of the total population (Worldometer 2020, Zimbabwe) and are in fact the majority. Women have increasingly realised the need to affirm themselves as a demographic and a powerful one for that matter. One analyst noted that women are taking advantage of their numerical advantage to assert themselves in leadership positions of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe (In-depth Interviewee, 19/10/20).

In the case of Zimbabwe, the 2013 National Constitution (Amendment no. 20) can be termed very democratic and since its promulgation, women's entry into civic society has increased. The Constitution, drafted during the era of the Inclusive Government in Zimbabwe and with a lot of input from women organisations has engendered the principle of gender equality more than the preceding Lancaster House Constitution. Women should thus hail the inclusion of gender equality in this more democratic Constitution because the previous one, for example, allowed gender discrimination where customary law operated. Masunungure (n.d.:1) says civil society since 2013 has sought to actively "engage" with the government while the others have sought to remain watchdogs. He also contends that by the standards of most African countries, except South Africa, CS in Zimbabwe is very robust. It is spread across all types of CS from community-based organisations to national civil society organisations, those that are for and others that are anti-government. Thus, CS organisations in Zimbabwe are very heterogeneous and this heterogeneity has been made possible by women's entry into civic spaces. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and the Zimbabwe Gender Commission have all been put in place to try and champion human rights in general and women's rights respectively. The state seems to take with the left hand what it gives with the right hand. It provides for civic participation, yet undermines that same participation as soon as it threatens its survival.

A paradigm and programmatic shift towards a better acceptance and encouragement of women's presence, participation and leadership of civil society organisations is long overdue. It is time to walk the talk especially by the powers that be. Constitutional provisions requiring gender equality have to be respected in the letter and spirit of the constitution. Women's participation in civic spaces constitutes empowerment and studies (Yunus 2006) have confirmed that women empowerment is a critical building block of societal empowerment and development. However, as this unfolds it should be based on meritocracy and not favouritism, nepotism or some other "ism". The institutional frameworks put in place to aid that participation in Zimbabwe need to be strengthened.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, women's participation in civic spaces in the three

countries has been a painstakingly slow process with a lot of impediments on the way. The historical weight of disadvantage in which colonial states and patriarchy connived to exclude women from the limelight has militated against their presence and participation in CS organisations. Little education, tradition and domination by patriarchy have been some of the major challenges hampering their participation. However, as more and more women got educated, especially in the post-colonial periods of these three countries, women began to come out of the closet. First, their participation in civil spaces was largely for bread-and-butter issues. It was only much later that they began to articulate issues of governance, political and social rights as well. This was on the back of the Beijing International Women's Conference that spoke to issues of inclusion of women in the higher echelons of socio-political organisations.

As more and more gender issues gained traction in the three countries, women empowerment laws and women's organisations that emphasised the need for women to support one another in bids for political office across the political divide began to sprout. An institutional framework for this cause has been out in place in each of the three case studies. This is a welcome development, because women's leadership and participation in civil spaces have been said to be a catalyst for development. As much as constitutional and institutional frameworks have been put in place to advance women's entry into CS organisations there are still some worrisome challenges that need a regional approach in tackling them. The states have only but paid lip service to the realisation of a 50-50 gender parity in socio-political positions. In Namibia, the realisation of a 50-50 threshold in leadership positions between men and women is still far off the mark because women's education still needs a lot of support. In the context of South Africa cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide, largely blamed on excessive alcohol consumption and other factors, are worrisome. In Zimbabwe, each time the authorities feel that state power is threatened they unleash violence regardless of who is involved. The findings of this paper from the tripartite case study have proved the liberal feminist theory to be quite robust in explaining the phenomena under study. This paper, therefore, contends that while some inroads have been made to ensure women's participation in CS organisations, more needs to be done. The sooner this important task assumes a regional dimension the better.

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