



THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN ZIMBABWE: INPUT TO THE WORKING GROUP ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

I. Introduction

The Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) welcomes the visit of the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls and is pleased to submit its input highlighting the lived realities of women and girls in Zimbabwe. This submission draws on insights from consultations, community engagements, and documentation gathered through women's forums held in Sanyati, Hopley, Buhera, Mutasa, and Lupane Districts, in addition to other community engagement initiatives conducted across the ten provinces of Zimbabwe in which ZimRights works. These platforms allowed women and girls to speak candidly about the discrimination, exclusion, and rights violations they experience in both private and public life.

Despite progressive legal and constitutional provisions that guarantee gender equality, women and girls in Zimbabwe remain structurally disadvantaged across nearly all aspects of life. Patriarchal norms, economic disparities, cultural practices, and institutional weaknesses intersect to marginalise women and undermine their ability to exercise agency. Although women constitute the majority of the population and play a vital role in the socioeconomic fabric of the country, their participation in leadership, decision-making, and governance remains limited and marred by challenges.

At the core of this imbalance lies a dissonance between legal frameworks and lived realities. The Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, particularly Sections 17, 56, and 80, guarantees equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. However, these provisions are often undermined by poor implementation, insufficient political will, and prevailing social norms that entrench male dominance and restrict women's rights. These challenges are especially pronounced in rural and marginalised communities, where cultural and religious practices further curtail the freedoms and life opportunities of women and girls.

This report outlines the key structural, cultural, and political barriers that impede the realisation of women's rights in Zimbabwe. It highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms, institutional accountability, and cultural transformation to bridge the gap between rights on paper and rights in practice.

II. Key Issues Identified

a. Family and Cultural Life of Women and Girls

Patriarchal traditions continue to dominate familial and community structures in Zimbabwe, dictating roles and responsibilities based on gender and marginalising the voices of women and girls in both household and public decision-making. From early childhood, cultural and religious socialisation assigns girls domestic and caregiving duties, reinforcing the perception that their primary value lies in homemaking rather than leadership or civic engagement. Women are often excluded from critical decisions unless they possess financial power or gain explicit approval from male family members, particularly husbands or fathers-in-law. Younger women, especially daughters-in-law, are frequently treated as outsiders, with their opinions either disregarded or filtered through male relatives' permission.

These cultural norms extend into religious life, where, in traditional churches, questioning male authority or established gender roles is seen as disruptive and threatening to social cohesion. In contrast, some Pentecostal denominations provide spaces for women's leadership and participation, and families are often more accepting of women's leadership in religious contexts. However, the same women who are encouraged to lead in church often face resistance or outright discouragement when they seek roles in politics or civic leadership, such as participating in ward development committees or local governance structures.

This resistance is compounded by the threat and reality of gender-based violence (GBV) that women face for their political engagement. Many women have experienced verbal, emotional, or physical abuse from spouses simply for participating in politics, particularly when their political affiliation differs from that of their husbands. In one striking account from Mutasa, a woman reported being chased multiple times around her home by her machete-wielding husband after returning from campaigning, despite his awareness of her political work. Paradoxically, the same husband accepted material benefits associated with her political involvement, such as food or financial handouts, highlighting the contradictory and exploitative dynamics women navigate.

In rural areas like Buhera, the burden of unpaid care work adds another layer of exclusion. Women are expected to wake up before dawn to complete all domestic chores, which include cooking, fetching water, tending to children, and the elderly, before they can attend any community meetings. This domestic workload is non-negotiable and always prioritised over their participation in civic or political processes, effectively limiting their ability to contribute to community leadership and decision-making. Together, these structural, cultural, and gendered barriers reinforce women's subordination in both private and public spheres, stifling their political agency and diminishing their role in shaping their communities and the nation at large.

Women in Zimbabwe are exposed to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms manifested through cultural, religious, and familial structures that systematically restrict women's autonomy, leadership, and participation in community and political life. The expectation that women prioritise domestic roles, the normalisation of male gatekeeping in decision-making, and the ever-present threat of GBV coalesce to reinforce women's subordination. Even where some space for female leadership exists, such as within certain religious contexts, these gains are often not transferable to civic or political arenas, reflecting a broader societal resistance to women's full and equal participation. This entrenched inequality underscores the urgent need for transformative cultural change, legal enforcement, and targeted support to dismantle these structural barriers and affirm women's right to participate equally in all spheres of life.

b. Economic and Social Life of Women and Girls

Economic dependency remains a major barrier to women's autonomy and participation in both family and community life. Women without access to income, land, or property are systematically excluded from decisions that directly affect their lives and are often rendered invisible in both private and public spheres. This economic marginalisation is further exacerbated by discriminatory access to aid and public resources. In areas like Hopley, women reported that food and humanitarian assistance are frequently distributed based on political affiliation or social connections, leaving out vulnerable groups, particularly widows, single mothers, and young women who lack the networks or influence needed to secure support.

Service delivery deficits such as unreliable access to clean water, irregular refuse collection, and lack of adequate street lighting have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, severely compromising their health, safety, and ability to participate in economic or community life. These challenges are widespread across urban areas and virtually endemic in rural areas. In districts like Buhera, women spend valuable time queuing at distant community boreholes to collect water, increasing the burden of unpaid care work and limiting time available for income-generating or civic activities. The chronic absence of functional public infrastructure reinforces poverty cycles and entrenches gender inequality.

In Zimbabwe's highly informalised economy, many women survive through vending or running small tuck shops. However, the lack of designated and accessible trading spaces often forces them to operate illegally in undesignated areas, where they face constant harassment from local authorities. Women reported being forced to pay bribes to avoid arrest or the confiscation of their goods, as going through the court system would result in significant income loss and disruption to their already precarious livelihoods. This constant state of insecurity undermines their economic stability and increases vulnerability to exploitation.

Health care, a critical pillar of women's well-being and empowerment, remains in crisis. In March 2025 alone, it was reported that over 300 babies and 54 women died due to complications during childbirth,

an alarming reflection of the state of Zimbabwe's public health system.¹ Public hospitals often lack basic life-saving medications and essential equipment, while private hospitals remain financially inaccessible for the majority. Maternal and child health outcomes continue to deteriorate, particularly in rural and low-income urban areas.

Education, another key determinant of empowerment, remains out of reach for many girls. Poverty-induced school dropout continues unabated, and early and forced marriages, often driven by cultural and religious norms, further limit girls' life choices. The influence of religious sects such as the Johanne Marange Church, which openly promotes child marriage and discourages formal education for girls, directly undermines national gender equality goals and violates child protection norms. These systemic failures not only restrict girls' and women's agency but also perpetuate generational cycles of poverty and disempowerment.

It is worth noting that child marriage is now outlawed in Zimbabwe, following the landmark ruling by the Constitutional Court in the *Mudzuru & Anor v Ministry of Justice, Legal & Parliamentary Affairs N.O. & Ors* case, where the court declared all forms of child marriage unconstitutional.² This decision was later reinforced by the Marriage Act [Chapter 5:15], which came into effect in 2022, and clearly sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for both girls and boys. While this legislative progress is significant, it remains to be seen whether the law will be faithfully and consistently implemented, especially in rural and religious communities where child marriage remains deeply entrenched.

The economic, infrastructural, and institutional barriers faced by women in Zimbabwe reveal a multi-layered system of exclusion that not only undermines their autonomy but also entrenches poverty and gender inequality across generations. Economic dependency, discriminatory access to aid, and lack of basic services such as water, healthcare, and education severely limit women's and girls' ability to participate meaningfully in family, community, and national life. The informal economy, while offering a survival strategy, exposes women to legal and financial insecurity, while poor maternal healthcare and the persistence of child marriage despite legal reforms highlight the gap between policy and practice. Without targeted investment in public services, equitable resource distribution, and the enforcement of gender-protective laws, structural inequality will continue to marginalize women and girls, impeding national progress toward inclusive development.

c. Political and Public Life of Women and Girls

Despite women constituting the majority of registered voters in Zimbabwe, their representation in political candidacy and leadership remains disproportionately low. In the 2023 general elections, only 57 out of 210 parliamentary constituencies had female candidates, and only one woman contested

¹ New Zimbabwe, Darlington Gatsi "299 babies and 54 mothers die in a month as Zimbabweans pay the price for shambolic health system" 2 March 2025. Available at <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/299-babies-and-54-mothers-die-in-a-month-as-zimbabweans-pay-the-price-for-shambolic-health-system/>.

² *Mudzuru & Anor v Ministry of Justice, Legal & Parliamentary Affairs N.O. & Ors* (CC 12 of 2015; Constitutional Application 79 of 2014) [2016] ZWCC 12 (20 January 2016).

the presidential election, a significant decline from previous cycles. The political sphere remains male-dominated, shaped by systemic exclusion, economic constraints, and an environment of violence and intimidation.

Economic barriers, including exorbitant nomination fees and high campaign costs, significantly hinder women, especially those from low-income backgrounds, from contesting elections. The presidential nomination fee was increased twentyfold, from US\$1,000 to US\$20,000. Similarly, the fee for constituency candidates rose from US\$50 to US\$1,000, while party-list nomination fees doubled from US\$100 to US\$200.³ These prohibitive costs effectively price out many capable women. Additionally, political party structures often perpetuate exclusion by failing to prioritise women in leadership development and candidate selection processes. This systemic neglect persists largely unchallenged, as there are no legal or institutional consequences for parties that fail to promote gender equality. Despite their active involvement in party mobilisation, women are frequently overlooked during nominations. Those who do contest are commonly subjected to gendered and sexualised smear campaigns aimed at discrediting their candidacy and undermining their legitimacy. Several women in Mutasa District shared that they opted out of primary election races in their respective political parties after enduring smear campaigns in which they were called derogatory names, accused of having sexual relations with male party leaders, among many other accusations.

The Constitution introduced the proportional representation system in Zimbabwe as a mechanism to promote gender inclusion in politics. Section 124(1)(b) and Section 277(4) of the Constitution established a quota system to ensure a minimum number of women in Parliament. Specifically, 60 seats in the National Assembly are reserved for women, allocated based on party lists submitted in each of the country's ten provinces. These seats are distributed proportionally according to the votes each political party receives in the general election. A similar mechanism is used in local authorities to increase the number of women in leadership in local authorities. While this system has increased the numerical presence of women in political office, its effectiveness in promoting substantive representation remains limited. Women elected through this system do not have defined geographical constituencies or direct mandates from voters. This lack of a constituency base significantly weakens their connection to communities and their capacity to implement development projects or influence local governance priorities. Their roles are often seen as symbolic, reinforcing perceptions of tokenism rather than enabling genuine political empowerment. Councillors elected through proportional representation in Mutasa indicated that they are compelled to depend on directly elected ward councillors to take action on community needs. This extends to the mere act of convening meetings with communities in the wards they reside in, further limiting their influence and independence. In this context, proportional representation, while important for representation in

³ Sunday News "Election nomination fees gazetted" 18 June 2023. Available at <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/election-nomination-fees-gazetted/>.

principle, risks marginalising women in practice unless coupled with broader reforms that empower them with the authority and resources needed to lead meaningfully.

Despite constitutional guarantees for gender equality and protection from abuse, such as those outlined in Sections 17, 56, and 80 of the Constitution, women in politics continue to face entrenched systemic barriers, including cyberbullying, hate speech, and deeply rooted gender stereotypes. The Data Protection Act [Chapter 11:12], which criminalises online abuse, has proven largely ineffective due to weak enforcement mechanisms, limited institutional capacity, and insufficient political will. High-profile female politicians such as Linda Masarira, Thokozani Khupe, and Fadzayi Mahere have been frequent targets of online and offline misogynistic attacks, often subjected to derogatory slurs and disparaging remarks about their physical appearance or marital status, tactics aimed at discrediting and silencing them. This reflects a broader patriarchal political culture that discourages female participation. Testimonies from women in communities such as Hopley, Buhera, Sanyati, and Mutasa further reveal that many women who aspire to leadership ultimately retreat, citing political violence, reputational attacks, and social backlash as deterrents. Although the legal framework sets a foundation for gender parity, the hostile and often unsafe political environment continues to marginalise women and obstruct their meaningful engagement in public and political life.

In addition to politicians, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face escalating threats, harassment, and state-sponsored repression. Joanah Mamombe, Cecillia Chimbiri, and Netsai Marova, all affiliated with the Citizens Coalition for Change opposition party and known for their youth and gender activism, were arrested in May 2020 after leading a peaceful protest in Harare. Following their arrest, they were forcibly disappeared, subjected to torture and sexual assault, and later abandoned in Bindura, just 87km outside Harare, where they were found two days after their arrest in a traumatised state.⁴ Instead of investigating their abduction, the state turned its focus on the survivors, charging them with "publishing falsehoods" and "obstructing the course of justice."⁵ After enduring a period of pretrial detention and three years of persecution, they were eventually acquitted in July 2023.⁶

Tsitsi Dangarembga, an internationally acclaimed writer and filmmaker, and her colleague Julie Barnes were arrested in July 2020 for holding a small, peaceful demonstration calling for institutional reform. They were charged with "inciting public violence" despite the non-violent nature of their protest.⁷ In

⁴ Amnesty International, "Zimbabwe: Hospitalized Activists Risk Being Jailed" 8 June 2020

Index Number: AFR 46/2339/2020. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr46/2339/2020/en/>.

⁵ Freedom House, "Three women are charged with lying about their abduction and torture" 11 June 2020.

Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/article/zimbabwe-release-and-drop-all-charges-against-opposition-activists>.

⁶ Voice of America, Gibbs Dube, "CCC's Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri's Case Thrown Out as High Court Judge Says State Case in Tatters" July 04, 2023. Available at <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/7166848.html>.

⁷ OMCT, "Arbitrary arrest of Tsitsi Dangarembga: a worrying turn in the systematic repression of civil society in Zimbabwe" 3 August 2020. Available at <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/arbitrary-arrest-of-tsitsi-dangarembga-a-worrying-turn-in-the-systematic-repression-of-civil-society-in-zimbabwe>.

September 2022, both were found guilty and fined.⁸ They also received a six-month suspended prison sentence, conditional on not committing a similar offence within five years. In May 2023, the two successfully appealed their conviction. Although they were not subjected to pretrial detention, their conviction has a chilling effect on free expression, particularly for women engaging in peaceful protest or critique of government policy.

Fadzayi Mahere, a lawyer, political leader, and former spokesperson of the Citizens Coalition for Change at the time, has faced repeated legal and digital persecution for her outspoken advocacy on constitutionalism, corruption, and the rule of law. In January 2021, she was arrested and charged under section 31(a)(iii) of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act for “publishing falsehoods” after posting about an incident involving police violence that was later verified. She was detained at Chikurubi Female Prison and endured nearly a week of pretrial incarceration in conditions described as dehumanising. In April 2023, she was convicted and fined, despite the Constitutional Court having previously struck down the same legal provision she was charged under.⁹ Similarly to the Tsitsi Dangarembga case, Ms Mahere appealed her conviction and in February 2024, her conviction was set aside with the court finding that she had been convicted on the basis of a non-existent law as she had claimed in her initial defence.¹⁰ Her case highlights the weaponisation of unconstitutional laws and the gendered targeting of high-profile women critics through judicial processes and online harassment.

Another chilling case is that of Namatai Kwekweza, a youth activist and founder of WeLead Trust, who has consistently advocated for democratic reform and youth participation. In July 2024, she was abducted at Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport alongside fellow activists Robson Chere and Samuel Gwenzi by suspected state agents.¹¹ The group was held incommunicado for several hours, during which they were subjected to physical and psychological abuse before being handed over to the police. Kwekweza was charged with disorderly conduct and spent 35 days in pretrial detention before being granted bail in September 2024.¹² Her abduction and continued prosecution reflect the

⁸ Al Jazeera, “Zimbabwe court fines novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga over protest” 30 September 2022. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/30/zimbabwe-court-fines-novelist-tsitsi-dangarembga-over-protest>.

⁹ Centre for Human Rights, “Press Statement the Centre for Human Rights Condemns the Conviction Of Zimbabwean Political Activist Fadzayi Mahere” 18 April 2023. Available at https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/centrenews/2023/Press_Statement_Conviction_of_Fadzayi_Mahere.pdf.

¹⁰ The Zimbabwean, “High Court Quashes Fadzayi Mahere’s Conviction and Sentence for ‘Dead Baby’ Tweet” 28 February 2024. Available at <https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2024/02/high-court-quashes-fadzayi-maheres-conviction-and-sentence-for-dead-baby-tweet/>.

¹¹ The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Urgent Appeal ZWE 001/0824/OBS 037 available at <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/zimbabwe-arbitrary-detention-and-alleged-torture-of-namatai-kwekweza>.

¹² Zimbabwe Human Rights Association and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, “The State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe,” December 2024. Available at <https://www.omct.org/site-resources/legacy/Obs-report-The-State-of-Civic-Space-in-Zimbabwe-Extended-Version-191224.pdf>.

state's increasing reliance on security apparatuses and legal harassment to stifle dissent and punish civic engagement.

The participation of women and girls in Zimbabwe's political and public life is systematically undermined by a constellation of legal, structural, cultural, and political barriers that reinforce exclusion and gender inequality. While the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides progressive guarantees for gender equality, political participation, and protection from discrimination, the lived experience of women reveals a stark disjuncture between legal rights and practical realities. The existing quota systems and legal reforms have improved numerical representation of women in political leadership, but the systems and reforms fall short of delivering real influence, with women often sidelined from decision-making processes and subjected to symbolic roles.

The targeted repression of women human rights defenders through abductions, arbitrary detention, and the misuse of legal instruments reveals a broader state strategy to silence dissenting female voices. These actions not only violate fundamental rights but also send a chilling message to other women, reinforcing fear and discouraging civic engagement. Without structural reform, institutional accountability, and cultural shifts to dismantle patriarchal norms, women's participation in Zimbabwe's political and public life will remain constrained and precarious.

III. Conclusion

The testimonies and evidence presented in this submission paint a sobering picture of the systemic discrimination that continues to shape the lives of women and girls in Zimbabwe. Despite legal and constitutional frameworks that aspire toward gender equality, women remain marginalised across key areas of life due to entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional weaknesses, and deliberate political exclusion. Efforts such as quota systems and legislative reforms have improved the visibility of women in some leadership spaces, but have not translated into real empowerment or influence. The widespread targeting of women human rights defenders reveals a broader culture of repression and impunity, where the state's failure to uphold its own laws erodes public trust and deters civic participation. To truly achieve gender equality, Zimbabwe must go beyond symbolic inclusion and implement structural reforms that empower women economically, socially, and politically. This includes ensuring legal accountability, protecting women's rights defenders, investing in public services that reduce unpaid care work, and dismantling the social norms that perpetuate inequality.

a. Recommendations

To the Government of Zimbabwe:

1. Ensure full implementation of constitutional provisions on gender equality (Sections 17, 56, and 80) by aligning national laws and policies with international human rights standards.
2. Reform political financing laws to eliminate economic barriers to women's participation, including reducing nomination fees and establishing a public fund to support women candidates.

3. Strengthen institutional accountability by adequately capacitating the Zimbabwe Gender Commission and ensuring it has independence, resources, and enforcement powers to address gender-based discrimination.
4. End impunity for violence against women in politics by investigating and prosecuting cases of gender-based violence, harassment, and abductions, including those targeting women human rights defenders.
5. Improve access to essential services such as water, sanitation, maternal healthcare, and education, particularly in rural and high-density urban areas, to reduce the burden of unpaid care work and promote women's economic participation.
6. Expand legal and psychosocial support services for survivors of gender-based violence, including shelters, trauma counselling, and legal aid.
7. Enforce child marriage laws through community education, robust monitoring, and partnerships with religious and traditional leaders to challenge harmful norms and practices.

To the United Nations and International Community:

1. Provide increased targeted technical and financial support to local women's rights organisations, including grassroots initiatives advancing civic participation, political engagement, and legal empowerment.
2. Continue monitoring and raising concerns about ongoing violations against women human rights defenders and demand independent investigations into cases of abduction, torture, and judicial harassment.
3. Support independent civic education and electoral participation programs that equip women and girls with the tools to engage meaningfully in public life.
4. Facilitate capacity-building programs for law enforcement, the judiciary, and public officials on gender-sensitive governance and human rights-based approaches.