



## **International Women's Day Press Statement**

ZPP joins the rest of the World in celebrating International Women's Day 2023 which is running under the theme "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality". This year's observance of International Women's Day 2023 seeks to highlight the need for inclusive and transformative technology and digital education. Bringing women and other marginalized groups into technology results in more creative solutions and has greater potential for innovation that meets women's needs and promote gender equality. In line with the international theme this year, ZPP has adopted the theme "Promoting Cyber Tolerance and online Etiquette for Gender Equality" as a response to the many breaches of peace and exclusion of women in technology that are increasing as a result of socio-economic and political factors.

ZPP uses the human rights approach to advance sustainable peace in the country and is alarmed by the continued use of technology, particularly social media to attack and bully women human rights activists. ZPP notes with concern the increase in cyberbullying<sup>1</sup> of women activists through systematic threats and intimidation that have been launched against them in on online platforms. ZPP's gendered approach to research, programming, and advocacy has shown that the effects of cyberbullying differ for men and women. Only a small percentage of women engage in political processes, and the online harassment of these women discourages other women from taking part in politics which will have a negative impact on inclusive programming and gender equality across the board.

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<sup>1</sup> Cyberbullying is bullying with the use of digital technologies. It includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else.

The cyberbullying trend has continually been witnessed in the run up to elections and other special events since independence. The most prominent examples include Cecilia Chimhiri, Harare West legislator, Joanna Mamombe and Netsai Marova of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) after their abductions in 2020. The trio has been constantly trolled on social media platforms especially on Twitter by varakashi<sup>2</sup> being accused of being ‘purveyors of falsehoods and branded as being unpatriotic and regime change agents.’ As their case is still before the courts, they continue to face the wrath of varakashi whenever they post and continue to be reminded of the devastating ordeal, they went through at the hands of alleged state agents which negatively affects their mental health. Other women human rights activists and politicians who have been cyberbullied include Labour, Economists and African Democrats party president Linda Masarira and CCC member Thokozani Khupe who have been harassed by general citizens and CCC supporters respectively. This has discouraged other women in taking up leadership roles, for example in Gweru Urban, out of the 18 councilors, only one is a woman, which makes it challenging to advocate for respect of women’s rights.

Statistics from the 2022 by-election reports portray a glaring picture where few women participated in the elections, as exposed in the by-elections and the primary elections where there were more men than women as candidates. According to ZEC, only 15% of the candidates were women, which has not increased from the 15% recorded in July 2018 National Assembly elections. Furthermore, the few women who participate in political processes are harassed, intimidated and threatened according to our reports. In January 2023, 326 women and 7 Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) were victims of human rights violations. On 7 January Zanu PF supporters accosted elderly villagers among them women and flogged them ruthlessly with logs for convening a CCC gathering in Murehwa, a supposed Zanu PF ‘stronghold’ in Mashonaland East. Women and men were viciously assaulted and interrogated for attending the CCC gathering in Bhunu village. We are concerned that such abuse of women sends the wrong messages to young women who might fear taking part in politics, public office and other public and community responsibilities. The

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Varakashi is a Shona word for “destroyers”. They troll social media platforms especially Twitter, attacking people who challenge Zanu PF, President Mnangagwa’s policies or leadership. Their overarching aim is to push Zanu PF propaganda.

recent hike in fees for those who want to contest for public office are also prohibitive for many women and other vulnerable groups.

Sustainable Development Goal number 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Additionally, it is a prerequisite for accomplishing every goal in the 2030 Sustainable Development Plan. Gender Equality is essential in all aspects as enshrined in Section 56 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, that states that women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres. Every citizen should respect and promote human rights and freedoms as expected according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

ZPP monitors socio-economic rights through a human rights lens and notes with concern how low levels of general education are a major barrier to achieving gender equality in technology. The United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 sustainable development goal number 4 advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education which promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. This is in line with the national legislative framework in Zimbabwe through Section 75 of the Zimbabwe Constitution which states that, ‘every citizen and permanent resident of Zimbabwe has a right to basic state-funded education, including adult basic education’. However, the government has not done enough to realize the goal of provision of basic state-funded education and this is bound to have a negative long-term impact especially on young girls.

As the year 2023 started, ZPP recorded a significant number of cases in which young girls from different communities including Silobela, Dangamvura/Chikanga and Mazowe South, were denied entry in school premises by the school authorities for non-payment of school fees. Without inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong opportunities for all, it is difficult to achieve gender equality in technology and break the cycle of poverty, among other socio-economic targets. Poverty is a major barrier as female students in particular do not have resources and are dependent on parents and/or partners who have patriarchal beliefs that discriminate and exclude the needs of the girl child. This has resulted in female students particularly those in rural areas being forced into child sexual abuse and exploitation disguised as ‘early child marriage’ and their male counterparts being sent to school. In rural areas where the infrastructure is not disability friendly those with disabilities particularly those in wheelchairs find most schools inaccessible schools and

their right to education is infringed. Women PWDs are thus deprived of their right to education and this starts with segregation of PWDs in the enrollment process as they continue to face stigmatization and discrimination from different community members.

The goal of the Zimbabwe Peace Project is advancing sustainable peace in Zimbabwe guided by a vision where there is peace, justice, dignity and development for all. ZPP urges the Zimbabwean government to act responsibly and take bold steps in line with the Constitution and international treaties they are party to, to improve the situation of women. There is a need for urgent interventions in areas of social inclusion for poor and marginalized communities including PWDs.

ZPP recommends the adoption of the following interventions to promote gender equality in technology in Zimbabwe:

1. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and relevant government ministries should drive the narrative and start promoting cyber-tolerance and online etiquette where a lot of women have been excluded
2. CSOs are urged to produce data that is gender desegregated to inform initiatives to improve the lives of women and girls.
3. Citizens should be empowered to monitor the National Gender Policy's implementation and make government accountable.