
ZIMBABWE PEACE PROJECT

**“WE ARE
NOT
TIRED.
WE ARE
TIED”**

**A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE
IMPACT OF VAWP ON WOMEN
PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN
ZIMBABWE BETWEEN 2018 AND 2023**

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INTRODUCTION

With the support of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) is implementing a project which seeks to avail empirical data on the trends and magnitude of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) in Zimbabwe. The purpose of collecting this empirical evidence is to use it as a basis for engagement with parliament, media and civil society so that corrective action can be taken. By availing empirical data on the trends on VAWP in Zimbabwe, ZPP intends to generate public debate on the need to eradicate VAWP in Zimbabwean politics in the media, in civil society and in parliament. These public debates will in turn result in a closer understanding of the plight of women in politics which is critical to trigger policy and legislative changes on VAWP. The project aims to equip Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) and Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence (WALPE) with knowledge products that demonstrate the magnitude of VAWP in Zimbabwe that they can use to engage with parliament, the media and the Zimbabwean civil society.

Using empirical data, ZPP intends to demonstrate that VAWP is a big issue that warrants the immediate attention of Zimbabwean policy and legislative makers. Ultimately, ZPP envisages a downward trend on cases of VAWP as a result of this project, which will in turn create space for more women to come forward and avail themselves as voters and candidates in elections. This will ultimately result in gender equality in public decision-making positions in Zimbabwe. ZPP reached out to the women in politics who experienced VAWP from all the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe (Harare, Masvingo, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Midlands, Bulawayo, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Manicaland and Mashonaland Central), listened to their stories and experiences with VAWP and how the latter affected their participation in politics as voters or as candidates, documented these experiences and produced this report. This report is thus a compendium of the experiences of women in politics from across the country. It documents the physical, emotional, psychological, structural and cyber violence that the women in politics experienced on account of their participation in politics and the ramifications of such violence on their participation in politics.

BACKGROUND

In Zimbabwe, patriarchy and gender inequalities are deeply rooted in traditional, religious and cultural normative values. The pervasiveness of patriarchy and gender inequalities is evident in the under-representation and exclusion of women, who constitute 52% of the population, in decision making processes. The exclusion of women from key decision-making positions in public institutions runs contrary to SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 16 (inclusive societies). Despite constituting the majority of the population, women currently hold only 30% of the National Assembly Seats. In local authorities, they occupy a paltry 12.5%. This is regardless of the existence of 30% women quota in Council and 60 seat women quota in parliament. Of the 210 parliamentary seats not under the quota system, women only hold 22 seats (10,5%). These statistics point to a violation of Zimbabwe's obligations under local and international law. Locally, the statistics point to a violation of Sections 17, 56 and 80 of the Zimbabwean Constitution that provide for equal opportunities for men and women in political, economic and cultural spheres. Regionally, the statistics run contrary to the Maputo Protocol (Article ix) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol (Articles 12 and 13). Internationally, they are in violation of Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which provides for equal opportunities for men and women to vote and to be voted for. One of the biggest barriers to equal participation between men and women in politics, elections and public decision-making positions is the pervasiveness of VAWP. VAWP manifests itself in physical, psychological, structural and digital forms. Physical violence includes violence that is physically meted against women such as rape, torture or assaults. Psychological violence includes violence that causes psychological damage or distress on the victim. It includes intimidation, verbal abuse, character assassination, hate speech, to mention a few. Structural violence is embedded in the systems, structures, institutions, policies, laws and norms. Beliefs that perpetuate gender stereotypes and segregation are examples of structural violence. These forms of VAWP are perpetrated against women both online and offline and ZPP has over the years, through its Human Rights Monitoring and Documentation work, recorded such cases. All these forms of violence, when perpetrated against women in politics, have a cumulative effect of making politics an unsafe venture for women. In addition to pushing those women who are already in politics out, they also act as disincentives for women who would like to participate in politics and elections. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's post 2018 Elections Gender Survey lists sexual harassment, sexual and physical violence against women as well as name calling, sex shaming, negative stereotyping, derogatory statements and sexism

remarks from the media, community members, party membership and from rival political party members as factors that forced women to withdraw after filing their papers in the nomination courts. According to IFES, in 2018, 60% of violent discourse and related content in the political space was directed at women. Women were the object of nearly three times the amount of physical violence-related online sentiment than men. ZPP has documented cases of forced concubinage as a means of punishing women or their spouses for participating in politics, numerous cases of rape, gang rape, torture, intentional transmission of HIV, and sexual slavery by perpetrators against women in politics. Perpetrators of these crimes act with impunity and women survivors of political violence have limited opportunities to get justice and healing. This contravenes Zimbabwe's obligations under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA).

Women do not usually report violence for fear of retaliation, stigma or not being believed. In politics and elections, additional reputational risks exacerbate these fears. Within political parties, members may not speak about violence fearing their partisan loyalties and discipline will be questioned. In addition to direct (physical violence) women in politics also experience indirect, structural violence (social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way). The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organisation of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities). The idea of structural violence is linked very closely to social injustice and the social machinery of oppression. An example of structural violence is unfair documentation rules which prevented women from registering as voters. Institutions established to provide access to justice and healing women victims of VAWP such as the police, the courts and Independent (Chapter 12) Commissions have failed to take action against VAWP, especially if it is state sponsored. In Zimbabwe, it is difficult for law enforcement to bring perpetrators of VAWP online to book because sometimes it is perpetrated under a veil of freedom of expression and the challenges to social media accounts to certain individuals. The Zimbabwe United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-26 has four development outcomes, none of them explicitly or implicitly mention VAWP or work that will be done to reduce it.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Below are some of the terms commonly used in this baseline report:

- **Hate speech** refers to any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, i.e., their religion, ethnicity, gender or other identity factor. ¹
- **Sexist hate speech** relates to expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based specifically on a person's sex or gender
- **Body shaming** refers to the action or practice of mocking or stigmatising someone by making critical comments about the shape, size, or appearance of their body.
- **Character assassination** refers to the malicious and unjustified harming of a person's good reputation
- **Gender stereotype** means ascribing to an individual woman or man specific prejudiced or preconceived attributes, characteristics, or roles by reason only of her or his membership in the social group of women or men.
- **Misogyny** refers to the dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women
- **Gendered disinformation:** According to the Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights², the term refers to the weaponisation of gendered narratives to promote social or economic objectives. It refers to activities such as creating, sharing and dissemination of content which attacks people on the basis of their gender.
- **Disinformation** refers to the deliberate dissemination of false information deliberately creation to harm a person, social group, organisation or country. ³
- **Misinformation** is when false information is shared, but no harm is intended. ⁴
- **Mal-information** is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere. ⁵

1. Online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech, Learning Brief No. 2, Intersectional Feminist Media Development
https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IMS-Online-gendered-disinformation_final.pdf

2. ICF 2021 Best Practice Forum Gender and Digital Rights Exploring the concept of Gendered Disinformation BPF OUTPUT DOCUMENT DECEMBER 2021
https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/62/20661

3. Ibid

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical underpinnings of the research

The study was inspired by the Feminist Standpoint Theory which argues that all knowledge is socially situated. The theory places emphasis on the many stories that women tell about their knowledge, experience and lived realities and how these structure their social understanding (S Harding, 2012). It emphasises that the world has to be understood from the perspective of intersections such as race, gender, social class, disability and sexuality. Feminist Standpoint Theory draws upon the idea of a situated woman with experiences and knowledge specific to her place in the material division of labor and the racial stratification systems (Olesen, 2011, p. 130). It pays attention to situational knowledge, that is knowledge that reveals the experiences and voices of marginalised others. These experiences and voices are not only incorporated in this research but serve as a starting point for building gender knowledge in politics. This study analysed the narratives of women in politics and their experiences with VAWP, guarding against homogenisation of their experiences by looking at different aspects contributing towards their exclusion or inclusion in politics.

This study is also rooted in phenomenology, an approach to qualitative research which focuses on exploring and understanding human experiences as they are perceived by individuals. It seeks to uncover the essence of phenomena by examining how people experience and interpret events, situations, or concepts. Phenomenology is a research methodology that emphasises the study of individuals' lived experiences to understand the essence of a phenomenon. Phenomenology has three key distinct features namely:

- It focuses on subjective experiences.
- It explores meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences.
- It uses in-depth methods to gather detailed data.

Study Sampling and population

Sampling in the study was purposive and sequential. Network referencing was used to select respondents from each category for in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Sampling was purposive in that it sought to ensure equal representation of women in politics from all the ten provinces of Zimbabwe in the study. It also deliberately created space for women who faced multiple layers of vulnerabilities to participate. These include women in politics who have disabilities and those from remote rural areas who face severe economic vulnerabilities. The study deliberately targeted women who are active in politics and those who experienced VAWP. Men’s views and perspectives were also solicited as shown on Figure 2. A total of 20 focus group discussions were conducted with 192 women from across the country. Officials from relevant government institutions were interviewed for their expert knowledge. Experts on gender and politics were also interviewed. A total of 20 key informant interviews were conducted.

Demographic characteristics of respondents

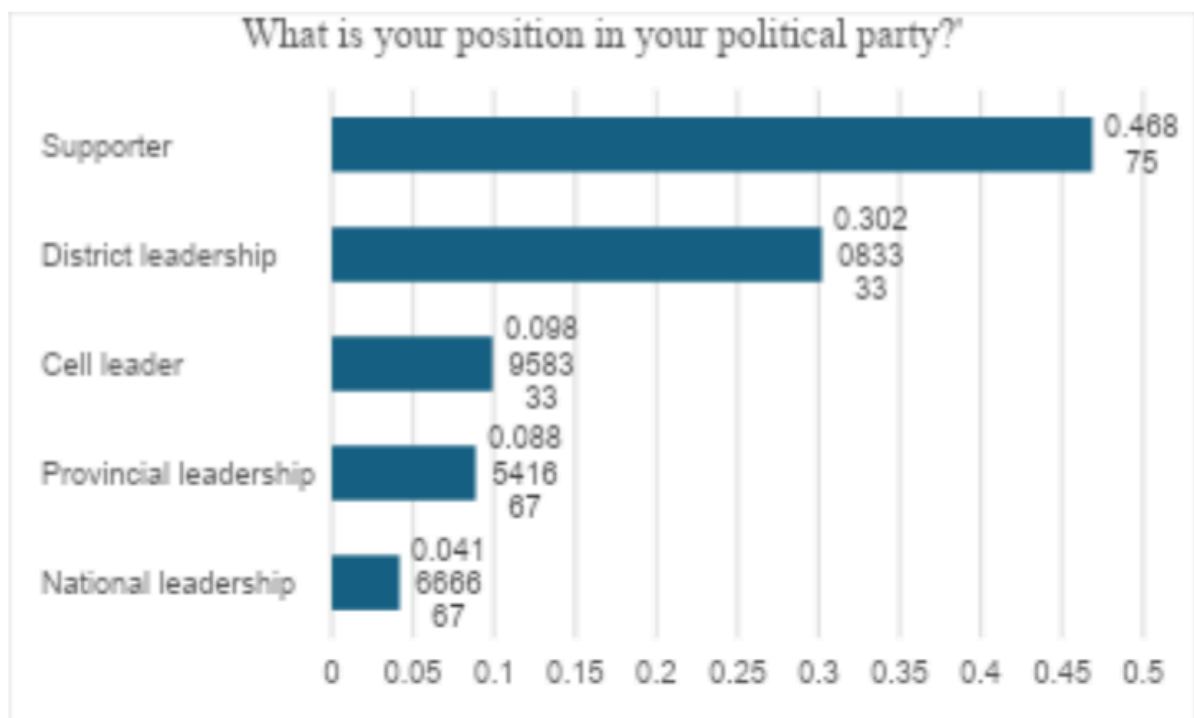


Figure 1: Respondents' positions in their political parties

Demographic characteristics of respondents

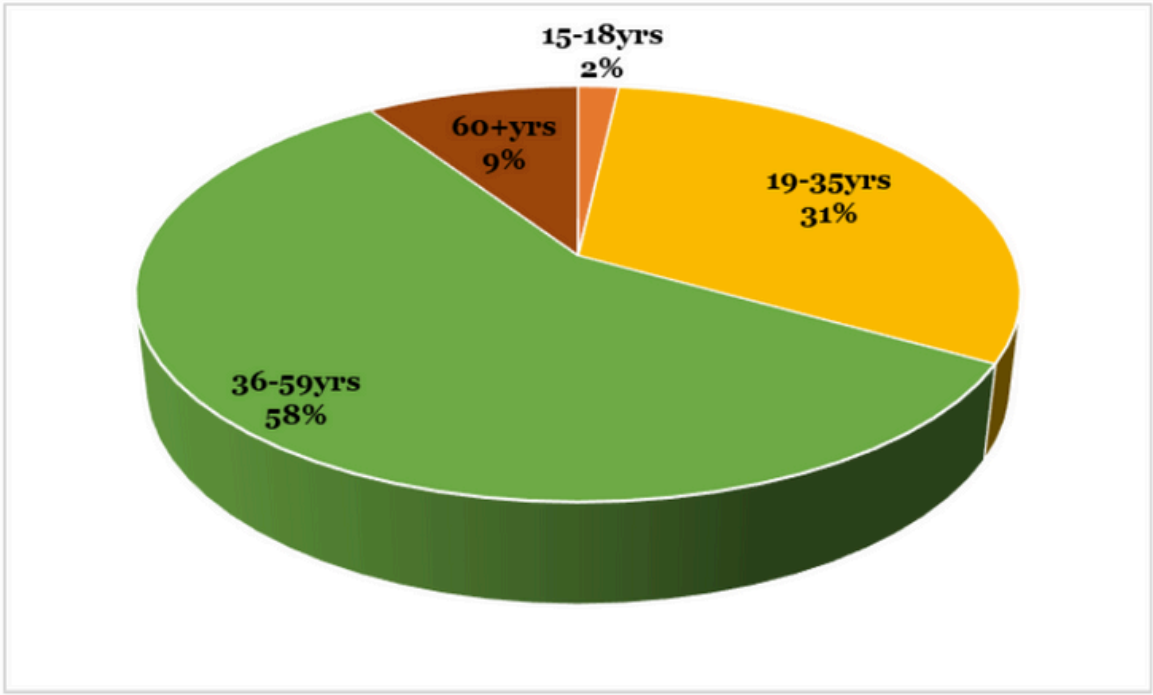


Figure 2: Ages of respondents

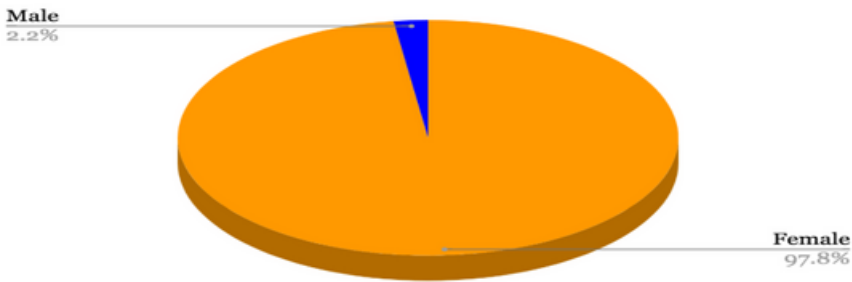


Figure 3: Sex of respondents

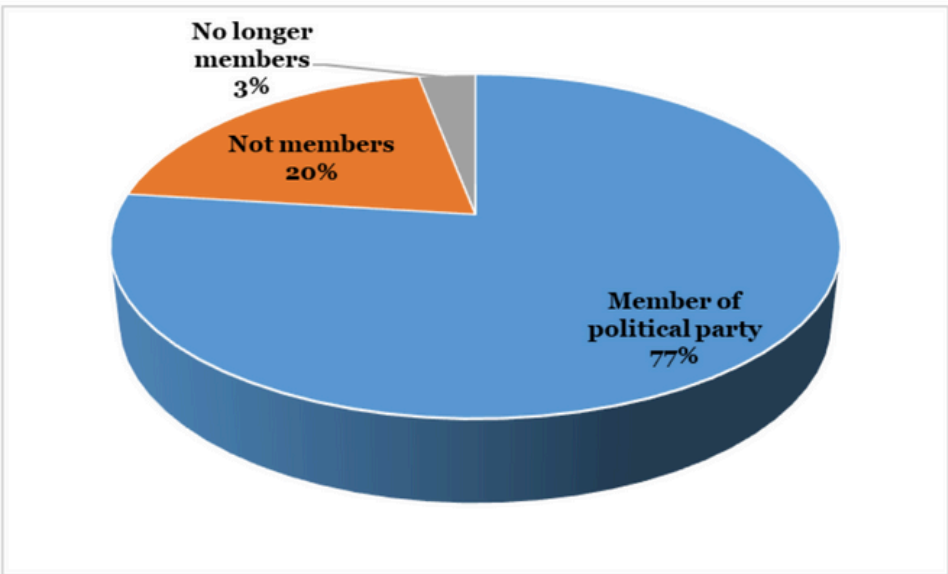


Figure 4: Political affiliation of respondents

Demographic characteristics of respondents

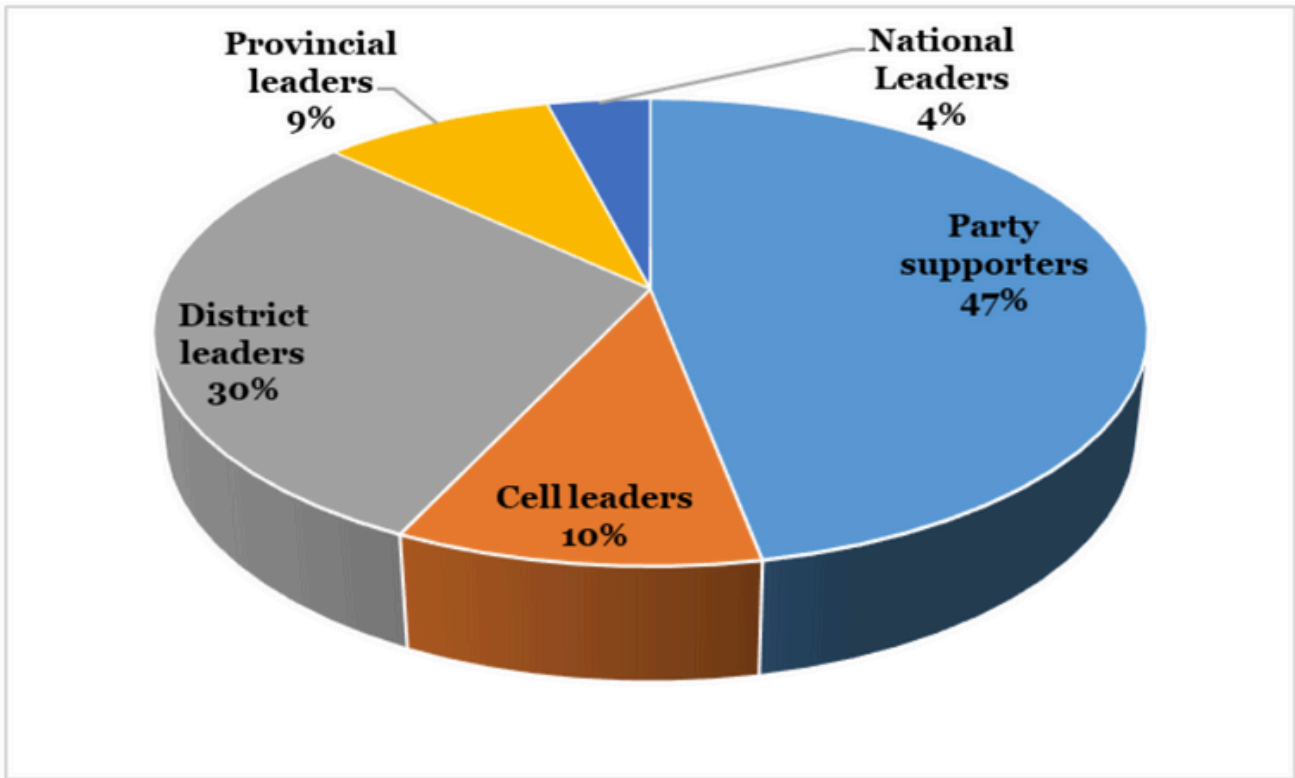


Figure 5: Leadership positions held by respondents

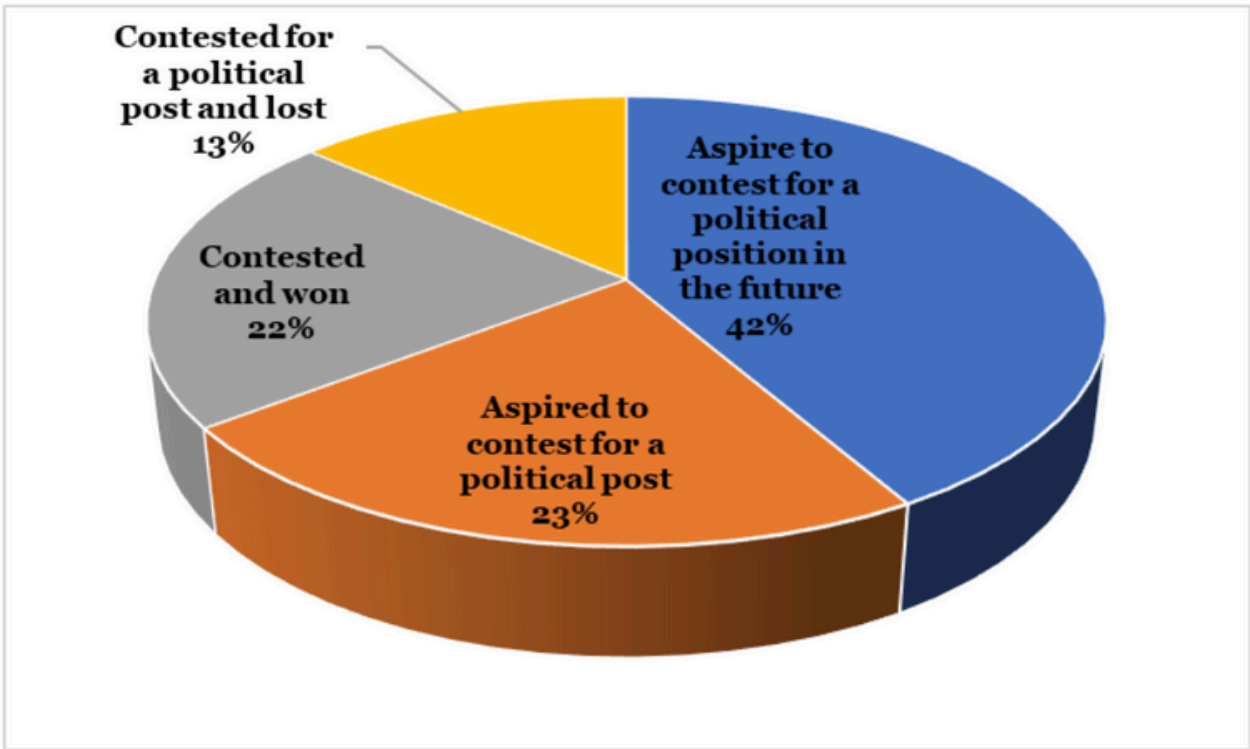


Figure 6: Political aspirations of respondents

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The women in politics whom ZPP reached out to from the ten provinces of Zimbabwe experienced VAWP in the form stipulated in table 1 below. A total of 591 VAWP related human rights violations were recorded, some of which are gross human rights violations which include rape (5), torture (13) and abductions (9).

Violations experienced	Count
Gender stereotyping	66
Body shaming	51
Character assassination	62
Sexist hate speech	43
Misogyny	16
Rape	5
Cyber bullying	34
Sextortion	16
Extortion	12
Sexual harassment	38
Assault	54
Verbal abuse	138
Abduction	9
Torture	13
Other	34
Total	591

Table 1: Number of VAWP related human rights violations documented

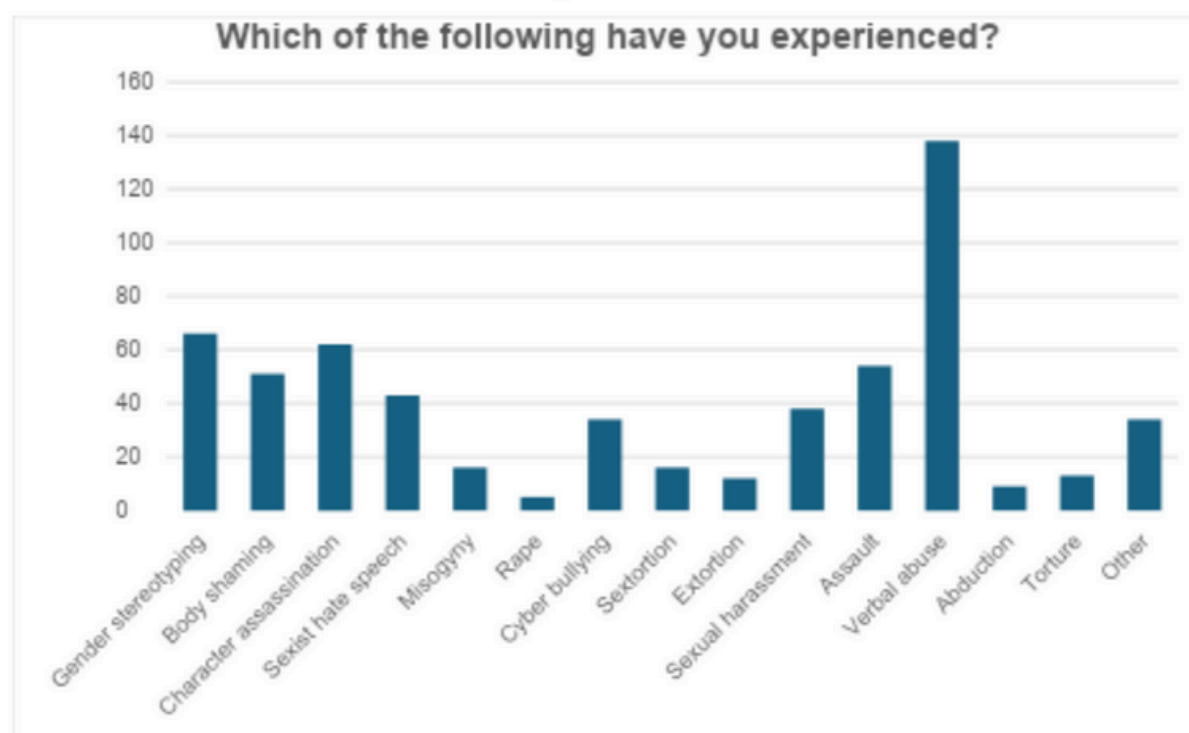


Figure 7: Categories of violence experienced by women

Sextortion: Rape stricto sensu

Sextortion is a subtle form of VAWP where those in power demand sex and sexual favors as payment for assistance/services rendered. In most political parties in Zimbabwe, including the ruling party (ZANU PF) and the largest opposition political party (CCC), it is the men who wield such power and as such, use it against women intending to participate in politics as political party leaders or candidates in elections. This practice is fueled by the unfounded belief by some men that women who participate in politics are of loose morals and as such, must “sleep their way to leadership positions.” Most women who participated in this study confirmed that sextortion is rampant in their political parties. 16 of the women reached out to were victims of sextortion. In its strict sense (*stricto sensu*), sextortion is a form of rape. This is because the consent that is given by a woman who wants assistance in becoming a candidate or to assume a leadership position in a political party is not willingly given, neither is it genuine or voluntary. It is given under coercive circumstances. There is no free will or agency on the part of the woman. Rather, the consent is constructed/engineered and shrouded in helplessness and incapacity to resist. It is consent which is given by someone in an exploitative position of dependency and vulnerability.

The consent is given in the context of unequal power dynamics. There is fear of loss on the part of the woman and an undue advantage on the part of the man. Things being equal, the act itself is unwanted on the part of the woman.

Discussions with the women from the ten provinces of Zimbabwe indicate that women fall prey to sextortion because of economic vulnerabilities which makes it difficult, if not impossible for them to use orthodox means to compete for political party positions or for nomination as candidates for elections with their male counterparts. The women who participated in this study stated that saying no to sextortion entails creating an additional barrier (to the already heavy burden of barriers) on one's leadership journey. Just like any other form of VAWP, sextortion makes politics an unsafe venture for women. 3% of the participants in this study said that they were victims of sextortion. This is notwithstanding the fact that there is a thin line between sextortion and sexual harassment (which affected 6% of the respondents).

Rape

As already indicated, sextortion is rape in the strict sense. However, for purposes of this section, rape will be narrowly confined to force (physical) based definitions, which, as already stated, this author finds problematic. From the 193 women in politics whom ZPP reached out to in this study, 9 of them, or 5% were raped. This is a staggering figure considering the gross nature of the violation. The figure is big enough to disincentivise any woman who aspires to participate in politics. Combined with other gross human rights violations as stipulated in table 1, it portrays a hostile environment, an unsafe venture for women.

Abduction

9 of the women who participated in this research were abducted. This figure is confined to the 193 women who participated in this research only. ZPP listened to the horrific circumstances surrounding the abductions of all these women. In all of the 9 counts of abductions, the victims and their family members were subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment as well as other forms of physical and psychological abuse. In all these 9 cases, the victims were sexually abused. Other women also witnessed their family members being abducted and tortured. Just like rape, torture and other gross human rights violations, abductions make the cost of women participating in politics very high.

Sexist hate speech

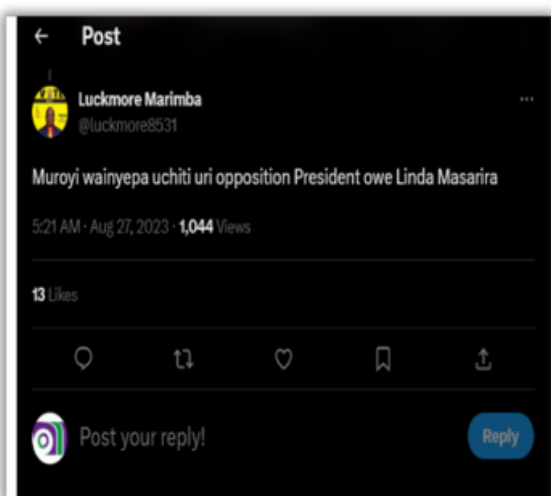
Hate speech occurs when communication in speech, writing or behavior attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, i.e., their religion, ethnicity, gender or other identity factor⁶. Hate speech can also be sexist if expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based specifically on a person's sex or gender is spread. Hate speech against women politicians has ramifications on their participation in politics either as candidates or as voters. Hate speech targeted against women in politics, which amounts to abuse and harassment on a daily basis, does not only cause harm on the targeted women and their loved ones, but also detracts them from their political priorities and agendas.

6. Online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech, Learning Brief No. 2, Intersectional Feminist Media Development
https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IMS-Online-gendered-disinformation_final.pdf

It is one way in which powerful male politicians express misogyny towards women politicians. It breeds and nurtures the notion that politics is not a safe venture for women, which disincentivises women who would be politicians. Hate speech may make those women that are already in politics to consider quitting.

In the run up to the August 2023 elections, there was pervasive hate speech, harassment, and misogynistic and sexist language used against politically active women. Women who were active in politics either as candidates or as voters were subjected to gendered digitally mediated and technologically facilitated violence and abuse. Online hate speech is a form of verbal digital violence that is harmful in itself and simultaneously facilitates an ideological preparedness to use physical violence against those constructed as enemies. The threat of physical violence also causes psychological trauma, insomnia and, ultimately, mental health issues such as stress, depression, anxiety and panic attacks.⁸

Thokozani Khupe, a presidential candidate in the 2018 elections, was verbally attacked by opponents who followed her to her car shouting 'sellout' and 'hure' (whore) at her. The Citizens Coalition for Change Parliamentary candidate in Bulawayo South was described as 'too white' to be a Member of Parliament in Zimbabwe. Journalist Shingai Nyoka was trolled online for a news article she penned on Citizen Coalition for Change Presidential candidate, Nelson Chamisa. X (formerly Twitter) users called her a snake and a mercenary journalist, for an article that criticised Nelson Chamisa's leadership. In Bulawayo, United Zimbabwe Alliance Parliamentary candidate for Entumbane/Njube, was described as a "masvina" meaning "a piece of dirt/filth" who is not worth voting for. She was described as someone who is not ethnically Ndebele and who is incapable of representing Entumabe-Njube. Aspiring presidential candidate Linda Masarira was called a witch who does not want to bathe by her opponents.



7. Saresma, T., Karkulehto, S., & Varis, P. (2021). Gendered Violence Online : Hate Speech as an Intersection of Misogyny and Racism. In M. Husso, S. Karkulehto, T. Saresma, A. Laitila, J. Eilola, & H. Siltala (Eds.), *Violence, Gender and Affect : Interpersonal, Institutional and Ideological Practices* (pp. 221-243). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56930-3_11

8. Women in Politics in Zimbabwe: How gender norms are fueling online violence. Nehanda Centre for Gender Studies, September 2023

Gendered disinformation

As has already been stated in the section on definitions, gendered disinformation entails the deliberate dissemination of false information deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country on account of their gender. According to the Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights⁹, the term refers to the weaponisation of gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives. It refers to activities such as creating, sharing and dissemination of content which attacks people on the basis of their gender. These misogynistic attacks, which also amounts to character assassination, are carefully calculated to erode the trust of the voters in the women candidates. They also reduce the candidate's self-esteem and erode their respect and dignity. Their moral status is degraded.

A key informant pointed out that VAWP has resulted in women shying away from social media platforms. Shying away from social media platforms by women in politics protects them from these ceaseless barrages of online attacks but at the same time, curtails their opportunities to engage with supporters on social media platforms. Elbowing women out of social media platforms from which support is canvassed creates an unfair advantage for men over women. Some female politicians have resorted to the use of 'ghost' accounts to pre-bunk and debunk myths and falsehoods about themselves. They use the ghost accounts to set the records straight, to provide explanations and evidence of the correct narrative. In some instances, women politicians explained that this involves defending female candidates by educating social media users on why women should partake in politics. This is something they could not do by using their genuine accounts because abusers are encouraged to keep on attacking when the person attacked seems to be responding.

Screen shots from X below shows that women in politics are called all sorts of names, including being labelled prostitutes, people who sleep their way up the political ladder, and epitomes of moral iniquity.

Malicious and unjustified harming of a women politicians' otherwise good reputations present a strong disincentive to young women who want to venture into politics. A few days before the August 2023 harmonised elections, a pornographic video was circulated on Whatsapp Groups in Nkulumane, Bulawayo.

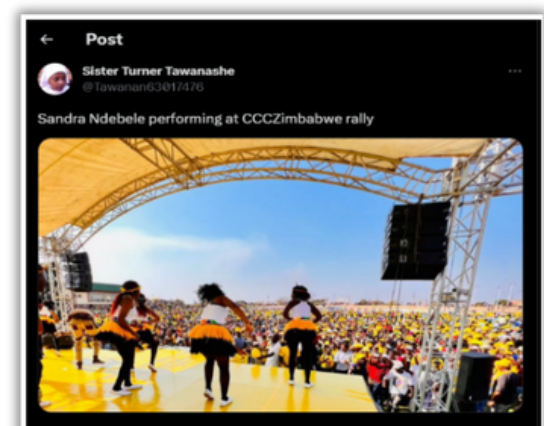
It was alleged that the pornographic video belonged to Sandra Ndebele, a musician and dancer who was contesting to become a Councillor in Nkulumane in a bid to dissuade voters from voting for her. Pictures were also circulated on social media which alleged that Sandra Ndebele had attended and performed at a rival political party's rally. This was done to create doubts about Sandra Ndebele's loyalty to her own party, and hence to cause her to lose voters' confidence.



As shown on the picture below, an army of trolls circulated a flier encouraging people to vote for Flora Bhuka, a ZANU PF Parliamentary candidate for Gokwe Nembudziya or else they will be beaten, killed or made to clean toilets with their tongues. This was made to tarnish her image as a violent politician and in a way, to discourage voters from voting for her.



Women in politics do not have to deal with the electorate alone. They also have to deal with their families. Therefore, when they venture into politics, the possibility of having their images tarnished, losing elections and losing family at the same time is a strong consideration which sometimes disincentivises them from venturing into politics. Those that choose to remain in politics against all these odds face an additional layer of challenges: to counter this gendered disinformation and to restore public confidence in their candidacy. This is not an easy task to accomplish given the fact that Zimbabwean consumers of information rarely interrogate or fact check the information that is posted.



Mal-information

Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere. The ultimate objective of mal-information is to tarnish the image of a woman who is in politics so that she loses public confidence and support and so that she⁹ ultimately becomes un-electable. Some of the women who participated in the focus group discussions told ZPP that they had their phones hacked and their private conversations posted publicly on social media. These conversations included their political strategies and tactics, thus giving unfair advantages to their political opponents, who are mostly male. Others stated that they had the most intimate details of their private life also posted on social media. This did not only result in loss of political capital, but created dents and in worst case scenarios, altogether damaged the fabric of their family relations. One female participant told ZPP that she had her HIV test results posted on WhatsApp groups for the constituency she was contesting. She said screenshots of her conversations with her intimate partners were also released to the public, particularly to the WhatsApp groups of potential voters. In all the cases of mal-information that ZPP documented, the perpetrators were male political opponents. Another woman told ZPP in the focus group discussions that her political opponents told potential voters at a rally that she has five children with different fathers.

Body shaming

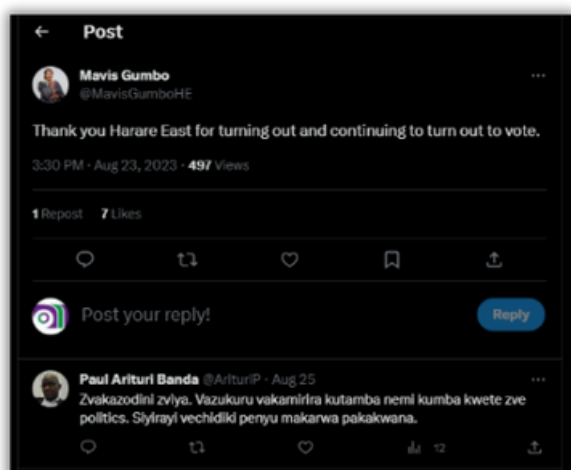
Body shaming refers to the action or practice of mocking or stigmatising someone by making critical comments about the shape, size, or appearance of their body. Women in politics are attacked on the basis of their bodies, their looks, their hair, or the way they dress, rather than the substantive content of their political ideas.

The most frequent body shaming comments detected from social media include “you are shapeless”, “you are formless” and “you are ugly.” Pictures of women are distorted to add beards, pimples and other unappealing features, posted and reposted on social media. The comments

dehumanise women, likening them to animals such as frogs and chimpanzees. Women who have darker skins are accused of being lazy to bathe while those with big bodies are likened to big animals such as elephants and hippopotamuses.

It is nearly impossible for women to participate in politics in Zimbabwe as candidates, voters and activists without their bodies being shamed and their appearances being sexualised. The president of LEAD, Linda Masarira, who is perhaps the biggest recipient of online trolls, has been described as an ugly woman who does not want to bathe. Images of her turned into cartoons and caricatures have been circulated all over the internet. Another prominent form of body shaming is ageism, that is, discrimination against older people because of negative and inaccurate stereotypes.

*“Every name you
can think of to
describe how bad I
look, I have heard
it.”*



The screenshot on the left shows a social media user depicting Mavis Gumbo, a Parliamentary Candidate for Harare East Constituency as a person who is too old to be involved in politics and suggesting that she should be home attending to her grandchildren.

Apparently there is no right age for women to be involved in politics, in the sight of online trolls. Shantel Yeukai Chiwara (25 years at the time), who was elected the youngest Mayor in the history of post independent Zimbabwe, was trolled for being too young for the post of mayor. Below are some of the social media reactions to Shantel's election as Mayor of the City of Masvingo:

"While it's commendable to give opportunities to our young people as well as propping women to positions of power, this may be one of the ineffective councils in the country. Local government requires craft, grit, experience and political clout which doesn't come at 25yrs."

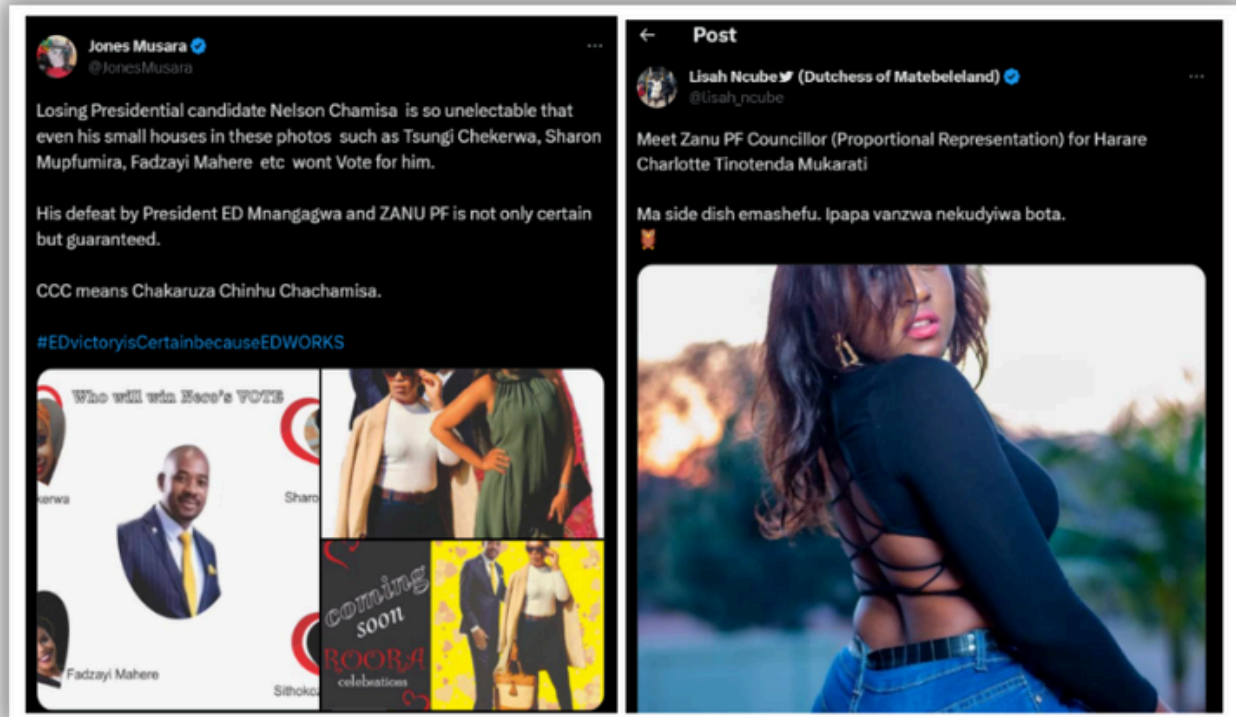
"Zimbabweans are experimenting again. I hope we won't regret it. What are the experiments for, we have one life guys"

Similarly, the wife of Nelson Chamisa, a presidential candidate in the 2023 elections, was described as old and ugly by a team of online trolls. Women's buttocks and facial looks have been on several occasions subjected to ridicule on account of their participation in politics. The screenshot below shows a social media user mocking Sandra Ndebele's buttocks. Sandra Ndebele was contesting as a Councillor in Bulawayo.



"Rather than focusing on the substance of a press conference, they focus on my face and hair" ¹⁰

Sexualised attacks



Sexualised attacks are a form of gendered disinformation on women politicians and activists. In the run up to the August 2023 elections, women in politics experienced unwanted sexualised comments on and offline. Perpetrators of sexualised attacks used metaphors to depict women as food. Comments ranged from “who is eating” and “food for senior politicians.” The depiction of women as food for male politicians trivialises women in politics and as such, is antithetic to gender equality in politics. It depicts women as sex objects for men. It also portrayed women politicians as dependent on their sexuality for political survival. These attacks are common when women assume new and higher political positions. Pictures below demonstrate how female politicians such as Fadzai Mahere and Charlotte Tinotenda Mukarati were portrayed as side dishes and small houses of senior politicians from their political parties.

RAMIFICATIONS OF VAWP ON WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

Figure 8 and 9 typify the fact that VAWP makes politics an unsafe venture for women to participate in. When confronted with VAWP, some women quit politics altogether. Some lose their support; some lose confidence and esteem while others become scared of joining politics. During the focus group discussions, some women told ZPP that they harbored suicidal thoughts as a result of the VAWP they experienced. Other women were left homeless after their houses were destroyed by their opponents. Some women are yet to heal from the wounds that were inflicted on them during the physical assaults. Others are yet to heal from the bereavement of losing family members (spouses and children) due to VAWP. Other participants told ZPP that they are suffering from depression as a result of the VAWP they experienced. It was however interesting to also note that a significant proportion of the women (31.54%) stated that the VAWP they experienced did not deter them. Rather, it made them more determined to participate in politics. For most women who participated in the focus group discussion, VAWP is an additional layer of vulnerability in the sense that women who dare to participate in politics have to overcome several other daunting odds. For example, women's access to financial resources is limited compared to their male counterparts. They have to overcome patriarchy, among other barriers.

How were you affected by VAWP?	Count	Percentage
Lost support	9	3.73
Quitted the race	15	6.22
Considered quitting	26	10.79
Diminished confidence	42	17.43
Feared to participate	55	22.82
Made me more determined	76	31.54
Other	18	7.47
Total	241	100.00

Figure 8: Impact of VAWP on women participation in politics

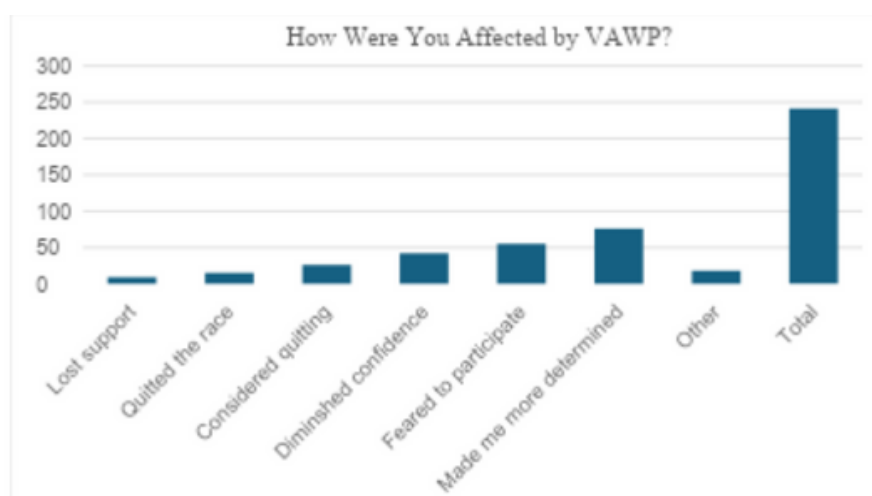


Figure 9: Impact of VAWP on women participation in politics

Have you considered quitting politics after experiencing VAWP?	Count
No	99
Yes	93
Total	192

Table 2: Number of women who considered quitting politics as a result of VAWP

HOLDING PERPETRATORS ACCOUNTABLE

Not many women politicians and activists who are victims of VAWP have brought their cases before the law. Those that did so indicated that they were not able to get remedies. One key informant who was a victim of online VAWP indicated that she tried to report the perpetrators to official social media companies. The response she got was that the attacks against her were made in vernacular language and that the company would in future employ official translators to deal with abuse in vernacular. Even when these companies decide to take action, there is not much they can do besides suspending or blocking the account perpetrating the attacks. Perpetrators simply open another account and continue the trolling. Women victims also pointed out that social media platforms like X and Facebook take too long to take action on the reports made by women politicians and candidates. As shown on Figure 10 below, the majority of the women who participated in this research indicated that their political parties do not have mechanisms to address VAWP. Another sizable number indicated that they are not aware if there are mechanisms to address VAWP in their political parties. Similarly, the majority of women think that there are no adequate remedies to combat VAWP at national level in Zimbabwe as shown on Table 2 and Figure 11.

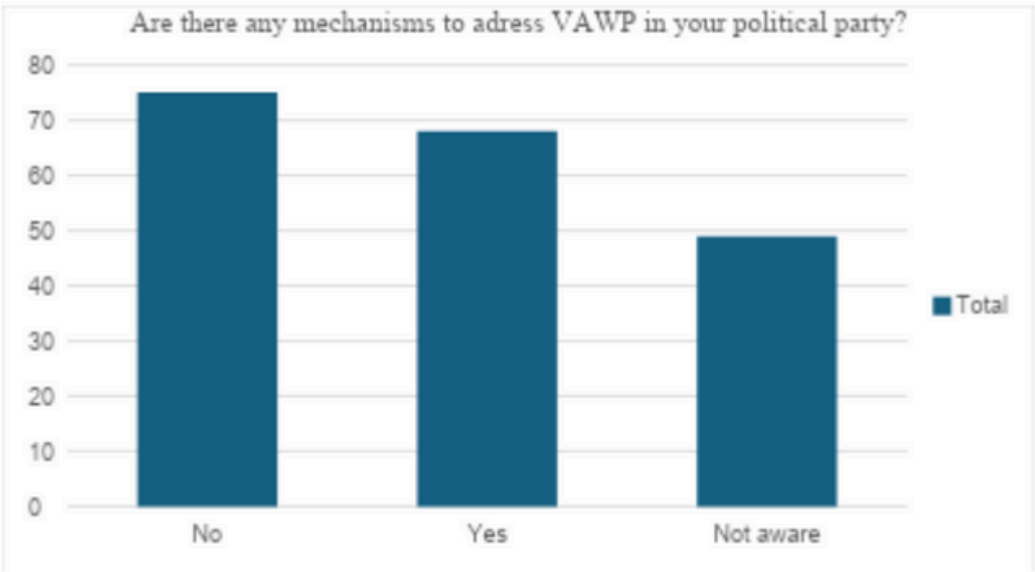


Figure 10: Mechanisms to address VAWP in political parties

Do you think there are adequate remedies for VAWP in Zimbabwe?	Count of 13)
No	149
Yes	43
Total	192

Table 3: Perceptions of women on the availability of remedies to combat VAWP in Zimbabwe

Do you think there are adequate remedies for VAWP in Zimbabwe?



Figure 11: Perceptions of women on the availability of remedies to combat VAWP in Zimbabwe

Women politicians who sought recourse to justice after experiencing VAWP include the few educated female MPs and women in organisations dealing with politics who understood the available mechanisms for their protection. In 2022, Fadzai Mahere, the Citizens Coalition for Change Spokesperson sued Edmund Kudzai for defamation, after he accused her of dating a married Harare businessman. The case is still pending.

Other women who reported their cases to the police complained that the turnaround time for dealing with them is very long. This is particularly for cases where perpetrators are from the ruling party. Most of the women victims of VAWP whom ZPP reached out to during this research (including those that were raped, abducted and tortured) are yet to get justice. The women that were subjected to online VAWP stated that jurisprudence on VAWP is very embryonic in Zimbabwe. The law enforcers themselves lack training, expertise and experience on the new provisions of the 2021 Cyber and data protection Act and in apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators of online violence against women in politics. Although there is support for the 2021 Act, there are questions as to who it is made for. Some women, while welcoming the Act and its potential to curb online violence against women in politics, wondered if it was created to benefit them or to protect men from embarrassment. One woman said:

“I think this was put into place for men because over the last years, there has been a lot of exposure on social media. Because these things have been happening to Zimbabwean women since time immemorial, left, right and centre, but suddenly, in the last I'd say 2 to 3 years, there's been an increase in the number of people coming [online to discuss private affairs]. I think [name] was one of the women who came online and shared. A whole list of sexual activities with various powerful men. And suddenly a bunch of powerful men think wow, we really need to look at this whole data protection. We need to take this seriously”¹¹

The majority of women politicians who were not currently serving in parliament, including local Councillors, were not aware of any policies or laws that protected them from VAWP. As a result, they suffered in silence without any recourse to justice. Women politicians who managed to report cases of online VAWP complained of the difficulties faced by law enforcement when it comes to apprehending abusers. This is because social media is free and allows abusers to create accounts with fake details. Zimbabwean law enforcers treat the physical offline violence perpetrated against people in politics far more seriously than the online violence faced by women politicians.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Zimbabwean online and offline political space is violent in nature. The majority of the perpetrators of this violence online and offline are men while the victims are women. The violence is gendered in nature in that it weaponises gendered narratives, and attacks women on the basis of their gender. VAWP has ramifications on women participation in politics. Some of the women who are victims of VAWP quit politics altogether, others lose elections, others quit social media while others remain on social media via ghost accounts. VAWP undermines the confidence that the electorate have in the female politicians, tarnishes their (and their loved ones') image and reputation, reduces their self-esteem, has negative psycho-social effects and it acts as a disincentive for women who are aspiring to become politicians. There have not been many prosecutions or lawsuits against perpetrators of VAWP in Zimbabwe.

Recommendations to the government of Zimbabwe

- All laws that inhibit 50-50 representation for men and women in Parliament, Local Councils and other statutory governance bodies must be repealed and replaced by laws that operationalise 50-50 representation.
- The government must enact legislation that obliges political parties to have 50-50 representation for men and women in their governance structures. Political parties which do not comply must be barred from participating in elections.
- The government must operationalise all constitutional and legislative provisions designed to end SGBV and VAWP and to achieve Gender Equality.
- The government must increase budgetary support to institutions mandated to combat VAWP. Local Council Budgets and the National Budget must ensure that 70 percent of the projects prioritise benefitting women.
- The government must facilitate access to justice and healing by all the survivors of VAWP, ensuring perpetrators of VAWP are brought to book. To enable access to justice by the survivors of VAWP, the government must ensure that the survivors/victims of VAWP have free legal representation.
- The government must develop context specific, culturally sensitive content on VAWP, disseminate it in local languages on all existing online, offline, and digital information portals to ensure that survivors of VAWP have knowledge of the existing remedies for VAWP and referral pathways for psycho-social support.
- The Zimbabwe Gender Commission must collaborate with the Zimbabwe Media Commission to design and implement anti-gender disinformation programing and campaigns. The two institutions also need to research and generate knowledge on the impact of VAWP online and offline.
- Government must expand the scope of the Gender Observatory beyond elections and make it a statutory body by passing an enabling legislation for its operationalisation and establishment as a permanent structure

- To stimulate judicial appetite for dealing with VAWP cases, the government must train office bearers in the Judicial Service Commission on VAWP so that they apply the knowledge in their interpretation of the law and in making rulings on cases that relate to VAWP. They can also use the knowledge in updating existing remedies that are available to survivors of VAWP. Judges who are trained on VAWP can entertain lawsuits on VAWP more, they can make rulings ordering compensation of survivors and reinstatement of office bearers forced to resign because of VAWP.
- The Judicial Service Commission must develop a Judges' Guide on Adjudicating Electoral Disputes from a Gender Perspective. It must develop a Training Manual/Curriculum for Electoral Courts on VAWP. This would trigger the appetite of the judges to prosecute perpetrators of VAWP and to pass deterrent sentences against them. Similar training can also be extended to the Members of the Republic Police so that they are gender sensitive in their law enforcement and so that they speedily process complaints on VAWP.
- The government must design, develop and implement programs aimed at enhancing the technical capacity of ZEC to deal with VAWP. Such programs may include analysing the voter and candidate registration procedures, flagging out barriers that these processes pose to women's participation and propose ways of breaking these barriers. ZEC must have extensive jurisdiction over political party conduct, including enforcement of gender quota laws.
- The government, through the Zimbabwe Media Commission, must work through the media to increase the visibility of gender equality concerns. This entails making the media a critical ally in all its forms as a powerful vehicle for denouncing violence and transforming public perceptions of women as leaders equally legitimate to men. The media must be capacitated to dismantle widely held notions that VAWP is normal. The Zimbabwe Media Commission, in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, must therefore train both state and non-state media on gender sensitive reporting

Recommendations to the Zimbabwean Civil Society

- Civil society and government must raise awareness on VAWP and its ramifications for women participation in politics. Awareness raising has been shown to challenge the harmful social norms that propel gender-based violence and to support positive norms. Awareness raising could target the general public through, for example, radio programs, roadshows and outreaches on VAWP
- Civil society should strengthen the knowledge and capacities of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, such as police officers, prosecutors and magistrates, in investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of VAWP
- Civil society must implement survivor-sensitive and human rights-based approaches to provide healing to survivors of VAWP
- Civil society must train political parties and leaders on VAWP
- Civil society must take interventions meant to address the patriarchal control tendencies that fuel the gender and social norms that undermine women's participation in politics. Further research is needed to identify the most effective methods for such interventions.
- Civil-society organisations should strengthen the digital literacy skills of women politicians and activists to effectively counter online VAWP. These skills could include the ability to secure their accounts and to report and block accounts, including ghost accounts that perpetrate gendered misinformation, disinformation and mal-information
- Civil-society organisations should extend psychosocial support to women survivors of VAWP to minimise its negative impacts on their emotional health and wellbeing.

