

ALiGN

**Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms**



BRIEFING NOTE

Are Zimbabwe's local authorities safe spaces for female councillors?

By Social Healing and Accountability Research

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About Social Healing and Accountability Research (SHARE)

Founded in 2020, Social Healing and Accountability Research (SHARE), an independent research house, is a consortium of emerging scholars and social science researchers from various disciplines in the fields of social sciences and humanities. Its sole aim is to create knowledge through research, through which evidence-based knowledge can be used to solve some of Africa's most pressing social, political and governance problems.

SHARE undertakes general, ad hoc and commissioned research and shares findings publicly to promote critical conversations that bring about positive change.

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Key findings

- This research finds that most of the female councillors surveyed in Zimbabwe have been affected by gender-based violence (GBV), regardless of their relationship status or any other characteristic.
- Sexual abuse was singled out as the major form of GBV experienced by female councillors in local government, with senior staff being the main perpetrators.
- Political parties and local authorities have policies related to GBV but these are not implemented systematically, exposing women to an unsafe and unregulated environment.
- The quota system introduced by the Government of Zimbabwe, which made it mandatory to reserve a specified number of seats in local government for women, may have led to an increasing number of cases of GBV in local government.
- Male counterparts perpetrate GBV against women in line with traditional and negative social norms that are embedded in society and that view women primarily as sexual objects.
- Local government is currently a very unsafe space for female councillors as a result of the prevalence of sexual violence against women.

Background

Patriarchal norms continue to shape women's lives in Zimbabwe, with gender-based violence (GBV) seen as confirmation of their prevalence and power. Gendered power inequality, rooted in patriarchy, is the main driver of GBV (Botha, 2020). Zimbabwe has worked to address patriarchy over the years through the actions of its civil society, pressure groups and government, using awareness initiatives as well as various forms of socio-economic empowerment for women. Participatory processes, however, all too often involve only those who are most vocal, and women, in particular, tend to lose out, being marginalised and overlooked (Mapuva, 2013).

The lack of women's participation in governance and decision-making processes has been identified as a major contributor to continued patriarchy in the formal sector. One method to empower women that is often cited is to encourage them to participate in local governance and have a say in the issues that affect them.

To this end, there have been growing calls for increased female participation in local government as well as in decision-making process, both within and outside government. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development prioritises the achievement of 50% women's representation in all spheres of decision-making by 2030. This is in harmony with Section 17 of Zimbabwe's Constitution, which supports gender equality in the country.

Political parties have introduced quota systems at various times and in various formats to enable women to become more active in politics and other governance activities. Dahlerup (Dahlerup, 2006) defines a quota system as an affirmative measure that establishes a fixed number for the nomination or representation of a specific group. These quotas have seen political parties fielding female candidates, and their number has increased steadily over the course of Zimbabwe's recent elections.

The number of female participants in political life has grown steadily since the country's independence in 1980. After the adoption of the new constitution in 2013, the proportion of women in the National Assembly more than double, rising from 14% to 32% in a five year period from 2008 to 2013. In 2018, however, this fell back to 29% (Mhlophe, 2021). This fall was probably because women were subjected to more unfair scrutiny from the media and the public scrutiny than male politicians (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2021).

In 2018, 1,156 females participated in local government elections. In theory, this provided grassroots women with role models that they could emulate. Unfortunately, the overall increase in the number of women in political and governance roles has been met with an increase in GBV against female actors. This has discouraged the participation of some women in democratic and governance processes.

Beyond the barriers to representation in office, there is a continued history of GBV, including a history of violence against women during elections. The fear of domestic violence in reaction to their civic or political participation restricts women's participation. Sexual bribery is also rampant, and many women are told outright that they must have sex with party leaders if they are to advance or gain a nomination as a candidate (Bardall, 2018).

GBV in Zimbabwe, as in many other countries, is linked to negative social norms which, drawing on social, cultural and religious practices, subordinate women and may make it unacceptable for them to step outside of their socially assigned gender roles (Independent Advisory Group on Country Information, 2009). With the exception of independent lobbying by advocacy organisations, there is no concrete legal framework that effectively protects women in the workplace other than one constitutional provision (Section 17 of the Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013).

Taken together, these challenges may explain why women account for just 14% of councillors in Zimbabwe. What's more, this figure has declined by two percentage points in each election since 2013, when women comprised 18% of the elected representatives in local government.

Cases of GBV within organisations in Zimbabwe are rife. The National Peace And Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), for example, has reported a worrying increase in GBV (Mutongwiza, 2020). The Zimbabwe Gender Commission reports that 22 women are raped daily, one every 75 minutes (International Commission of Jurists, 2020). Statistics from the Zimbabwe National Statistics Office also show an increase in sexual abuse in the country (Independent Advisory Group on Country Information, 2009) and women who participate actively in local governance as councillors are not spared. Female councillors may underperform as a result of the pressure and psychological effects of GBV, which has an impact on their capacity to perform their duties successfully.

Local governance in Zimbabwe remains a male-dominated field, where men are perceived to perform better in their expected roles than their female counterparts. For instance, media coverage given to male councillors is generally positive while female councillors receive more negative coverage. Traditional attitudes of male superiority thrive within local government, underpinned by deep-rooted gender norms. Most women recruited as councillors tend to be treated as political pawns who have no real power, according to women councillors' responses. Women are also objectified and seen as sex objects, and their contributions are not viewed in any manner beyond that (Alpha Media Holdings, 2017).

Women have long been used by men to achieve their political goals (Maphosa et al., 2015). When the electoral environment is patriarchal and prejudiced, the marginalisation of women becomes automatic (Hamandishe, 2018). They are also subjected to various forms of stigmatisation and abuse by their male counterparts (Musingafi et al., 2015) including being ridiculed for their body shape or relationship status, among other factors. In this way, both their wellbeing and their ability to perform their duties are compromised. There has been very limited research into violence against women within the local government sector. This study, therefore, aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how women are faring within local government.

Research objectives / rationale

Responding to the documented increases in GBV, this study aims to increase the understanding of how gender norms may contribute to GBV in local government. It assesses how safe females are within the local government work space, and to propose policy recommendations to ensure that female councillors are adequately protected and given an opportunity to inspire other women to participate actively in local government. The study has also explored the relationship between the introduction of the quota system and incidence of GBV in local council.

This knowledge is critical to support gender equality as set out in Sustainable Development Goal 5. One major problem that the study aims to explore is the absence of information on the prevalence of GBV within the local government sphere. This information could be used to influence policy development to create a safe space for female councillors. Mapuva (2013) has also noted that information for women is a prerequisite for their informed political decisions and their ability to engage in fruitful decision-making on the issues that affect them and their families.

As noted, the policies of both government and political parties encourage the participation of woman candidates in national and local government elections (known as the quota system). This has increased the number of female candidates for council elections. However, of the 1,156 females who took part in the local government elections in 2018, only 157 (14%) managed to win. Prior empirical studies and policy reports¹ by development organisations and available in the public domain show that many of these councillors, (and many other women who participate in the public sphere) have been subjected to varying forms of abuse, including sexual abuse and harassment, by their male counterparts. In this study, sexual abuse does not refer to rape or other forms of coerced sexual intercourse, but largely to indecent assault and indecent exposure, as well as the deliberate exposure of a female councillor to pornographic material (text and images) for the purposes of seduction.

Such GBV is rarely reported via the official channels and attempts by victims to seek redress are hampered by channels that are unclear and, unfortunately, often controlled by the perpetrators themselves. In some instances, female councillors have been abused by men from the communities they serve, which has created a working environment that is, overall, unsafe for women. While reported cases have not been widespread, it is likely that those that have been reported cases are just the tip of the iceberg. This study, therefore, aims to assess the true prevalence of the GBV experienced by female councillors.

¹ <https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/stories-histoires/2019/zimbabwe-gender-genres.aspx?lang=eng>, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752589/Zimbabwe_-_Women_and_GBV_-_CPIN_-_v3.0e_-_October_2018_.pdf, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2200&context=jjws>, <http://zimlil.org/content/constitutional-and-legal-frameworks-protection-women-against-violence-zimbabwe>, <https://www.africaportal.org/features/rethinking-womens-political-participation-zimbabwes-elections/>

Methodology

To establish the gender norms that are prevalent within local government, the questionnaire established:

- the prevailing social and gender norms that would aid an understanding of how women feel about their roles and positions in the workplace, as well as the way in which these roles and positions are perceived by men.
- whether female councillors perceive their work environment as unsafe and whether their views are based on their actual experiences.
- the strength of particular norms to determine the key variables that need to change in order to re-shape the dominant narrative: that local government is a male domain.

The following questions were asked:

- What are the gender norms that underpin GBV in local government?
- What is the effect of the introduction of the quota system in Zimbabwe on female participation in local government?
- To what extent does GBV exist and thrive within local government?
- How do men and women perceive GBV differently?
- Does an effective anti-GBV policy exist?

A largely exploratory study was carried out to gather responses to these questions. The study drew on both quantitative and qualitative data for triangulation purposes. Closed-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect primary data from 25 respondents. Four potential respondents from rural district councils declined to participate.

Initially, the study targeted four urban local authorities in Zimbabwe that had a total of 22 female councillors. Unfortunately, a number of potential respondents were unavailable and the study was, therefore, extended to other municipalities to ensure that it still covered 22 respondents. In all, the research design was changed to include five other municipalities (two urban and three rural) that had female councillors, to provide insights and comparisons in the responses between the urban and rural settings (Table 1).

Table 1: Analysis of respondents and participants

Type of local authority	Questionnaires administered to female councillors	Participants in focus group discussions	
Rural	9	9 females	2 males
Urban	12	11 females	4 males

It was not possible to increase the sample size still further by including more municipalities as a result of budget constraints. The sample size, therefore, was limited to 13% of the study population, with 21 female councillors responding out of a total of 157 female councillors nationwide. With a subsequent response rate of 84%, however, the study was able to establish some patterns related to GBV within local authorities.

The four member research team was comprised of two senior researchers (one male and one female) and two female research assistants. This team carried out data collection and analysis,

administered the questionnaires and facilitated the FGDs. Female team members took the lead in data collection to create a comfortable environment for the mostly female respondents.

Questionnaires were physically administered to a total of twenty two 22 female councillors, generating 21 responses. The questionnaires asked closed-ended questions relating to respondents' personal experiences and perceptions, interrogating institutional approaches to GBV as well as the effect on their roles as female councillors.

Of the 21 active respondents, 19 took part in the 9 FGDs that were conducted after the completed questionnaires had been collected, with a total of 6 males participating to provide an alternative voice, to probe assertions by female councillors and to learn more about male councillors' perceptions about men as perpetrators of GBV toward their colleagues. While it would have been ideal to meet females and males separately, the FGDs were combined, with just one or two males participating in any single discussion.

These discussions sought to triangulate the data gathered from the questionnaires, giving insights into the thought processes of respondents. They also aimed to draw conclusions about the way in which GBV emanates from the negative gender norms found in domestic and social relationships between men and women and in the community, and are carried into the workplace as a result of their widespread penetration across society. Discussions were instrumental and successful in shedding some much-needed light on GBV perceptions.

Findings

The over-arching impact of entrenched patriarchal norms

Traditional gender norms in Zimbabwe, such as those that perceive men as being the heads of households and the dominant forces in their communities, in their social interactions and in the workplace have found their way into the political sphere. Only a few women 'violate' these norms by venturing out into the public sphere to take on a leading role. In addition, pervasive gender norms mean that society accepts the inappropriate advances men make towards women because men are seen as being on a permanent search for sexual pleasure. This perception condones and normalises sexual harassment.

Patriarchal norms of direct relevance for female councillors include the perceived inferiority of women, which undermines women's self-esteem. This resonates with cultures and beliefs – also reflected by the views of those surveyed for this research – that promote the subservience of women. As a result of such norms, many women suffer in silence.

Impact of gender norms on women in local government

A number of significant gender norms such as the perceived inferiority of women continue to underpin violence against women in local government. These gender norms are upheld by the perceptions of both men and women, by institutional practices, and by individual perpetrators who hold positions of power within local government. The community at large, with its hold on traditional beliefs, also continues to uphold the negative gender norms that demean women.

The women who join local government as councillors include those who have political ambitions, while some take advantage of the quota system to try to advance the cause of women's emancipation. In all 95% of the respondents agreed that the quota system has increased women's participation, yet 85% of respondents believed that men still had more power in the workplace, even when working in the same roles. In addition, 51% of the questionnaire respondents felt that the introduction of the quota system was not genuine but ceremonial. This implies a passive acceptance by some women of the notion of women being pushed forward as political pawns.

Impact of gender norms on self-esteem

Another explanation advanced for the under-representation of women in leadership positions related to women's low self-esteem and lack of confidence (Chabaya et al., 2009) as a result of pervasive gender norms. It can then be assumed that this lack of self-esteem has an impact on their ability to gain and hold councillor positions in the face of strong pressure from male colleagues and superiors. This was confirmed when one male participant in a FGD dominated the discussions, with female participants seemingly over-powered. Female respondents consistently stated that they felt weaker than men as a result of such gender norms, regardless of their relationship status and even academic qualifications. One female participant from an urban municipality said:

'The man does not stop being a man because we are in council. If I disrespect him or challenge him, what will my husband say when he hears that?'

This resonates with traditional Ndebele and Shona cultures and beliefs (95% of the participants were native Africans, and predominantly from the Ndebele culture), which promote female subservience. Female councillors reported that their ward meetings were poorly attended when compared to those of their male counterparts. They felt that this was not because of their failure to mobilise residents, but because most households, which are headed by men, may have regarded a meeting chaired by a woman with contempt and would, therefore, prefer not to attend. Male leaders are still considered to be 'the norm' and this undermines both the self-esteem and effectiveness of female councillors. One female councillor from another urban area felt that:

'Men just think my meetings will never change anything in the community, just because I am a woman.'

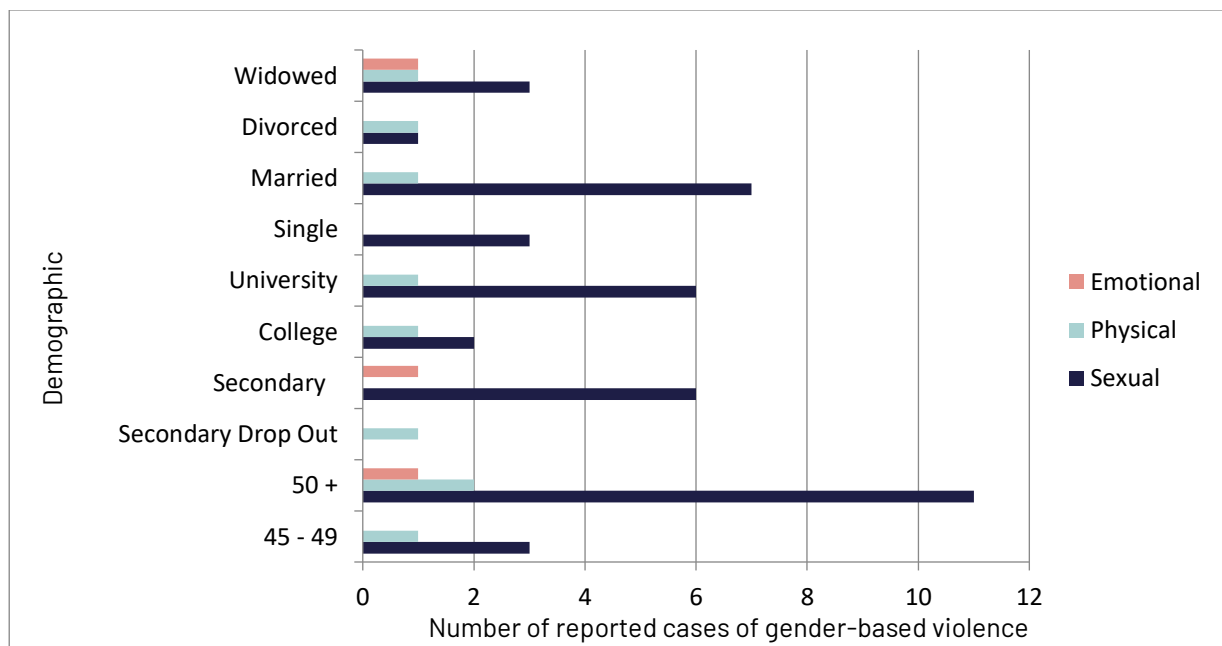
Naturally, this would demotivate a female councillor. It raises a question: why does this happen when the councilor has been chosen by the same residents who will not come to her ward meetings? The research team suggests that this is linked to the polarised nature of elections in Zimbabwe, with voters casting their votes for a specific political party with no knowledge of any particular candidate.

Forms of gender-based violence experienced by female councillors

Different forms of GBV were highlighted by the respondents, who identified sexual, physical and emotional abuse, in particular, with strong agreement that sexual abuse is the most prevalent form of GBV within local government. The FGDs revealed that such abuse referred largely to inappropriate contact, indecent exposure, sexually explicit comments, and sharing inappropriate messages and pictures.

Such abuse was confirmed by respondents from different contexts, backgrounds and groups. Intersectional analysis of their age, political affiliation, population group, educational qualifications, relationship status as well as their years of involvement in politics/local government found that women from all groupings consistently reported having experienced GBV in the workplace. The existence of GBV was also acknowledged within both rural and urban local authorities. Figure 1 shows that female councillors with different characteristics share very similar experiences of GBV.

Figure 1: Experiences of different forms of gender-based violence



Male councillors interviewed in the FGDs reported cooperation and consent from their female colleagues and denied any forced sexual advances. The study noted that while male councillors were implicated in around 14% of cases, the vast majority of perpetrators (67%) were not male councillors but superiors from the local authority (appointed officials and not periodically elected as councillors) who were not part of the study. The group discussions also revealed that some male community members were involved in sexual harassment against female councillors, although the prevalence of this could not be established with certainty.

A reluctance to become ‘ambassadors’ on gender-based violence

In all, 67% of the respondents stated that they were not willing to be GBV ambassadors in the community, which would involve activism and taking the lead in raising awareness and speaking out against patriarchy. It is possible, however, that this concept could have been misunderstood by some respondents as this concept is not widely known. While women in the FGDs expressed a general reluctance to take on the role of GBV ambassadors, they did not give any concrete reasons for this reluctance when asked. Nevertheless, such reluctance continues to muffle the voices of those who might speak out against patriarchy and GBV.

The men interviewed were defensive about their roles in disempowering women, citing women’s lack of interest in pushing forward their empowerment agenda. One male participant from a rural local authority was quick to say:

'We have our ways of doing things in our culture. If women have learnt something new, let them say it. If they are quiet, we will assume that they are happy.'

Respondents also revealed that they needed more institutional support if they were to become community leaders, policy-makers and even role ambassadors – support that they felt did not exist. Every respondent emphasized that they had not received any capacity building support on GBV before taking office. As a result, they had no relevant preparation at party level that could have included the sharing of knowledge about the policies of their party on GBV and pathways to redress.

A success story

In one municipality with perennial water problems, a female councillor¹ became Chairperson of the Water Action Committee. She has since attracted a great deal of attention to her work in that capacity as she has initiated and overseen city-wide water conservation programmes and awareness campaigns. A review of press coverage reveals that she is the only female councillor whose development work in her ward is covered continuously by the mainstream media. Part of her success in local government could be attributed to the fact that she was already a gender activist, a role most of the respondents to this research survey were reluctant to assume.

Policies to protect female councillors from gender-based violence

Only 50% of respondents expressed a belief that their local authority would punish perpetrators of GBV. Indeed, 60% of female councillors did not agree that local government prioritises their safety and protection from GBV.

Some 52% of the respondents confirmed that their political parties provided some recourse in cases of GBV and that they had some idea about how to seek redress. However, 71% of the respondents were skeptical about the ease of using official channels within local authorities for redress. This could mean that, despite some awareness of party policies, there is no confidence in their practical application.

In addition, female councillors did not view themselves as being effective in the setting of policies that could guarantee their own safety. In all, 53% of the female councillors strongly disagreed that their input into policy development was valued, as the recommendations that they have continued to make in committees on a range of issues have rarely found their way to official policy. Some 76% of the respondents feel that they are not involved in policy formulation and that their voices are not heard.

Evidently, several barriers limit women's ability to make meaningful contributions to relevant safeguarding policies. As a result, female councillors are caught in a vicious cycle of the risk of continued GBV as they do not trust the system and have a general perception that appointed senior council staff, as perpetrators, may not provide the needed redress.

An attempt to conduct a desk review of the Bulawayo City Council Gender Policy was not successful as it was not possible to access the policy or to all of the Youth Policy, both of which were said to be available in full on the Internet. This corroborates claims by 62% of the respondents that GBV prevention is not being given the priority it deserves in local government. There is no concrete

evidence of enforcing policy compliance at party or municipal level, and the application of policies is reported to be selective and inconsistent. Respondents in the FGDs felt that some policies were outdated and some were in place to comply with best practice but with no real application.

Weaknesses in the quota system

While over 90% of respondents felt that the quota system itself had been effective in increasing female participation in local government, there are clear signs of subsequent weaknesses, as 76% of respondents to the questionnaire would not encourage other women to pursue political office because of the risks of GBV. Further, 81% of the respondents strongly believed that there is a very high chance (higher than 50%) of any new female councillor being exposed to GBV and 76% felt that local government is not a safe space for female councillors.

Ultimately, this signals that while the quota system has helped more women to enter local government, it has not yet contributed to a shift in pervasive inequalities, including the norms that perpetuate GBV. Young women, easy targets for GBV, are also easily discouraged from taking part in local government, as seen by the age (45 years) of those covered in the study. In all, 85% of the respondents had been active in politics for more than 10 years.

While there is no law or policy blocking younger women from participating, most female councillors are over 40 years of age. This could result from a number of factors: gender norms encourage most younger women to be preoccupied with domestic responsibilities; a few others focus on building their career at that age; and finally, many lack interest as a result of the weaknesses in the political system. However, it could also imply that younger women may have been deemed by political parties as too inexperienced and as not being ready to represent the party. In this way, patriarchy persists, with the quota systems being upheld – but ineffectively.

The study also notes that female councillors were not exposed to a wide range of portfolios as over 90% of them had Housing and Health portfolios, as allocated by the elected Mayors, all of who were men. While these are important portfolios, they reflect a bias that considers women to be necessarily interested in these spheres and not in others. This derives from a gender stereotype around the role of women and sets obvious limits on the professional growth and exposure of female councillors.

The increasing number of female councillors in local government is encouraging. Given a safe and conducive environment in their workplace, their participation could strengthen and amplify female voices that aim to influence and enforce policy. The study also revealed that most respondents are fairly well-educated, with secondary or tertiary academic qualifications: 56% of the respondents had a minimum of a college qualification and only 4% had no secondary school qualification. This is a plus for female councillors: the FGDs revealed that their male counterparts had lower academic qualifications and that most were career politicians².

² Female participants participating in FGDs noted that men, use masculine power to assert their dominance, sometimes in an attempt to make up for their academic shortcomings. If this was found to be the case more systematically, councillors could be encouraged to have a minimum academic credentials.

Conclusion

The current local government environment in Zimbabwe does not provide a safe space for female councillors. Sexual abuse, amongst other forms of GBV, is frequent. Men feel threatened when women seemingly invade 'their' space (and even more so if the women are academically superior) and re-assert their self-imposed authority. At the same time, women who arrive in work spaces have often been socialised to defer to men, and are undermined as a result of negative gender norms and a patriarchal society

There are safeguarding policies for both Zimbabwe's political parties and local authorities, but these policies are just on paper and lack the practical implementation that would create safe spaces for women in local government. Their weak implementation can be attributed to perpetrators being in charge of policy implementation, as well as weak accountability mechanisms in general.

The introduction of Zimbabwe's quota system did have the desired effect of increasing female participation in local government as well as in other spheres of government, but, as a result of these challenges, it has been less effective in empowering women than anticipated. The perceived and actual barriers to their participation means that the number of active women in local government is not expected to increase.

GBV issues within local government cut across political parties and social groups – they are derived, rather, from a structure of negative gender norms that dominate behaviours and perceptions in every domain and that call, therefore, for a holistic and inclusive approach.

There is need to shift the mindset of men who possess the power to be genuine in supporting, empowering and protecting women. They have a critical role to play, as they are best suited to challenge other men who perpetrate harassment. Those who perpetuate patriarchy should espouse a paradigm shift, letting go of traditional views and approaches, so that women can occupy their rightful space in the spirit of a National Gender Policy that advocates for 50-50 representation in government.

Recommendations

- There is a need to sensitise the public in general and workplaces in particular to transform discriminatory gender norms. Patriarchy is a social ill that must be tackled by pushing for whole-scale and holistic behavioural change across Zimbabwe's society, including its workplaces, starting with domestic settings and communities at large.
- The support of central government should be solicited to harmonise and standardise safeguarding policies. This would help to ensure that safeguarding policies have minimum standards across the political divide and for all local authorities across the country.
- There is a need to mainstream the National Gender Policy in Zimbabwe and programmes need to work with men to foster the positive masculinities that would support shifts in negative attitudes and behaviours toward women.
- The involvement of more women in policy formulation and implementation should be actively promoted. The quota system paves the way for women to be included, but says nothing about issues such as the portfolios they receive. Political parties and councils must consider handing the more critical portfolios to female councillors. Further, the quota system could be extended to include the sub-committees that formulate policy. Increased participation would give female councillors a sense of ownership of their party, as well as municipal policies and activities, increasing their confidence and their influence as role models.
- GBV policies at party and municipal levels should be reviewed, and punitive measures should be introduced to punish perpetrators. This would enhance the reliability of the policies and increase their acceptance by female councillors. Ultimately, this would improve the perceived and actual safety of local government for women. There is also a need to raise awareness, through the refinement of recourse processes to ensure that they are clear, impartial and effective, and through the education of councillors to enable quick redress.
- The need for capacity building can never be over-stated. Capacity building can take the form of pre-office training on handling GBV, recourse channels and information on relevant legislation. Programmes are needed for both elected female officials and for their male colleagues in local government. Using political parties as the entry point is an approach that is likely to bear more fruit.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

About this research

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