BRIEFING NOTE

LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ZIMBABWE: INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

By Deaf Women Included and the Local Development Research and Advocacy Trust

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About the authors

Deaf Women Included

Deaf Women Included (DWI) is a deaf-led grassroots organisation that works with women with disabilities from across Zimbabwe, with a special focus on women who are deaf. DWI was established out of a realisation that deaf women were being routinely excluded from participating in their communities as a result of language barriers. As a result, deaf women lived at the margins of their societies. DWI began operating in 2014 and has had considerable success in the short time that it has been in existence. Its success stories include the gender based violence (GBV) awareness project and the Young Deaf Women Participation project.

Local Development Research and Advocacy Trust

The Local Development Research and Advocacy Trust (LODRAT) is an organisation that was created to mobilise an increasing wealth of evidence-based solutions to problems facing our communities. Formed by academics, legal experts, development practitioners and human rights activists, LODRAT deals with a diversity of issues that confront communities. LODRAT maximises synergies with civil society, academic institutions and independent researchers and advocates for indigenous sustainable solutions to socio-economic, environmental, health, political and development issues. The organisation has a team of highly qualified experts in research, advocacy and training whose skills and knowledge are a driving force in finding solutions to common problems.

Acknowledgements

Key findings

- The inclusion and participation of women with disabilities (WWDs) in Zimbabwe's governance is both low and passive. They rarely take part in matters that shape their daily lives, such as choosing leaders, voting or sharing their ideas during local governance discussions.

- The challenges to their participation in local governance are rooted in patriarchal norms and values that devalue women as a weaker sex, and that are worse still for WWDs who are viewed by society and some leaders as 'useless beings' whose views do not matter.

- Religious and cultural norms view disability as a curse, particularly for women as their impaired bodies are undesirable, seen as shameful for their families, and render them 'othered'.

- They are seen as unproductive beings who should be hidden from the public, and have limited access to the basics that are needed for effective participation in local governance, such as education and information.

- Stakeholders, including local leaders and WWDs, would benefit from capacity strengthening, as well as awareness raising to change mindsets and support the greater inclusion and participation of WWDs.

Key terms

Intersectionality: the closer inspection of the interfaces of varied identities or social categorisations of WWDs and how these shape positive or negative experiences.

Local governance: the ability by community stakeholders, including locals, to take collective action and solve problems that affect their community. This collective action may be conducted through state and non-state actors to plan and manage the political and material needs of a specific local area.

Models of understanding of disability:

- The **charity model** views women with disabilities as unfortunate and suffering victims of impairment who require sympathy and donations as they cannot take charge of themselves.

- The **medical model** focuses on the biological and physical condition of a person with impairments. Therefore, a woman with a disability is seen as having a sickness that should be cured to make her 'normal'.

- The **religious model** view impairments as a curse from God or ancestors for the wrongdoings of the person or their close relatives. The model expects women with disabilities to relax and wait for compassionate people to provide them with gifts.

Political inclusion of women with disabilities: The act or practice of providing WWDs with access to governance opportunities, including leadership positions in the structures, programmes and platforms that make decisions on matters of concern to them on an equal basis with others. Political inclusion leads to the presence of WWD in key institutions and their descriptive representation, which ultimately shapes perceptions of the political system as representing everyone (Fangen, 2009). It does not, however, automatically lead to meaningful participation and substantive representation.

Political participation of women with disabilities: Unlike the passive act of inclusion, participation entails a broad range of activities through which WWDs are involved in governance (such as voting, being voted for, or participating in public forums and discussions about local affairs that affect them) resulting in the active provision of inputs (Quick and Feldman, 2011).

Women with disabilities: women with long-term physical, or sensory impairments which may, when they interact with various barriers, hinder the full and effective participation of WWDs in society on an equal basis with others.

Introduction

> 'Whenever I try to attend meetings or ask family members about local development, people often say that doesn't concern you because you're a crippled woman.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

Background

True democracy demands the full inclusion and participation of all people in governance, including the most disadvantaged groups such as women with disabilities (WWDs). For WWDs, inclusion and participation remain both an 'end' and a 'means' to minimise their marginalisation and the discrimination they face in society. In reality, however, WWDs comprise the majority of all persons with disabilities (PWDs) who live on the margins of society (Grech, 2009), who face discrimination and who are excluded from governance. WWDs suffer multiple discrimination and exclusion as a result of their varied forms of disabilities, working in combination with the disadvantages of being women in patriarchal societies that largely devalue them because of their sex (Erevelles and Minear, 2010). The challenges faced by WWDs can also be exacerbated by their location, particularly if they live in remote or rural areas.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and a number of feminist disability theorists (Garland, 2005; Meekosha, 2011) all lament the way in which WWDs are excluded and discriminated against in wider society. This is not only because of the challenges presented by their impairments: it is rather the result of widespread prohibitive power that is embedded in gender norms, culture, and within legal and institutional mechanisms. Erevelles and Minear (2010:128), describe the plight of WWDs:

> '...individuals located perilously at the interstices of race, class, gender, and disability are constituted as non-citizens and nobodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitation) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them.'

Despite such recognition of the challenges, few empirical studies have sought to understand, through a feminist lens, how the intersectionality of disability and gender impact the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance. Studies to date have either focused on people with disabilities (PWDs) more broadly, on women as homogenous, separate groups (Erevelles and Minear 2010), or the barriers experienced by WWD in politics in the context of the so-called 'global North'[1] as opposed to the global South (Garland, 2005; Grech, 2009; Meekosha, 2011; Langford and Levesque, 2017; Evans and Reher, 2023). While literature focused on the global North has been key in exposing the lack of opportunities for WWDs in governance, it does not capture the experiences of WWDs in the context of the global South, where feminist disability theorists have noted that the exclusion of WWDs has remained largely invisible (Garland, 2005; Meekosha, 2011; Sackey, 2015).

Scholarship on WWDs in Zimbabwe focuses on this group's social exclusion, rather than their scope for political inclusion. Many general gender and disability studies decipher the marginalisation and

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1   The reference to the 'so-called' global South and global North recognises the colonial power hierarchies implicit in these terms and the problematic nature of the terminology. For ease of reading, the remainder of this report refers to the regions as global South and North only.

exclusion of WWDs in all facets of life (Choruma, 2006; Lang and Charowa 2007). A few studies have examined the political inclusion and participation of PWDs, including Mandipa (2013), Mandipa and Manyatera (2013), and Dziva (2022), but there has been little focus on WWDs specifically. Mandipa's 2013 study surveyed laws, policies and institutional frameworks that advance the rights of PWDs in Zimbabwe.

While such studies have explored the progress and challenges to the political participation of PWDs, they have not revealed gender-disability specific barriers in local governance. It is, therefore, pertinent to investigate and understand the intersectionality of disability and other societal gender-cultural norms that influence the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance structures.

Democratisation and inclusive governance in Zimbabwe

Since its independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has made democratising efforts for the inclusion and participation of PWDs in local governance through legal, policy and institutional reforms. The Constitution, National Gender Policy (NGP), National Disability Policy (NDP) and National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) emphasise inclusive development that leaves no-one behind. Women's rights, including the rights of WWDs, are enunciated in the Constitution (sections 3g, 17 and 80), the National Gender Policy (NGP), the Domestic Violence Act and the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1).

The Government of Zimbabwe has also adopted a decentralisation and devolution policy that applies a three-tier system of government: national; provincial and metropolitan councils (PMCs); and local governance. All three tiers create varied opportunities for the inclusion of women and PWDs in governance. However, women continue to face persistent forms of gender-based violence (GBV), poverty, socio-cultural and other institutional barriers across all three of these tiers, which limit their inclusion and participation (Veritas, 2023).

At the *national tier*, the executive, judiciary and legislature are male-dominated despite the calls enshrined in laws and policies for women's inclusion. Following the 2018 elections, Zimbabwe had an all-male presidium team (President, and the two deputies) and a paltry representation of women in the Cabinet of just 24% (IPU, 2023). For the presidium, particularly deputy presidents and cabinet ministers, such under-representation shows a clear lack of will by the appointing authority to 'walk the talk' in the implementation of laws and policies on gender equality (Dube and Dziva, 2014).

Nevertheless, there were some noticeable improvements in gender representation after the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, when women accounted for 48% of seats in the Senate and 31% of those in Parliament, courtesy of the women's quotas (this falls to 12% in Parliament if the 60-seat quota is excluded) (Veritas, 2023).

While all women face challenges to political participation, exclusion is more pronounced for WWDs. Alive to this challenge, the Parliament of Zimbabwe promulgated Amendment No. 2 of the Constitution, which stated that WWDs should be part of the 60-women quotas in Parliament. This is commendable, considering that WWDs had been side-lined in this quota since its introduction in 2013.

In Senate, two of the 80 seats are reserved for female and male senators with disabilities. These have included the late Senator Rejoice Timire, who was influential in lobbying for disability mainstreaming in all spheres of development. While the reservation of two seats in the Senate is welcome, PWDs and scholars argue that the number is still far too low to drive policy changes to foster inclusion (Mandipa and Manyatera, 2014; Dziva, 2022). Some scholars would prefer a quota in the lower house of Parliament, where the key decisions, policies and resource allocations are made (Dziva, 2022). The Parliament of Zimbabwe also created the office of the Special Advisor for

Disabilities to the President and Cabinet in 2007. The Special Advisor's office is the focal point for the mainstreaming and implementation of disability-related decisions taken by the government.

At the *provincial tier*, each PMC is comprised of 10 members who are elected through the so-called 'zebra' system.[2] This ensures gender representation, with women accounting for 50% of the 100 elected PMC members after every national-presidential election in Zimbabwe. However, there are no stipulations for the selection of WWDs as PMC members. In addition, the PMC members have only been elected to office to date, and the PMCs themselves are not yet operational in the absence of an enabling law.

At the *local governance tier*, there are structures that should enable all people to participate in the matters that shape their daily lives. These include rural district councils (RDCs), urban councils and structures of traditional leadership. At the helm of RDCs are councillors elected during national elections to serve for five years. While electoral laws allow everyone to run for these positions, the election of women in general remains very low, and is virtually non-existent when it comes to WWDs (Veritas, 2023).

In the 2022 by-elections, only 19 out of the 103 councillors elected were women (Veritas, 2023), despite the 2021 Constitutional Amendment (No. 2), which created a 30% quota for women councillors. While this law may increase women's representation, it makes no mention of WWDs, which will result in their exclusion from the quota. This lack of progress is attributed, in part, to weak mechanisms, resource constraints, limited capacity, and lack of political will on the part of duty bearers (Zvobgo and Dziva, 2017; Padare et al., 2020; Veritas, 2023).

At the heart of local governance tier lie the varied committees that are intended to allow all citizens at local level to take part in the matters that shape their daily lives. As shown in Figure 1, these are the District Development Committees (DDCs), the Ward Development Committees (WDCOs) and the Village Development Committees (VIDCOs). As members of these committees are drawn from the grassroots, the structures allow WWDs to be included and have a voice in local governance.

Figure 1: Local governance system
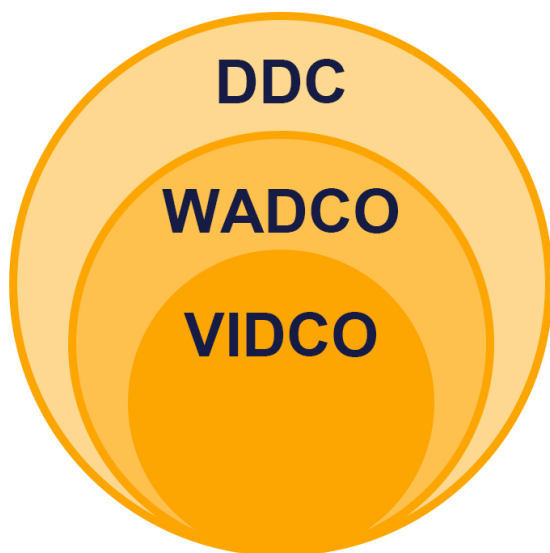
District development committees (DDCs)
Planning and coordinating committee composed of local councillors together with 18-28 central government officials.

Ward development committees (WADCOs)
Planning body that collates development plans from VIDCOs for onward submission to DDC.

Village development committees (VIDCOs)
An elected body of local community members with responsibility for defining local needs and transmitting them to WADCOs.

The mechanisms and structures presented in Figure 1 should provide an avenue for the participation of PWDs and women in local democracy. However, while these avenues are in place, WWDs continue to be under-represented in every local structure.

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2   The Zebra system refers to a gender quota for party lists in a proportional representation electoral system. Parties alternate between women and men on their candidate lists, meaning that 50% of the candidates are women, and 50% are men.

Research objectives/rationale

This study seeks to understand the opportunities and challenges related to the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance in Zimbabwe and fill a gap in the literature on their experience. In essence, the study seeks to:

- understand the impact of laws, policies and practices on the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance

- document support mechanisms for the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance

- understand the influence of gender and cultural norms on the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance; and

- proffer cutting-edge strategies to transform gender and cultural norms and improve the inclusion and participation of WWDs in governance.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to understand the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance. This allowed for the collection of more nuanced data on the experiences of WWDs in local governance inclusion and participation.

The study sample was chosen from two areas where Deaf Women Included (DWI) and the Local Development Research and Advocacy Trust (LODRAT) operate. In rural Zimbabwe, data were gathered from Gokwe district in Midlands province, while data for an urban area were gathered from Harare Metropolitan province. Given that Harare is Zimbabwe's capital city, it represents typical urban life in the country and is more developed than rural areas in terms of infrastructure and social amenities. In contrast, rural Gokwe, like all other rural areas in Zimbabwe, has poor infrastructure and amenities. The selected areas provided data on the distinct experiences of WWDs in both rural and urban Zimbabwe.

Data were collected through individual interviews with WWDs, key informant interviews (KIIs), and a review of existing literature on the participation of WWDs and relevant gender and cultural norms.

Individual interviews were conducted with 43 WWDs (20 rural; 23 urban) and 18 men with disabilities (MWDs) (10 rural; 8 urban). The sample included women and men with physical, visual, speech and hearing impairments. In reaching out to participants, the two organisations used their contacts with disabled persons organisations (DPOs), and representatives of PWDs. MWDs were interviewed to compare the different norms that affect them and WWDs.

The study also relied on 17 semi-structured interviews with selected key informants that work with WWDs, including representatives from state institutions such as the Department of Social Development (DSD) under the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (MPSLSW), the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises (MWACSME), RDCs

and urban councils, DPOs and community leaders, such as councillors and traditional leaders. The researchers also reached out to key informants from the three dominant political parties in government.

The study followed ethical research guidelines, which included informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. Participants were informed of the study's purpose before they were asked to consent to their participation.

One limitation of the study was the exclusion of people with certain disabilities, such as mental disabilities. While the team in urban areas included a sign language specialist to engage with those with hearing impairments, the rural data gathering team depended on respondents' aides. Some personal aides may not have been sign-language specialists and there was a risk, therefore, of distorting the meaning of some communications from respondents. In two instances where respondents had no aide, the study failed to engage respondents effectively. Nevertheless, one of the respondents was able to provide her responses in writing.

Some limitations also pertain to the qualitative nature of the study, and its small sample size. While the study revealed the nuances of the participation of WWDs on the basis of religion and location (living in either urban or rural areas), the study failed to bring out information on race and ethnicity.

Key findings

> 'As the project progressed, decisions were made without even us. The implementing partner and local leaders would comprise the majority of attendees of workshops meant for us.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

This section presents and discusses the opportunities for, and challenges faced by, WWDs in relation to inclusion and participation in local governance. First, the section outlines the varied facets of participation and inclusion, followed by the barriers faced by WWDs.

The participation of women with disabilities in community initiatives

The meaningful participation of WWDs was noted in only a few instances of community development programmes, particularly meetings and activities spearheaded by non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and community leaders. In most cases, these meetings were targeted at WWDs as beneficiaries, with leaders reaching out to this group to participate and paint a picture of an inclusive society/project that seems to be striking to donor communities, but is, in fact, just tokenistic inclusion. As some WWDs explained:

> 'We are often mobilised when NGOs are rolling out a project that concerns us. We often get transport money for ourselves and our aide.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

> 'There was a project for disability participation in socio-economic and political activities in this community. So, when the project started, we were mobilised to take part, but the local implementing community-based organisation and local leaders who were at the forefront of the baseline would hardly give us PWDs a voice.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

Economic differences played an important role in the participation of WWDs, as the poorest women are more often invited by meeting conveners. This is simply because they represent the poverty that is the basis for many of the projects that target this group.

In urban Zimbabwe, however, increased participation of WWDs in community development is the result of efforts by leaders to disseminate information about meetings and other local governance in audio, text and video format on WhatsApp. This was also possible because more WWDs in urban areas possessed mobile phones, particularly smartphones, than WWDs in rural areas. These WWDs – often from a better socio-economic situation – could easily access communications about local government gatherings.

Class differences were also evident among WWDs when respondents stated that attendance at meetings in an urban area was the preserve of WWDs who could afford the cost of transport to those meetings. However, this participation took part primarily during the project formulation stages. WWDs reported more limited engagement during the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages of the projects.

The limited participation of WWDs was also noted in relation to budget consultations and policymaking processes. In urban areas, WWDs knew about the law and policy-making outreach by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committees, but only a few had participated. In rural Zimbabwe, most WWDs were not privy to these processes, which are often held at central points in their districts, far from their homes. Even the few who were aware of such processes never participated – the result of the many limitations discussed in the barriers section of this report.

In most cases, a few educated WWDs are included to some extent, and play an active part in local governance, while the remainder participate – if at all – only as passive voters – the supporters of candidates and political parties. Some WWDs explained that they are invited by candidates to be showed off and paraded around during campaigns to show inclusiveness, but their issues are disregarded once an election is over.

Some WWDs complained of being side-lined and not listened to at local governance gatherings:

> 'Even if you are there, what difference does it make, because no-one thinks of using sign language. You will be there to see the faces of leaders.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

A visually impaired woman added:

> 'You contribute and people laugh at you and your suggestion. Even if you talk of things that affect us WWDs, they will laugh at you but they don't do that with MWDs.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

The struggles of WWDs go beyond the barriers to their attendance at meetings or gatherings for local governance: they also struggle to be heard at such events and lack access to information if they do attend. This lack of access to information at community gatherings affected sign language users more than any other group of WWDs. However, many of the WWDs felt that they were looked down upon with the exception of the few who were of higher socio-economic standing. Local governance decisions are even made about WWDs without any consultation. Rather, family members or male counterparts make the decisions on behalf of WWDs. Naturally, this is demotivating for WWDs.

Women with disabilities in local government structures

The WWDs in this study have rarely run for or vote in national or local elections. While 68% of WWDs are registered to vote (see Figure 2), the majority of them – 57% - do not do so.

Figure 2: Participation in electoral processes
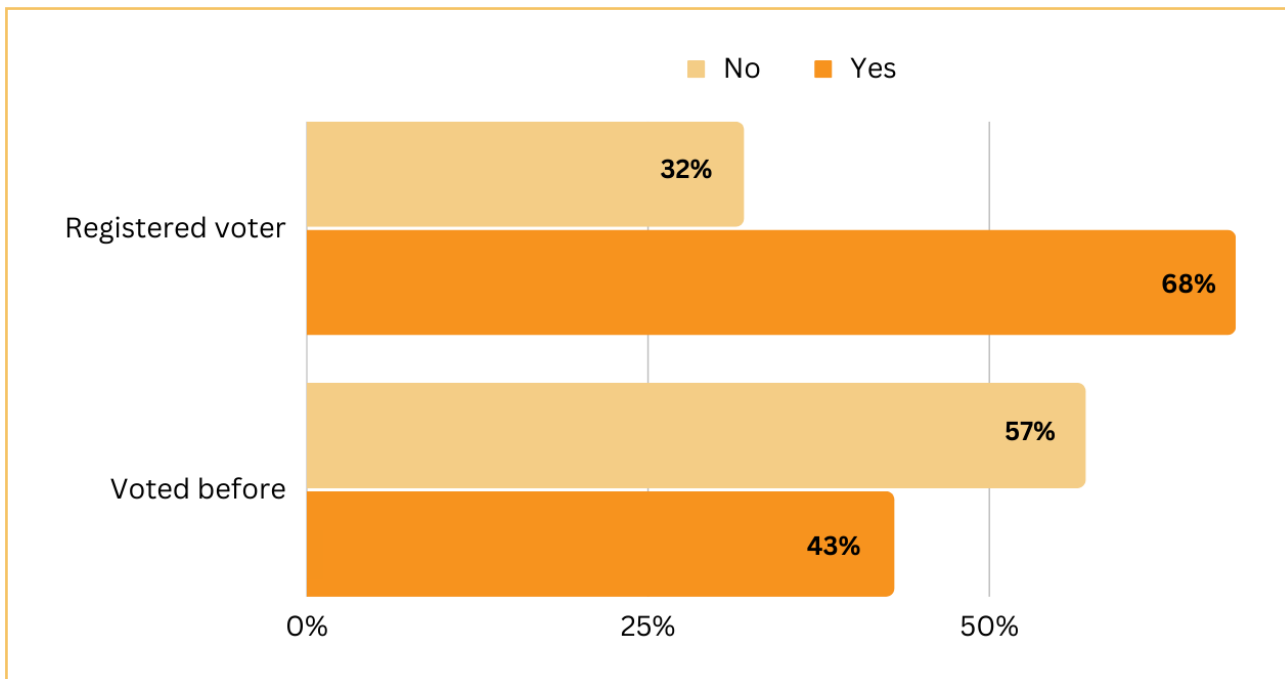
As summarised in Table 1 (below), about 28% of the respondents indicated having been elected or integrated in local governance structures such as the WADCOs, VIDCOs, and also School Development Committees (SDCs), or other local governance structures. However, not a single WWD among our research participants had held a top or influential post within these structures. WWDs mostly participate in committees as community members in VIDCOs. The majority of WWDs occupied lower posts such as secretaries (10%); committee members (49%) and community members (41%).

Table 1: Representation in committees

Committees	% of respondents
Village development committees	33%
Ward development committees	27%
District development committees	10%
Local authority structures	30%
Average WWDs who are members of committees	25%
Positions held	
Chairperson/Vice Chairperson	0%
Treasurer	0%
Secretary	10%
Committee member	8%
Community member	41%

For the lower positions they occupy, WWDs had been nominated or seconded by some supportive councillors or traditional leaders, as highlighted by one of the participants:

> 'When I stood for the position of School Development Committee, I was ridiculed enough to kill my zeal for participation; but I stood firm. I thank the ward councillor who stood by me until I was allowed to contest for the position of Secretary even though I lost because the same people who ridiculed me were supposed to vote me in. The following year I contested again with the help of the councillor and I won. Now people had seen that, just like them, I can deliver.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

Overall, WWDs explained that any preferential treatment comes only from traditional leaders, rather than to elected local governance leaders who report as being inconsiderate of their issues. Traditional leaders live with WWDs in the same communities and have more understanding of the challenges they face. They felt that elected officials only seem to want WWDs as passive participants who can vote for them during elections. One WWD explained:

> 'During elections you are not left behind, they reach out to us community leaders for PWDs soliciting support and requesting us to mobilise fellow WWDs. Even those who cannot access voter registration and voting centres are ferried by politicians, their representatives, and family members to polling stations.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

Barriers to the inclusion and participation of women with disabilities

The limited inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance emanate from complex and multifaceted barriers that are shaped by social norms, which are – in turn – affected by disability and gender.

Social norms and attitudes

> 'Even if you want to be voted for as a local councillor who will vote for a visually impaired woman to lead a non-blind society? They laugh at you!'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

WWDs struggle to participate in local governance because they are devalued by the patriarchal and ableist norms and attitudes that prevail in Zimbabwean society. First, they are demeaned as weak, and unfit for public space and leadership. They are often called derogatory words such as 'handicapped', 'witches', and 'blind women'. Such words disempower WWDs so they shy away from any form of public participation for fear of such name-calling.

The reference to WWDs as witches stems from a religious model of disability, which regards such people's impaired body parts as cursed by Gods or by ancestors for bad deeds, such as bewitching others in society. In Zimbabwean tradition, witchcraft is mostly associated with women who are perceived as ugly, with unpleasant bodies - with many in society associating this to a resemblance to WWDs. As a result of this religious view, some WWDs, particularly in rural areas are stigmatised, ridiculed and excluded from participation. One interviewee said:

> 'If a WWD wants to lead, the community will turn against her saying we cannot be led by someone with demons or whose parents are being punished for their wrongdoing.'
> *Community Leader, Gokwe 2023*

The religious model works in tandem with medical and charity models of disability. These two models view disability as a tragic and unwanted state that should be cured (Retief and Letšosa, 2018). For many community members, women's inclusion makes sense (if at all) only for able-bodied women, not WWDs. As a result of the medical model of disability, WWDs are seen as sick people with nothing to offer society.

This situation was found to be worse for WWDs from both Christian and traditional religious backgrounds. These views are more pronounced for WWDs with visible impairments, as society does not see them as having any agency to act in a normal way or to be included or participate in local affairs. The charity model also sees WWDs as objects of pity. As a result of Christian values that favour feelings of pity for PWDs and that offer them charity, WWDs are perceived as beneficiaries.

The ultimate impact of stereotypes, prejudice, and limited societal expectations on WWDs is the loss of self-esteem and an erosion of the confidence needed to take part in local governance. WWDs were consistent in stating that they felt vulnerable and weaker than MWDs in all respects,

including participation in public spaces. Indeed, some WWDs said that politics is not for women in general, and certainly not for WWDs, as one explained:

> 'You must be strong and fit enough to fight and run with your life if it turns nasty as is always the case with Zimbabwean politics.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

As these quotes show, governance issues in Zimbabwe have been associated with violence and human rights abuses. The views of WWDs are shaped by the violent scenes that often characterise the processes of selecting local leadership. In a 2017 baseline survey by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, violence was identified by 58% of women respondents as one of the primary reasons for not participating in elections as voters or as candidates (ZEC, 2017).

Such problems have a particular impact on WWDs, as their mobility (and therefore their ability to reach safety) is often affected by impairments. WWDs suffer most from targeted rape and violence during these skirmishes, mostly because they are differently abled, defenceless and highly vulnerable (RAU, 2010; Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2017). Ultimately, WWDs shy away from participation in such activities, as they regard this a preserve for those who are able-bodied.

WWDs are also taken to care institutions for treatment and rehabilitation by caregivers at the instigation of the charity, medical and religious models. The institutionalisation of PWDs was found to affect WWDs more than MWDs, as families want to protect WWDs from sexual violence, in particular. Similarly, some WWDs are sent to institutions or hidden from the public by relatives as they are considered shameful (Groce and Kett, 2014).

WWDs who are institutionalised and/or hidden at home miss out on governance information and opportunities to be included and participate in local governance. While they are in care institutions, WWDs are viewed by caregivers as charity cases or rather pitiable individuals who do not need to take part in local affairs. Through institutionalisation, WWD are treated as children who need the continuous care and guidance of those without disabilities. As noted, they cannot make decisions and are barred from participation in local government as they are locked in institutions.

Institutional and systemic barriers

> 'How do you campaign without money when people expect you to fund them by providing campaigning material and food?'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

Table 2 (below) summarises barriers that prevent the political participation of WWDs, and the underlying social norms around gender and disability that underpin them.

Table 2: Institutional and systematic barriers and norms

Barriers to the participation of WWDs	Example	Underlying norms
Poverty and lack of education	Limited education and skills for girls with disabilities; WWDs are unemployable; no disposable income for WWDs	WWDs are not seen as a good investment with education and skill sets – they cannot be employed or married to return the costs of investment. As a result, they are seen as indigents who stay at home and survive on charity. They cannot be leaders and do not want to participate in public life as they are poor in all respects.
Lack of finance	Not able to fundraise for promotional materials	Male dominance – women should depend on men and not have their own source of income and finance.
Lack of access to governance facilities	School buildings and meeting venues with physical barriers	PWDs, particularly WWDs are not seen as 'normal' or 'standard' members of society – they are seen as 'other' or outside of the standard norm and, therefore, do not need to be considered in systemic decisions. WWDs are regarded a burden to society because their inclusion comes with an extra cost.
Lack of transport	Dependence on public transport	WWDs are weak, physically and mentally. They should be at home, protected from the outside world.
Lack of ID to vote or be elected	Parents do not see the need to register children with disabilities at birth and, therefore, WWD lack appropriate documentation in later life	As the norm sees a woman's place as being in the home and not in public, WWDs do not need identification cards or birth registration to be active in the public sphere, as their place is behind closed doors, away from the public.
Lack of translation/ sign language	Information not in accessible format	WWDs are seen as charity cases without agency, who should wait for others to act for them or on their behalf. Therefore, there is no need to invest in providing them with information to participate on their own.
Violence	Physical harassment	Women must be submissive to men in all aspects of their lives, including physically and sexually. Non-compliance leads to violence.

Poverty and unmet education needs

The inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance are hampered by resource constraints and poverty. PWDs suffer from the highest poverty levels: 74% compared to 70% of those who do not have disabilities (PRFT, 2021). Poverty amongst WWDs is characterised by an inability to meet their own basic needs, such as health, education and assistive devices (Virendrakumar et al., 2018). Without assistive devices, such as wheelchairs and crutches, WWDs with mobility challenges are hardly able to attend local governance gatherings. Similarly, visually impaired WWDs need access to spectacles, Braille materials and reading glasses if they are to be included and participate in local affairs. Limited access to assistive devices is also a result of the perception by society that WWDs do not deserve to be in public spaces. The limited prioritisation of this group in budget allocations or social services provisions results in their inability to access devices.

WWDs also singled out lack of money as a major factor that limits their ability to stand as candidates for both local and national government seats. As one respondent explained:

> 'I'm crippled and wheelchair bound and you talk of campaigning. How do I do that without resources, the car, and the campaign material? It's impossible even to attend consultation meetings and rallies, what's more campaigning.'
> WWD, Gokwe 2023

Ahead of the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe, the Government of Zimbabwe increased the presidential nomination fee from $1,000 to $20,000, and for Members of Parliament from $50 to $1,000 (Statutory Instrument 144, 2022). These amounts are unduly restrictive for disadvantaged groups, including WWDs who often have no means to earn an income.

The financial woes of WWDs are made worse by limited financial support from the government. The government's monthly disability grant of $20 per month, which is disbursed through the Department of Social Development, is meagre and erratic causing PWDs go for months without receiving the money (Lang and Charowa, 2007; Dziva, 2022). Many WWDs who wished to be candidates in local government elections explained that both leaders and voters discourage the so-called poor from running for election: the reason being that they do not have the capacity to lead and provide electorates with their needs.

As a result of patriarchal views, WWDs are considered a bad educational investment for those investing. The prospects of a family accruing benefits from an educated WWD are believed to be slim, given their low prospects for marriage and employment in the form of bride price and salary, respectively. Without education, WWDs' understanding of local governance and active political participation remains compromised (Lord et al., 2012). Ultimately, one impact of this remains limited comprehension of written local governance information. This lack of knowledge about available support structures results in WWDs suffering in silence without any recourse to justice – unable to claim their space in local governance.

It also follows that parties and politicians are hesitant to appoint or field uneducated candidates. WWDs explained that uneducated candidates are rarely preferred as leaders by electorates. As a result, the chances of WWDs occupying local government structures (whether by appointment or through election) are limited by low educational attainment.

Accessibility challenges: physical and legal barriers

Local government and community physical structures, including offices, halls and schools used as polling stations and meeting venues, remain inaccessible for WWDs. One WWD mentioned:

> 'We struggle to access meeting venues or even voting stations because they are not accessible to us wheelchair users and the visually impaired. Most buildings have steps and no guiding rails.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

The 2018 European Union Observer Mission Report on Zimbabwe noted that PWDs failed to gain access at 10% of the country's polling stations on election day (European Union, 2018). Similarly, scholars in Zimbabwe have documented the inaccessibility of polling stations and local government offices (Mandipa, 2013; Dziva, 2022). This becomes a hazard, as WWDs have to be lifted, sometimes by men, to access such structures. WWDs are also deterred from participation by inaccessible ablution facilities, such as toilets and bathrooms with narrow doors, or toilets that are dirty or have no water. This unhygienic environment exposes WWDs to the risk of contracting diseases more than anyone else.

WWDs also complained about transport systems to access meetings and polling stations. Participants explained the difficulties in getting transport to reach voting and meeting points:

> 'We are excluded from the first step because venues and meeting points even for budget consultations are done at central venues far away from our homes. For you to attend, you need to seriously think of transportation and the costs associated with your wheelchair because transporters have no mercy.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

> 'Operators sometimes leave you behind as they do not want the hassle of lifting you and your wheelchair especially when competing for customers.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

While these challenges affect all wheelchair users, it is particularly demeaning and frustrating for a WWD to be lifted by men. In some instances, the process might result in indecent exposure as the WWD is carried, or even sexual harassment. As a result of this, many WWDs miss out on local governance inclusion and participation. Even when local governance meetings are held relatively nearby, WWDs in both urban and rural Zimbabwe complained of inaccessible roads. The situation is particularly difficult in rural Zimbabwe where the uneven terrain causes problems for those with mobility challenges and the visually impaired. However, even in urban areas, one WWD stated:

> 'The roads everywhere are full of potholes, making it difficult for persons using wheelchairs to access meeting points and polling stations.'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

While blame for this situation may be apportioned to poor service delivery, some political leaders are also criticised for being inconsiderate of WWDs and their needs when scheduling their engagements with politicians. It appears that leaders plan without thinking about this group as they are not viewed as participants. In addition, leaders and duty bearers seem to believe that investing in the participation of WWDs is a costly venture that does not bring results.

The marginalisation of WWDs extends to their difficulties in obtaining identity documents, such as birth certificates or identity card (ID). Without these documents, WWDs struggle to take part in local government elections as candidates or voters. In this study, close to 30% of WWDs indicated that they had failed to vote in previous elections because they lacked ID. Ultimately, therefore, society's negative views of WWDs as useless people whose place is in the home and who have nothing to offer in local governance undermines their inclusion and participation.

Communication barriers

The lack of accessible information was also a barrier to the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance. More often than not, information about meetings and local government activities where communities can participate overlooks WWDs with sensory impairments, visual impairments, and cognitive disabilities as communication often comes in inaccessible formats. Many of the

WWDs have to rely on information about local governance from family members or friends. One woman with hearing impairments said:

> 'Attending meetings wastes time because you hardly follow proceedings as there will be no sign language interpreter. Even for voter registration and the day of voting, you need to go with your sign language interpreter because there will be no sign language interpreter there to assist you.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

Wheelchair users and people with short stature complained of failing to read high posters and noticeboards.

> 'You find some posters in high places or buildings and even in trees when there are political party posters during election time. You will need someone to read out for you.'
> *WWD, Gokwe 2023*

For the visually impaired, information such as pamphlets and notices has not been provided in accessible Braille format. As one visually impaired respondent stated:

> 'I'm blind but I can read Braille but who will give you Braille documents? There are no Braille documents or communications I have ever received from council about consultations they do with villagers. So how do we know what is happening?'
> *WWD, Harare 2023*

It appears that gender-disability mainstreaming simply does not exist in Zimbabwe's local governance, as leaders look down upon WWDs as non-participants. Taken together, all of these factors – from social norms and attitudes to systemic and physical barriers – combine to deter and hamper the participation of WWDs in the local governance that shapes their lives.

Conclusion

The inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance in Zimbabwe are facilitated by various laws, policies and practices. The Constitution and NGP, for example, aim to circumvent the gender and cultural norms that limit women's participation. Similarly, Devolution and Decentralisation Policy, NDS 1, constitutional quotas and local government structures all aim to create space for women's inclusion and participation in governance. These frameworks are, however, inadequate as they make no specific mention of the protection of WWDs: a minority group that is more excluded and that faces greater discrimination than most other groups, as documented in this study.

The study noted the presence of local leaders who rise above pervasive gender, traditional and cultural norms to include WWDs in local affairs. However, they remain the exception, as most leaders are still influenced by gender and cultural norms to demean and devalue WWDs.

As a result of rampant gender and cultural norms, most WWDs remain poor and uneducated and have only a limited understanding of what inclusion and participation entail and the frameworks that are available to aid them. Similarly, they are unable to access identity documents, information, facilities and transport – a particular problem in rural Zimbabwe, where infrastructure and conditions are especially challenging for WWDs. Without the necessary knowledge and accommodations, WWDs remain passive participants, invisible and under-represented at all levels of local governance. Such exclusion and discrimination lead to their further disempowerment and disenfranchisement.

Recommendations

The unique social norms engraved in patriarchal and ableist systems that marginalise WWDs warrant combined and targeted action from policymakers and other groups in positions of power. Based on the study findings, the following steps should be considered by various actors to target both the systemic barriers to the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance, as well as the norms that underpin them.

The Government of Zimbabwe – as the primary duty bearer, through the Parliament, line ministries, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission and local government officials, should consider the following:

- Enact laws to include WWDs in parliamentary quotas and increase the number of WWDs represented by the Senatorial quota system. Such inclusion will give WWDs the chance to challenge the social norms against them in policymaking circles, drive positive reforms and lobby for resources to their constituency. This ought to be accompanied by adequate financial resourcing and programming (as mentioned below) to ensure that the laws are obeyed and implemented, and that there is political will and buy in.

- The MWACSME and the Zimbabwe Gender Commission should raise awareness across society about the rights of WWDs, including their rights to identity documents, and should debunk the social and gender norms that are so detrimental to WWDs' participation in local governance. Such awareness-raising campaigns could be conducted, for example, through networks, self-help groups, print media (newspapers, pamphlets, and flyers), broadcasting media (radio/television programmes) and social media where skits, drama and poems may be shared. Information should be provided in accessible formats such as Braille, large print and sign language to fight gender-disability stereotypes and ensure a cultural transformation of communities.

- The MWACSME and the Department of Social Development should empower WWDs with financial support so that they can meet their own needs for education, health, transportation and access to assistive devices. This may also include adequate financial support to WWDs who want to participate in local governance as elected leaders to cover their transport needs, campaigns and nomination fees.

- The Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing and its departments should make it mandatory for all public buildings and structures to be accessible to all PWDs.

- Strengthen the capacity of local leadership (traditional and religious leaders and councillors) for disability-gender mainstreaming by reserving positions for and appointing WWDs in local governance structures. Community leaders hold strong social influence and can play a vital role in norm change within social networks.

The election management body (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) should consider gender-disability mainstreaming in electoral processes. This includes the following:

- Encourage and support the inclusion and participation of WWDs in local governance. This may entail the introduction of incentives for political parties that field WWDs in local governance elections.

- Scrap the nomination fees for WWDs who want to run as candidates in national elections.

- Ensure that venues for electoral process, including nomination courts and polling stations, are located at places that are central and accessible for WWDs.

- Design disability-inclusive information, education and communication materials on electoral education and participation.

- Adopt innovative communication and information-sharing methods to reach out to all of society, including women with communication challenges. This entails the use of sign language interpreters during meetings, and the dissemination of both audio and texts messages on WhatsApp platforms.

- Consider postal voting for PWDs especially WWDs.

Civil society organisations, including disabled persons organisations, could consider the following to help create space for WWDs to take part in local governance:

- Litigate, lobby and advocate with Parliament to establish legal quotas that reserve seats for a considerable number of WWDs in local government structures, and support the beneficiaries to effectively bridge existing disparities in key local governance decision making institutions.

- Support the capacity building of WWDs on varied protection mechanisms, lobbying and advocacy strategies so that they can navigate and claim their space in civic spaces.

- Strengthen the capacity of local government institutions, including their leaders such as councillors, and mainstream disability into their activities and structures.

- Strengthen the capacity of duty bearers in inclusive communication, including sign language, and how to mainstream gender and disability when communicating local development issues.

- Invest in the education of girls and WWDs through the provision of scholarships to girls with disabilities so that they can understand the concepts of participation and gain recognition from society for election and appointment to key local governance positions.

- Roll out non-formal education programmes to support a shift towards more equal gender norms by exposing communities to new ideas and knowledge that fosters critical thinking, communication and collaboration. Above all, communities should be equipped with knowledge and skills to engage others in their networks in transformative conversations.

- Raise awareness about gender equality and women's empowerment to refute the social norms that devalue and exclude WWDs from local governance.

Political parties

Political parties are urged to consider the following:

- Raise the awareness of their membership about the rights of WWDs and the need for inclusive party structures. These efforts should include the capacity strengthening of their women's wings to raise awareness on party social media platforms, aiming to dismantle the misogyny, social and gender norms that are detrimental to WWDs' participation in governance.

- Adopt innovative communication and information sharing methods to reach out with political messages to all members and to women with communication challenges. Parties must strive to use sign language interpreters during meetings, and disseminate both audio and text messages on WhatsApp platforms.

- Choose accessible venues and facilities for political gatherings.

- Recognise, enrol, appoint and reserve positions for WWDs within their women's wings and include this group on their party lists for constitutional quotas in government.

- Desist from the violent conduct, including sexual and gender-based violence that discourages the participation of WWDs during electoral processes.

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ALIGN | **Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms**

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.

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