

# **Religion and Gender Equality. An Assessment of the Role of Religion in Women's Political Participation in Zimbabwe**

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## ***Abstract***

Regardless of women being half of the world's population, they remain considerably underrepresented in political leadership around the world. Women's participation in political leadership has become a huge problem and has resulted in the marginalisation of most women in political leadership. African women's history in political leadership demonstrates that marginalisation of women was rampant. Religion has played an important role in shaping public policies, participation and public life in many countries around the world. Religion has a significant influence on political behaviour and its impact on women's political participation in Zimbabwe remains underexplored. Gender inequality is a prevalent phenomenon in developing countries, due to poor governance and religious institutions. This study examined the role of religion in shaping women's access to political leadership, using a conceptual analysis grounded in Social Role Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Political Theology. Does religion impact women's participation in political leadership in Zimbabwe? Marginalisation of women perpetuates the violation of women's rights and infringes conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women, and the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013. The research reviewed Zimbabwe's constitutional, legislative and policy frameworks alongside Christian and African Traditional religious perspectives. Findings indicated that religious beliefs and practices can contribute to limiting women's political participation. The study underscored the complex interaction between religion, culture and politics in women's political participation. The study highlighted the need for multi-sectoral strategies that include among others advocacy, policy reforms and public awareness to promote inclusive political participation. Limitations include reliance on

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secondary data and there is need for empirical studies to investigate religion's influence on women's political leadership in Zimbabwe. Recommendations were made to the relevant authorities on the elimination of outdated religious practices that limit women's participation in political leadership in Zimbabwe.

**Key Words: religion, gender equality, political participation, discrimination, Africa, leadership**

## Introduction

Political participation is essential for democratic government as it permits people to contribute in how society is managed.<sup>1</sup> Political participation is defined as the actions of citizens to influence government and politics.<sup>2</sup> According to the Political participation is considered as the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women encounter enormous challenges in accessing political leadership opportunities. Women constitute about 52% of the total population in Zimbabwe and are under-represented in political leadership positions.<sup>4</sup> Women have traditionally been underrepresented in political leadership positions around the world.<sup>5</sup> Even though statistics show that there are more women voters than men, the chances of them being elected into parliamentary offices remain slim.<sup>6</sup> Only 14% of women contested in July 2018 for the National Assembly elections.<sup>7</sup> Despite women in Zimbabwe constituting 52% of the total population only 14% of women contested in 2018 parliamentary elections. These

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<sup>1</sup> M Grasso & K. Smith) 'Gender inequalities in political participation and political engagement among young people in Europe: Are young women less politically engaged than young men? (2021) Vol 42(1), *Politics* 40.

<sup>2</sup> B Virendrakumar, etal ('Disability inclusive elections in Africa: a systematic review of published and unpublished literature' (2018), Vol 33 (4) *Disability & Society*, 510.

<sup>3</sup> A Begum, 'Political Participation of Female in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges,' (2023) *Vol 41 (1) Unisia* 39.

<sup>4</sup> CK Bingisai 'Electoral Participation as a Fundamental Right for Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe' in E. Mavengano & S. Chirongoma *Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe, (2023) Vol 2 Election and Beyond*, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham21.

<sup>5</sup> K. Bingisai (n 5 above) 20 '.

<sup>6</sup> H Venganai and C Dube 'Some Are Empty Shells Without Groundnuts' (2022)- *Social Construction of Female Political Candidates in Urban, Journal of African Elections*,144.

<sup>7</sup> CK. Bingisai (n 5 above) 23.

statistics demonstrate that there is widespread discrimination against women in political leadership.

Different factors affect women's participation in politics vary everywhere around the world.<sup>8</sup> Women continue to face barriers to full equality and advancement due to culture, religion and disability.<sup>9</sup> Religion plays a critical role in the cultural life of people and is profoundly rooted in peoples' experiences and the political direction of the society.<sup>10</sup> Religion is one of the basic institutions of a society.<sup>11</sup> Religion as articulated by Leege et al. (2002), is a powerful instrument for persuasion.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the ages, political actions have been ascribed to religious motivation.<sup>13</sup> However, religion is perceived as a problematic obstacle to the pursuit of a gender equality.<sup>14</sup> In most religions, power and authority is believed to belong to men hence subjugating women and subsequently putting women into subsidiary roles in society.<sup>15</sup> Religion is generally a significant predictor of women's political participation, as documented in previous studies.<sup>16</sup> Religion is one of the instruments that have been used in keeping women in continuous servitude, domination, and underrepresentation in decision making.<sup>17</sup> Misinterpretation of religion and patriarchal society are key factors that influence women's political participation.<sup>18</sup> Religion, therefore assumes a significant

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- <sup>8</sup> ABullough ' Women's political leadership participation around the world: An institutional analysis' (2012) Vol 23 *The Leadership Quarterly* 398.
  - <sup>9</sup> N Maruzani et al 'Gender, Disability and Empowerment In Institutions of Higher Learning in Zimbabwe', (2014) Vol 9(8) *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, 4.
  - <sup>10</sup> I T. Akindele and EO. Dunmade 'The Role of Gender and Religion on Women Participation in Decision Making Process in Nigeria' (2020) Vol 5(2), *Fountain University Osogbo Journal of Management (FUOJM)* 4.
  - <sup>11</sup> S Khan et al 'Religion and Gender Role:A Quantative Study of Women Political Partcipation in District Charsadda, Pakistan' (2019) Vol 3(2) , *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*97.
  - <sup>12</sup> K D Wald 'Making Sense of Religion in Political Life' (2005) Vol 8 *Annual. Review of Political. Science*, 8125.
  - <sup>13</sup> G McClendon and RB. Riedl 'Religion as a Stimulant of Political Participation: Experimental Evidence from Nairobi, Kenya' (2015) Vol 777(4), *The Journal of Politics*1045.
  - <sup>14</sup> J Rivers 'Law, Religion and Gender Equality' (2007) Vol 9 *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*24; S S Kassa 'Challenges and Opportunities of Women Political Participation in Ethiopia' (2015) Vol 3(4) *Journal of Global Economics*4.
  - <sup>15</sup> S Kassa 'Challenges and Opportunities of Women Political Participation in Ethiopia'. (2015) Vol 3(4) *Journal of Global Economics* 4.
  - <sup>16</sup> E EDim and J. Y. Asomah. 'Socio-demographic Predictors of Political participation among women in Nigeria: Insights from Afrobarometer 2015 Data.' (2019) Vol 20(2) *Journal of International Women's Studies*101.
  - <sup>17</sup> S Ndlovu and S B Mutale 'Emerging Trends in Women's Participation in Politics in Africa,' (2013) Vol 3(11) *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 77.
  - <sup>18</sup> A Begum, 'Political Participation of Female in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges' (2023) Vol 41(1) *Unisia* 445.

role of keeping women at home.<sup>19</sup> Women have been branded as the weaker sex in most patriarchal societies, and this has affected their spheres of life including political leadership positions.<sup>20</sup> Religions globally respect women for the crucial role they play in family life, particularly as mothers and wives and do not advocate the emancipation of women in the sense of equality with men.<sup>21</sup> One of the misconceptions about the African woman is that she does not possess the necessary attributes for leadership.<sup>22</sup>

Religious experiences shape individuals' political beliefs by providing authoritative guidance on proper conduct and constraining personal attitudes that are governed by social norms.<sup>23</sup> The clergies take support of religion to oppose and oppress women's voice.<sup>24</sup> Max Weber argued that individuals undoubtedly act on the basis of their beliefs and the ways in which they conduct themselves follow from the religious conceptions to which they subscribe.<sup>25</sup> Religion is an essential factor that influences the culture of a people. Religion is, therefore, important for understanding the place of women in any given society.<sup>26</sup>

A number religions of the world are patriarchal in their view about the place of women, both in the church hierarchy and in society.<sup>27</sup> Women have been excluded from every government and politics around the world.<sup>28</sup> Women with disabilities suffer double

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<sup>19</sup> S Khan et al 'Religion and Gender Role: A Quantitative Study of Women Political Participation in District, Charsadda Pakistan' (2019) Vol 3 (2) *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 197.

<sup>20</sup> C Mwale and O. Dodo 'Sociocultural Beliefs and Women Leadership in Sanyati District' (2017) Vol 9(1), *Journal of Social Change* 107.

<sup>21</sup> S K. Frimpong, 'The Role of Religion in Gender Inequality in Ghana: The Christian Perspective' (2022) Vol 8(9), *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 274.

<sup>22</sup> E. K. Agorsah 'Women in African Traditional Politics' Vol 31 (1991) *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 84.

<sup>23</sup> B D McKenzie and S M Rouse 'Shades of Faith: Religious Foundations of Political Attitudes among African Americans, Latinos, and Whites' (2013) Vol 57(1) *American Journal of Political Science*, 219.

<sup>24</sup> AH Khattak et al 'Does the factor of religion affect women leadership? A Case study of Dir Lower, Pakistan' (2020) Vol 4(1) *Liberal Arts and Social Science Journal*, 132.

<sup>25</sup> K DWald 'Making Sense of Religion in Political life' (2005) Vol 8 *Annual Review of Political Science* 125.

<sup>26</sup> S K Frimpong 'The Role of Religion in Gender Inequality in Ghana: The Christian Perspective' (2022) Vol 8(9), *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 271.

<sup>27</sup> S Kassa 'Challenges and Opportunities of Women Political Participation in Ethiopia' (2015) Vol 3(4) *Journal of Global Economics*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> S R Sandusky 'Women's Political Participation in Developing and Democratizing Countries: Focus on Zimbabwe', (1999) Vol 5 *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*, 253.

discrimination, firstly as women, and secondly as persons with disabilities.<sup>29</sup> Cultural beliefs and practices weigh too heavily against the realisation of the rights of women with disabilities.<sup>30</sup> Women with disabilities constitute 60 percent of persons with disabilities and their plight is even worse because of additional barriers resultant from their gender and disability.<sup>31</sup> Women with disabilities therefore face additional challenges, as a result of continuing disproportions and discrimination based on both gender and disability. Against this background women encounter enormous challenges to participate in politics due to religion.

The study examined how religion influences women's political participation in Zimbabwe, focusing on Christian and African Traditional religious perspectives. It situated the discussion within the broader context of Zimbabwe's constitutional, legislative, and policy frameworks on gender equality. The study highlighted the complex interactions between religion, culture and political participation.

## **2. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative doctrinal desk-top research design supported by document analysis to examine how religion influences women's participation in political leadership in Zimbabwe. The methodology was structured to generate an in-depth understanding of the interaction between religion, gender norms, political structures and legal frameworks. A descriptive research design was used as the study sought to describe how religious beliefs, doctrines and institutions shape the political participation of women in Zimbabwe. This design enabled the researcher to interpret socio-cultural norms in religious and political systems. The study used a desktop-based qualitative approach, relying on doctrinal analysis of the international, regional and domestic legal frameworks on women's political participation. A review of scholarly literature including academic journal articles and books on religion, gender, political theology, feminist theory and intersectionality was done. The approach allowed the holistic understanding of the religious, cultural and legal dynamics. The

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<sup>29</sup> E Mandipa 'A Critical Analysis of the Legal and Institutional Frameworks for the Realisation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Zimbabwe' (2013) 1, *African Disability Rights Yearbook*, 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> N Maphosa, and C.G. Moyo and B Moyo 'Left in the periphery: Analysis of voting rights for persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe' (2019) Vol 7, *African Disability Rights Yearbook*, 113.

research focused on Christian's denominations and African Traditional Religion. These were analysed in terms of their teachings, belief systems, leadership structures and gender norms. Data was collected through the analysis of primary documents, that include the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13], 2004. International Legal instruments included among other Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Women. Peer-reviewed articles on religion, gender studies, political science, intersectionality and feminist theology were used in the research. Data was analysed to identify recurring patterns and themes. Themes were interpreted using the theoretical framework using the Social Role Theory, Intersectionality Theory and Political Theology.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### Social role theory

Religion is one of the social identities that shapes the personality of a female if the society in which the individual grows is religious in nature.<sup>32</sup> The Social role theory uses a structural approach to sex differences, instead of a cultural approach. The view is that people have a social role constructed solely on their gender. All world religions today maintain male social dominance within societal structures.<sup>33</sup> The Social role theory provides a framework to help understand the complexity of gender in the political sphere.<sup>34</sup> According to the social role theory individuals develop descriptive and prescriptive gender role expectations of others' behaviour based on the division of labour.<sup>35</sup> The social role theory posits that gender stereotypes originate from the social roles men and women hold, these social constructs dynamically change as roles

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<sup>32</sup> A Nair and S Arnold, The Theory of Intersectionality, Feminism and Religion (2019) Vol 9(3) *Pramana Research Journal*, 536.

<sup>33</sup> K Klingorová and THavlíček 'Religion and gender inequality: The status of women in the societies of world religions' (2015) Vol 23, *Moravian Geographical Reports*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> MC. Schneider and A L. Bos' The Application of Social Role Theory to the Study of Gender in Politics' (2019) Vol40(1) *Advances in Political Psychology*, 173.

<sup>35</sup> C Mwale and O Dodo 'Sociocultural Beliefs and Women Leadership in Sanyati District', (2017) Vol9(1) *Journal of Social Change*, 110.

shift.<sup>36</sup> Social role theory highlights that shared gender stereotypes exist in society and are based on a division of labour that aligns with gender.<sup>37</sup>

### Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory contends that diverse forms of social disparity, subjugation and discrimination interact in multidimensional ways. Intersectionality theorists argue intersectional structures of discrimination are based on factors such as race, class, age, religion and ethnicity.<sup>38</sup> The intersection of gender and other social identities exacerbates the situation of vulnerable women. Intersectionality refers to the multidimensionality of marginalised subjects lived experiences.<sup>39</sup> The theory of intersectionality devised by Kimberley Crenshaw is associated with feminism where different social identities add to the oppression of a female.<sup>40</sup> Intersectionality recognises multiple forms of inequality.<sup>41</sup> This framework allows for the broader understanding of how religion interacts with social identities to influence political participation. Using the Intersectionality Theory, it is noted that religion intersects with other axes of disadvantage such as gender, disability to exacerbate exclusion. Religion promotes structural inequalities by legitimising traditional beliefs that restrict access to political leadership opportunities.

### Political Theology Theory

Political theology examines the connections between religious beliefs and political power. Political scrutinises how religious ideas, doctrines influence political ideologies. Political theology posits that religious beliefs can have a profound impact on socio-

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<sup>36</sup> D van der Pas and L. Aaldering and A L Bos 'Looks Like a Leader: Measuring Evolution in Gendered Politician Stereotypes,' (2023) *Political Behavior*, 5 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-023-09888-5>(accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>37</sup> J Stephanie and P P. Ryan, "Social Role and Role Congruity Influences on Perceived Value of Women's Leadership at South western Research Universities" (2022) Vol 283 *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 9 <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/283> ( accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>38</sup> K. Zigomo ('Virtue, Motherhood and Femininity: Women's Political Legitimacy in Zimbabwe' (2023) Vol 48(3) *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48 531.

<sup>39</sup> U. Ozkaleli ' Intersectionality in Gender Mainstreaming:Equity Organizing in Turkey' (2018) Vol 39(2) *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*138.

<sup>40</sup> A Nair and S Arnold, 'The Theory of Intersectionality, Feminism and Religion' (2019) Vol 9(3) *Pramana Research Journal*,536.

<sup>41</sup> M J Clark etal, 'Special Issue on Intersectional Methods and Moral Theology: Introduction' (2023) Vol 12(1), *Journal of Moral Theology* 6.

political.<sup>42</sup> Political theology is used in conversations of how theological perceptions relate to political participation. political theology is a form of intellectual discourse which, depending on your perspective, provides a theological interpretation of the political or a political interpretation of the theological.<sup>43</sup> Moltmann defines political theology as “a designation for theological reflection on the concrete political practice of Christianity.”<sup>44</sup> For Moltmann, Political theology is based largely on a ‘theology of hope’ and a theology of ‘ethical and political anticipation’.<sup>45</sup> The concept of intersectionality focuses on the interlocked effects of different dimensions of power and oppression in everyday life.<sup>46</sup> The research used Political Theology to analyse how interpretations of Christian and African Traditional religious doctrines shape women’s political participation in Zimbabwe.

#### 4. Overview of the Legal Framework on Gender Equality in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwe government has ratified a number of international treaties on women’s rights but this has not been translated into concrete deliverables for women’s political participation and representation.<sup>47</sup> Despite the existence of supportive legal instruments, Zimbabwe has not progressed well in promoting the participation of women in politics.<sup>48</sup> Zimbabwe is a state party to several international and regional legal instruments, and it has an obligation to incorporate all international conventions, treaties and agreements into national legislation in terms of Section 34 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.<sup>49</sup> The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with

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<sup>42</sup> C Asha, ‘Religion, Culture, and Politics: Analysing the Influence of Religious Beliefs on Sociopolitical Dynamics’ (2023) Vol4 (2), *International Journal of Culture and Religious Studies* 29.

<sup>43</sup> L Gearon and A. Kuusisto ‘Researching religious authority in education: Political theology, elites’ theory and the double nexus’ (2018) Vol10(1) *Power and Education* 7.

<sup>44</sup> A G Aubert ‘The Political Theology of Martin Luthe’, (2023) Vol10(1) *JOURNAL OF REFORMED EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY* 76.

<sup>45</sup> T Van Wyk ‘Political Theology as critical theology’, (2025) Vol 71(3) *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 2. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.302](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.302)(accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>46</sup> A Giorgi ‘Religious feminists and the intersectional feminist movements: Insights from a case study’ (2020) *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 2.

<sup>47</sup> D Mandiyanike ‘The Marginalised Majority Zimbabwe’s Women in Rural Local Government’ (2012) Vol11(2) *Journal of African Elections* 89.

<sup>48</sup> M Maphosa ‘Participation of Women in Zimbabwean Politics and the Mirage of Gender Equity’ (2015) Vol 4(2) *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation*, 127.

<sup>49</sup> Section 34 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.



Disabilities (CRPD) are key international human rights legal instruments that promote and protect women's rights to participate in political leadership.

Article 1 of the ICCPR states that:

*"All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status".*<sup>50</sup>Article 3 of the ICCPR goes on to say:  
*"States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present Covenant".*<sup>51</sup>

The right to vote is enshrined in article 25(b) of the ICCPR which states that to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage.<sup>52</sup> All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of this right people can freely determine their political status".<sup>53</sup>Article 3 of the Covenant provides that

*"States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present Covenant".*<sup>54</sup>

Women in politics have become a thing of discussion in the turn of the 21st century, mostly after the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women CEDAW at the 1979 Beijing conference.<sup>55</sup> The Committee to the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) defined political participation as a broad concept referring to the exercising of political power in particular the exercising of legislative, judicial, executive and administrative power and this covers all aspects of public administration and the formulation and implementation of policy at the international, national, regional and local levels.<sup>56</sup> Equally so, the law also provides special measures for women with disabilities to exercise their electoral rights.<sup>57</sup> State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination

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<sup>50</sup> Article 1 of ICCPR.

<sup>51</sup> Article 3 of ICCPR.

<sup>52</sup> Article 25(b) of the ICCPR.

<sup>53</sup> Article 1 of 1CCPR.

<sup>54</sup> Article 3 of 1CCPR.

<sup>55</sup> L Amusan et al ) 'Patriarchy, Religion and Women's Political Participation in Kwara State, Nigeria,' (2017) Vol 15(1) *Gender & Behaviour*, 8442.

<sup>56</sup> CEDAW, General Comment No 23'Political and public life' para 5.

<sup>57</sup> Art 7 of CEDAW.

against women in the political and public life of the country and in particular shall ensure to women on equal terms with men the right.<sup>58</sup>

Article 29 of the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) sets out the mechanism of protecting the right to political participation and public life for persons with disabilities.<sup>59</sup> The CRPD underscores the equal right of persons with disabilities to participate in political life.<sup>60</sup> Article 6 of the CPRD importantly recognises the marginalisation of women with disabilities especially in political and public life.<sup>61</sup>

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) are regional legal instruments that are critical in the promotion and protection of women's political participation. The Preamble of the Charter espouses freedom, equality, justice and dignity.<sup>62</sup> Article 13 of the Charter guarantees the right of every citizen to participate freely in the government of his country.<sup>63</sup> Article 9 of the Maputo Protocol recognises the right to participation and decision-making.<sup>64</sup> Article 9.1 of the Maputo Protocol requires States Parties to take "specific positive action", including affirmative action, to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries, and to ensure that:

- "(a) women participate without any discrimination in all elections,*
- (b) women are represented equally at all levels with men in all electoral processes,*
- (c) women are equal partners with men at all levels of development and implementation of State policies and development programmes."*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Article 7 of Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1991).

<sup>59</sup> Article 29 of the CRPD.

<sup>60</sup> B Virendrakumar, et al 'Disability inclusive elections in Africa: a systematic review of published and unpublished literature' (2018) Vol 33(4) *Disability & Society* 509.

<sup>61</sup> Article 6 of the CPRD.

<sup>62</sup> Preamble of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

<sup>63</sup> Article 13 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

<sup>64</sup> Article 13 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

<sup>65</sup> Article 9.1. of Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol).

State parties shall take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action.<sup>66</sup> The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance in Article 4 obliges State Parties to “commit themselves to promote democracy, the principle of the rule of law and human rights and recognize popular participation through universal suffrage as the inalienable right of the people” and most importantly<sup>67</sup> Article 17 requires State Parties to “re-affirm their commitment to regularly holding transparent, free and fair elections in accordance with the Union’s Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa.”<sup>68</sup> The African Commission in *Purohit and Moore v The Gambia* held that the right to political participation is extended to every person under the ACHPR, including persons with psychosocial disability.<sup>69</sup>

The Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 makes a commitment to gender equality.<sup>70</sup> Inclusion of all society's voices is critical to the legitimacy of constitutional reform and the Constitution as the central instrument of a legitimate government.<sup>71</sup> Section 3 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 provides principles of good governance, which bind the state and all governmental institutions and agencies at every level, including recognition of the rights of women.<sup>72</sup> Section 17 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 provides that the state must promote full gender balance in the Zimbabwean society, and the state must provide for the full participation of women in all spheres of the Zimbabwean society on the basis of equality with men.<sup>73</sup> Section 80 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 states that every woman has the same dignity as men, including equal opportunities in political, economic, and social activities.<sup>74</sup> The Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013<sup>75</sup> provides that that every woman has full and equal

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<sup>66</sup> Article 9 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003). Article 9.

<sup>67</sup> Article 4 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

<sup>68</sup> Article 17 of African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

<sup>69</sup> *Purohit and Moore v The Gambia* (2003) AHRLR 96 (ACHPR 2003.)

<sup>70</sup> M Maphosa et al ‘Participation of Women in Zimbabwean Politics and the Mirage of Gender Equity’ (2015) Vol 4(2) *Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation* 132.

<sup>71</sup> S R Sandusky ‘Women’s Political Participation in Developing and Democratizing Countries: Focus on Zimbabwe, (1999) Vol 5 *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*, 254.

<sup>72</sup> Section 3 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Section 17(1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Section 80 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Section 83 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

dignity of the person with men and this includes equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.<sup>76</sup> Section 56 of The Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 provides a sound framework for the defence and enhancement of the rights of women.<sup>77</sup> It provides for women and men's rights to equal opportunities in the political sphere.<sup>78</sup> The assessment has revealed that whilst there have been some moves towards gender equality, these have not resulted in gender equity.<sup>79</sup> It not only affirms the equality of all individuals but also expressly outlaws discrimination based on gender.<sup>80</sup> Section 60 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 provides that every person has the right to freedom of conscience, which includes freedom of thought, opinion and religion.<sup>81</sup> The Constitution is the supreme law of Zimbabwe and any law, practice, custom or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid to the extent of the inconsistency.<sup>82</sup> Religious practices must comply with the Constitution for them to be valid. It is therefore prudent to note that religious practices that relegate women to subservient political positions is inconsistent with the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 which provides for equality in political participation. The Electoral Act in terms of Section 3 explicitly prohibits gender-based discrimination in political campaigns.<sup>83</sup> The Electoral Act states in Section 3 provides that

*(b) every citizen has the right — (i) to participate in government directly or through freely chosen representatives, and is entitled, without distinction on the ground of race, ethnicity, gender, language, political or religious belief, education, physical appearance or disability or economic or social condition, to stand for office and cast a vote freely;*<sup>84</sup>

The Disabled Persons Act of Zimbabwe (the DPA), which is the primary law dealing exclusively with disability matters, falls short of adequately addressing the human rights of PWDs.<sup>85</sup> Even so, the Disabled Persons Act's conceptualisation of Persons

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<sup>76</sup> Maphosa et al (n 71 above)133.

<sup>77</sup> Section 56 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Maphosa et al (n 71 above )152.

<sup>80</sup> L Mhuru, 'Gender justice, law and religion in Zimbabwe: An evaluation of the role of sacred texts' (2023) Vol 79 (3) HTS *Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i3.8160>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>81</sup> Section 60(1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Section 2 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Section 3 of the Electoral Act of Zimbabwe.

<sup>84</sup> Section 3(1) of the Electoral Act of Zimbabwe.

<sup>85</sup> The Disabled Persons Act [Chapter 17:01].

with Disabilities, let alone Women with Disabilities, is out-dated, and the instrument fails to confer any rights to this disadvantaged group Zimbabwean women, who make up more than half of the electorate, have long been struggling to secure a foothold in the political arena. This situation persists despite a supportive legal and policy framework. The National Disability Policy highlights that Guidelines for the political participation of persons with disabilities must be developed.<sup>86</sup> The National Gender Policy of 2017 foresees a gender-just society, where equality and equity reign supreme. It outlines Zimbabwe's vision for a gender-just society and gives guidance on how Zimbabwe should strive towards this. Despite the robust legal framework, societal norms and religious interpretations limit the practical realisation of political rights. Laws granting equal political rights may be insufficient if religious norms continue to discourage women from participating in elections. Religious norms shape political behaviour and expectations and this affect adversely women's political participation.

## 5. Gender Equality: A Christian Perspective

The bible provides a number of verses which highlight women's submissiveness to their husbands. The bible highlights that women to be submissive to their husbands as in Ephesians 5:22-33: "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands as you are to the Lord..."...verse 25<sup>87</sup> "...and husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church..."<sup>88</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11-15: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection."<sup>89</sup> Titus 2:4-5: "Teach the young women to be ... obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed."<sup>90</sup> The root of the weakening of women has its source from the belief that Eve was created from Adam's left rib.<sup>91</sup> Religious reasons also become a deterrent for women who want to involve in political life and become political representatives.<sup>92</sup> These bible verses suggest that women occupy an inferior position in life that even in political leadership women would be regarded as

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<sup>86</sup> accessed 24 March 2025).

<sup>87</sup> The King James Version Bible (2004) www.holybooks.com - <https://www.holybooks.com/download-bible/> p674.( accessed 25 January 2025).

<sup>88</sup> D Namwembe 'Religion Doesn't Justify Discrimination Against Women, in Religion, Gender & Women's Rights' (2017) Vol 62, *Arise*25.

<sup>89</sup> King James Version (n 88 above).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> BS Maula, 'Indonesian Muslim Women, Between Culture, Religion, and Politics' (2016) Vol1(1), *Ijtimā'iyya*, 119.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p125.

subordinate to men. The bible verses are used by Christians to bar women from engaging in political leadership positions as taking up these leadership positions would be viewed as violating biblical doctrines. Patriarchy is viewed as a divinely created order and willed by God as a male was first created and then, secondly, a woman (Genesis 2:22).<sup>93</sup> The prevalence of patriarchal interpretations of Christianity in Zimbabwe has impacted significantly women's political participation. Although there are progressive legal and policy frameworks, women continue to face barriers rooted in religiously sanctioned gender structures

Women are therefore frequently regarded as second-class citizens, within the churches as well.<sup>94</sup> Christianity buttresses the cultural conditioning of submission and leads to the depersonalisation of women.<sup>95</sup> Religions across the globe respect women for the crucial role they play in family life, especially as mothers and wives and do not advocate emancipation in total equality with men.<sup>96</sup> Women are therefore socialized into passive political roles, and this militates against their engagement in politics.<sup>97</sup> For instance, according to the Bible which is the manual for Christians, women are expected to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22).<sup>98</sup> Dykes (2019) further connotes that religion has assigned women to the status of helpmates, too rational to lead and too intellectually limited for public dimensions of life.<sup>99</sup> Religion has therefore been acknowledged as a limiting factor to women's participation in political life. Religion generally supports female suppression to male supremacy. Bible verses were quoted as supporting the role of women and discouraging them from life in the political sphere.1 Timothy 2; 11-13 says,

*“Let a woman learn quietly with submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to*

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<sup>93</sup> L Christina and S.Shumba 'Religion and Gender Policy Implementation in Zimbabwe: Women's Access to Land Ownership in Gwanda District', (2020) Vol 46(2) *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*,1Unisa, <https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>. accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>94</sup> Frimpong 'The Role of Religion in Gender Inequality in Ghana: The Christian Perspective' (2022) Vo 8(9) *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)*,271.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p273.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> M Ette & P Akpan-Obong 'Negotiating Access and Privilege: Politics of Female Participation and Representation in Nigeria' (2023) Vol 58(7) *Journal of Asian and African Studies*1304.

<sup>98</sup> A Ingwani and MN. Kwaramba 'Rhetoric or Reality? Assessing the Efficacy of Policy and Legislative Interventions in Enhancing Women Political Participation in Zimbabwe in E Mavengano and S. Chirongoma (2023) *Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe, Vol II The 2023 Election and Beyond*, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham.120.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

*teach or to exercise authority over a man. For Adam was first formed then Eve*<sup>100</sup>

However, according to Genesis 1:26–27, men and women were equally positioned in the community of life at the beginning, after being jointly formed in ‘the image of God.’<sup>101</sup> In the Holy Bible, the book of Romans 2: 11 says: “For God does not show favouritism.”<sup>102</sup> Also, in James 2: 8-9 it says: “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” Therefore, if God doesn’t show favouritism, then it means that the prevailing gender imbalances are man-made.<sup>103</sup> They were given the order to rule the world as a unit.<sup>104</sup> For instance some Christian institutions have used Genesis 1:27 which states that:

*“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God, created He him; male and female, created He them. And so God blessed them and said, have many children so that your descendants will live all over the earth and brings it under control. I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds and all the wild animals. I have provided every kind of grain and all kinds of fruit for you...”*(Holy Bible, 2001:1)<sup>105</sup>

Being made in the image of God would also inspire respect and dignity for all people, regardless of gender.<sup>106</sup> The bible also highlights that men and women were created in the image of God which demonstrates that they are equal and have equal dignity. According to Matthew, all conventional obstacles have been removed, and women are now welcome in the new parliament. Women who played significant prophetic roles included Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah and many others. Other women, like Esther, were crucial to the salvation of God’s people at a pivotal point in their history.<sup>107</sup> From this perspective it can also be viewed that men and women are equal in dignity from a Christian perspective. Christianity could be considered a religion that had

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<sup>100</sup> New Kings Version Bible.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> D. Namwembe (2017) Religion Doesn’t Justify Discrimination Against Women, in Religion, Gender & Women’s Rights, *Arise*, 62, p26.

<sup>104</sup> Mhuru, (note 81).

<sup>105</sup> King James Version (note 88).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

equality principles laid down in bible. So, from a Christian perspective it could be viewed as unbiblical to treat women as second-class citizens as their created in the image of God.

## 6. Religion and the African Political Life

Religion constitutes an inextricable part of African society.<sup>108</sup> Women have been subordinated under the auspices of deep-rooted African cultural practices compromising their fundamental rights.<sup>109</sup> In African Traditional Religion, the fostering of values is achieved through the involvement of the individual in the activities of society through participation in the community.<sup>110</sup> Despite women's major roles they play, society has not given recognition to women due to abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures.<sup>111</sup> Most religions including the African Traditional Religion have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders.<sup>112</sup> Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular have been thriving under traditional leadership systems that were mainly dominated by men since time immemorial.<sup>113</sup> Kweku Osam states Traditional Religion strongly influence the lives of the people and is ambivalent in its images of women.<sup>114</sup> African Traditional Religions (A.T.R.), is reputed to be more benign to women and ideas of God as Father have eroded the traditional conceptions of the Supreme Being.<sup>115</sup> Religion and patriarchal values therefore seem to be instruments of women domination and exclusion from politics.<sup>116</sup> Patriarchy and religion are close bedfellows and both work in manner that they restrict women freedom to partake actively in politics.<sup>117</sup> Gender inequalities have

<sup>108</sup> O M Agbiji and I Swart 'Religion and Social Transformation in Africa: A Critical and Appreciative Perspective' (2015) Vol 114 *Scriptura* 10.

<sup>109</sup> L Sithole and C Dziva 'Eliminating harmful practices against women in Zimbabwe: Implementing article 5 of the African Women's Protocol'(2019) Vol 19 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 568-590 <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2019/vl19n2a1>. accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>110</sup> Agbiji and Swart (note 109) (2).

<sup>111</sup> D T Agbalajobi 'Women's participation and the political process in Nigeria: Problems and prospects Women's participation and the political process in Nigeria: Problems and prospects' (2010) Vol 4(2) *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 075.

<sup>112</sup> S Ndlovu and S B. Mutale 'Emerging Trends in Women's Participation in Politics in Africa' (2013) Vol 3(11) *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 77.

<sup>113</sup> O Dodo' Traditional Leadership Systems and Gender Recognition: Zimbabwe' (2013) Vol 1(1) *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies* 29.

<sup>114</sup> SK Frimpong 'The Role of Religion in Gender Inequality in Ghana: The Christian Perspective' (2022) Vol 8(9), *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)*, 271.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> L Amusan et al 'Patriarchy, Religion and Women's Political Participation in Kwara State, Nigeria,' (2017) Vol 15 (1) *Gender & Behaviour*, 8444.

<sup>117</sup> Amusan et al (note 117) 8457.



been perpetuated by the patriarchal system and traditional cultural practice from African Traditional Religion.<sup>118</sup> Women's political participation has been constrained by religious beliefs, traditional values and social taboos in many countries including advanced democracies..<sup>119</sup> Traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes especially as regards women's roles and status in society remain strong particularly in rural areas..<sup>120</sup> Traditional roles and the division of labour are still clearly gendered. Social norms make it more difficult for women to leave their traditionally domestic roles for more public roles outside of the home.<sup>121</sup> The African Traditional Religion therefore subjugates women in political leadership.

## 7. Status of Women's Political Participation in Zimbabwe

The status of women in most African societies, including Zimbabwe, has been characterised by patriarchal dominance and victimisation of women in situations of socio-political conflict and religious extremism.<sup>122</sup> Although Zimbabwe has a robust legislative framework for women's participation in politics, women still face challenges in the political process.<sup>123</sup> In Zimbabwe, there has been controversy around the absence of gender policy in churches.<sup>124</sup> According to Smith, religion orients people to the world they inhabit thereby providing a sense of direction and purpose.<sup>125</sup> The relationship between religion and politics in Zimbabwe is compromised. A number of scholars have given different views on this engagement with arguing that religion and politics are Siamese twins.<sup>126</sup> A conformation of this assertion is evident in the survey conducted by Pew Research which discovered that, out of the estimated 12, 5 million Zimbabweans, (87.0%) are Christians, (0.9%) Islam, (<0.1%), Buddhism, (<0.1%) Hinduism and (<0.1%) Judaism.<sup>127</sup> Christianity a dominant religion in Zimbabwe.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Christina and Shumba (note 94)

<sup>119</sup> M Moniruzzaman and Farzana 'Religion, Society and Gendered-Politics in Central Asia: A comparative analysis' (2019), *Intellectual Discourse, Special Issue*,746.

<sup>120</sup> C Mlambo and F Kapingura 'Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region,' (2019) Vol 5(1) *Cogent Social Sciences*5 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1681048>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Mhuru, (note 81).

<sup>123</sup> C Manyeruke 'A Reflection on the Women in Zimbabwean Politics through Gender Lenses' (2018) Vol5(3), *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 124.

<sup>124</sup> Mhuru (note 81)

<sup>125</sup> M Mujinga'Religion as a Riding Horse of Politics?' A Critical Evaluation of Political Influence in the Zimbabwean' (2018) Vol 23*Ecclesiastical Life, Alternation Special Edition*,246.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid p248.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid p255.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

Women have been denied access to full participation in the religious and political activities in their communities.<sup>129</sup> Women face obstacles in political participation in Zimbabwe.<sup>130</sup>

The largest impediment to the realization of true equality of women in Zimbabwe is traditional thinking and customary law.<sup>131</sup> Traditional law is extremely repressive to women, forcing them into the status of dependents.<sup>132</sup> The root of the problems emanates from the patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society. Women's participation and leadership is often viewed through the narrow lens of traditional gender roles reinforcing fostering social exclusion.<sup>133</sup> African Charter on Human and People's Rights urged the Government of Zimbabwe to take decisive legal measures and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to address the long-standing historical discrimination that has hindered women's political participation.<sup>134</sup> The Zimbabwe Gender Commission has revealed that women's participation in all political parties is regressing with no gender equality in practice.<sup>135</sup> This is despite an elaborate legislative and policy framework in Zimbabwe pushing for their participation.<sup>136</sup> Section 56 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe protects the right of every woman to vote and contest elections as a candidate.<sup>137</sup> The Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13], 2004 in section 3 explicitly prohibits gender-based discrimination in political campaigns.<sup>138</sup> The National Gender Policy of 2017 envisions a gender-just society, where equality

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<sup>129</sup> N Mudzingwa 'Double Tragedy for Women with Disabilities in the Zimbabwean Education System. (2017) Vol 4 (2) *Advances in Social.Sciences Research Journal*179.

<sup>130</sup> S R Sandusky, (1999) Women's Political Participation in Developing and Democratizing Countries: Focus on Zimbabwe (1999) *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*254.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> N Zulu, New approaches needed to improve women's political participation in Zimbabwe, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/theindependent/opinion-analysis/article/200017559/new-approaches-needed-to-improve-womens-political-participation-in-zimbabwe>. (e accessed 17 January 2025.)

<sup>134</sup> <https://africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/statement/statement/achpr/2023-08-01/press-statement-on-womens-political-participation-in-the-run-up-to-the-august-2023-presidential-elections-in-zimbabwe/eng@2023-08-01>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>135</sup> A Chibamu, 'Women's participation in politics, declining, parties not achieving gender Equality- Says Zimbabwe Gender Commission, *New Zimbabwe*,17 May 2023' <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/womens-participation-in-politics-declining-parties-not-achieving-gender-equality-says-zimbabwe-gender-commission/>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Section 56 of the Zimbabwean Constitution, 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Section 3 of the Electoral Act.

and equity reign supreme.<sup>139</sup> The vision of the National Gender policy is to eradicate gender discrimination and inequalities in all spheres of life and development.<sup>140</sup> Civic society organisation is playing a pivotal role in the promotion and protection of women's political participation in leadership positions. Community-based civic education initiatives can complement legal frameworks by addressing social norms that restrict women's political participation. Awareness campaigns should focus on women, men and community leaders about the value of inclusive leadership.

The UN Women is supporting Zimbabwe's five-year Framework on Women Political Participation(2023-2028) that will enhance women's political participation in elections.<sup>141</sup> Zimbabwe also ratified the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008) which aims to provide for the empowerment of women, to eliminate discrimination and achieve gender equality by through the implementation of gender-responsive legislation, policies and programmes and projects.<sup>142</sup> Article 13 of The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development states that state Parties shall adopt specific legislative measures and other strategies to enable women to have equal opportunities with men to participate in all electoral processes including the administration of elections and voting.<sup>143</sup>

However the political leadership role of women in Zimbabwe is celebrated through the recognition of the role played by Charwe, the woman spirit medium (*svikiro*) of Mbuya Nehanda Nyakasikana popularly known as Mbuya Nehanda.<sup>144</sup> Thirty-eight years after independence, the people in Zimbabwe recognise with high esteem the spirit of Mbuya Nehanda.<sup>145</sup> This woman spirit of Mbuya Nehanda therefore represents a fighting spirit, liberation, unity and a struggle for empowerment.<sup>146</sup> Mbuya Nehanda motivated a lot of young women to go to war to fight for what was also theirs.<sup>147</sup> Important to

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<sup>139</sup> National Gender Policy of 2017.

<sup>140</sup> C Manyeruke 'A Reflection on the Women in Zimbabwean Politics through Gender Lenses' (2018) Vol 5 (3) *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 124.

<sup>141</sup> S Tsiko, UN Women supports political participation of women framework, *The Herald*, 8 August 2023.

<sup>142</sup> Manyeruke (note 141)123.

<sup>143</sup> Article 13 of The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development.

<sup>144</sup> Manyeruke (note 141 )124.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid 125.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

Zimbabweans is that the spirit of Mbuya Nehanda is a woman who had a critical role to play in Zimbabwean politics and is still considered relevant and a formidable force.<sup>148</sup>

## 8. Importance of Women Political Participation

Genuine democracy cannot exist without the equal participation of men and women in politics.<sup>149</sup> Democracy means that a political system should have a fair and reflective system of representation in politics and decision-making for the various segments of its population.<sup>150</sup> Women constitute a key national resource, whose ideas, creative solutions and concern for the cohesiveness of the social fabric can help change the quality of life and society at large (Nzomo, 1994:203).<sup>151</sup> For society to be just, democratic, representative and progressive, must ensure women's significant presence and participation in the politics and public policy decision-making positions.<sup>152</sup> It is critically important to have women participate in political leadership to enhance democracy.

Direct democracy provides opportunities to make meaningful input in policymaking processes to underrepresented groups, who otherwise would have few channels of political power.<sup>153</sup> The exclusion of women from political power sends a strong signal to female citizens that they are subject to political hierarchy and incompetent to influence political decision-making.<sup>154</sup> It noted that 'full involvement of women in politics is one method of defending women's interests in society.'<sup>155</sup> It is paramount to involve women in politics so as to take stock of their concerns effectively. The active participation of women is critical to the achievement of equality and sustainable development. Women's equal participation with men in power and decision-making is

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> T.Dube,(2013) Engendering politics and parliamentary representation in Zimbabwe, *Journal of African Studies and Development*,5(2) p201.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> JH. Kim 'Direct Democracy and Women's Political Engagement,' (2019) Vol 63(3) *American Journal of Political Science*596.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> M Ette and P. Akpan-Obong 'Negotiating Access and Privilege: Politics of Female Participation and Representation in Nigeria' (2023) Vol 58(7), *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1292.

part of their fundamental right to participate in political life.<sup>156</sup> Political participation of women leads to improved living standards, improved community services and equal opportunities in decision-making organs.<sup>157</sup> Women's representation in political parties can encourage women's representation in politics through representation in legislative bodies will affect all government policies on gender-related issues.<sup>158</sup> Women's political participation in political leadership roles is imperative in the policy-making process that is targeted to achieve gender equality.<sup>159</sup> The role of women is of great importance in social, economic and political development.<sup>160</sup> Women's participation in political leadership role enhance their economic, social and political standing in the community.<sup>161</sup> The exclusion of women in politics has been identified in recent times as one of the major setbacks for economic development.<sup>162</sup> If women participate in the political process, as a member of a political party or a legislator, this will result in the women representing concerns of for women adequately.<sup>163</sup> Women's full and effective political participation is a matter of human rights, inclusive growth and sustainable development.<sup>164</sup> Full and equal participation of both women and men in political decision-making provides a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and enhances the legitimacy of political processes.<sup>165</sup> Women's political participation typically ensures transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and responsiveness of the political system at all levels of government in the general interests of collectivism.<sup>166</sup> It is necessary, in order to achieve legitimacy in

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<sup>156</sup> Mlambo and F. Kapingura 'Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region' (2019) Vol 5(1) *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1681048>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>157</sup> LB Makalanga et al 'Women Political Leaders' Participation in Local Decision-Making Structures in Tanzania' (2022) Vol 8(2), *African Journal of Applied Research* 69.

<sup>158</sup> F Rahmanto, et al 'Women's Representation Through Political Parties in Parliament Period of General Election 2019-2024' (2021) Vol 6(3), *Indonesian Political Science Review* 343.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid 344.

<sup>160</sup> S R. Zaky and M M. Moawad, 'The role of women in political participation in work to achieve development in local societies' (2021) Vol 11(1) *The Egyptian Journal of Social Work*, 123.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid 1.

<sup>162</sup> MA Orisadare ('An Assessment of the Role of Women Group in Women Political Participation, and Economic Development in Nigeria'. (2019) Vol 4(52) *Frontiers in Sociology*, 1.

<sup>163</sup> A Y Kamlasi et al 'Women's Participation in Politics as Efforts to Achieve Gender Equality: A Case Study in KUPANG CITY, Indonesia,' (2021) Vol 7(9) *International Journal of Business and Applied Social Science*, 9.

<sup>164</sup> C Mlambo and F. Kapingura 'Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region', (2019) Vol 5(1) *Cogent Social Sciences*, 1.

<sup>165</sup> S Kassa 'Challenges and Opportunities of Women Political Participation in Ethiopia' (2019) Vol 3(4) *Journal of Global Economics* 3.

<sup>166</sup> E E. Dim and J Y Asomah 'Socio-demographic Predictors of Political participation among women in Nigeria: Insights from Afrobarometer 2015 Data' (2019) Vol 20(2) *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 92.

constitutional reform, to mobilize the traditionally marginalized groups, specifically women.<sup>167</sup>

## 9. Enhancing Women's Political Participation

The levels of participation of women in politics and decision making positions remains a major concern in Zimbabwe and all over the world.<sup>168</sup> Zimbabwe must acknowledge women's needs and rights and recognising their precious contributions to the economy, policy-making, democracy and development.<sup>169</sup> The Zimbabwe Gender Commission has called for an imperative need to address some challenges limiting women's participation which include violence, gender inequality and inadequate resources.<sup>170</sup> The ACHPR reminded the Government of Zimbabwe to uphold its obligations under the aforementioned instruments, recognizing and guaranteeing the rights of all citizens to freely participate in the political sphere of the country.<sup>171</sup> It is against this background that the Women's Academy for Political and Leadership Excellency, (Walpe), in partnership with African Women's Initiative in Developing Economies (Awide), is training women in Zimbabwe to enhance their participation in all leadership positions, local and national.<sup>172</sup> More importantly, this recognition needs to result in concrete policies, laws and practices that effectively promote women's political participation and leadership, as well as budget allocations for initiatives that empower women in politics.<sup>173</sup> The media should ensure balanced coverage and neutral representation of women in its political reporting and during debates and this

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<sup>167</sup> S R.Sandusky, 'Women's Political Participation in Developing and Democratizing Countries: Focus on Zimbabwe', Vol 5(5) *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*, 255.

<sup>168</sup> T Dube, 'Engendering politics and parliamentary representation in Zimbabwe,' (2013) Vol 5(2) *Journal of African Studies and Development*, 200.

<sup>169</sup> N Zulu, New approaches needed to improve women's political participation in Zimbabwe, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/theindependent/opinion-analysis/article/200017559/new-approaches-needed-to-improve-womens-political-participation-in-zimbabwe>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>170</sup> A Chibamu, 'Women's participation in politics, declining, parties not achieving gender Equality- Says Zimbabwe Gender Commission, New Zimbabwe, 17 May 2023 <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/womens-participation-in-politics-declining-parties-not-achieving-gender-equality-says-zimbabwe-gender-commission/>(accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>171</sup> <https://africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/statement/statement/achpr/2023-08-01/press-statement-on-womens-political-participation-in-the-run-up-to-the-august-2023-presidential-elections-in-zimbabwe/eng@2023-08-01>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>172</sup> T Zivira and T Gomwe, 'A revolution to enhance women's political participation, *Newsday*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2019/10/a-revolution-to-enhance-womens-political-participation>.(accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>173</sup> Zulu, (note 170).

would contribute greatly paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable political landscape.<sup>174</sup> For women to participate effectively in politics and have transformative agency women should commit themselves to the principle and practice of collectivism to foster a shared conceptualized understanding of political representation.<sup>175</sup>

Women should have concerted, collaborated efforts to work towards political empowerment and articulation of political issues from the standpoint of women which embraces their lived experiences.<sup>176</sup> Women will not be able to take a truly equal role in political affairs until the patriarchal nature of society is changed so that women are no longer stereotyped and regarded as inferior to men.<sup>177</sup> Changing societal attitudes is likely to take many years, though change may be speeded up if women are given greater access to resources so that they become more economically active.<sup>178</sup> Quicker change may be brought about if political parties are encouraged to put up more women candidates for election to Parliament and local authorities.<sup>179</sup> This could be done by making State funding for parties conditional on their nominating a specified percentage of women candidates.<sup>180</sup> Achieving gender equality in politics is not merely a matter of changing laws; it requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. Societal attitudes and norms must evolve as much as the legal framework does.<sup>181</sup>

## 10. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered.

### 10.1 To Ministry of Justice

The government of Zimbabwe must enact specific legislation that promotes and protects women's political participation. The Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13] must be

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> G Balance 'Agency and Capabilities: Rethinking Zimbabwean Women 's Participation in Politics' Vol 9(3), *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, .124.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Election Watch 9/2023, Women's Political Participation in Zimbabwe,8 March 2023.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Zulu (note 170) New approaches needed to improve women's political participation in Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Independent, 23 October 2023, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/theindependent/opinion-analysis/article/200017559/new-approaches-needed-to-improve-womens-political-participation-in-zimbabwe>. (accessed 17 January 2025).

amended to legislate political party adherence to gender responsiveness and legally obligate political parties to ensure equal gender representation and participation as candidates in elections. The Zimbabwe Government should institute a collective approach towards the promotion of electoral participation for women. ZEC should conduct awareness campaigns in religious groups on women's right to political participation in leadership positions.

#### **10.2. To Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)**

ZEC should develop a Policy, which, amongst other things, encourages increased participation of women in political leadership. ZEC must develop and disseminate civic and voter education on women on them to political participation. ZEC should put in place sound laws that protect women against political violence and discrimination. ZEC should conduct awareness campaigns in religious groups on women's right to political participation in leadership positions.

#### **10.3. To Political Parties**

It is important to note that challenges faced by women in participating in political leadership roles can best be resolved by effective collaboration from political parties. Political parties must make a bold decision to promote the political participation of women as election candidates. Political parties must make a quota for women as a step towards the realisation of the political participation of women. Political parties must promote democratic practices in their parties to accommodate women in political leadership roles. Political parties should conduct awareness campaigns in religious groups on women's right to political participation.

#### **10.5. Zimbabwe Gender Commission**

The Gender Commission should conduct awareness campaigns in religious groups on women's right to political participation. The Gender Commission should mainstream women's gender equality in political participation in leadership roles.

#### **10.6. Religious Groups**

There is a need for advocacy and public awareness programmes to be conducted in religious organisation to provide awareness on the political participation of women.

### **11. Conclusion**



Religion has played a pivotal role in discouraging women from participating in political leadership roles. Political participation of women in Zimbabwe is a contentious issue as it adversely affected by religion. The study concluded that women are constrained by religion to enhance their political participation. Religions such Christianity and African Traditional Religion proved that women face discriminatory religious practices that deter women from political participation in political leadership roles. It was evident in this research that religious activities hinder gender inequality in political participation.

Women's political participation is as important as a political right for a representative and democratic society. The study demonstrated that religion plays a significant role in shaping societal expectations regarding women's leadership. Patriarchal interpretations reinforce gendered barriers to political participation. The analysis highlighted that legislative and institutional frameworks alone are insufficient. Religious norms influence women's access to political leadership. Religious teachings may restrict women's political participation, whereas progressive religious interpretations may foster equality and inclusion. Given the limited empirical evidence, further research is necessary to understand the mechanisms through which religion affects women's political participation. Promoting gender equality in politics requires multi-sectoral interventions that includes legal reforms, advocacy and public awareness campaigns in religious communities. By addressing the religious barriers, Zimbabwe can advance towards a political environment in which women participate equally in political leadership as guaranteed by constitutional and international commitments.