

# Factors Influencing Participation of Rural Women in Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution Referendum: A Case Study Of Ward 22, Gutu District

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**Abstract:** Participation is the cornerstone of citizen engagement. In constitution making and other public policy formulation processes, public participation typically involves preparing the public to participate through civic education and public information campaigns, as well as consulting the public on issues such as how the process should take place and the contents of the constitution itself. This study sought to examine the factors that influence women's participation in constitution making processes, specifically relating to voting in the constitution referendum, in the case of rural women residing in ward 22 of Gutu district of Zimbabwe. Gutu District is the third largest district in Masvingo province. Ward 22 is located in the communal region of Gutu central. The people of ward 22 largely depend on subsistence farming and market gardening for their livelihoods. The objectives of the study were to ascertain to what extent media campaign and publicity; efforts by women's civic groups; and public interaction through public meetings and hearings were able to influence the participation of Zimbabwean women in the 2013 referendum, in ward 22, Gutu district. Over and above these objectives, the study sought to document the experiences and views of rural Zimbabwean women on the constitution making process. This study adopted a descriptive case study research design. Samples of 108 women from Ward 22, Gutu District, were conveniently selected to participate in this study. Data was collected using a structured interview guide and questionnaires which were administered to the respondents. A focused group discussion was also carried out to verify the information gathered through these instruments. Findings and conclusions were derived by means of detailed comparative and inductive analysis of data. Descriptive statistics were employed in the presentation of the findings. Amongst the major findings are that rural women in ward 22 in Gutu district were in actual fact well informed on the contents of the constitution and could cite the benefits for women as provided for by the new framework. This is despite the fact that a large proportion of the respondents had not seen or read any part of the constitution. So contrary to popular perception and findings of other studies carried out post the referendum, rural women actually voted in the referendum from an informed position rather than mere acquiescence and conformity as previously suggested. The study also revealed that women understood the importance of their participation in the referendum and saw the value of constitutional reform. The bulk of the information on the referendum and the constitution making process in general was disseminated through word of mouth, wherein political parties played a major role in disseminating information and encouraging women's participation in the referendum. The study confirmed that there was a lack of print media particularly in relation to dissemination of the actual printed copies of the draft constitution. On the basis of the conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations are made; There is need to continue raising awareness on the New constitution beyond merely encouraging its acceptance by word of mouth but by actually distributing copies of the constitution document to women in rural areas. Women's wings of political parties should be supported and capacitated to continue to provide relevant information on the constitution to women at grassroots by leveraging on their competitive advantage over other civil society groups as well as their agency in influencing women's political participation. The power in dialogue and word of mouth should be harnessed to mobilise women for action around issues that affect them, for example, through workshops and discussions.

**Index Terms:** Constitution making process, Participation, Referendum, Voting, Women's Engagement

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Simply stated, a constitution is a set of rules by which a country or state is run. In recent years there has been increased attention on constitution making particularly in developing countries. The constitution has come to be regarded as a contract among the people on how they would like to be governed. Involvement of citizens in the process of constitution making embodies the principles of democracy which provide for the right of citizens to participate particularly in public affairs as enshrined in international human rights instruments such as International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)- 1979 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Democracy

emphasises individual freedom and direct citizen participation in political processes, of which Constitution making is one. This is the ultimate expression of sovereignty. Constitution making like all other public policy processes must be inclusive, by allowing participation particularly of minority groups such as youth, women and people living with disabilities. By its nature, citizen participation is an open process in which the rights of the citizens to be informed, to provide comments to the government and to receive a response from government, are met, by means of a full opportunity to be involved and to express one's needs and interests. There are many benefits of public participation, especially when undertaken holistically by involving vulnerable and marginalised groups. These benefits include enhancing national unity, promoting legitimacy and acceptance of the policies, raising awareness on the constitution and fostering civic education as well as facilitating innovation and information sharing amongst citizens. Public participation also enhances the confidence of citizens to take responsibility and action on issues that affect their livelihoods such as the provision of social services. Furthermore, public participation raises the voices of marginalised and minority groups, particularly women, whose opinions are usually overlooked. Africa has witnessed many new constitutions in recent times. The 1996 South African Constitution, the 1995 Uganda Constitution and the 2010 Kenyan Constitution are noteworthy examples of legal craftsmanship in the best liberal

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tradition. The wave of new constitutions in Africa is part of the struggle for democracy across the continent. "Modern ideas on Constitution making place emphasis on popular participation and widespread consultation in order to produce a constitution that will endure and which people feel is truly their own"- Ben Hlatshwayo (Zimbabwean High Court Judge). Like many other former British colonies, Zimbabwe was 'given' its constitution by the British Government at the attainment of Independence in 1980. There have been several amendments to the constitution since independence, yet the document has remained a source of political tension and general dissatisfaction. In February 2009, following a protracted election process which was marred by violence and disputes between the ruling party and the opposition, a new inclusive government was formed between ZANU PF and the two formations of MDC. This establishment was on the basis of the Global Political Agreement (GPA), which was brokered by SADC and signed on 15 September 2008 by the three political parties. The GPA was a transitional arrangement whose purpose was to restore democratic rule, stabilise the economy and undertake key reforms. Constitutional reform was specified in the GPA as ultimate criterion for democratisation of the government and nation of Zimbabwe. Following adoption of GPA and as stipulated, Zimbabwe undertook a participatory Constitution making process which culminated in a draft constitution which was resoundingly adopted by the people of Zimbabwe through a majority 'YES' vote in the referendum. According to the Zimbabwe Election Support Network Report (March, 2013), 93% of the voters in the referendum endorsed the draft constitution. The Constitution making process was led by the Constitutional Parliamentary Select Committee (COPAC). Altogether, COPAC convened 4700 meetings of Zimbabwean citizens across the country in which they were able to reach close to 1,6 Million people. There have been several explanations and postulations pertaining to the reasons for the much higher turnout in Zimbabwe's constitution referendum compared to previous elections. For instance, according to the Election Resource Centre (2013), in their report on the referendum, the higher voter turnout can be attributed to several factors which include relaxed voting requirements that enabled non-registered but eligible voters to cast their ballots, the prevailing peaceful environment, a new generation of first time voters, effectiveness of voter awareness programmes by civil society as well as increased interest in the referendum process generated through social media platforms such as facebook and twitter. Women represent the majority of Zimbabwe's population. According to ZIMSTAT (2012), the population of women relative to men is 52%. This implies that the majority of the electorate constitutes of women. Unfortunately there is no statistical data available to date which clearly shows how many women compared to men voted in the Constitution referendum. This may be attributed to the fact that voter registration was not a requirement to vote in the referendum. However, according to the Research and Advocacy Unit, R.A.U (2013), in their audit of the June 2013 voter's roll, the gender distribution shows that a higher number of registered voters are women (51,93%) as compared to men (48,08%). The report also revealed that there was a higher registration rate of women than men in rural areas as compared to metropolitan provinces. On the basis of this report, it can be inferred that more women than men also voted in the Referendum on the new constitution. Participation is the cornerstone of citizen engagement. In constitution

making and other public policy formulation processes, public participation typically involves preparing the public to participate through civic education and public information campaigns, as well as consulting the public on issues such as how the process should take place and the contents of the constitution itself. According to the concept of democracy, constitution making should be characterised by a process in which citizens are allowed to take part in the discussion, drafting and ratification of the constitution through highly participative procedures. The process should take place in a context in which citizens are free to choose a constitution they want without fear, threat or socio-political limitations. The majority of Zimbabweans live in the rural areas and 52% of the population residing in the rural areas are females. (Labour Force Survey, 2011). It is critical therefore to fully ascertain whether it is justified to conclude that the New Zimbabwean Constitution is a citizen driven document that projects the views, opinions and interests of Zimbabwean citizens, particularly rural women who constitute 36% of Zimbabwe's total population. The concept of Inclusiveness versus participation requires exploration and inquiry in order to understand the reasons behind women's participation in the referendum on the constitution. Understanding the actual factors that influenced rural women's participation in the referendum will assist the researcher in explaining why there is limited knowledge on the constitution amongst rural women, specifically those residing in ward 22, Gutu district.

### 1.1 Statement of the problem

Participation of Zimbabwean women in politics, governance and the constitution making process in particular, is a key indicator of gender equality within the society. The ability of women to engage with the process implies that they can influence public policy on equal footing with their male counterparts and without discrimination. The turnout at the referendum on Zimbabwe's New constitution was remarkably high. According to the Zimbabwe Elections Commission (2013), the official voter turnout at the referendum was 3, 317, 695, which is more than half the number of eligible voters. This turnout was much higher than previous elections including the 2008 Presidential run off which was highly contested wherein 2, 514, 750 people voted. The monumental voter turnout is indicative of high awareness on the contents of the constitution and the actual voting process. It is also a reflection of heightened interest and commitment of citizens to the constitution making process as a whole. However, despite this high turnout, various reports have shown that women in Zimbabwe have relatively low knowledge on gains for women provided for by the new constitution include; equal rights regarding custody and guardianship of children, protection from previously permissible harmful laws, customs, traditional and cultural practices that go against the rights of women as well as full and equal dignity of person pertaining to equal opportunities in political social and economic activities. On the ground, women are unable to translate these constitutional gains to their day to day lives due to ignorance, as reflected in the results of the survey undertaken by The Women's Trust. As part of national efforts towards constitutionalism and operationalisation of the New Constitution, The Women's Trust, a local NGO based in Harare, carried out a rapid assessment on women's priorities for the commissions that are provided for in the New Constitution. The survey was carried out in 4 districts (2rural and 2 urban). One of the key

findings of the survey was that although the majority of respondents voted in the referendum, less than half knew about the New Constitution. Even more disturbing was the finding that below a quarter of the respondents had ever seen or read any part of the constitution. In light of this, several key question and concerns emerge such as whether the participatory Constitution making process in Zimbabwe was really participatory and whether the majority 'YES' vote for the new constitution is a true reflection of women's understanding of the gains and benefits enshrined in the new framework. The critical question that women therefore need to answer is; "Why did I vote YES! for the new constitution in the referendum?", because, despite an overwhelming 'YES' vote in the constitutional referendum in Zimbabwe, and widespread pronouncement on the perceived benefits for women in the new constitution, women in rural communities have poor knowledge and limited understanding of the New Constitution i.e. women at grassroots are unable to define what a constitution is or explain its purpose.

## 1.2 Objectives

The general objective of this study was to investigate the factors influencing the participation of rural women in Zimbabwe's constitution making process: a case study of ward 22, Gutu district.

## 1.3 Specific Objectives

1. To determine the influence of media campaign on rural women's participation in Zimbabwe's referendum on constitutional reform in ward 22 of Gutu district.
2. To establish the influence of public interaction on rural women's participation in Zimbabwe's referendum on constitutional reform in ward 22 of Gutu district.
3. To determine the influence of advocacy efforts by women's civic groups on the participation of rural women in Zimbabwe's referendum on constitutional reform in ward 22 of Gutu district.

## 1.4 Conceptual Framework

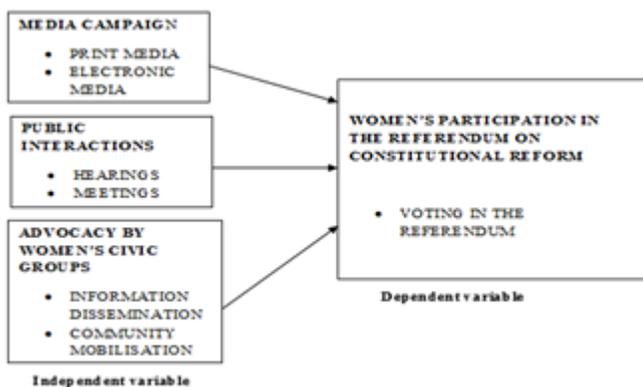


FIG 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

## 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

A descriptive case study research design was employed by this study. A case study is an in depth study of a particular

situation. It is a form of qualitative descriptive research that draws conclusions only about the particular group and context under study. Case studies are useful especially when the researcher seeks to answer "How" and "Why" questions. The goal of case studies is to raise new ideas and questions that feed into further research. Case study research design was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to focus on women in ward 22 of Gutu District specifically, thereby getting more detailed information pertaining to their participation in the constitutional referendum. A case study also enabled the researcher to explain the causal link between women's engagement and specific factors that influence their participation in Constitution making processes, specifically in terms of the referendum. Additional insights such as women's experiences with the media, public interactions as well as women's civic groups were also derived through employing a case study research design.

## 2.2 Data Analysis

The qualitative data derived from the analysis of the interviews and Focused Group Discussion, was used to arrive at various findings and conclusions through detailed content analysis. Where necessary, relevant literature was used to contextualize these findings. IBM SPSS Version 22 software package was used in capturing and analysing quantitative data collected largely from the closed questions in the questionnaire. This package enabled the researcher to analyse data in a more comprehensive way by generating corresponding tables, graphs and other relevant statistics.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Influence of media on rural women's participation in the referendum

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked a question which sought to ascertain from which specific medium women in general were able to access information on the referendum. The interviews on the other hand, allowed respondents to cite all sources from which they, at a personal level, had received information related to the referendum. 65,4% of those who responded to the questionnaire cited word of mouth as the main source of information, 34,6 % cited the radio and 2,6% cited print media.

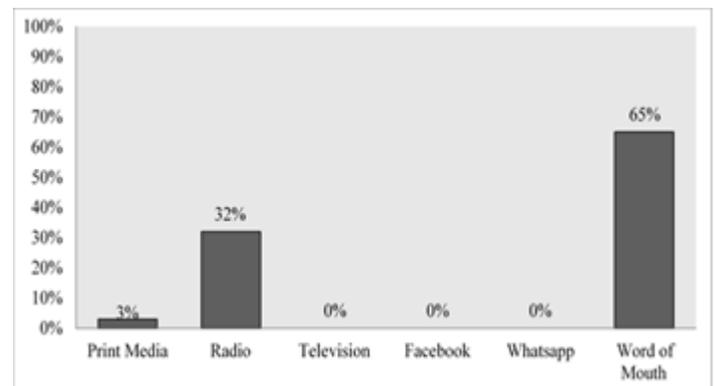


FIG 2: ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON THE REFERENDUM

Half of the interview respondents cited the radio as their source of information on the referendum, whilst newspapers

were cited by only 3 of the respondents. This corresponds with the findings made through the questionnaires. Of note however are workshops which were cited by 15 out of the 18 interview respondents. This essentially means that 83,3% of the respondents had received information on the referendum through dialogue and engagement in discussions as is typically the case with workshops. It can thus be inferred that word of mouth cited in the questionnaires includes workshops to a large extent but also extends to discussions with other members of the community (cited by 27,7%), women's gatherings (cited by 38,9%) as well as political party meetings (cited by 44,4%) which were also given by respondents as alternative sources of information outside the options that respondents were asked to choose from. In one of the interviews, the respondent made the following profound declaration; "*Women would not have voted in the referendum if they had not received the full information from their political parties*". This statement demonstrates that mainstream electronic and print media alone did not suffice in providing rural women with information on the constitution and referendum.

### **3.2 Influence of advocacy by women's civic groups on participation of rural women in the referendum**

Women were asked through the questionnaire the extent to which they felt that women's organisations had played a part in influencing their participation in the referendum, through information dissemination and or mobilization of women. 100% of the respondents reported that women's organizations influenced women's participation to a great extent. On probing this further through the interviews, respondents cited various ways in which women's organizations and civic groups had contributed to women voting in the referendum. 72,2% of the respondents reported that women's civic groups brought women together and gave them information on the importance of their participation in the referendum. Other methods that were used by women's organizations and civic groups to encourage participation of women in the referendum as cited by the respondents include; holding meetings for women only, working with councilors at ward level to mobilize women and encouraging women to attend public meetings during the constitution making process. When asked to further explain how women's civic groups influenced women's participation particularly in the build up to the referendum i.e. during the different stages of the constitution making process, 55,6% of the respondents described how women's groups held many meetings to teach women about their constitutional rights. The respondents also revealed that these women's groups also encouraged women to vote in the referendum, they motivated women to take up leadership positions and they strengthened the capacities of female councilors to disseminate information on the constitution. The role of women's civic groups in influencing women's participation is shown in the following statement made by one of the respondents; "*Women's groups helped us through holding meetings and giving us reading materials during workshops in ward 22 as well as other wards governed by female councilors*". This is further supported by the following sentiment made by another respondent; "*They gave women enough information which enabled them to make beneficial choices*".

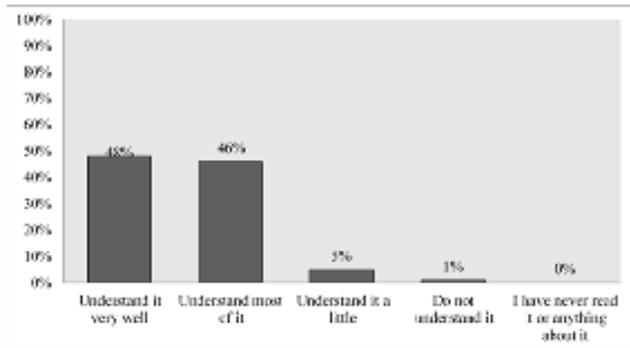
### **3.3 Influence of public interactions through hearings and meetings on participation of rural women in the**

#### **referendum**

Respondents were asked through the questionnaires whether they had attended any public meeting or consultations on the constitution that were held in their ward before the referendum. During the interviews, respondents were also asked the same question although an additional dimension in relation to their knowledge on the actual existence of these meetings was also interrogated. 98,7% of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they had attended a public meeting or consultation. 83,3% of the interview respondents revealed that they had knowledge and were aware of public meetings that were held in their ward to discuss the constitution. However, 77,8% of the interview respondents reported that they had attended a public meeting or consultation on the constitution. Reasons for nonattendance were cited as follows; lack of information on the meetings and occupation with other commitments at the time of the meeting. During the focused group discussion, one of the women mentioned that she was well aware of the public meetings that were taking place in her ward but gave the following reason for her failure to attend any of them; "*My husband attended on my behalf*". The main reason given for women's attendance at public meetings and hearings was cited by 38,9 % of the respondents as follows; "*we wanted to get information on the constitution and to understand which rights were provided for women in the new constitution*". The following additional reasons were also given by the women for their attendance; "*I wanted to participate because I had heard discussions about these meetings on the radio*" and "*I wanted to get information on how to access resources to start projects*". In response to the question on whether women were given the opportunity to express themselves during these public interaction, 98,7% of the respondents to the questionnaires said YES, whilst 100% of the interview respondents concurred with this view. The following statement made by one of the interview respondents supports this finding; "*I wanted to contribute my own views on the constitution because as women, we were searching for freedom from discrimination*".

### **3.4 Level of knowledge and understanding of the Women's Rights section of the new Zimbabwean constitution**

Given that there was a widespread perception amongst Zimbabweans that the new constitution as tailored to meet the needs of women, respondents were asked in the questionnaire the extent to which they understood the section on women's rights that is written in the constitution. A follow up question was asked during the interviews to actually verify the level of understanding of women in relation to the specific constitutional gains for women that are provided for in the constitution document. Figure 3 below illustrates the findings;



**FIG 3:** Level of understanding of Women's Rights section in the new constitution

The following responses were given by women during interviews when they were asked to list the specific gains for women that are written in the constitution; Women's rights are now clearly specified (cited by 22,2%), women have equal rights and opportunities as men (cited by 27,8%), women can now obtain birth certificates for their children freely even in the absence of the father (cited by 44,4%), women have guaranteed seats in parliament (cited by 22,2%) and women can now start their own business and projects (cited by 16,7%). All the responses cited are correct reflections of the three broad categories under the section on women's right i.e. socio-economic and political rights, rights of custody and guardianship of children and protection from violations resulting from traditions, customs or cultural practices.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Amongst the major findings of this study are that rural women in ward 22 in Gutu district were in actual fact well informed on the contents of the constitution and could cite the benefits for women as provided for by the new framework. This is despite the fact that a large proportion of the respondents had not seen or read any part of the constitution. So contrary to popular perception and findings of other studies carried out post the referendum, rural women actually voted in the referendum from an informed position rather than mere acquiescence and conformity as previously suggested. The study also revealed that women understood the importance of their participation in the referendum and saw the value of constitutional reform. The bulk of the information on the referendum and the constitution making process in general was disseminated through word of mouth, wherein political parties played a major role in disseminating information and encouraging women's participation in the referendum. The study confirmed that there was a lack of print media particularly in relation to dissemination of the actual printed copies of the draft constitution. This study demonstrated that when women are informed and given the opportunity to contribute their views to a political process, they freely mobilise and participate as reflected by the high voter turnout at the referendum on constitution reform. This applies to women living in rural areas as well, as they often tend to be overlooked in the provision of information particularly if it is in written form.

#### 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the conclusions drawn from the findings of this study, the following recommendations to increase the meaningful participation of women in general and rural women in particular in elections and or referendums are made;

1. There is need to continue raising awareness on the New constitution beyond merely encouraging its acceptance by word of mouth but by actually distributing copies of the constitution document to women in rural areas so that they have the opportunity of reading and framing their own understanding and opinions on the document as well as a chance to fully tap into the gains they voted for in the referendum.
2. Women's wings of political parties should be supported and capacitated to continue to provide relevant information on the constitution to women at grassroots by leveraging on their competitive advantage over other civil society groups as well as their agency in influencing women's political participation.
3. The power in dialogue and word of mouth should be harnessed to mobilize women for action around issues that affect them. Interventions centered on workshops and discussion can be employed to build solidarity and to influence the participation of women in political processes such as elections without the limitations of educational qualifications and or other technical competencies, which tend to restrict involvement and participation of women in rural areas.

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