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Gender, Politics and the Quest for Equality in Zimbabwe: Reflections on the 2018 Harmonised Elections

TAPIWA MUSASA¹

Abstract

This article argues that women can make a difference if given a chance to claim their equal share and representation in the political arena. Zimbabwe, like many other African countries in the world, has more women than men (52% and 48%, respectively). Due to the dominance and discrimination of patriarchal societies in most countries, women are always marginalised in all facets of life, be it social, political or economic, irrespective of the fact that they are the majority. The international community realised the need to bring gender parity into the world because women are not contributing their maximum potential in intellectual and physical capabilities, costing the world a major percentage in sustainable development inputs, initiatives and progress. Despite the existence of legal instruments promising equality between men and women, women remain outnumbered in most decision-making positions, rendering policies and laws ineffective. Gender equality for most women in Zimbabwe and the world at large is just an illusion. The article examines the 2018 harmonised elections' processes, challenges and opportunities that could have been encountered by women countrywide in their political careers.

Keywords: discrimination, marginalised, male dominance, level playing field, equity

INTRODUCTION

The population of Zimbabwe was reported to be 13.5 million in 2012 (Zimstats, 2012). Currently, estimates indicate a total population of 15.26 million, that rose from 14.88 million in 2017 and women constitute 51.32% of that number. (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs-Population Division, 2018). It is disappointing to note

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that the numbers of women in leadership and decision-making positions in the country remain far below that of their male counterparts, although women are the majority in the country. Zimbabwe is a signatory and has ratified many international treaties and conventions that promote gender equality. Following guidelines from international conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW articles 7 and 8) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG number 5 and also MDG 3), the country prioritised the issues of women to the extent of including a section for them in her constitution in 2013.

Special reference is made here to section 17:1(b) that states:

the state must take all measures, including legislative measures to ensure that (ii) women constitute at least half the membership of all commissions and other elective and appointed governmental bodies established by or under this constitution or any act of parliament.

In addition, a national gender policy was created to effectively deal with gender issues in the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development. This inquiry is making special reference to section 5:3 of the National Gender Policy 2013-2017 (Gender, Politics and Decision-Making) whose main objective reads:

To create a supportive environment for gender parity in politics and decision-making positions

(ii) Strategy-develop and strengthen policies, legal provisions and programmes, to ensure attainment of a 50/50 representation of men and women in politics and other key decision-making positions.

When a democratic process like the 2018 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe is taking place, that is when instruments can be measured in terms of pragmatism, usefulness, effectiveness and efficiency. It is the gist of this article to explore to what level women are being involved and participating in this critical decision-making process and also find out how the gender instruments will be used to improve gender parity. Whether the blueprints are a reality or not for women in Zimbabwe will be evaluated using the final results of the elections, relying on the actual numbers of women who will finally get a chance to represent more than half of the population, who-women. The information presented in this study was collected from April to August 2018 when the election period was being held. This period afforded the researcher a chance to investigate the issues before, during and after the 2018 harmonised elections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's involvement and participation in public spheres has been tackled from different angles by different authors. From a democratic point of view, most authors quote Abraham Lincoln who states, "Democracy is a government of the people by the people." This means representatives are chosen through free and fair periodic elections. According to Onkronkwo-chukwu (2013), democracy is about the fair representation of all interest groups in society. The low representation of women is a violation of the principle of democracy as provided for in the Beijing platform of action which states that the affirmative quota for women should always be at least 30% because women constitute more than half of the population. Singh (2014) concurs and maintains that equitable participation of women in politics is believed to be essential in building democracy. Despite comprising over 50% of the world's population, women remain underrepresented as voters, political leaders and elected officials, thus democracy cannot claim to be delivering for all its citizens when half of the world's population remains underrepresented in politics.

The following statistics, as presented by the Global Fund for Women (2005), shed some light on the status of women worldwide:

In 2003, at least 54 countries had discriminatory laws against women. [Amnesty International, 2003] Some countries still do not have universal suffrage. Among them are Brunei, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. [Women in Politics 2003] Women hold only 6.4% of the seats in Arab states' Parliaments, 14.4% of seats in sub-Saharan Africa, 17.6% of seats in Europe and 18.5% of seats in the Americas. [Women's Learning Partnership, 2002].

According to Kumar (2017), the majority of Members of Parliament worldwide were male in 2017. Of the 39 142 Members of Parliament, 29 924 were male while only 9 268 were female, constituting a mere 23.6%. In the upper house leaders, only 1 581 were female as compared to 5 291,- a female representation of 23%. The author went on to give a detailed analysis of the regional and Southern African countries' female representation in parliaments as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The statistics show that gender parity in politics is still a mirage worldwide.

Table 1: Representation of women in parliament-(Regional) (Kumar, 2017:78)

Regional Average	Lower House (%)	Upper House (%)	Both Houses' Combined (%)
Nordic countries	41.7	41.7
Americas	28.3	27.6	28.1
Europe(excluding Nordic)	26.1	26.0	26.1
Sub Saharan Africa	23.9	22.9	23.8
Asia	19.7	16.0	19.3
Pacific	14.6	37.1	17.2
Arab States	18.2	12.6	17.5

Table 2: Representation of women in parliaments in Southern Africa (Kumar, *ibid.*:82)

No	Country	Year	Total Seats	Seats by Women	% Women
1	South Africa	2014	449	185	41.2
2	Mozambique	2014	250	99	39.6
3	Angola	2012	220	84	38.8
4	Namibia	2015	146	53	36.3
5	Zimbabwe	2013	350	125	36
6	Lesotho	2017	149	35	23.5
7	Zambia	2016	167	30	18
8	Malawi	2014	192	32	16.7
9	Swaziland	2013	95	14	14.7
10	Botswana	2014	63	6	9.5

UN Women (2017) avers that there is slow progress towards gender equality in politics. It is fact that from local to the global level, women's leadership and political participation are restricted. Very few can be seen leading civil institutions, private organisations or academic institutions despite their good leadership qualities and their strength in them as agents of change and improvement, patience, tolerance and good governance. Women's political empowerment and access to leadership positions at all levels are fundamental to achieving Sustainable Development Goals and a more equal world (Pankhurst, 2002). From a study carried out by the World Bank (2008) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the proportion of seats held by women in parliament increased from 3.9% in 2000 to 8.8% in 2007 and the regional average remained the lowest

in the world. While women remain the majority across the world, constituting more than 50% of the population, figures display a dominance of males over females that may take a long to redress. This gender disparity has negative impacts and was confirmed by Kofi Anani in Tanikodi and Surgirtha (2007:589) who states:

The role of women in decision-making is central to the advancement of women around the world and the progress of humankind as a whole. There is still far to go in ensuring that half of the world's population took up its rightful place in the world's decision-making.

From this quote, it can be deduced that the reason more women should enter politics and participate as voters and candidates is that they take up their role of leading half of the world's population.

Why women remain under-represented in politics, leadership and decision-making positions may vary from country to country but there appears to be common features in the challenges. The political playing field is uneven and not conducive to women's participation. The environments are hostile and unfriendly. Even those who have managed to brave the chilly weather, have suffered media attacks and labelling by family and society (*ibid.*). In concurrence is Singh (2014), who avers that politics is biased against women. When women fail, the failure is boldly highlighted, the overemphasis being on trying to prove to the affected woman and others that politics is not for them. That, though, is never the case when men fail. Samakafu (undated) posits that patriarchy, systems, corruption and sexual exploitation faced by women in politics, lead to other women shunning politics. Mis-definition of democracy by political parties, society and development partners, has also contributed to the low participation and failure of women in their political careers. In India, for example, the customs, patriarchal setups, societal norms and values have always treated women as subordinate to men leading to the unequal distribution of resources, in the process crippling women of the ability to campaign due to a lack of all types of resource. (Chaudhary, 2018).

Gender stereotyping is one of the impeding factors for women to succeed in politics and this affects decision-making from the individual woman who needs to decide to stand for political election to party selection of candidates with great influence on them on

whom they should vote for on the actual election day. They mentioned issues as illiteracy, work and family, lack of political networks, private-public divide, lack of finance, societal norms and cultural factors as challenges that should be looked into, should there be any meaningful increase in the involvement and participation in politics by female candidates. In concurrence is Agbalajobi (2010), who points out that in Nigeria, the nature of gender roles, lack of economic incentives, discriminatory customs and laws and lack of affirmative quota action within parties, have remained the main impediments to the success of women in their political careers.

In addition, women are not respected when they fight for their rights, like land and family issues in courts. They are usually hurt by unnecessary scrutiny of their private lives, for example, publishing scandals in their lives or even attacking their fashion choices. Again, that is generally not the case for men (Kumar, 2017). On the same notion, UN Women (2013), points out that women in India face physical and verbal violence, abduction and threats of murder the moment they publicly show their interest and enthusiasm in standing for political office. Women also face violence in politics. Krook and Restrepo-Salazar (2016) call this political and electoral violence, psychological violence, economic violence, symbolic violence, interrelated violence and sexual and mental harassment. The continued existence and proliferation of such cases show that the implementation of laws is inadequate, including a lack of support from the police, judiciary and power structures. While such unfavourable conditions are not peculiar to India, they are common in Third World countries and across the world, leading to low numbers of women participating in politics. In most cases, women candidates are given very little support by political parties and the voters exercise apathy towards women believing that the women are most unlikely to win the election and parties do not want to risk losing the seats. However, with support from the party, educating the electorate and the women candidates themselves increasing contact with other organisations, coupled with a reduction in the dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations, women can win elections just like their male counterparts, if not better (Shvedovo, 2005; Chowdhury, 2009; Pyeat and Yanus, 2018).

It is essential to note at this point that women themselves are not a homogeneous group. When dealing with women's issues one should consider the position of older women/aging, adolescents/young women, refugees/asylum seekers, indigenous women, entrepreneurs/self-employed, migrant women, rural women, disabled women and female household heads. According to Driedger (2013), women will always make a difference in politics because they have different life experiences from those of men, that can broaden and enhance the quality of debate and balance of policy perspectives on a wide range of important issues.

Dahlerup (2005) found two ways that can be used to increase women's numbers in politics: the fast track and the incremental track to gender balance in politics. According to the incremental track discourse, women do not have enough resources, so they have to wait until this discrepancy is addressed and then eventually, equality can prevail. In contrast, the fast-track discourse rejects the idea of gradual improvement in favour of affirmative action and quotas. This is due to the realisation that discrimination and exclusion are so rampant that gender equality will never just happen on its own and the growing impatience by contemporary feminists who cannot wait for 70-80 years before attaining their goals. Thus fast track is the only solution.

Kumar (2017) posits that the challenge in politics, Zimbabwe politics in particular, is that people tend to vote for a party, not the candidate. In that case, parties have to adopt a quota system so that the 50/50 representation from most international guidelines is met. Parties that do not meet the stipulated representation should not be allowed to contest and this can go a long way in ensuring equal participation by both genders in the political arena for most countries in the world.

According to Maphosa *et al* (2015), there are many instruments and articles that promote gender equality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for example, its articles 2 and 21 emphasize the fact that everyone has a right to partake in the government of his/her country without discrimination based on sex. In addition, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW articles 7 and 8 emphasizes the inclusion of women in

politics and representation in Government. The Convention provides the basis for realising equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life - including the right to vote and to stand for election - as well as education, health and employment. States parties agree to take all appropriate measures, including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms. According to the UN (2015), Agenda 2030, another crucial international document, is not silent on the need to bring equity and equality across genders. Goal numbers 4 and 5 emphasize the need to ensure inclusive equitable education, as well as achieve gender equality and empower women and girls, respectively.

Regionally, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) guidelines call for a 50% threshold of female representation in decision-making positions. Locally, enshrined in the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013, section 17:1(b) (i) and (ii), stipulate that the state has a responsibility to ensure that both genders are equally represented in all spheres.

Despite all these instruments and pieces of legislation, women still remain underrepresented in politics due to various factors alluded to by different authors reviewed herein, a clear indication that there is a gap between blueprints and the situation on the ground.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A combination of primary and secondary (desktop) research were used in this inquiry. In the primary research, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods were used during the data-gathering process in an attempt to increase the validity and reliability of the findings from the inquiry. Participant observation, face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Senior officials were interviewed in the Zimbabwe Gender Commissions and the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, particularly the Gender Division, for views and comments on the status of women and female numbers participating in 2018 harmonised elections.

FINDINGS

The inquiry found the following statistics from the Zimbabwe 2018 harmonised elections:

Table 3: Highest Office: Presidential Candidates (*Author's Field Work, 2018*)

Group	Number	Percentage
Men	19	82.6
Women	4	17.4
Total	23	100

Table 4: House of National Assembly Candidates per province (*ZEC Website, Retrieved August 2018*)

Entry	Province	Total Candidates	Male	%	Female	%
1	Bulawayo	202	165	81.7	37	18.3
2	Harare	316	235	74.4	81	25.6
3	Manicaland	191	169	88.96	22	11.1
4	Mash Central	98	88	89.9	10	10.1
5	Mash East	121	105	86.8	16	13.4
6	Mash west	159	142	89.3	17	20.7
7	Masvingo	136	125	91.1	11	0.9
8	Mat North	135	122	90.16	13	9.1
9	Mat South	97	81	83.5	16	16.5
10	Midlands	176	159	90.3	17	0.3
	Total	1631	1391	85.3	240	14.7

Table 5: Local authority candidates per province (*ZEC Website, Retrieved August 2018*)

Entry	Province	Total Candidates	Female	%	Male	%
1	Bulawayo	335	113	33.73	222	66.26
2	Harare	591	147	24.87	444	75.12
3	Manicaland	848	145	17.09	703	82.9
4	Mash Central	578	60	10.38	518	89.61
5	Mash East	621	86	13.84	535	86.15
6	Mash West	815	133	16.31	682	83.68
7	Masvingo	707	86	12.16	621	87.83
8	Mat North	759	127	16.73	632	83.26
9	Mat South	562	103	18.32	459	81.67
10	Midlands	760	132	17.36	628	82.63
	TOTAL	6576	1132	17.22	5444	82.78

A general summary of statistics, facts and figures from the 2018 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe

- 1) All the 23 candidates contesting the presidential elections were first-time contestants to run for the presidency. A female representation of 4/23 (17%) is the greatest number of women to ever contest for the highest office in the land. The current (2019) leadership in the same post is 100% men. No woman got any post on the presidium.
- 2) Out of the 210 constituencies in the whole country during the elections, only 84 were contested for by women.
- 3) Of the 47 parties that fielded candidates, 20 of them did not field any women.
- 4) There were 10 985 polling stations during the voting process and the presence of women was that of polling agents and voters.
- 5) Out of the 55 political parties running for the elections, 40 fielded candidates for the local authority, 12 of these fielded men only. Women constituted 17% of the 6 796 candidates.
- 6) Of the 5.6 million people registered to vote, 54.5% were women, while 45.5% were men.
- 7) Coontrary to expected results in 6 above, men won an average of 85.03% of the seats in the elections while women won an average of 14.97% of seats in the national assembly, local authority and unopposed wards.
- 8) At least 60% of the registered voters were below the age of 40. Youths between 18 and 34 years of age registered to vote, constituting 43.5%, while those above 60 years constituted 13.6%.

Table 6: Number of women in unopposed wards (Primary data)

Province	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Mash Central	18	94.7	1	5.3	19
Mash East	7	77.7	2	22.3	9
Mat North	1	100	0	0	1
Mat South	3	75	1	25	4
Midlands	11	84.6	2	15.4	13
Total	40	87	6	13	46

DISCUSSION

Zimbabwean women remain under-represented in politics, despite the existence of numerous international, regional and national

instruments advocating for a 50% representation of women in all decision-making positions. The statistics from the 2018 harmonised elections show that men still have a lion's share of the decision-making positions in the land, a situation of serious gender inequality. Concerning this 2018 election, the results show that the population still finds prefers to be led by men in all sectors of the economy. With a 54% representation on the voter's roll, obviously the women could have scooped most of the seats should they have considered voting for each other, but they got a pathetic 14.7% representation through votes, while the men won 85.3% of the seats (Table 3). Even in local authorities elections, men got 82.7%, while women got 17.21 % (Table 4), showing more or less the same trends in the results. Compared to 2013, when women had a 36% representation (Table 2), 2018 had less women parliamentarians, showing a negative trend. It is, therefore surprising that women cry for gender equality but when it comes to elections, they hardly vote for each other. This shows that there is more to these statistics than meets the eye. What then is the reason women vote for men instead of their own during elections? The question researchers should be asking, therefore, is whether women themselves are even interested in the gender equality issue, or if there is a serious need for attitudinal change in the majority of the population, the women. One common answer found during the data-gathering process was that there are no role models in politics. Those who have made it in the political circles either abort their career or are passive and are not doing anything at all. The few elected women parliamentarians just sit in Parliament without raising any useful issues that affect women, nor do the female MPs demonstrate maximum ability in bringing change and development. This may be because the women do not have access to resources or they lack communication skills and publicity because in politics, one needs to be well-connected, which most women fall short of.

Sometimes, to gain popularity that is missing in most female-led constituencies, one does not have to use own resources but has to connect with the correct resourced people, as well as the media. Responses got during the research show that the media is biased against women. When female parliamentarians contact a journalist to cover their activities in their constituencies, they are given a million questions on the popularity and influence of the person seeking

coverage as well as whether they are male or female. In most cases, journalists give excuses for not coming as opposed to when a well-known male requests the same. This affects the women negatively in their political careers as well as affects the chances of other women winning the elections. Some of the women interviewed during the data-gathering process preferred voting for men because men are strong and are not easily intimidated by economic challenges. Another view from the interviewees was that if you vote for a woman, you have betrayed your political party because women will never win. The best way to make your party win was, therefore, to vote for a man who is very active in politics. This is then a clear indication that people vote for a party, not individuals. This could be the reason independent candidates rarely win because they do not belong to any political party.

Even if an individual is corrupt, lazy or never there for the people during development initiatives and policy implementations, people will still vote for him/her because they just want the party to win. This is a dangerous in Zimbabwean politics because people are not voting for development that should be the main priority to consider when choosing parliamentarians and other political leaders. The country is in a very critical situation in which the leadership is calling for a multi-stakeholder approach and pro-development people are needed to usher the country into a middle economy by 2030 (Vision 2030). Meritocracy is a better approach than being partisan when choosing the right candidates for development. When men were asked why they would not vote for women, some indications were that women behave too docile when they are in Parliament as if they were at a funeral, making no contributions all, thus voting for a woman is a mere waste of time. On the same note, some men also commented that men are very active in Parliament. One wonders then if the activism in Parliament has anything to do with the throwing of chairs, shouting and banging of desks that is very common in parliamentary debates.

However, a marked improvement can be seen in the participation of women in Zimbabwean politics. The fact that four women out of the 23 candidates (17.4%) lined up for presidential candidacy contested for that seat are a marked improvement, one of its kind in the history of gender equality in Zimbabwe (Table 1). It shows that some women

are fully realising the need to claim their rightful share in leadership positions in the country. Instead of waiting quietly at home, some women are taking up initiatives to empower themselves and help reduce the gender gap in the leadership. In as much as some men think women should take up leadership positions, there is no way the men are going to offer that gender parity on a silver platter. A clear indicator is that no woman got any position in the highest office. The vice presidency that was once occupied by a woman, Joyce Mujuru, went back to a man once again, proof that the system remains highly polarised in terms of gender equality. Women themselves, therefore, need to realise that there is need for awareness campaigns, sensitisation workshops, training and the development of support groups for gender equality.

The women who have made it into leadership should continue fighting for their equal share in political leadership in Zimbabwe. Most of the posts should come through winning elections, rather than from the quota system that may still be insignificant considering the number of women in the country. Some of the reasons women may not speak in Parliament may be due to cultural backgrounds in which women are never given a chance to say anything, lower educational qualifications and lack of exposure due to marginalisation which shakes one's confidence in public gatherings. These and many more factors have always been identified by many scholars as hindrances to women's empowerment. There is need to continue advocating for more schools in rural areas and mechanisms that ensure that girls stay in school and progress into vocational training colleges and institutions of higher learning as a prerequisite if the nation is to reach sustainable gender equality levels. It is also critical to discuss why women may prefer not to participate in politics in the first place.

There is no level playing field in the political arena. A history of violence has always been reported and families of those women who choose to participate in politics are targeted. There is worse violence and intimidation in intraparty elections than in interparty elections. This is a clear indication that politicians in Africa do not have development at heart but for hunger for fame, prestige and personal financial gains at the expense of community development, the reason the majority of the people remain in absolute poverty while a few

continue to get richer through corruption and swindling of public funds, thus increasing the inequality gap. Most of those people who win the elections see it as a mission accomplished when, in fact, it should be the beginning of their work as they become servants of the people. In addition, women lack campaign finances due to the dependency syndrome on men due to the already mentioned lack of education and access to resources even at household levels. This means that in a situation where one's husband does not want them to participate in public life, they can always deny the women the opportunity and the financial support, leading them to losing the elections. In addition, because of the patriarchal society that believes a woman should be married to gain significance, recognition and respect, single and widowed women rarely win the elections because they are labelled as "loose or prostitutes", when in fact, women should be treated as autonomous individuals who can think and make decisions independently of a man or a married surname. The plain truth is single women are even better placed to brace the war in the political arena since they have the time and flexibility to schedule their programmes as and when duty calls, as compared to their married counterparts. In some situations, women's private lives, like their love affairs, are published by weak men who think they can use that to derail women, while on the other hand, the same men have nauseating prostitution relationships that no other man has ever dared to publish or talk about.

Women still have a long way to go and unity, coordination and supporting each other is the best way to win the gender equality war. While meritocracy, the current *status quo* precludes women to get leadership positions. It is, therefore, critical to reconfigure strategies so that the quota system includes professional, young, middle-aged and female war veterans since women are not a homogeneous group. Women should have a say in choosing who goes to represent women in the quota system because if it is done by men, they make sure they choose incompetent women who will dance to their tunes, with no meaningful contribution so that other women will turn against them accusing them of incompetency. Where are all the educated, professional, young women and why are they not being given a chance? The patriarchal leaders are taking advantage of the system and it is high time for the women in Zimbabwe to fight for their rightful 50% representation in politics. However, those who get the

chance should not be placeholders but real champions and advocates of equitable, meaningful sustainable development for the benefit of their children and future generations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Zimbabwe still has a long way to go attain gender equality in political leadership and other crucial decision-making positions. Men still hold the lion's share of crucial roles and responsibilities, making gender equality in this sector a mirage for Zimbabwean women. However, equality is a process, not an event since it has something to do with institutions like socialisation and patriarchy that cannot be changed overnight. Although some remarkable improvements have been noted in the numbers appearing for candidacy and also those representing various groups, much has still to be done to reach recommended levels of gender equality thus the article makes the following recommendations:

- Women should be sensitised through workshops and campaigns on the need to vote for another woman for gender equality and sustainable development.
- The few women in power, those who got the chance to lead, should be trained and sensitised to lead with integrity, honesty, transparency and good advocacy for women's issues like health, food security and special needs for women. This will give other women some role models to follow as well as good reason to vote for a woman when they see women-led constituencies progressing.
- If people are voting for a party, not an individual, then political parties can be forced to field women on an equal basis with men to qualify for registration.
- For sustainable leadership and sustainable gender equality, more girls should continue to be enrolled and encouraged, through various stakeholders, to stay in school to reach institutions of higher learning. This will give them confidence and enable them to be appointed on merit and to perform effectively and efficiently alongside their male counterparts.
- Organisations can be encouraged to learn from others like the Commissions under section 12 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Their commissioners comprise at least 55% women representation, a clear indication that it is possible to reach gender equality in leadership. It is also a way to lead

by example especially when you are preaching democracy to others.

- There is need to reconfigure the women's quota so that the women chosen represent all sectors of the female population, that is to consider meritocracy as a priority. The women themselves, represented in their heterogeneity, should participate in the implementation of the quota system.

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