

Five Decades of Women Empowerment in Zimbabwe: Progress, Challenges and Prospects from Independence to Vision 2030 (1980-2030)

CHIDO SANYATWE¹

Abstract

This qualitative study examines Zimbabwe's women empowerment trajectory from 1980 to 2030, focusing on the progress achieved, persistent challenges and future prospects in the context of national development aspirations and Vision 2030. Though current studies on gender and development in Zimbabwe have revealed critical insights, they dominantly focus on specific sectors, policy periods, or dimensions of empowerment and neglect the entire post-independence era. Data were generated through an extensive desk review of constitutional provisions, national policies, legislative frameworks, development strategies, parliamentary debates, regional and international instruments, academic literature and grey literature spanning the five decades (1980-2030) to cover this gap. Textual and thematic analysis techniques were employed to identify dominant discourses, policy shifts, implementation gaps and emerging trends in women empowerment. The findings reveal that Zimbabwe's women empowerment agenda has evolved from welfare-oriented approaches in the early post-independence period to more rights-based, participatory and transformative approaches in recent decades. Progress has been recorded in girls' education, women's political participation, legal protection, access to health services and gender mainstreaming within public institutions. However, these gains remain uneven and fragile due to recurring

1. Development Programming and Management, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University: Bindura, Zimbabwe, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4423-8232>

economic crises, entrenched patriarchal norms, weak institutional accountability and limited access to economic opportunities for many women, particularly those in rural and marginalised communities. The study concludes that achieving meaningful women empowerment by 2030 requires strengthening institutional accountability, enhancing women's economic inclusion, addressing socio-cultural inequalities, promoting intersectional approaches and ensuring effective implementation of gender-responsive policies and programmes. The study contributes to policy and academic discourse by providing a comprehensive historical and forward-looking perspective on women empowerment in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: gender equality, gender mainstreaming, women's rights, national development, zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

At the international level, women empowerment has been shaped through a long-standing evolution of global norms, treaties and development agendas aimed at eliminating gender inequality and advancing women's rights across all spheres of life. Central to this global framework is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which obliges states to pursue legal, political and social reforms to eliminate discrimination against women. This has been reinforced by the Beijing Platform for Action which provides a comprehensive global policy agenda for women empowerment across critical areas such as education, health, political participation and economic empowerment. More recently, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, have further consolidated these commitments by positioning gender equality as both a stand-alone objective and a cross-cutting requirement for sustainable development.

At the regional level, women empowerment has been strengthened through African and Southern African policy frameworks that contextualise global gender equality commitments within regional realities marked by historical inequalities, economic disparities and socio-political diversity. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development stands as a key regional instrument that sets binding targets for member states in areas such as women's political representation, economic participation, education and the elimination of gender-based violence. This protocol, alongside broader African Union gender frameworks and related regional declarations, has played a significant role in translating international commitments into actionable regional strategies. As a result, many African states have been encouraged to adopt constitutional reforms, implement gender quotas, establish gender-focused institutions and integrate gender mainstreaming into national development planning. These regional mechanisms have, therefore, served as an important bridge between global norms and national policy implementation, ensuring that gender equality commitments are not only aspirational but also operationalised within specific regional governance systems.

In Zimbabwe, women empowerment has evolved within this broader international and regional policy environment, while being shaped by the country's specific historical, political and socio-economic contexts. Since independence in 1980, the state has prioritised addressing historical gender inequalities, beginning with welfare-oriented approaches that improved women's access to education, health and social services, but did not fully dismantle structural and patriarchal constraints (Chiweshe *et al.*, 2017). Over time, legal and institutional reforms such as the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 (Law, 2020), constitutional gender quotas, gender mainstreaming policies and land reform programmes reflected a gradual shift

towards rights-based empowerment. However, despite these advances, women continue to face persistent inequalities driven by patriarchy, economic marginalisation, structural adjustment impacts, unequal land access (Ossome and Naidu, 2021) and limited substantive political representation (Bhatasara and Chiweshe, 2021), alongside intersectional disparities linked to class, age, disability and geography (Azcona and Bhatt, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in the Patriarchy Theory and the Intersectionality Theory which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the persistence of gender inequalities and the complex realities shaping women empowerment in Zimbabwe. Other dimensions include class, rural, disability, youth, age and ethnic oppression. The Patriarchy Theory explains how male dominance is embedded within social, political, economic and cultural institutions in ways that systematically privilege men while subordinating women (Dutt, 2018). The theory argues that patriarchal systems are sustained through institutional practices, social norms, cultural beliefs and power relations that reinforce unequal gender relations and limit women's agency. In the Zimbabwean context, patriarchy remains evident in customary practices, inheritance systems, political structures, labour relations and decision-making institutions which continue to disadvantage women despite progressive constitutional and legislative reforms. Although post-independence Zimbabwe introduced laws and policies intended to promote gender equality, patriarchal attitudes and informal systems have often undermined the implementation and effectiveness of these reforms.

The Patriarchy Theory is particularly relevant to this study because it helps explain the contradiction between formal gender equality commitments and the persistence of

substantive inequalities in women's lived experiences. For example, while women's political representation increased through constitutional gender quotas, patriarchal political party structures and cultural expectations continue to limit women's influence in leadership and governance processes (Bhatasara and Chiweshe, 2021). The issue has manifested itself in the poor representation of women in senior executives, women being marginalised in terms of land ownership and allocation following land reforms and the fact that women still face difficulties in accessing productive resources such as inputs and financial services. Similarly, although women gained legal rights through reforms such as the Legal Age of Majority Act 1982 and land reform programmes, customary norms and male-centred power relations frequently restrict women's control over productive resources and economic opportunities (Ossome and Naidu, 2021). The theory, therefore, demonstrates that gender inequality is not merely the absence of progressive laws, but rather the result of deeply embedded structural systems that sustain male dominance across generations.

In addition, the Patriarchy Theory highlights the historical and transnational dimensions of gender inequality by linking contemporary gender relations to colonial legacies and global systems of power. Colonial rule disrupted pre-existing gender systems and institutionalised male dominance through economic and political structures that marginalised women's roles and labour (Rory, 2022). These historical processes continue to influence contemporary gender dynamics in Zimbabwe and across Africa. Patil (2013) further argues that patriarchy must be understood within both local and global contexts because gender inequalities are shaped by interactions between domestic institutions, colonial histories and international development systems. This perspective is important in understanding how global gender equality frameworks have influenced Zimbabwe's policy reforms while

structural inequalities remain deeply rooted within local socio-cultural systems.

Complementing the Patriarchy Theory, the Intersectionality Theory provides a framework for understanding how multiple and overlapping social identities interact to shape women's experiences of oppression and empowerment. Originating from Black feminist scholarship, the Intersectionality Theory challenges the assumption that women constitute a homogenous group with similar experiences (Logie *et al.*, 2021). Instead, the theory argues that inequalities are shaped by the interaction of gender with other social categories such as class, ethnicity, race, disability, age, religion and geographical location. As a result, women experience empowerment and marginalisation differently, depending on their social positions and contexts (Handl *et al.*, 2022).

The Intersectionality Theory is relevant to this study because women empowerment outcomes in Zimbabwe are not uniform across all women. Urban women, rural women, women with disabilities, women in informal employment and women from different socio-economic backgrounds experience empowerment opportunities and barriers differently. Economic crises, unemployment, political instability and unequal access to resources have disproportionately affected poor and marginalised women, particularly those in rural communities. While some women have benefited from educational advancement, political representation and formal employment opportunities, others continue to face exclusion due to intersecting inequalities linked to poverty, location and social status. Intersectionality therefore enables this study to move beyond simplistic understandings of gender inequality by recognising the diversity of women's experiences and the multiple systems of oppression affecting empowerment outcomes.

The theory also contributes to policy analysis by demonstrating how empowerment programmes may benefit some groups of women, while excluding others. Gender mainstreaming strategies and affirmative action policies may improve formal representation without adequately addressing broader structural inequalities affecting marginalised women. The Intersectionality Theory, therefore, calls for context-specific and inclusive approaches that recognise diversity among women and addresses interconnected forms of inequality. Empirical studies have increasingly highlighted the importance of intersectional approaches in policy and development research because they provide a more comprehensive understanding of social exclusion and empowerment processes (Villamizar and Bueno-Hansen, 2021; Christoffersen, 2023; Brown *et al.*, 2024). The combined framework also supports the study's broader objective of analysing the gap between formal policy commitments and substantive empowerment outcomes in Zimbabwe's pursuit of gender equality and Vision 2030.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a literature review of the study. The reviewed themes include evolution of women empowerment policies and gender agendas, institutionalisation of gender equality and implementation gaps and socio-cultural and structural barriers to women empowerment.

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT POLICIES AND GENDER AGENDAS

Early approaches to women empowerment during the 1970s and 1980s focused largely on improving women's welfare through increased access to social services such as education, healthcare and nutrition programmes. Women were often viewed as beneficiaries of development interventions rather than active agents of social, political and economic transformation (Azcona and Bhatt, 2020). In many post-colonial societies,

including Zimbabwe, early post-independence policies concentrated on expanding women's access to basic services as part of broader nation-building processes. Over time, international feminist movements and global human rights discourses increasingly influenced national gender policies, resulting in a shift towards rights-based approaches to women empowerment. International frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and later UNSustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, significantly shaped policy reforms across different countries (Och, 2018; United Nations, 2023).

The institutionalisation of gender equality also led to the adoption of gender mainstreaming policies and affirmative action mechanisms such as gender quotas in political institutions. Gender mainstreaming emerged as a strategy for incorporating gender perspectives into all stages of policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, while quotas sought to address historical underrepresentation of women in political leadership and decision-making spaces (Olaitan, 2024; Krook, 2025). Across many countries, these interventions increased women's numerical representation in governance structures and improved policy visibility regarding gender issues. However, studies show that the implementation and outcomes of these policies vary significantly depending on political commitment, economic conditions, institutional capacity and socio-cultural contexts (Acosta *et al.*, 2020; Kuttygalieva *et al.*, 2024).

Constitutional and legislative reforms have, therefore become central mechanisms for advancing women empowerment globally. International frameworks such as CEDAW, African Union gender protocols and SDGs have exerted normative pressure on states to align domestic legislation with

international gender equality standards (Och, 2018). Gender equality provisions have increasingly been incorporated into constitutions and legal systems, reflecting growing recognition of women's rights within governance frameworks. However, scholars argue that legal reforms alone are insufficient without broader social transformation and institutional support systems capable of addressing structural barriers to gender equality (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2017). Patriarchal norms, discriminatory cultural practices and unequal power relations continue to limit the practical implementation of progressive laws and policies across many societies (Acosta *et al.*, 2020).

The literature further demonstrates that women empowerment extends beyond legal recognition to include broader socio-economic and cultural transformation. Studies indicate that empowerment policies are more effective when complemented by community-based initiatives that address local realities and socio-cultural barriers (Hennebry *et al.*, 2018). Community-driven interventions often focus on economic inclusion, leadership development, social mobilisation and awareness creation, thereby filling gaps neglected by formal policy structures. Intersectional perspectives also show that empowerment outcomes differ across groups of women depending on class, ethnicity, disability, religion, geographical location and other social identities. As a result, context-specific and inclusive approaches are increasingly recognised as essential for ensuring equitable and sustainable empowerment outcomes (Chikwe *et al.*, 2024; Monaco, 2024).

In the Zimbabwean context, the evolution of women empowerment policies reflects these broader global and regional shifts. Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has introduced a range of constitutional, legislative and institutional reforms aimed at promoting gender equality and women's participation in development. These include the Legal Age of Majority Act of

1982, gender mainstreaming policies, affirmative action measures and constitutional gender quotas introduced under the 2013 Constitution. Zimbabwe has also ratified regional and international gender equality instruments such as CEDAW and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development.

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

Literature on gender policy implementation highlights the complex relationship between formal institutional reforms and the persistent structural barriers that undermine substantive gender equality outcomes. Although many countries have established gender ministries, gender machineries and policy frameworks aimed at promoting women empowerment, these institutional arrangements often face significant implementation challenges related to accountability, political commitment, institutional resistance and resource limitations (Caywood and Darmstadt, 2024).

Research on gender mainstreaming demonstrates that the existence of institutional structures alone does not guarantee effective implementation of gender equality policies. Freidenvall and Ramberg (2019), for example, observe that even countries with advanced governance systems experience challenges related to policy complacency, competing national priorities and weak institutional commitment. Gender mainstreaming initiatives may, therefore, become symbolic exercises rather than transformative interventions when institutions lack strong accountability mechanisms and sustained political support. Similarly, studies on quota systems indicate that while affirmative action measures may increase women's numerical representation in leadership and governance structures, they do not necessarily dismantle patriarchal institutional cultures and discriminatory practices (Wroblewski, 2021).

Literature further identifies political resistance and power relations as central obstacles to gender policy implementation. Institutional actors often resist transformative gender reforms because such reforms challenge existing power structures and entrenched privileges (Caravaca and Agud-Morell, 2026). Mergaert and Lombardo (2017) observe that resistance to gender equality policies may occur through bureaucratic inertia, policy dilution, selective implementation, or the depoliticisation of gender agendas within institutions. Such resistance demonstrates that implementation challenges are not simply technical or administrative problems, but are deeply connected to struggles over power, authority and institutional culture. Minto and Mergaert (2018) similarly argue that institutional resistance reflects broader political dynamics in which dominant actors seek to preserve existing hierarchies and control over decision-making processes.

Another major concern highlighted in the literature relates to monitoring, evaluation and accountability systems within gender policy implementation. Many institutions lack adequate mechanisms for collecting gender-disaggregated data, assessing policy outcomes and ensuring continuous review and adaptation of gender programmes (Caywood and Darmstadt, 2024). Civil society organisations and feminist movements are, therefore, increasingly recognised as important actors in promoting accountability and advancing women empowerment agendas. These groups play a critical role in advocacy, awareness creation, policy monitoring and representing the interests of marginalised women within policy processes (*ibid.*).

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Studies from different contexts consistently demonstrate that deeply entrenched gender norms continue to reinforce male dominance and limit women's agency, even where progressive

policies and empowerment programmes exist. Research in Bangladesh, for example, found that microfinance and income-generating programmes did not fundamentally transform household gender relations because men continued to control women's earnings and dominate major household decisions (Shohel *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, studies conducted in India reveal that restrictive community-level gender norms significantly reduced women's mobility, autonomy and participation in decision-making processes despite policy efforts aimed at enhancing empowerment (Gopalakrishnan *et al.*, 2024).

Economic crises and political instability further intensify gender inequalities by disproportionately affecting women's access to livelihoods, social protection and political participation. Structural inequalities often become more visible during periods of economic decline, unemployment and governance instability, as women are pushed into insecure forms of labour and excluded from formal economic opportunities (Milazzo and Goldstein, 2019). Political instability may also reduce civic space and weaken institutional commitment to gender equality, thereby limiting the implementation of empowerment policies and programmes. In many contexts, women who enter political leadership spaces encounter resistance, intimidation and gender-based violence rooted in patriarchal political cultures. Research conducted in Kenya demonstrates how increased participation of women in politics has been accompanied by backlash, harassment and violence targeting female politicians as a means of preserving male-dominated power structures (Matfess *et al.*, 2022).

Literature also emphasises the importance of understanding women empowerment through an intersectional lens. Ethnographic studies in Muslim communities in East Java, for instance, reveal how religious institutions and interpretations

can reinforce male dominance, while simultaneously creating spaces for women-centred forms of resistance and participation (Cholil, 2017). Empowerment initiatives that fail to account for these differences may inadvertently reproduce exclusion and inequality. Sustainable empowerment, therefore, requires integrated approaches that combine legal reforms, economic inclusion, institutional accountability, social transformation and community-level engagement to address the deep-rooted barriers affecting women's agency and participation. These insights are particularly relevant to Zimbabwe, where formal commitments to gender equality continue to co-exist with persistent socio-cultural, economic and political challenges that limit transformative empowerment outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research, predominantly extensive desk review approach with a historical analysis to examine Zimbabwe's women empowerment trajectory from 1980 to 2030. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore the evolution, direction, continuity and complexity of women-centred interventions within their historical, political, economic and socio-cultural contexts. The design enabled an in-depth examination of the ways in which women empowerment policies, institutional reforms and gender equality discourses have developed over the five decades of 1980 to 2030, while also interrogating the contradictions between normative policy commitments and women's lived realities. Qualitative research was, therefore, suitable for capturing the meanings, interpretations, narratives and structural dynamics shaping women empowerment in Zimbabwe.

The study relied primarily on secondary data obtained through a comprehensive review of documentary sources. These sources included constitutional provisions, national gender policies,

legislative frameworks, government strategic plans, parliamentary debates, regional and international conventions, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy briefs, institutional reports, conference papers and grey literature related to women empowerment and gender equality. International instruments such as the CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development and SDGs), particularly SDG 5, were also included. The inclusion of both national and international documents enabled the study to situate Zimbabwe's women empowerment agenda within broader global and regional gender equality frameworks.

Document selection was guided by relevance to the study objectives, credibility of the source, historical significance and contribution to understanding women empowerment trends between 1980 and 2030. The study purposively selected literature capturing divergent perspectives within the literature that addressed key themes such as constitutional and legislative reforms, gender mainstreaming, political participation, economic empowerment, institutional mechanisms, implementation challenges, patriarchy, intersectionality and socio-cultural barriers affecting women in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts. To ensure comprehensiveness and academic rigour, literature searches were conducted using electronic databases and search engines including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, JSTOR and institutional repositories. Key search terms included "women empowerment in Zimbabwe", "gender equality", "gender mainstreaming", "women and politics", "patriarchy", "intersectionality", "gender policy implementation", and "SDG 5". The use of multiple databases enhanced access to authoritative and diverse academic and policy sources relevant to the study.

The study employed textual and thematic analysis as the primary methods of data analysis. Textual analysis enabled the systematic examination and interpretation of policy documents,

legislative texts, institutional reports and scholarly literature to identify dominant discourses, recurring themes, silences and shifts in the framing of women empowerment over time. Through this approach, the study analysed how women's rights, participation, leadership and empowerment have been conceptualised and institutionalised within Zimbabwe's policy and development agenda across different historical periods. Thematic analysis was further used to categorise and interpret patterns emerging from the reviewed literature in relation to the study objectives. Themes such as welfare-oriented approaches, rights-based empowerment, institutional reforms, implementation gaps, patriarchal resistance, economic exclusion and intersectional inequalities were identified and analysed. Triangulation of multiple documentary sources was done to enhance trustworthiness and credibility. This process strengthened consistency and reduced the risk of relying on a single perspective or source of information. Furthermore, the study focused on peer-reviewed and reputable sources to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that Zimbabwe's women empowerment trajectory from 1980 to 2030 has been characterised by gradual but significant transformation in legal, political, economic and institutional spheres. Across the five decades, the country has moved from welfare-oriented approaches focusing mainly on education and social services towards more rights-based and institutionalised gender equality frameworks. The findings further demonstrate that Zimbabwe has recorded notable progress in women's access to education, healthcare, political representation, legal protection and economic participation. However, the study also establishes that persistent patriarchal norms, economic instability, political challenges and weak policy implementation mechanisms

continue to limit substantive empowerment outcomes for many women.

1980-1989: POST-INDEPENDENCE WELFARE REFORMS AND FOUNDATIONS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The first decade after independence marked the beginning of Zimbabwe's formal commitment to addressing historical gender inequalities inherited from colonial rule. The findings show that the government prioritised social reconstruction policies aimed at expanding access to education, healthcare and social services for previously marginalised populations, including women and girls. During this period, significant progress was made in increasing female literacy rates, school enrolment and access to primary healthcare services. These reforms improved the social welfare conditions of women, particularly in rural areas where access to public services had previously been limited. One of the most significant achievements of this decade was the enactment of the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 which granted women legal adulthood and greater autonomy in areas such as property ownership, contractual rights and legal representation. This legislation represented a major milestone in dismantling colonial and customary legal restrictions that had previously subordinated women under male authority.

The study further established that women increasingly participated in public life during this decade due to the influence of the liberation struggle, where women had played active roles in nationalist movements and community mobilisation. However, despite these achievements, women empowerment policies during the 1980s remained largely welfare-oriented. Women were viewed mainly as beneficiaries of development programmes rather than change agents. Patriarchal cultural norms and male-dominated political structures continued to restrict women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes. The findings also

reveal that customary practices and traditional gender roles remained influential within households and communities, limiting substantive changes in women's control over productive resources and political authority. Although women gained improved access to education and legal rights, structural inequalities rooted in patriarchy continued to shape social and economic relations. Consequently, the decade laid an important institutional and legal foundation for women empowerment while simultaneously revealing the persistence of deeper socio-cultural barriers.

1990-1999: ECONOMIC REFORMS, INTERNATIONAL GENDER COMMITMENTS AND EMERGING RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES

The 1990s represented a transitional decade in Zimbabwe's women empowerment agenda as global gender equality discourses increasingly influenced national policies and institutional reforms. The findings indicate that Zimbabwe became more actively involved in regional and international gender equality frameworks during this period, including participation in the Beijing Platform for Action and continued alignment with the CEDAW. These developments contributed to the gradual shift towards rights-based frameworks centred on women's participation, equality and empowerment.

The study found that awareness of gender equality issues increased significantly during this decade, leading to the emergence of women-focused advocacy organisations, civil society movements and institutional discussions around gender mainstreaming. Gender became increasingly recognised. Educational achievements among women also continued to improve, with more women accessing secondary and tertiary education.

However, the findings further show that the implementation of Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs) during

the 1990s negatively affected many women's socio-economic conditions. Economic reforms resulted in rising unemployment, reduced social spending and increased informalisation of labour, disproportionately affecting women who already occupied vulnerable economic positions (Muchabveyo *et al.*, 2025). Many women turned to informal trading and low-income survival activities due to declining formal employment opportunities. The economic hardships of the decade increased women's unpaid care responsibilities and household burdens, particularly in low-income and rural communities.

The findings also reveal that although gender equality discourse became more visible in policy spaces, patriarchal institutional cultures and customary systems continued to undermine substantive empowerment outcomes. Women remained under-represented in political leadership and formal economic structures despite increasing educational participation and growing advocacy for gender equality. These findings demonstrate that the 1990s marked an important period of ideological and institutional transition towards rights-based empowerment, although economic instability and structural inequalities continued to limit transformative change.

2000-2009: LAND REFORM, ECONOMIC CRISIS AND EXPANDING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

The findings indicate that the period between 2000 and 2009 was characterised by both significant opportunities and major challenges for women empowerment in Zimbabwe. One of the most important developments during this decade was the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) which redistributed agricultural land and transformed agrarian relations across the country. The study established that the programme increased women's participation in smallholder agriculture, local markets and rural livelihood activities (Muringaniza *et al.*, 2024). Many women became actively involved in farming and income-

generating activities, thereby improving household food security and economic participation.

The findings further reveal that some women successfully accessed land through formal allocation processes, inheritance arrangements and social networks. Women demonstrated agency by navigating complex political and social systems to participate in agricultural production and rural economic activities (Ossome and Naidu, 2021). These developments represented important progress in expanding women's economic opportunities and challenging colonial inequalities in land ownership.

However, the study also established that the benefits of land reform remained uneven and heavily influenced by patriarchal systems. Many women accessed land as secondary beneficiaries through male relatives rather than as independent landowners (Ossome and Naidu, 2021). Customary practices, insecure land tenure systems and gendered power relations continued to limit women's control over productive resources and agricultural decision-making. Women from poorer households and marginalised communities faced greater difficulties in accessing land, agricultural inputs and financial support.

The findings additionally show that this decade was characterised by severe economic and political crises that negatively affected women's empowerment outcomes. Hyperinflation, unemployment, declining public services and political instability increased poverty and vulnerability among women. Many women relied on informal trading and survival strategies to support households during economic decline. Despite these hardships, women demonstrated resilience and continued to contribute significantly to household livelihoods and community survival mechanisms.

The decade, therefore, reflects both progress and contradiction within Zimbabwe's women empowerment journey. While land reform created new opportunities for economic participation and indigenous ownership, structural inequalities and economic instability limited the transformative potential of these reforms for substantive gender equality.

2010-2019: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS, GENDER QUOTAS AND INSTITUTIONALISATION OF GENDER EQUALITY

The findings show that the decade between 2010-2019 marked one of the most significant periods of institutional and constitutional reform for women empowerment in Zimbabwe. The adoption of the 2013 Constitution represented a major milestone in strengthening gender equality provisions and women's political representation. The introduction of a proportional representation quota system significantly increased the number of women in Parliament and improved women's visibility within governance structures (Kim and Fallon, 2023; Acheampong *et al.*, 2024).

The study established that the constitutional reforms enhanced women's participation in formal political institutions and demonstrated government commitment to regional and international gender equality obligations. Women became more visible in parliamentary debates, governance discussions and public leadership spaces. The decade also witnessed growing policy emphasis on gender mainstreaming across public institutions, with ministries increasingly integrating gender perspectives into planning and development frameworks.

The findings further reveal that Zimbabwe strengthened institutional mechanisms for promoting gender equality during this period through gender-focused ministries, gender policies and public sector gender mainstreaming initiatives. Gender equality became more prominent within national development

planning and governance discourse. Increased advocacy from civil society organisations and women's movements also contributed to broader public awareness regarding women's rights and participation.

Despite these achievements, the study established that women continued to face significant barriers within political institutions and public governance structures. Political parties remained male-dominated and frequently limited women's advancement into influential leadership positions (Sisimayi *et al.*, 2026). Women politicians often experienced marginalisation, stereotyping and exclusion from strategic decision-making processes. Consequently, increased numerical representation did not always translate into substantive political influence.

The findings also indicate that gender mainstreaming implementation remained inconsistent across government institutions due to limited resources, weak coordination and inadequate accountability systems. Economic instability during this decade further constrained the operational effectiveness of gender programmes and institutional reforms. Nonetheless, the decade represented a major turning point in the institutionalisation of gender equality and constitutional recognition of women's rights in Zimbabwe.

2020-2030: VISION 2030, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The findings indicate that the current decade is increasingly shaped by Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 development agenda and global commitments to SDGs, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and women empowerment. The study established that gender equality remains an important component of national development discourse, with continued emphasis on women's participation in governance, economic inclusion, entrepreneurship and access to education and digital technologies.

The findings show that women continue to make progress in education, entrepreneurship, civil society leadership and public sector participation. Increased access to higher education and digital communication platforms has expanded opportunities for women's advocacy, networking and economic activities. Women's organisations and gender advocacy groups continue to play important roles in promoting accountability, policy reform and awareness on gender-based violence, political inclusion and economic empowerment.

The study further reveals growing recognition of intersectional inequalities affecting women in rural communities, informal sectors and marginalised social groups. Policy discussions increasingly acknowledge the importance of addressing socio-economic disparities, gender-based violence, climate change vulnerabilities and unequal access to resources affecting women differently across communities. There is also increasing policy attention towards financial inclusion, women entrepreneurship and youth empowerment as part of broader economic recovery strategies.

However, the findings indicate that significant challenges remain in achieving substantive gender equality by 2030. Economic instability, unemployment, poverty and political polarisation continue to affect women disproportionately. Patriarchal norms and cultural practices still limit women's leadership opportunities, ownership of productive resources and participation in strategic decision-making. Gender-based violence and unequal economic opportunities also remain critical concerns.

The prospects for women empowerment in Zimbabwe, therefore, depend on strengthening implementation mechanisms, improving institutional accountability, expanding women's access to productive resources and transforming patriarchal

social norms. The findings suggest that achieving Vision 2030 goals requires integrated and intersectional approaches that move beyond policy formulation towards substantive transformation in women's lived realities.

DISCUSSION

The process of women empowerment in Zimbabwe reflects a gradual shift in women empowerment efforts from welfare-focused intervention to a rights-based and institutional approach and the findings of this research are consistent with the existing literature on post-independence gender policy in Zimbabwe. First, there is supporting evidence in the findings regarding the improvement in women's access to education, healthcare services and legal recognition. These findings confirm the assertions of Chiweshe *et al.* (2017) and Law (2020) in relation to the initial reforms that increased women's citizenship status without dismantling the patriarchy entirely. Also, this research findings support the idea of Azcona and Bhatt (2020) in respect of women being regarded primarily as development beneficiaries, rather than change agents. Considering the Patriarchy Theory, the findings indicate that despite the implementation of legal reforms, the patriarchal system was strong enough to retain the patriarchal norms and practices and, therefore, women's autonomy remained underdeveloped (Dutt, 2018). Although the passage of the Legal Age of Majority Act in 1982 was crucial, the patriarchal system undermined its significance. In general, the findings of the study demonstrate that Zimbabwe took essential steps towards women empowerment during the 1980s. However, structural gender inequality constrained further developments in this field. The findings for the 1990s and 2000s are similar to the ones in literature which suggests that although the language of empowerment usually becomes predominant during periods of economic reform and economic crises, the practice itself actually tends to disempower women. Although it is clear that

both ESAP and economic instability caused many women to engage in insecure and precarious forms of livelihoods, this finding is similar to observations made by Milazzo and Goldstein (2019) and Muchabveyo *et al.* (2025) in relation to the impact of economic recession on women. Indeed, the findings on the expansion of women's participation in economic activities due to land reforms and lack of security of ownership of resources are supported by Ossome and Naidu (2021), who argue that access to land in Zimbabwe was under patriarchal domination, despite attempts at land reform. The results lend weight to the Patriarchy Theory in suggesting that women could be more involved in agricultural practices and survival economies, but could not actually be in charge of productive assets. Additionally, the findings align with the ideas of the Intersectionality Theory, as rural, impoverished and disadvantaged women faced more risks and challenges than their counterparts (Logie *et al.*, 2021; Handl *et al.*, 2022).

In this respect, the results confirm the findings in the literature regarding the fact that there was an increase in women's visibility, yet no actual empowering experience. The increase in women's parliamentary representation is in line with Kim and Fallon (2023), Acheampong *et al.* (2024) and Olaitan (2024), who show that quotas can improve numerical inclusion and policy visibility. However, the continued exclusion of women from strategic leadership roles and the inconsistent implementation of gender mainstreaming agree with Freidenvall and Ramberg (2019), Bhatasara and Chiweshe (2021), Caywood and Darmstadt (2024) and Sisimayi *et al.* (2026), all of whom stress that institutional commitment is often weak. These researches have emphasised that the level of commitment from institutions to women's empowerment policies may be low. This finding agrees with the works conducted by Mergaert and Lombardo (2017) and Minto and Mergaert (2018) that indicate that resistance, bureaucratic inertia and mere tokenism may

hinder substantial changes. Concerning the intersectionality framework, women living in rural areas, those engaged in informal work and women with disabilities are in line with Patil (2013), Christoffersen (2023) and Brown *et al.* (2024), in highlighting that women do not have an equal experience of empowerment. In conclusion, it can be stated that Vision 2030 will only be realised if patriarchal barriers and policy implementation become inclusive and effective.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined Zimbabwe's women empowerment trajectory from 1980 to 2030 and established that the country has made significant progress in advancing gender equality through constitutional reforms, institutional development, expanded educational opportunities, economic participation and increased political representation of women. The findings demonstrate that Zimbabwe's women empowerment agenda evolved from predominantly welfare-oriented approaches during the immediate post-independence period towards more rights-based, institutionalised and policy-driven frameworks influenced by regional and international gender equality commitments such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and SDGs, particularly SDG 5. The study concludes that substantive empowerment outcomes remain constrained by persistent patriarchal norms, socio-cultural inequalities, economic instability, political volatility, weak institutional accountability and implementation gaps. The findings reveal that formal policy commitments and constitutional reforms have not always translated into transformative changes in women's lived realities. Women continue to experience unequal access to productive resources, limited decision-making authority, political marginalisation and socio-economic vulnerability, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Structural barriers rooted in patriarchy continue to shape power relations within

households, institutions, political parties and economic systems. The study further concludes that Zimbabwe's women empowerment journey reflects broader global and African trends where descriptive progress in policy, representation and institutional reform often advances faster than substantive transformation. The application of the Patriarchy Theory and the Intersectionality Theory demonstrates that women's experiences are shaped by overlapping inequalities related to class, location, marital status, economic position and socio-cultural norms.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen women empowerment and accelerate progress towards gender equality in Zimbabwe by 2030.

Political parties and governance institutions should promote substantive political participation by reforming internal party structures and leadership systems that continue to marginalise women. Measures should include leadership training programmes for women politicians, enforcement of anti-discrimination mechanisms within political parties and greater inclusion of women in strategic parliamentary committees and decision-making positions. Beyond increasing numerical representation, efforts should focus on enhancing women's influence over policy formulation and governance processes.

Public institutions should strengthen gender mainstreaming by enhancing the capacity, authority and resources available to gender focal persons and gender departments. Gender mainstreaming should move beyond procedural compliance towards transformative institutional practices capable of addressing structural inequalities within governance systems. Inter-ministerial coordination and collaboration with civil society organisations should also be strengthened to improve implementation effectiveness and accountability.

The study further recommends increased investment in community-based gender awareness programmes aimed at transforming patriarchal norms, discriminatory cultural practices and gender stereotypes that continue to undermine women's empowerment. Traditional leaders, religious and educational institutions and civil society organisations should play active roles in promoting positive social attitudes towards women's leadership, property rights and participation in decision-making processes.

The study additionally recommends the adoption of intersectional approaches in policy design and implementation to address the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities affecting women across different social groups. Policies should consider the specific needs of rural women, young women, women with disabilities, women in informal employment and other marginalised groups whose experiences of inequality differ according to socio-economic and geographical circumstances.

Finally, Zimbabwe should continue aligning its national development agenda with regional and international gender equality commitments under SDG 5, CEDAW and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. Achieving Vision 2030 requires sustained political commitment, inclusive governance, economic justice and transformative social change capable of bridging the gap between formal policy commitments and women's lived realities.

REFERENCES

- Acheampong, A. O., Opoku, E. E. O. and Rustagi, N. (2024). Gender Quota, Women in Politics and Gender Parity in Education. *Economics and Politics*, 36(3), 1223-1260. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecpo.12287>
- Acosta, M. *et al.* (2020). The Power of Narratives: Explaining Inaction on Gender Mainstreaming in Uganda's Climate Change Policy. *Development Policy Review*, 38(5), 555-574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12458>

- Azcona, G. and Bhatt, A. (2020). Inequality, Gender and Sustainable Development: Measuring Feminist Progress. *Gender and Development*, 28(2), 337-355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2020.1753390>
- Bengesai, A. V. and Derera, E. (2021). The Association between Women Empowerment and Emotional Violence in Zimbabwe: A Cluster Analysis Approach. *SAGE Open*, 11(2), 215824402110213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211021399>
- Bhatasara, S. and Chiweshe, M. (2021). Women in Zimbabwean Politics Post-November 2017. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 56, 218-233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620986576>
- Brown, N. E. et al. (2024). Intersectional Identity and Representative Politics. *Politics and Gender*, 20(3), 727-733. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x24000199>
- Caravaca, A. and Agud-Morell, I. (2026). Resistances to Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education: Insights from Schools of Education. *Gender and Education*, 38, 363-379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2026.2617578>
- Caywood, K. and Darmstadt, G. L. (2024). Gender Mainstreaming at 25 Years: Toward an Inclusive, Collaborative and Structured Research Agenda. *Journal of Global Health*, 14, 04011. <https://doi.org/10.7189/Jogh.14.04011>
- Chiweshe, M., Mavuso, J. and Macleod, C. (2017). Reproductive Justice in Context: South African and Zimbabwean Women's Narratives of their Abortion Decision. *Feminism & Psychology*, 27(2), 203-224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517699234>
- Cholil, M. (2017). Complexities in Dealing with Gender Inequality: Muslim Women and Mosque-Based Social Services in East Java Indonesia. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 11(2), 459-488. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jiis.2017.11.2.459-488>

- Christoffersen, A. (2023). Applying Intersectionality in Policy and Practice: Unseating the Dominance of Gender in Responding to Social Inequalities. *Sozialpolitik.Ch*, 1(2023). <https://doi.org/10.18753/2297-8224-4030>
- Dutt, A. (2018). Locating Patriarchy in Violence against Women in India: Social, Legal and Alternative Responses. *People: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), 212-228. <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.212228>
- Freidenvall, L. and Ramberg, M. (2019). Implementing Gender Mainstreaming in Swedish Model Municipalities. *Politics and Gender*, 17(2), 225-249. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x18001022>
- González Villamizar, J. and Bueno-Hansen, P. (2021). The Promise and Perils of Mainstreaming Intersectionality in the Colombian Peace Process. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 15(3), 553-575.
- Gopalakrishnan, L., El Ayadi, A. and Diamond-Smith, N. (2024). The Role of Community-Level Men's and Women's Inequitable Gender Norms on Women's Empowerment in India: A Multilevel Analysis Using India's National Family Health Survey-5. *PLOS ONE*, 19(12), E0312465. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0312465>
- Handl, M. N., Seck, S. L. and Simons, P. (2022). Gender and Intersectionality in Business and Human Rights Scholarship. *Business and Human Rights Journal*, 7(2), 201-225. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2022.12>
- Hennebry, J., Hari, K. and Piper, N. (2018). Not without Them: Realising the Sustainable Development Goals for Women Migrant Workers. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(14), 2621-2637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2018.1456775>
- Kim, J. and Fallon, K. M. (2023). Making Women Visible: How Gender Quotas Shape Global Attitudes toward Women in Politics. *Politics and Gender*, 19(4), 981-1006. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x23000089>

- Krook, M.L. (2025). The Growth of a Field: Politics and Gender and Research on Gender Quotas. *Politics and Gender*, 2025, 1-27. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/s1743923x25000066>
- Kuttygalieva, A. et al. (2024). Integrating Global Norms for Gender Equity in Kazakhstan: Aligning Workplace and Social Security Legislation with Sustainable Development Goals. *Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review*, 4(4), E02531. <https://doi.org/10.47172/2965-730x.sdgsreview.v4.n04.pe02531>
- Law, K. (2020). 'We Wanted to Be Free as a Nation and We Wanted to Be Free as Women': Decolonisation, Nationalism and Women's Liberation in Zimbabwe, 1979-85 1. *Gender and History*, 33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12491>.
- Logie, C. H. et al. (2021). A Scoping Review of the Integration of Empowerment-Based Perspectives in Quantitative Intersectional Stigma Research. *Global Public Health*, 1451-1466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1934061>
- Matfess, H., Kishi, R. and Berry, M. E. (2022). No Safety in Numbers: Political Representation and Political Violence Targeting Women in Kenya. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 506-528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2045618>
- Mergaert, L. and Lombardo, E. (2017). Resistance to Implementing Gender Mainstreaming in EU Research Policy. *Towards Gendering Institutionalism: Equality in Europe*, 1(18), 1-21. <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2014-005a>
- Milazzo, A. and Goldstein, M. (2019). Governance and Women's Economic and Political Participation: Power Inequalities, Formal Constraints and Norms. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 34(1), 34-64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lky006>
- Minto, R. and Mergaert, L. (2018). Gender Mainstreaming and Evaluation in the EU: Comparative Perspectives from Feminist Institutionalism. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20(2), 204-220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1440181>

- Monaco, S. (2024). SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls. In: *Sustainable Development Goals* (51-62). Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83797-549-520241006>
- Muchabveyo, B., Magaiza, G. and Kamwendo, J. (2025). Gender and Informal Economies in Rural Zimbabwe: Pathways to a Gender-Responsive Model. *Discover Sustainability*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S43621-025-01894-3>.
- Muringaniza, K. *et al.* (2024). Land Cover Changes in Rural Communities of Zimbabwe Pre and Post Land Reform Era: A Case of Shurugwi South Constituency. *South African Geographical Journal*, 107(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03736245.2024.2341655>
- Och, M. (2018). The Local Diffusion of International Human Rights Norms - Understanding the Cities for CEDAW Campaign. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20(3), 425-443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1447312>
- Olaitan, Z. M. (2024). Impact of Gender Quotas on Substantive Women's Representation: Perspectives from Botswana and South Africa. In: Olaitan, Z. M. (ed.). *Women's Representation in African Politics: Beyond Numbers*, 163-212. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Ossome, L. and Naidu, S. C. (2021). Does Land Still Matter? Gender and Land Reforms in Zimbabwe. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, 10(2), 344-370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22779760211029176>
- Patil, V. (2013). from Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We've Really Come. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 847-867.
- Rory, P. (2022). Women and Work in Zimbabwe, C.1800-2000. *African Economic History*, 50, 117-93. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aeh.2022.0004>.

- Shohel, T. A., Niner, S. and Gunawardana, S. (2021). How the Persistence of Patriarchy Undermines the Financial Empowerment of Women Microfinance Borrowers? Evidence from a Southern Sub-District of Bangladesh. *PLOS ONE*, 16(4), E0250000. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250000>
- Sisimayi, T. P., Muperi, J. T. and Nyathi, V. S. (2026). Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Zimbabwe: Analysing Structural Challenges and Pathways to Gender Equality between 2013 and 2023. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 10(1), 13.
- Vida, B. (2020). Policy Framing and Resistance: Gender Mainstreaming in Horizon 2020. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(1), 26-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506820935495>
- Wroblewski, A. (2021). Quotas and Gender Competence: Independent or Complementary Approaches to Gender Equality? *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, 740462. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.740462>
- Zimbabwe Gender Commission and UN Women. (2021). Zimbabwe Gender Commission Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. Harare: UN Women Zimbabwe Country Office.