

Exploring Forms of Political Violence Against Women and their Effect on Women's Political Participation in Matero Constituency of Lusaka District, Zambia.

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ABSTRACT

This article explored the forms of political violence against women and their effects on women's political participation in Matero Constituency of Lusaka District, Zambia. This research took a qualitative approach and rode on a case study design to generate evidence. A sample of 24 political party leaders were recruited through homogenous purposive sampling procedure. The data was generated using interviews and was analysed thematically. This research found that five (5) forms of political violence against women were in existence in Matero Constituency. These included: physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic violence. This research also revealed that political violence against women affected the political participation of women negatively as cases of resignations, disenfranchisement and fear to participate, confinement to lower positions and reduced freedom of expression were prominent in the constituency. This research concluded that there was a growing increase in the forms of political violence against women in Matero constituency and this discouraged women from participating in political processes as expected. Among others, it is recommended that the Zambia Center for Inter-party Dialogue (ZCID), the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) should convene wider consultative seminars and workshops to familiarize themselves and the general public with the forms of political violence against women.

Key words: Constituency, Forms of Political Violence, Political participation, Women.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Political violence against women is increasingly being recognized around the world as a significant barrier to women's political participation (UN Women, 2016). This has come as a result of a rise in reports of assault, intimidation, and abuse directed at politically active women (Baltrunaite et al, 2019). For example, on 13th March 2012, Juana Quispe, a councilwoman in Bolivia was murdered in La Paz for trying to help female Bolivian politicians file complaints dealing with sexual, physical and psychological harassment (Archenti and Albaine, 2013). Similarly, on 16th June 2016, Jo Cox, the British Labour Party Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen, was shot and stabbed multiple times. In the same line, Jess Phillips, British Labour party Member of Parliament for Birmingham Yardley received more than 600 rape threats on Twitter in a single night after her objections to International Men's Day in a parliamentary committee (Oppenheim, 2016).

A study by Kawila et al (2023) on Bottlenecks of Electoral Violence on Electoral Process and Human Welfare in Kanyama Constituency of Lusaka District, Zambia, reports similar incidences of women being the most affected by political and electoral violence. Equally, more empirical studies conducted on state of political landscape among women have attested to the existence of different forms of political violence against women ranging from physical assault, emotional abuse and sexual harassment among others (Krook, 2019; United Nations women, 2016; Archenti, 2017; Faruqi, 2016; Herrera, 2011).

Political Violence against women according to Juliana (2019) are actions that specifically target women to leave politics by pressuring them to step down as candidates or resign a particular political office. Similarly, empirical studies conducted by Kawila et al (2023), Krook and Restrepo (2016) and Sialombe (2019) have shown that political violence prevents women from participating in democratic activities freely. The act of political violence against women is also an assault on their freedom of expression (Funk, 2010) as women like any other citizens are supposed to participate in politics (Bardall, 2011) and express themselves freely but within the confinement of the law that govern electoral processes (Matole, Simui and Muleya, 2023; Krook and Norris, 2014).

International and regional organizations across the globe have identified political violence as a global phenomenon with cases reported in places as diverse as Mexico, Australia, Kenya, India and the United States, among others (Adolfo et al, 2017). For example, in Afghanistan's 2010 elections, women were the target of 90 percent of the threats made against candidates. In Peru, studies by the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones revealed that nearly half of elected women in 2011 and more than a quarter of female candidates in regional and local elections in 2014 experienced violence or harassment. Data on political violence collected by International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Bangladesh, Burundi, Guinea, Guyana, Nepal, and Timor-Leste showed that female politicians were four times more likely than male politicians to be victims of such violence (Adolfo et al, 2017).

In Africa, political violence against women in politics has taken an equally ugly face. For example, in Kenya, Flora Terah, a parliamentary candidate, was among the several women who were abducted, tortured and abused because they dared to run for political office in 2007 (Koko, 2013). Zambia, being a multi-party democratic country, has not been spared by this retrogressive vice (Goldring and Wahman, 2016).

In Zambia, the period between 2011 and 2021 witnessed many vicious incidents of violence against women. For example, Namakau Kabwiku, the former United Party for National Development (UPND) chairperson for women was beaten and stripped naked by Patriotic Front (PF) cadres. Similarly, on 12th March, 2016, Priscilla Mwiinga, a United Party for National Development (UPND) member was stripped naked and beaten by Patriotic Front (PF) cadres in full view of the police on youth day (Carter Center, 2016).

Many stakeholders have observed that occurrences of political violence against women are widespread in the majority of other towns apart from Lusaka such as Chingola, Kabwe, Kapiri-Mposhi, Kitwe and Ndola only that such incidences have not received adequate media coverage. More to the above, Sialombe (2019) points out that political parties in Zambia have been the main perpetrators of this political vice. Several stakeholders including international and local non-governmental organisations, government departments of gender and individual gender activists have expressed their views on political violence against women and its effects on their political participation. The views of political parties, who are at the centre of political violence against women, have remained scanty hence this research.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

There is a view among political stakeholders that women are a key component in the country's democracy and hence, they need to take part in political processes without being hindered by factors like political

violence (Malambo, 2022). However, Zambia has seen a rise in the number of acts of violence against politically active women (Carter Center, 2016). The scenes of political violence against women between 2011 and 2021, where women were stripped naked, assaulted and harassed, worried many stakeholders (Carter Center, 2021). It is also almost three years since politicians gathered at Mulungushi Conference Centre in Lusaka under the auspice of the Zambia Center for Inter Party Dialogue (ZCID) where they all agreed to put an end to all forms of political violence, including violence against women. Despite these concerted efforts, political violence against women has continued to rise and is a source of concern for many stakeholders (Carter Center, 2021). Political violence against women discourages women from participating in political processes, constitutes a fundamental violation of their human dignity, undermines democracy and is an obstacle to the strengthening of an egalitarian and non-discriminatory society (Kawila et al, 2023). It is within the context of these circumstances that this study aimed at exploring forms of political violence against women and their effect on women's political participation in Matero constituency of Lusaka District.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was guided by the Social Feminist theory propounded by Wollstonecraft (1792). Social Feminist theory also known as Feminist Social theory or Feminist theory is a two-pronged theory that broadens Marxist feminism's argument for the role of capitalism in the oppression of women and radical feminism's theory of the role of gender and the patriarchy in the oppression of women in society. Socialist feminists attempted to produce a creative synthesis of debates about the roots of the oppression of women. These debates were characterized by a focus on officially mandated inequalities between men and women, such as the legal barring of women from voting, property rights, employment, equal rights in marriage, and positions of political power and authority. Furthermore, social feminists sought to address barriers to gender equality, focusing on issues like sexuality, reproductive rights, women's roles and labour in the home, and patriarchal culture. According to Ferguson (2017), the social feminist theory postulates that the exploitation and oppression of women are rooted in the social structures of society. This theory also argues that women have been oppressed in almost all known societies by virtue of them being women. It adds that women are always victims in violent situations because of their weak nature and inability to defend themselves.

In contextualizing the above theory to political violence against women, it can be argued that society views political participation or leadership as a man's activity. There is a perception in society that looks at the presence of women in politics as a favour done to them by men especially that the political arena is dominated by men (Malambo, 2022). The Social Feminist Theory fitted so well to the Zambian context and in this research because of its elements associated with women's weak nature and their ability to participate in political activities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

(a) Research approach and design

This article employed qualitative research approach to provide insights into forms of political violence against women and their effects on women's political participation in Matero constituency of Lusaka District Zambia. Qualitative research approach was chosen because it gave an opportunity to the principal investigators to interact with research participants and make conclusions on the topic under exploration (Creswell, 2014). The researchers used case study design as this design helped the researchers to 'immerse' themselves in a social setting, thereby generating real context of the nature and effects of political violence against women in Matero constituency (Yin, 2018). This design also helped to make comparison of the generated data with the adopted theory (Feminist Theory).

(b) Tools for data generation

The interview guide with Semi-structured questions was used to generate data from 24 purposively selected participants on forms of political violence against women and the effects it has on women's political participation. Zohrabi (2013) argues that the purpose of an interview is to reveal existing knowledge held by the participant in such a way that it can be expressed as answers to the interviewer's questions and can be interpreted. In the context of this research, interviews helped to generate rich data as the researchers were able to interact with research participants in a detailed manner.

(c) Data analysis and quality assurance

Qualitative data collected from 24 participants was analysed using thematic analysis. Data generated from interview discussion was explored by reading through while identifying and noting common themes in accordance with the items on the interview guide. Thorough categorization was done by coding and creating labels for common themes on each item. Major themes were drawn and described in line with the objective of this research. This made it easy for the findings to be presented in themes. Data quality assurance was based on four principals of trustworthiness: dependability, credibility, conformability and transferability.

(d) Ethical considerations

The researchers embraced a number of ethical considerations. Before the data collection stage, this study was approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of Zambia. Permission was obtained from the selected political parties. Informed consent from the research participants was obtained. Before interviewing the participants, the researcher did personal introduction and produced a letter of introduction from the University of Zambia. Research participants were informed on the aims, benefits to be accrued from this research, methods and potential dangers if any as a result of participating in this research. None of the participants participated in the research without their consent. As such they were requested to append their signature to the consent letter.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(a) Forms of Political Violence Against Women

When participants were asked to state the different forms of political violence against women, all of them first acknowledged the fact that political violence against women came in different forms. However, what they could not tell individually was the exact number of forms of political violence against women. Therefore, each one of them mentioned the ones that they knew. Essentially, five forms emerged from the interviews, and these were: physical violence; psychological violence; sexual violence; economic violence and semiotic violence.

1. Physical violence

Participants interviewed were able to identify physical violence as one of the forms of political violence against women. Participant one (1) pointed out that this form of violence (physical violence) involves efforts to inflict bodily harm and injury to a woman who is politically active. She further stated that:

“In the act of political violence, women are beaten, assaulted and thrown to the ground by opposing political party cadres. In some instances, the cadres use machetes, metal bars and stones thereby making women sustain deep cuts”.

Similar views were stated by other participants among them, participant two (2) who had this to say:

“If we were to go with what is reported in the media, we would say physical violence is the most common because these physical acts are the most widely recognized”.

From the views above, it can be argued that physical violence was present in Matero Constituency and the participants were able to identify what constituted physical violence. It was observed from the findings that physical violence involved efforts to inflict bodily harm and injury to women who were politically active. As noted in the findings, women were beaten, assaulted and thrown to the ground by opposing political party cadres. This could be likened to the assertion by Kasoma (2012) who observed that, cadres could use machetes, metal bars and stones to occasion bodily harm on women.

2. Psychological violence

Participants identified the second form of political violence against women as psychological violence. However, only smaller fraction of participants was able to give a clear explanation of what constitutes psychological violence. These participants explained that psychological violence included any act that inflicts trauma on individuals' mental state or emotional well-being. They also provided examples of psychological violence which included death and rape threats, carried out in person or online. Participant three (3) stated that:

“Some politically active women are insulted on twitter and Facebook. They also receive death threats and are called demeaning names like prostitute. Most of the times, women resort to blocking their twitter or Facebook accounts”.

As pointed out above, participants identified the second form of political violence against women as psychological violence. This goes in line with Faruqi (2016) who also identified psychological violence as a form of political violence against women and explained that psychological violence includes any act that inflicts trauma on individuals' mental state or emotional well-being. Similarly, Herrera (2011) goes further to provide examples of psychological violence which include death and rape threats, carried out in person or online, and being called demeaning names like prostitute, ugly and bootlicker.

3. Sexual Violence

Participants identified the third form of violence against women as sexual violence. When Participant five (5) was asked to explain what constituted sexual violence, she had this to say:

“Sexual violence includes all sexual activities and attempts at sexual acts by using force or in other words, against a person's will. Any sexual advances and efforts to do any sexual activity to a woman is part of sexual violence”.

Based on the findings above, it can be argued that there were a lot of women politicians in Matero who were harassed or even raped. Despite them being victims of sexual violence, they found it very difficult to come in the open and report these cases to the police for fear of being stigmatized. This makes it very difficult for women politicians to come out in the open or report to the police that they were harassed or even raped. This situation goes in line with the views of Archenti and Albaine (2017) who argued that despite sexual violence and harassment being common, stigma prevents many women from coming forward to report their experience of sexual violence.

4. Economic Violence

Participants also identified economic violence as the fourth form of violence against women. However, it was observed from the above findings that economic violence was not common in Matero, but there were

traces of its existence in form of burning campaign materials for women politicians so that they could find it financially difficult to compete with men.

Participant four (4) clearly pointed out that:

“Economic violence is not common in Zambia. Despite it being rare, it is an abuse that aims at denying or controlling women’s access to financial resources. This form of political violence against women includes property damage such as breaking a woman’s car, defacing and tearing down a woman’s campaign posters. This is aimed at making it difficult for a woman to compete equally in terms of financial resources”.

Based on the responses given, it can be argued that there are efforts by male dominated political system to make it difficult for women to have resources to fund their political activities. This allies well with the Feminist theory which argues that economic violence is an abuse seeking to deny or control women’s access to financial resources (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Further, Kawila et al (2023) explains that economic violence involves property damage, ranging from petty vandalism to attempts to undermine citizens’ economic livelihood.

5. Semiotic Violence

Participants were able to identify semiotic violence as the fifth form of political violence against women. When asked what semiotic violence was, Participant four (4) explained that:

“It involves people posting degrading images about a woman’s past life like how they used to dress when they were in their teens and telling people that such dressing does not befit a person aspiring for a political office. Political opponents of women aspiring for public office publish stills from alleged sex tape, photos of a woman wearing a bikini with the aim of making them go viral so that the public perception about her is changed”.

Similar to the above sentiments, participant nine (9) said:

“In most cases, women are trivialized in the media. Political opponents of most women fund people to publish articles that suggest that women are not suited for politics. They propagate that women do not have the ability to perform political duties. Women are usually framed in the media as not viable, competent, or suited to higher office, with more attention paid to their appearance than their policy positions”.

Participants argued that it was common in Zambia to see stereotypical images of women politicians. Based on the findings of this research, it was observed that semiotic violence is aimed at demeaning and degrading the dignity of women so that they are seen as not suitable to take up political positions. Krook (2019) points out that semiotic violence is perpetrated through degrading images and sexist language. The United Nations women (2016) also observes that some media perpetuate rumours, sexist behaviour or misogynistic remarks that have the effect of denying women any political competence whatsoever.

(b) Effects of Political Violence on Women’s Political Participation

Apart from determining the different forms of political violence against women, the study went on to find out the effects of political violence on the political participation of women. When asked about the effects of political violence on the political participation of women, political participants were quick to mention that the effects that political violence had on the political participation of women were immense. They also said that the effects of political violence on the political participation of women were more negative than positive. Key themes that emerged includes: Resignations, disenfranchisement and fear to participate, confinement to lower positions, and reduction of freedom of expression.

1. Resignations

The research found that resignations were one of the most common effects of political violence on the political participation of women. Participants observed that when political violence increased in the political arena, women had no option but to resign from certain political positions so that they could save their lives. Participant twenty (20) had this to say:

“I was a ward chairlady for the United Party for National Development (UPND). One day, as we were conducting a door-to-door campaign, we were attacked by Patriotic Front (PF) cadres and I sustained deep cuts from the machetes that they were using. After being discharged from Matero level 1 hospital, I thought twice about my political life. I realized that I could have lost my life and left my children suffering. So, I decided to resign from my position as ward chairlady”.

Responses from the findings gives an impression that the more political violence became rampant, the more resignations by women were recorded in the political arena. This tallies well with Krook and Restrepo (2016), who state that political violence against women refers to behaviours that specifically target women as women to leave politics by pressuring them to step down as candidates or resign a particular political office.

2. Disenfranchisement and Fear to participate

This research also revealed that fear to participate was one of the most common effects of political violence on the political participation of women. Participants observed that because of increased levels of political violence in the political arena, women had become fearful. Participant Eighteen (18) remarked:

“It is not safe to participate in political affairs when there is political violence. Women are afraid to participate in any political activity, be it attending rallies or just a door-to-door campaign. They are afraid of being attacked, hence, they prefer to just sit at home and watch from afar”.

Findings of this research shows that the traits of violence in the political landscape makes it difficult for the majority of women do exercise their democratic rights as expected. This tallies well with a study by Kawila et al (2023) in Kanyama constituency which found that electoral and political violence prevented women from attending political rallies and casting of votes in fear of being beaten as well as losing their lives. However, despite Sialombe (2019) stating that to deliberately exclude eligible people to vote is a very serious crime and attracts a penalty of a minimum of one year with hard labour in In America, Zambia has no law that criminalized those people who caused deliberate disenfranchisement of women.

3. Confinement to lower positions

Participants recognized confinement to lower positions as one of the effects of political violence on the political participation of women. They felt that because of political violence, women were afraid of taking up higher positions be it in their respective political parties or public offices. They observed that the higher the political position a woman vied for, the greater the political violence she was likely to face. They added that political opponents of women were willing to put up a fierce fight when it came to higher political positions. Participant Fifteen (15) commented as follows:

“It is very dangerous for a woman to vie for a higher political position in this political set up. If political violence can be vented on me as constituency secretary, what more if I vie for the position of National secretary or I aspire to become a Member of Parliament? The level of political violence increases as a woman aims for higher positions. So, we decide to only stick to lower positions that attract very little political violence”.

Similar views were echoed by participant Twenty-One (21) who said:

“Women have a lot of abilities that the nation can benefit from if they are given an opportunity to ascend to higher positions. Women are transparent, accountable and hate corruption. The fact that they are confined to lower positions makes it difficult for the nation to benefit from these abilities”.

Based on the responses given, it is clear that confinement to lower positions was an effect of political violence against women. This does not resonate well with Bardall (2011) who argues that in an era where international organizations are advocating for an increase in the number of women in higher offices, confinement to lower positions as an effect of political violence is not only counterproductive, but also an assault on the strides that have so far been made in as far as increasing women participation is concerned.

4. Reduction of freedom of expression

This research also revealed that reduction of freedom of expression was yet another effect of political violence on the political participation of women. Participants argued that women by nature like expressing themselves through talking and enjoy being given an enabling environment where they can be free to do so. However, participant Thirteen (13) bemoaned the lack of a favourable political environment where women could be free and air their views on the political matters of their constituency. She added that:

“With the increase in the number of TV and radio stations, we are afraid of expressing ourselves as women in terms of the challenges that we are facing in our different wards. The moment you say something against your political opponents on TV, their cadres will begin looking for you till they find you and beat you up. In order to avoid being beaten, we just keep quiet even when things are not okay”.

Freedom of expression, as explained by Funk (2010), is a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or a community to articulate their opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, censorship, or legal sanction as this is recognised as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights law by the United Nations. Unfortunately, this research found that there was presence of reduced freedom of expression among women as a result of political violence. Krook and Norris (2014) observe that women by nature like expressing themselves through talking and enjoy being given an enabling environment where they can be free to do so. However, participants argued that there was no favourable political environment where women could be free to air their views on the political matters of their constituency. This goes well with the Social Feminist Theory which point out elements such as silencing or expelling women from political life as an act perpetrated by men to secure their headship.

CONCLUSION

This article explored forms of political violence against women and its effects on their political participation. This research was motivated by a rise in political violence against women in Matero Constituency between 2011 and 2021. Fundamentally, this research identified the different forms of political violence against women in Matero constituency and described the effects of political violence against women. From the findings of this research, it was delineated that there is an increase in forms of political violence against women in Matero constituency ranging from physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, economic and semiotic violence. It was found that these forms of political violence against women increase during campaign periods. It was also concluded that these forms of political violence have adverse effects on the political participation of women. Their Zeal to participate in political landscape is being stifled by political violence whose effects on women’s political participation are resignations, disenfranchisement and fear to participate, confinement to lower positions, reduced freedom of expression and assembly and increased determination. Thus, it is clear that the gendered political environments in which women work,

continue to make it difficult for them to exercise their political rights and impedes the proliferation of democracy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Zambia Center for Inter-party Dialogue (ZCID), the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) should convene wider consultative seminars and workshops to familiarize themselves and the general public with the forms of political violence against women.
2. The Zambian Judiciary should establish Fast Track Courts so as to deal with political violence cases expeditiously thereby avoiding political violent cases taking too long to be concluded.

COMPETING INTEREST

There is no competing interest emanating from the authors.

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