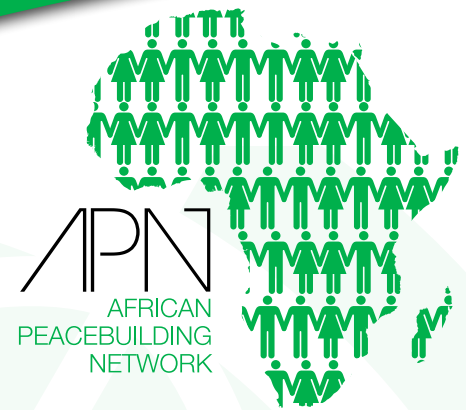




# SSRC



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# Including Women Living with Disabilities in Governance in Zimbabwe: *Some Policy Options*

**By Rumbidzayi Marevegwa**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The Zimbabwe Statistics Agency should enhance** data collection and analysis related to women with disabilities as a critical step towards effective planning and advocacy for more targeted support and empowerment of this demographic.
- **Through the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, a law expanding quota systems for the representation of women** with living with disabilities in legislatures, public offices/institutions, civil service, and political parties at the local, provincial, and national government levels should be enacted. For example, the current allocation of 2 out of the 80 senate seats to PWDs, should be increased, including the designation of seats to women living with disabilities.
- **Special programs for WWDs should be designed and implemented** under the leadership of the Disability Department under the Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Development and cooperating partners, including FODPZ, to strengthen the capacities of women living with disabilities. Such training activities should be accessible at the grassroots, and strategically designed to hold multiple Train-the Trainer sessions across the country for an intersectional gendered approach towards integrating PWDs and WWDs into governance and development in Zimbabwe.
- **Special economic initiatives targeting women living with disabilities should be launched** by government and the private sector. Such targeted support will provide access to financial resources, education, vocational training, and skill-development programs. Programs of economic empowerment for PWDs will enable women living with disabilities to support their families, as well as participate meaningfully in governance.

This policy brief is based on an analysis of the marginalization and exclusion of women living with disabilities (WWD) in governance and decision-making in local communities and makes some recommendations for addressing this challenge.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL CONTEXT

The 2022 population census, conducted by the Zimbabwe Statistics Agency, reveals that 1.2 million individuals in Zimbabwe face challenges in performing physical activities, with 192,000 individuals identified as having permanent disabilities. Despite these figures, the availability of accurate statistics specifically pertaining to women with disabilities in Zimbabwe remains elusive. This gap in data, which is part of a bigger problem, underscores a critical need for more concerted efforts towards identifying the specific needs of women living with disabilities in the country, including addressing the challenges they face.

In 2015, the United Nations made a commitment through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 'to leave no one behind and to reach those furthest behind first.'<sup>1</sup> This includes ensuring the participation of women living with disabilities in governance, which is an integral factor for promoting sustainable development.

Zimbabwe was one of the first countries in the world to historically dignify the lives of people living with disabilities through legislative and constitutional representation.<sup>2</sup> The country enacted the Disability Act of 1992, signifying the government's commitment to achieving an inclusive society for People Living with Disabilities (PWD). Furthermore, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013 in Section 22 implores the State and all institutions and agencies of government to recognise the rights of persons living with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, the National Disability Policy, launched in 2021, emphasises the rights of PWD

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to participate in elections and to contest for any public office of their choice.<sup>4</sup>

While global, national, and organizational policies and commitments to the protection and empowerment of affected populations apply to persons with disabilities, they often lack specific references to women living with disabilities. The structural obstacles to their participation in local governance are rooted in patriarchal norms and values that devalue women as a weaker sex. Also, the socio-cultural construction of femininity and configuration of gender roles in Zimbabwe tend to undervalue women.<sup>5</sup> This state of affairs is much worse for women living with disabilities, who are largely viewed as unimportant, and even frequently excluded from decision-making. WWDs also face the brunt of social stigma, arising from the perception that disability is a punishment from God. This stigma feeds discrimination against PWDs, WWDs, and women who have disabled children.

A study by Bingisai, on the participation of women in Zimbabwe elections revealed that women with disabilities are more prone to violence than their counterparts without disabilities.<sup>6</sup> Such women do not get adequate support for electoral participation; hence, their role is peripheral and downplayed. Furthermore, the provisions in the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the National Disability Policy are rather broad, referring to “women” and “people with disabilities” without directly and precisely targeting “women with disabilities.”

Efforts are being made in Zimbabwe to increase the participation of women with disabilities in governance, with a focus on empowering them to engage in dialogue with local authorities, lawmakers, and decision-makers on disability rights. The Federation of Organisations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ), in collaboration with UNESCO, conducted training programs aimed at enhancing the capacities of women and girls with disabilities to become self-advocates. The initiatives included lobbying and advocacy training, which are instrumental in shifting the perception of women and girls with disabilities from objects of charity to individuals with rights.<sup>7</sup> Intensifying such efforts, in conjunction with the recommendations below, contributes significantly towards the inclusion of women with disabilities in governance.

<sup>1</sup> Shi, G., Ke, S., & Banozic, A. (2022). The role of assistive technology in advancing sustainable development goals. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 4, 859272.

<sup>2</sup> Chikate, P. (2020). Disabled women in a dictatorial regime: Sexual assault and disability in Zimbabwe. Minnesota State University, Mankato.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Zimbabwe. Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (Number. 20) Act, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Government of Zimbabwe. National Disability Policy Zimbabwe. Harare: Government of Zimbabwe; 2021.

## Recommendations

### **The Government of Zimbabwe, through its various institutions and agencies, should consider the following measures:**

- The Zimbabwe Statistics Agency should enhance data collection and analysis related to women with disabilities as a critical step towards effective planning and advocacy for more targeted support and empowerment of this demographic.
- Through the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, a law expanding quota systems for the representation of women with living with disabilities in legislatures, public offices/institutions, civil service, and political parties at the local, provincial, and national government levels should be enacted. For example, the current allocation of 2 out of the 80 senate seats to PWDs, should be increased, including the designation of seats to women living with disabilities.
- Special programs for WWDs should be designed and implemented under the leadership of the Disability Department under the Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Development and co-operating partners, including FODPZ, to strengthen the capacities of women living with disabilities. Such training activities should be accessible at the grassroots, and strategically designed to hold multiple Train-the Trainer sessions across the country for an intersectional gendered approach towards integrating PWDs and WWDs into governance and development in Zimbabwe.
- Special economic initiatives targeting women living with disabilities should be launched by government and the private sector. Such targeted support will provide access to financial resources, education, vocational training, and skill-development programs. Programs of economic empowerment for PWDs will enable women living with disabilities to support their families, as well as participate meaningfully in governance.

<sup>5</sup> Jaji, R. (2020). Gendered subjectivities: The nexus between femininity and peacebuilding in Zimbabwe. *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review*, 10(1), 1-27.

<sup>6</sup> Bingisai, C. K. (2023). Electoral Participation as a Fundamental Right for Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe. In *Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe, Vol II: The 2023 Election and Beyond* (pp. 19-40). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/women-and-girls-disabilities-zimbabwe-speak-about-their-challenges>