

Women's political leadership and participation in Zambia

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This study explores women's political participation and leadership in Zambia, examining their representation in parliament, government, political parties and the 2026 elections. It analyses the structural, legal, institutional and financial barriers that continue to limit women's meaningful participation, while also assessing recent reforms, support mechanisms and initiatives aimed at advancing women's political leadership.

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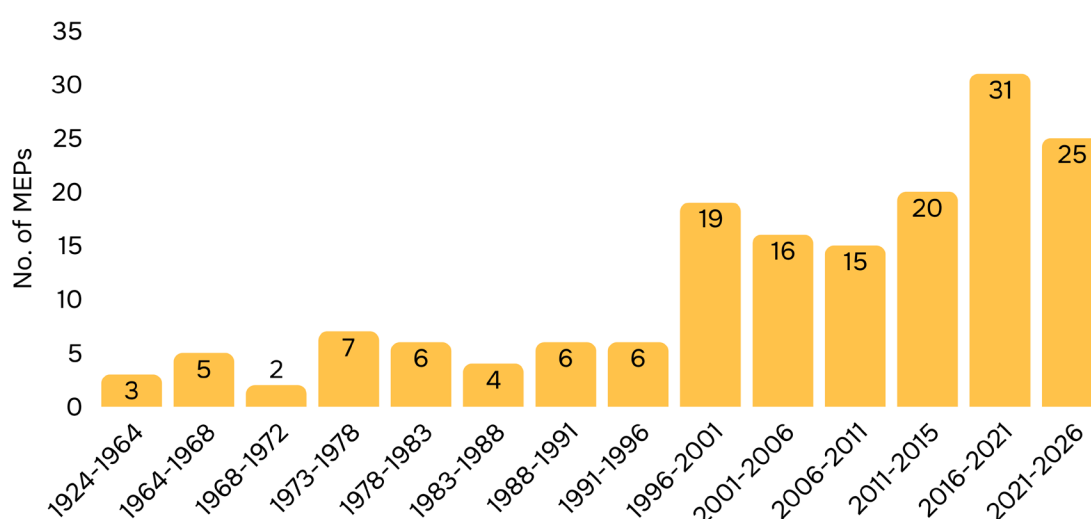
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Introduction

Women are the largest demographic in Zambia at 50.5% of the population and make up the majority of voters. In the upcoming 2026 election, there are a total of 8,786,300 registered voters, of whom 4,665,431 (53.1%) are women and 4,120,869 (46.9%) are men.¹

Despite this, **women remain under-represented in all spheres of public life** even after the return to multiparty democracy in 1991. There were only five women in the 1991-1996 parliament, only 4% of its 150 members. This number rose to 16 (11%) between 2006-2011. Ten years later, in the 2016-2021 parliament, women's representation increased to 31 (20%) in a 156-member house. However, there was a reversal of this positive trend for the 2021-2026 parliament, to which only 25 women (16%) were elected (Figure 1).² The situation is particularly acute at local government level, where representation has remained in the 7% to 9% range since 1991.³



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Figure 1: Number of Women Members of Parliament: 1924-2026

The situation is similar for women's representation at the senior decision-making level. A three-election trend analysis shows that while the 2011 cabinet included only two women out of a 19-member cabinet (11%), this increased to 8 in the 33-member 2016 cabinet (24%) and, in 2021, fell to five women in the 25-member cabinet (20%).⁴ These percentages document the failure of Zambia to implement its regional, continental and global-level commitments to promote gender equality, specifically, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) and the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

¹ Electoral Commission of Zambia, "2026 Registered Voters by Gender". Available [here](#).

² Research Department of the Zambian Parliament, 2022. "An insight into the Evolution of the Zambian Parliament". Available [here](#).

³ Ministry of Gender. 2018. "Gender Statistics on Women's Representation in Local Government: The Case of Zambia". Available [here](#).

⁴ "Zambia: Cabinet Fails to Address Gender Gaps," All Africa. October, 7, 2011. Available [here](#). Peter Clottey, "Zambia Group Hails Appointment of Female Cabinet Ministers," VoA September 29, 2016. Available [here](#).

In the proportional part of the new MMPR system, 20 seats are reserved for women, 15 for youth and five for persons with disabilities (PWDs).

The 2026 election will take place just eight months after the enactment of the Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 13 of 2025, which introduces mixed member proportional representation (MMPR). Before these changes, all seats, except for the President, were elected on a constituency basis using the first-past-the-post system. Under the new MMPR system, 40 seats will be allocated proportionally according to political parties' share of the national presidential vote.

In addition, the constitutional amendment provides for an increase in the number of constituencies, from 156 to 226. The introduction of MMPR and these additional 70 constituencies were presented by the ruling United Party for National Development (UPND) as critical for the inclusion of minorities and for the fair distribution of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), which now stands at K40 million per constituency as against K1.6 million in 2021. These additional constituencies were established on the basis of population, geography and other variables.

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The main women's umbrella body, the Non-Governmental Organisations Coordinating Council (NGOCC), opposed the constitutional amendment on the grounds that **the adoption process was rushed, non-inclusive, and sidelined accountability, essentially making it a propaganda move ahead of the poll.**⁵ Other stakeholders have argued that the disagreements between NGOCC and the ruling party resulted in the women's movement being unable to effectively engage with the ruling party on the need to field women in the new constituencies.⁶

While the issue was formally addressed during the high-level Accelerated Women's Political Participation and Leadership Conference organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Democracy Deepening Project together with national and international partners in April 2026, this was deemed inadequate and convened belatedly. There are, however, about **56 women candidates in the 70 new constituencies, running both as independents and with various political parties.**⁷ Critics also observed that there was no effective engagement with the ruling party to enlist females on the party PWD and youth lists.⁸

⁵ Elizabeth Mabenga, 'NGOCC rejects Bill 7,' News Diggers, June 3, 2025, accessed July 26, 2026. Available [here](#); UPND Criticizes NGOCC For U-Turning on Bill 7,' News Fountain, June 4, 2025, accessed July 26, 2026. Available [here](#); Emmanuel Mwamba, 'Bill 7 is Rejected. Zambians must rise to protect the integrity of the Constitution,' November 10, 2025, accessed July 26, 2026. Available [here](#).

⁶ Anonymous, interview with former NGOCC Board Member, July 18, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 20, 2026; Anonymous, interview with OASIS Forum/Church mother body leadership, July 19, 2026.

⁷ These figures were compiled by the author based on the list of nominated candidates released by the Electoral Commission of Zambia.

⁸ Anonymous, interview with female former member of parliament, July 19, 2026; Anonymous, interview political party leader, July 19, 2026; Anonymous, interview with NGOCC member, July 19, 2026.

Women leadership in government and parliament: 2016-2026

Although few in number, some women have occupied key positions in both government and parliament. **Between 2016 and 2021, Zambia had its first female vice president, and there were eight women out of the 33-member cabinet (24%).** They served as ministers in the following portfolios: Lands and Natural Resources; Commerce, Trade and Industry; Finance; Agriculture; Information and Broadcasting; Higher Education; Livestock and Fisheries; Labour and Social Security; and Gender. There was also a female minister in the vice president's office.

During the 2021-2026 parliament, the vice presidency was held by a woman, and the first female Speaker was elected, together with a woman as one of the Deputy Speakers. Out of the 25 cabinet positions, five (20%) were held by women. They held the following portfolios: Information and Media; Health; Lands and Natural Resources; Community Development and Social Services; Labour and Social Security; and Justice. One of the ten provincial ministers was also a woman. The chairperson of the Electoral Commission of Zambia is also a woman, the second woman to serve in that position since its establishment in 1996.



These women exerted considerable influence over a range of policy and legislative processes in their respective portfolios. For instance, the outgoing Vice President oversaw matters relating to the Resettlement Management Bill, which seeks to reform the processes for relocating and compensating people affected by development projects, mining, and disasters. This is particularly significant from a transparency and accountability perspective, given the growing focus on the extraction of critical minerals in rural communities where many people have limited literacy and limited economic resources. The outgoing Minister of Justice oversaw the 2025 constitutional amendment process, while the Minister of Information initiated and guided the process that culminated in the enactment of the Access to Information Act. The Act provides citizens and residence permit holders with a legal right to request and access information held by government departments. **All of these legislative instruments were tabled in a parliament presided over by a female Speaker.** Several women also served as high-level technocrats in government ministries, departments and agencies, further underscoring women's influence across key levels of the legislative and policy-making process.

Women and political party leadership

The representation of women in political party leadership is more problematic.

Currently, of the **top six leadership positions in the ruling UPND** – the President, Vice President, Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Party Secretary and Treasurer – **only the Vice President is a woman**. However, the party's women's section is always chaired by a woman.

The situation is similar in the Patriotic Front (PF) and its breakaway groupings. The PF, which lost power to the UPND in 2021 and, until recently, was the largest opposition party, has been characterised by infighting and now has three separate splinter parties. Two of these, led by Miles Sampa and Robert Chabinga have joined the UPND. The third, led by Makebi Zulu, joined the National Restoration Party for Unity and Prosperity (NRPUP), whose presidential candidate Brian Mundubile is one of the front runners in the upcoming election. Makebi Zulu is Brian Mundubile's running mate, and both served as ministers in the PF government.

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The NRPUP, whose membership largely consists of disaffected Patriotic Front members, has not held a convention to elect its leaders, and those serving in various positions have not been elected to office. They are all men and were appointed by the party president three months before the election. The NRPUP's constitution is not in the public domain, and the party mostly utilises the Tonse Alliance constitution,⁹ which does not provide any form of quota for women's representation. The NRPUP's 2026 election manifesto, however, states that the party will support efforts to put women at the centre of decision-making and improve representation if elected into power.¹⁰

Apart from the PF, which had the second-largest representation in the recently dissolved parliament, the Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD), New Congress Party (NCP) and Party for National Unity and Progress (PNUP) each had one seat. The PNUP is currently in an alliance with the UPND and has not fielded candidates at any level. The NCP and FDD have not fielded presidential candidates but are fielding candidates at legislative and local government levels.

The key leadership positions of these two minority parties, which are part of the Tonse Alliance supporting the NRPUP presidential candidate Brian Mundubile, are mostly unfilled. Since 2025, when the female president of FDD died, the party has not filled the vacancy and is in a state of instability. Zambia therefore goes to the polls with a fragmented opposition and a degree of uncertainty among its electorate, especially women. One independent candidate observed that she chose to contest the election independently because of the confusion and divisions within the Patriotic Front.¹¹

⁹ NRPUP is a member of the Tonse Alliance. The author consulted the media and reached out to the leadership of the NRPUP to access their party constitution but was unable access it. Instead, the author was provided with the Tonse Alliance constitution.

¹⁰ Tonse Alliance, 'Manifesto of Brian Mundubile,' NRPUP, accessed June 26, 2026. Available [here](#).

¹¹ Anonymous, interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 22, 2026.

Candidate selection and nomination

The parliamentary candidate selection process is complex and is governed more by established practices than party constitutions. The candidate selection process is hierarchical, beginning at the ward level, where aspiring candidates canvass for votes from the local party structures. As constituencies are made up of multiple wards, parliamentary candidates need to be popular across all the wards that form a constituency. Following the canvassing, the ward party functionaries then conduct elections in which the aspiring candidates are ranked in order of perceived potential. These lists are then sent to the provincial leadership for the next stage.

Potential candidates are interviewed by the provincial leadership to ascertain their standing with the electorate, length of party membership, party leadership roles held, personal financial resources for the campaign (some parties require the presentation of bank statements) and donations made to the party.¹² The financial resources of a candidate are particularly critical due to the lack of state funding for political parties.¹³ Once the candidates are selected by the provincial offices, the names are forwarded for endorsement to the highest decision-making organs of the parties: in the UPND and NRPUP, the National Management Committees; for the PF, the Central Committee. Some parties have another layer of vetting by party office-holders (such as the Secretary General, Deputy Secretary General, Elections Chairperson and the Mobilisation Chairperson) prior to the final decision by the national authorities.¹⁴

Corrupt practices have been reported at all levels, but particularly at the local level and within the vetting committees.¹⁵ Some constituency-level selection processes have been declared null and void, but action is not taken to deal with the damage caused by the vetting committees.¹⁶ **In a country where the majority of the women are poor, many potential candidates lack the financial resources to bribe party officials at the various stages of the selection process.**

The selection of presidential candidates is the prerogative of party general assemblies, while candidate lists for municipal councils are managed by ward officials and forwarded to the constituencies for interviews and final selection. **Complaints regarding the selection of candidates for local government are significantly less than for those in parliamentary elections.**

¹² Chizonde Bright, Chimuka Nachibinga, William Nyarko and Geoffrey Sizala, Elections and Money: Perspectives from Members of Parliament in Zambia (Transparency International, 2024). Available [here](#); Anonymous, interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 22, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 20, 2026.

¹³ This should not have been the case if article 60 of the Zambian Constitution (as amended in 2016) was implemented as it provides rules on the registration of parties, public financing of political campaigns, disclosure of funding sources and spending limits. The article further provides for a constitutional framework for regulating political party finances, but no legal framework has been put in place. The Political Parties Bill, which was spearheaded by the Zambia Centre for Inter Party Dialogue (ZCID), is yet to be tabled in parliament. In April 2026, a landmark judgement in the constitutional court directed the government to enact the bill into law within 12 months.

¹⁴ Anonymous, interview with UPND ward leader, July 22, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 20, 2026; Anonymous, 2026, interview with National Democratic Congress member, July 19, 2026; Anonymous, interview with Citizens Forum member, July 19, 2026.

¹⁵ See Bright, Nachibinga, Nyarko and Sizala, Elections and Money.

¹⁶ Anonymous, interview with former Cabinet Minister, July 18, 2026.

The 2026 UPND candidate selection and nomination process has given rise to concerns, with cases reported of two or more candidate nomination certificates being issued for the same constituency. The President of the Republic and UPND presidential candidate, Hakainde Hichilema, acknowledged this anomaly and apologised to those affected, including women. Most of the aggrieved members are contesting the elections as independent candidates, resulting in an unprecedented number of independents. There are 354 independent candidates in the 226 constituencies, and, of these, 35 are women (10%), and 319 are men (90%).¹⁷

A notable feature of the upcoming election is that **none of the presidential candidates has made prominent pronouncements on gender quotas during the candidate selection process.** In the case of UPND, which has announced a 30% female candidate quota, this statement was issued by a relatively junior party official, the Elections Chairperson. This contrasts with 2021 when the party President and current President of the Republic, Hakainde Hichilema, personally made the commitment. His pronouncement carried considerable weight at the time, and appears to have influenced the broader political environment, including the then ruling party, the Patriotic Front, which incorporated a 50/50 women representation provision into its 2021–2026 electoral manifesto.

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It is important to note, however, that the 30% quota recently announced by the UPND is in line with its party framework. **To date, the UPND appears to be the only political party with institutionalised gender quotas.**¹⁸ Nevertheless, the party failed to implement its own quotas, with women accounting for only 15% of parliamentary candidates, 15% of mayoral candidates and 8% of councillor candidates. The party has failed to explain why it did not implement the quota. NGOCC did, however, raise concerns about reports of violence, intimidation and manipulation during candidate selections in some parties.¹⁹ NGOCC also suggested that the UPND may be relying on the seats allocated under proportional representation instead of the constituency-based seats for women's representation.²⁰ These developments highlight the persistent gap between formal commitments to women's political representation and their implementation in practice. More broadly, regardless of political party affiliation, **women in Zambia continue to face structural, legal, institutional and other barriers to meaningful participation and representation in political life.**

Gender disaggregated data

An analysis of the 2026 presidential candidates shows that **out of the 14 validly nominated candidates, there is only one woman, and she is running as an independent.** There are also three female running mates, including the current vice president. The other two are standing on the Socialist Party and Zambia Wake Up Party (ZAWAPA) tickets. Of the 973 parliamentary candidates selected, only 122 (13%) are women, and 851 (87%) are men. Out of the 439 mayoral candidates, only 48 (11%) are women and 391 (89%) are men. Out of a total of 5,099 councillors selected, 433 (8%) are women compared to 4,666 (92%) men. Among the 354 independent parliamentary candidates, there are 37 (10%) women and 317 (90%) men.²¹

¹⁷ These figures were compiled by the author based on the list of nominated candidates released by the Electoral Commission of Zambia.

¹⁸ Zambia has more than 80 parties according to the records of the Registrar of Societies. There has been no in-depth review of party constitutions to determine how many have gender quotas.

¹⁹ 'Women's Candidature Plunges In 2026 As Zambia Backslides on Gender Parity – NGOCC' Cloud FM Zambia Facebook post, July 28, 2026, accessed July 28, 2026. Available [here](#).

²⁰ Anonymous, interview with NGOCC member, July 21 2026.

²¹ Unpublished data from the Electoral Commission of Zambia Corporate Affairs Department.

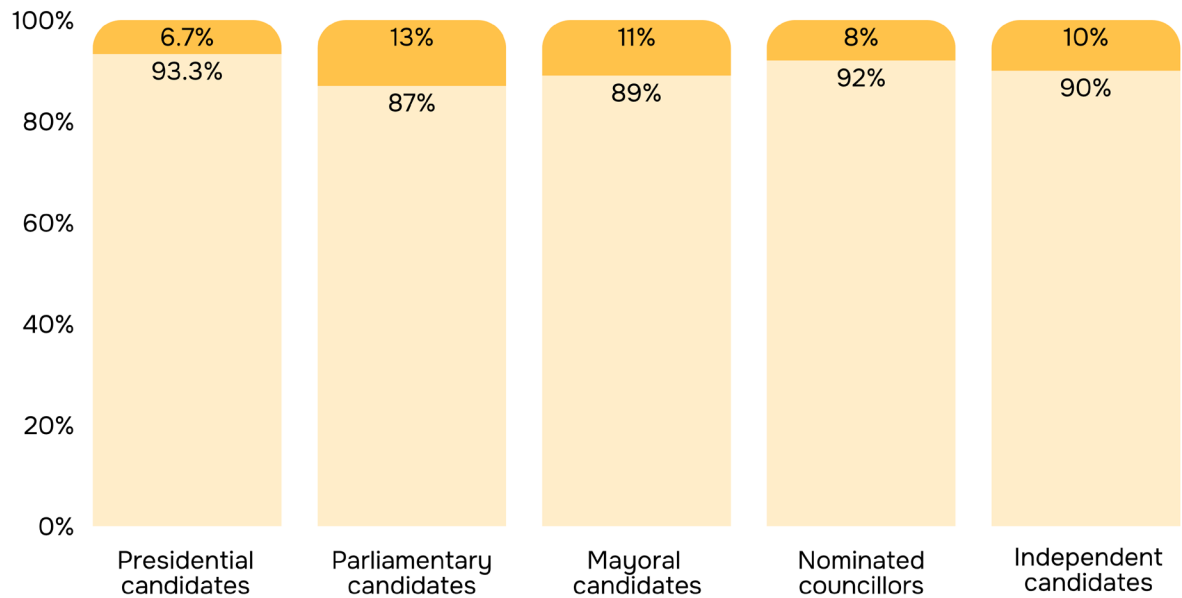


Figure 2: Candidates by Gender: 2026 Elections

A review of the 2026, 2021 and 2016 election data show that **Zambia has had only one female presidential candidate in the last three elections.** The 2026 elections also have a lower percentage (13%) of female parliamentary candidates compared to 2021 (21%) and 2016 (17%). The situation is similar at the mayoral and councillor levels, with 2026 at 11%, 2021 at 15%, and 2016 at 12%. At the councillor level, the 2026 percentage of women candidates is 8%, in 2021 it was 10%, and in 2016, 10%. There is also a real crisis of representation of women in local government, where this figure has consistently remained in the 7% to 10% range since 1991.

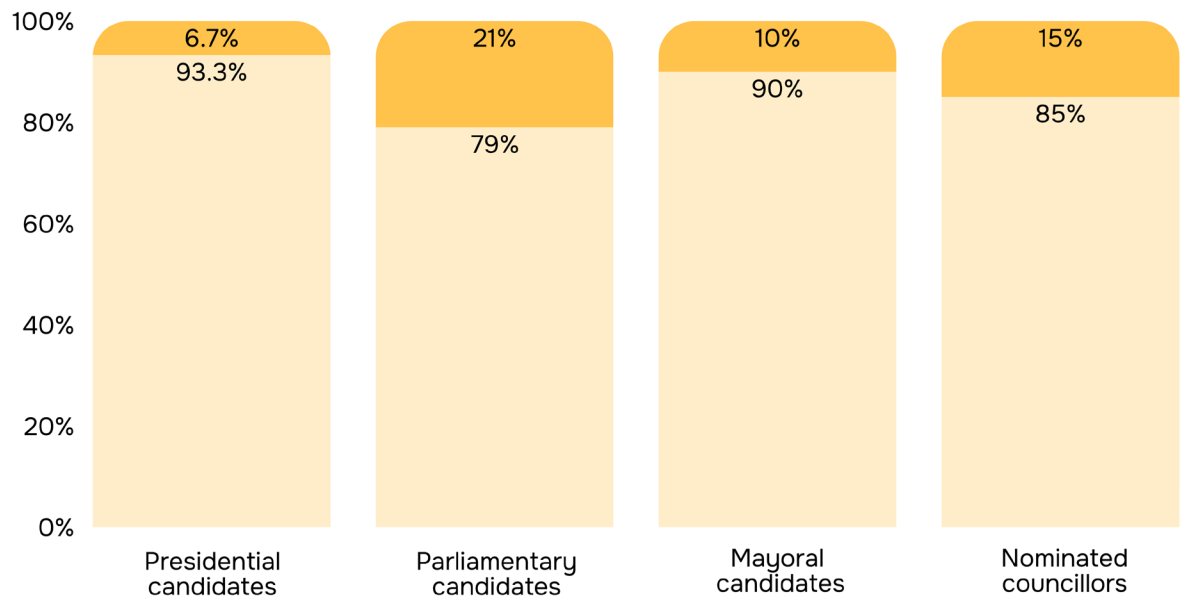


Figure 3: Candidates by Gender: 2021 Elections

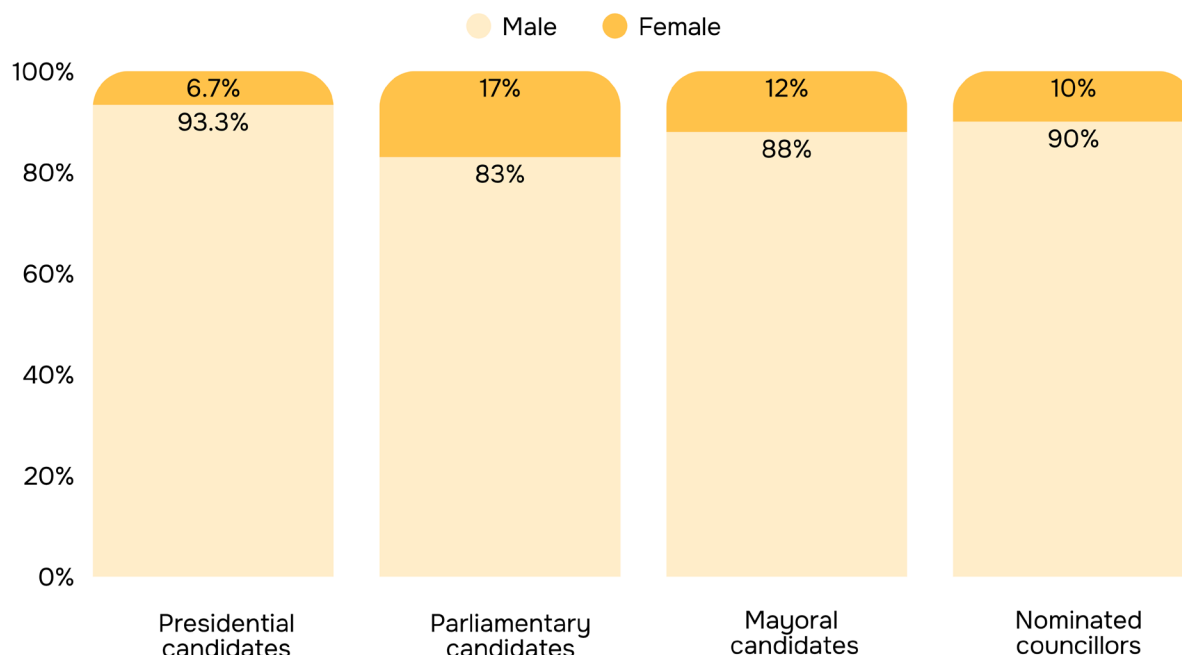


Figure 4: Candidates by Gender: 2016 Elections

The electoral commission's registration fees for candidates are straightforward but expensive for female candidates, especially at the presidential level.²² Since 2021, the fee structure takes account of the rural-urban divide and is gender-, youth-, and PWD-sensitive. A minimal adjustment was made to the fees in May 2026, and the new fee structure is as follows:²³

- **Presidential candidates:** Male K100,000, Female K80,000, Youth (19-34 years), PWDs K60,000.
- **Parliamentary candidates:** Male K17,000, Female K14,000, Youth K10,500, PWDs K10,000.
- **Mayoral candidates:** Male K17,000, Female K14,000, Youths K10,500, PWD K10,000.
- **Council chairperson** (equivalent of mayor but operates below city councils): Male K4,000, Female K3,500, Youths K3,000 and PWDs K2,500.
- **Councillor candidates** (city and municipal councils): Male K1,700, Female K1,200, Youth K1,200, PWDs K1,000.
- **Councillor candidates** (town council): Male K800, Female K 700, Youth K700, PWDs K500.

²² Saboi Imboela (President of the National Democratic Congress Party), telephone Interview with author, July 21, 2026; Chishala Kateka (President of the National Heritage Party), telephone Interview with author, July 23, 2026.

²³ Mwenya Mofya, 'ECZ increases Nominations Fees for August Polls,' News Diggers, May 6, 2026. Available [here](#).

Three main data gaps were observed during this study.

- The first is the **absence of systematically collated data on gender representation** within political parties or party membership registers.
- The second concerns **female candidate selection**, especially how many women sought selection as candidates by political parties but were unsuccessful and for what reasons they were rejected. NGOCC has a database of these women, but it is incomplete. Collecting and consolidating this information would support more targeted engagement with, and assistance to, women seeking political office. There will also be a need to collect data on successful female candidates following the election.
- The third gap relates to the **lack of comprehensive data on gender representation** provisions in party constitutions, policies and other governing documents. Such data would help identify gaps between formal commitments to gender equality and their implementation in practice. These gaps could also provide potential areas for dialogue and collaboration between the EU and partners, civil society and political parties.

Political party support to women candidates

A review of the main political parties taking part in this election – UPND, NRPUP, Socialist Party and Citizens First – shows that none of them has taken deliberate measures to promote female political candidates. The support that political parties such as the UPND are providing is for all candidates regardless of gender.²⁴

The only outstanding efforts noted are towards a 26-year-old woman parliamentary candidate in Mwense constituency, who is the youngest UPND contestant. Her male opponent has been a member of parliament for three consecutive terms and served as Minister of Education from 2018 to 2020. Support for the young aspirant is not structured, but party functionaries have made concerted efforts to raise campaign funds for her, including ensuring she has an active presence on social media.



²⁴ Author interviews with UPND candidates revealed that the UNPD makes weekly financial disbursements of K25,000, K10,000 and K3,000 to Parliamentary, Mayoral, and Local Government Candidates respectively.

Structures supporting women representation

The primary structures supporting women's political representation include **non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's sections within political parties and the women's parliamentary caucus.**

NGOs such as **NGOCC and the Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL)** have been leading in this area but operate on very limited budgets. External donors, who are their main funders, have concentrated on capacity building programmes, which some women have found repetitive and ineffective.²⁵ NGOCC received just over USD 360,000 (K6.5 million) from The Carter Centre and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2024.

It also received funding from the UNDP in 2025.²⁶ The funds supported female members of political parties who had expressed interest in contesting the 2026 elections into a mentoring programme and the creation of a database of these women candidates. The funds also supported NGOCC's engagements with political parties to consider women from this pool for selection. Over 500 women were registered in 58 of the 116 districts where the project was implemented. Of these, 50 were seeking election to parliament while the rest sought elected office in local government. In 2024, to prepare these potential candidates effectively, NGOCC launched the "Her Time Is Now" campaign, which involved training and mentoring these potential female candidates, promoting inclusive leadership and mitigating violence against women in elections (VAWE). NGOCC also supported the women during the nomination stage. Records show that 48 of the 50 parliamentary aspirants successfully filed their nominations, and of these, 35 were selected by the ruling UPND, while the rest are contesting on the NRPUP ticket or as independents.²⁷

NGOCC further revealed that a further 35 women had approached the organisation for support during the course of the programme but were unable to join either because they were late in expressing interest or because they resided in areas not covered by the programme.²⁸ Recently, NGOCC launched the "Donation Button": an online fundraising platform aimed at raising funds for female candidates, but it has yet to disclose how much was raised by this initiative. This engagement by NGOCC has shown that there is considerable interest among women in participating in the governance of the country.

ZNWL has received funding from the Scottish government to support radio programmes for female candidates in three districts, Kabwe, Lusaka and Kapipi Mposhi. It has also received financial assistance from the **European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)** earmarked for election monitoring.²⁹

²⁵ Anonymous, interview with female political party leader, July 20, 2026.

²⁶ Anne- Mbewe Anamela (Executive Director of NGOCC), telephone interview with author, July 25, 2026.

²⁷ Patricia Lwayile (Coordinator for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (WEGE)/Social and Economic Development at NGOCC), telephone interview with author, July 26, 2026.

²⁸ Patricia Lwayile, telephone interview.

²⁹ Golden Nachibinga (Acting Executive Director of ZNWL), telephone interview, July 20, 2026.

Views are mixed on the effectiveness of the interventions implemented by the two NGOs.³⁰ While some candidates consider these interventions helpful, the majority expressed a preference for direct financial support, which they felt would provide more immediate assistance during electoral campaigns. Such concerns are understandable given that the average cost of winning an election in Zambia is estimated at K3.8 million, with campaign expenditure alone requiring at least K500,000.³¹ In these circumstances, the K6.5 million in funding provided to NGOCC would be sufficient to support only two candidates.

These challenges stem from broader shifts in international funding. The **European Union's Global Gateway strategy** exemplifies this trend. The withdrawal of USAID from Zambia has reduced overall support to governance and democracy building.

Women's sections of the various political parties also play a critical role in women's representation, especially by building capacity and comradeship. Chaired by women, these structures are also critical in the grassroots mobilisation of women. The recognition and visibility of leadership positions helps these women to obtain selection at various levels of the process and even appointment to cabinet posts and other decision-making positions. The current chairperson of the UPND women's section is the outgoing Minister of Community Development and Social Services.

Apart from these bodies, the women's parliamentary caucus, which has been in existence since 1997, has sought to advance women's decision-making power through capacity building efforts "but often lacks visibility and influence due to its limited financial and technical capacity".³²

The limited funding for these NGOs is attributed to changes in the international aid architecture where there is a shift away from traditional frameworks and a move towards modern, geostrategic models of infrastructure and investment.

³⁰ Anonymous, interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 20, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female political leader, July 20, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female party member, July 19, 2026.

³¹ Bright, Nachibinga, Nyarko and Sizala, Elections and Money; Wahman, Michael, The Cost of Politics in Zambia: Implications for Political Participation and Development (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023). Available [here](#).

³² Nalukui Milapo, EU support for women's political participation and leadership under the EU's Gender Action Plan: A case study on Zambia (European Democracy Hub, 2021). Available [here](#).

Donor support to women political leadership

Over the past five years (2021–2026), international donors have implemented several targeted programmes aimed at enhancing women's political participation. These include:

- **Women's Political Participation Programme (2013–2022)**

This programme was funded by Demo Finland and implemented by ZNWL. It supported political parties in promoting gender equality and the formation of multi-party alliances among women. Dialogue platforms for women politicians were established in three local districts (Kaoma, Kapiri Mposhi and Lusaka) and at the national level. It also strengthened the capabilities and leadership skills of local councillors. Aspiring women candidates nominated women candidates and their campaign managers also received targeted training.

- **Deepening Democracy Project (2025–27)**

Managed by UNDP and funded by Denmark, Luxembourg and the Republic of Korea, the project is a successor to the Democracy Strengthening in Zambia project (2020–25). Its aim is to enhance inclusive participation and electoral integrity ahead of the 2026 general elections. It has undertaken the following activities: i) mitigating targeted digital threats directed at women; ii) convening a high-level national conference whose aim was to hasten women's political participation. Invited stakeholders used this platform to lobby political parties for more representation of women in newly created constituencies. They also advocated for further legal reforms to build on the achievements made with the introduction of the MMPR system; iii) the action Equal Access to Electoral Justice, which supports women's access to justice, including handling of electoral complaints and appeals in a transparent and fair manner. The DPP collaborates with the Zambian judiciary to address judicial mechanisms that hinder equal access to justice.

- **Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWE) Reporting Mechanism (2026)**

This action involves support for a toll-free hotline and related tracking systems aimed at protecting female candidates and voters from political intimidation and violence. The UN coordinates the action under the Spotlight 2.0 Initiative, and it is mainly funded by Ireland.

- **Women in Local Leadership Project (2021–27)**

This USD7 million action is implemented by the Local Government Association of Zambia and financed by Canada. Activities have involved providing technical and financial capacity to women contesting local and mayoral elections in the 2026 cycle.

Barriers to equal influence

The barriers to equal influence are mainly **structural, legal and institutional**. Structural barriers persist in Zambia, a patriarchal society where men dominate every sphere of life. They are considered superior, lead decision-making in communities and households and have more privileges. This situation limits, and in some cases prevents, women's access to education and employment opportunities, which in turn affects their access to financial resources.³³ Without financial resources, women's participation in elections is constrained. An interview with two female political party leaders revealed that they both opted not to contest the 2026 election because they could not afford the nomination fees, and each of them is now endorsing a male presidential candidate.³⁴ One of them was a presidential contestant in the 2021 election.

The low status of women in Zambian society leads to societal doubts about the efficacy of women's leadership. It also contributes to the violence and ridicule that women suffer, especially when they enter politics, which is considered a male sphere. These phenomena have been significantly reduced, including in the online sphere, following the enactment of the Cyber Crime Act of 2025 and the actions of various stakeholders, including the President of the Republic, who has committed to mitigating electoral violence. However, these measures have not fully addressed the problem, partly because enforcement of the Act remains weak and much of the harassment occurs on platforms and through anonymous accounts that are difficult to trace and prosecute. As a result, running for office still exposes women to disproportionate levels of online harassment, discouraging potential candidates from entering the field.

Legal barriers are mainly associated with the first-past-the-post electoral system, which gives an advantage to males with financial resources. The newly adopted Mixed Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) aims to address this imbalance, but an increase in the quotas is still required to achieve substantial results.

Institutional barriers include the gender-insensitive practices of political parties. Most political parties are founded and led by men, reflecting their greater access to financial resources and capacity to mobilise networks. Because of the male dominance in these institutions, party constitutions and other governing documents are conceptualised with negligible attention to the inclusion of women. Efforts have been made in the past, mostly by ZNWL, to ensure that party documents are gender- and PWD-sensitive. However, such changes, even when accepted by party committees, need to be tabled and adopted by the general assemblies. In most cases, parties are unable to hold assemblies due to lack of funding, which leads to failure to institutionalise proposals for reform.

³³ Nalukui Milapo, EU support for women's political participation.

³⁴ Saboi Imboela (President of the National Democratic Congress Party), telephone interview with author, July 21, 2026; Chishala Kateka (President of the National Heritage Party), telephone interview with author, July 23, 2026.

Religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, class, sexual orientation and women's political empowerment



While race is not a major factor, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, class and sexual orientation are significant factors in women's political empowerment.

Most political parties in Zambia are organized around ethnic groups, and women who run on a party ticket that is popular among their ethnic group have a higher chance of being elected.³⁵ A study by Afrobarometer revealed that half of Zambians (50%) have strong feelings of belonging to both their ethnic group (tribe) and country.³⁶ ZNWL recognised this dynamic, and for a long time, the organisation encouraged political parties to endorse more women in the areas where they had a greater chance of winning. Women who also contest elections on a ruling party ticket tend to perform well because a party in power has access to resources and the advantages of incumbency. For instance, during this election, each parliamentary, mayoral and local government candidate from the ruling party, regardless of gender, receives a weekly campaign allowance. This is not the case with opposition candidates.

Political affiliation, especially membership in a dominant political party, also ensures access to financial resources and other campaign support for women. Women who contest as independents often lose elections because they lack this type of support.³⁷

Sexual orientation and religion play a role mainly because Zambian society is anchored on cultural traditions and Christianity.³⁸ **Only heterosexual women have a chance of being politically supported** since any other sexual orientation conflicts with the moral and cultural fabric of the country. **Many politicians strategically highlight their personal faith during election seasons to build immediate trust with the electorate.**

³⁵ See N. Daniel Poster, 'Ethnicity and Ethnic Politics in Zambia' in *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91-129; Jotham C. Momba, 'Contested Class Hegemonies and the Limits of Ethnic Politics in Zambia: The Case of the 2021 Elections,' *Southern African Journal of Policy and Development*, 8, no. 1 (2025): article 4. Available [here](#).

³⁶ See *Ethnicity and Democracy: Findings from Afro barometer Round 6 Survey in Zambia* (Afrobarometer, 2014). Available [here](#).

³⁷ *Challenges Faced by Women Candidates in Accessing Campaign Financing: Zimbabwe, Malawi & Zambia* (Women Empowered for Leadership and Hivos, 2020). Available [here](#).

³⁸ Zambia is officially declared a Christian nation in its Constitution.

Challenges faced by women political candidates

Women, as noted earlier, face structural, legal and institutional barriers. Religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, class and sexual orientation also affect women's political empowerment and, by extension, representation. However, during this campaign period, women argued that the biggest challenge they face, compared to their male counterparts, is the lack of funds and technical capabilities to mount successful campaigns, as well as the mishandling of candidate selections.³⁹

A study conducted by Transparency International Zambia shows that a parliamentary candidate needs a minimum of K 3.8 million to run a successful campaign, an amount that is too high for many women. As a result of this lack of resources, female candidates are largely outside the online sphere, except a few who have an established presence on social media.

The majority of women candidates are **unable to pay for media advertising, hire artists to entertain audiences during campaign events and enlist social media influencers and content creators**. They are unable to procure Information and Communication Technology materials. Some of them have expressed the view that their lack of digital skills frustrated their efforts to effectively manage their online campaigns.⁴⁰ The cumulative effect of these deficiencies is that the women candidates are not able to canvass for votes as effectively as their male counterparts, which will affect their results in the upcoming elections and will perpetuate the cycle of underrepresentation in legislative bodies.

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Conclusion

There are numerous barriers to women's political representation in Zambia, and the divide between civil society and political actors affects women's representation. **The recent constitutional amendment, which provides for 20 seats for women under the mixed-member system, is an important milestone but not sufficient to address the historical inequalities in women's representation.** There have also been other advances, particularly in reducing online harassment of women through the enactment of the Cyber Crime Act of 2025. In 2021, the Electoral Commission of Zambia revised the nomination fee structure to take account of the rural and urban divide, including women, youth and PWDs. This gave some relief to these minority candidates, although many still consider the fees to be exorbitant.

As in the past, money is playing a major role in the 2026 election. This was the case during the selection process and is true now during the campaign period, ultimately making it difficult for women to compete effectively. The challenges for women will be even more

³⁹ Saboi Imboela (President of the National Democratic Congress Party), telephone interview with author, July 21, 2026; Chishala Kateka (President of the National Heritage Party), telephone interview with author, July 23, 2026; Chishala Kateka (President of the National Heritage Party), telephone interview with author, July 23, 2026; Anne- Mbewe Anamela (Executive Director of Non-Governmental Organisations Coordinating Council), telephone interview with author, July 25, 2026; Anonymous. interview with female parliamentary candidate, July 20, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female political leader, July 20, 2026; Anonymous, interview with female party member, July 19, 2026.

⁴⁰ Focus group discussion held with council, mayoral and parliamentary candidates, July 18, 2026.

pronounced during the 2026 elections because local civil society organisations have limited funding. Both the ZNWL and NGOCC have received inadequate financial resources from donors for this election cycle.

The EU should therefore build on the legislative amendments and institutional progress made through the Electoral Commission of Zambia. At the same time, greater attention should be directed towards political parties, which contribute to the challenges that women face by failing to institutionalise women's representation in party constitutions, policies and other governing documents. Even where parties have adopted some form of institutionalised quotas, implementation of these provisions remains weak. The failure to enact the Political Parties Bill also had implications for political party financing. Continued support to women organisations through targeted grants remains important, not only to assist women during the selection and nomination process but also to provide support throughout the campaign period.

Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are proposed for the EU and EU Member State policymakers and donors, as well as practitioners in democracy support.

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- **Advocate and Support Legal Reform:** A review of women's representation in Zambia demonstrates that legislative reforms matter. The EU and its partners should build on the momentum created by recent legal reforms, including constitutional amendments that provide for representation quotas for women. This action should be extended to the Electoral Commission of Zambia, with a view to introducing administrative and regulatory amendments to reduce barriers faced by women, especially during the selection and nomination process.
- **Bridge Relations Between Political Parties and Civil Society:** Legal changes need to be accompanied by mechanisms that promote transparency, accountability and effective oversight. The EU and its partners should therefore establish and support platforms for sustained dialogue between political parties and civil society organisations advocating for women's representation. Traditional support to civil society organisations should be maintained, particularly as implementers of donor-funded programmes, especially during elections.
- **Support to Political Parties:** The EU and its partners should support political parties to institutionalise provisions on women's representation across their structures and to strengthen the enforcement of compliance. This should be anchored in support to the enactment of the Political Parties Bill, which should also make provisions to promote greater gender equity in political party financing.

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