

Zambia National Women's Lobby

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PRELIMINARY STATEMENT ON THE CONDUCT AND GENDER DIMENSIONS OF ZAMBIA'S 13 AUGUST 2026 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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“An election can be procedurally functional while still failing to provide equal conditions of participation for women and other vulnerable groups.”

1. Introduction

Zambia National Women's Lobby's (ZNWL) mandate is to track how electoral processes affect women as voters, candidates, electoral officials, party agents and monitors, as well as to promote women's participation across the electoral cycle so as to close the gender gap in democratic governance. It is against this mandate that ZNWL monitored the 13 August 2026 General Elections, tracking the pre-election period and voting day processes of station opening, voting, closing, counting and announcement of results at selected polling stations in Lusaka, Central and Southern Provinces.

The 2026 General Elections were held to elect the President, Members of the National Assembly, Mayors/Council Chairpersons and Councillors. Of the fourteen validly nominated presidential candidates, only one was a woman, underscoring the persistent gender gap in access to the highest political office. Women also constituted 122 of the 973 parliamentary candidates (12.5%), 48 (11%) of the 439 mayoral and council chairperson candidates, and 433 (8%) of the 5,099 councillor candidates.

ZNWL is issuing this statement before final results are announced. The assessment therefore focuses on the conduct of the electoral process and the extent to which it met established democratic, electoral and gender-equality standards, rather than on the outcome of the election. Our overall assessment is that the electoral process in the locations monitored was largely functional and orderly. This assessment, however, must be qualified by significant gender-specific vulnerabilities and incidents affecting the safety, participation and procedural rights of women voters, candidates, election officials and election monitors.

2. Methodology

ZNWL deployed 270 polling station-based monitors (who covered 150 polling stations) and 3 mobile teams across Lusaka, Central and Southern Provinces. The mobile teams played a dual role, providing supervisory support to deployed monitors while independently monitoring polling stations. Both station-based and mobile monitors used standardised forms to observe and document developments across five reporting phases: the pre-election period, station opening, voting, closing and counting, and critical incidents.

The monitors submitted reports through the Vote Monitor application while those who had internet connectivity challenges made paper-based submissions, generating the dataset underlying this statement.

The monitoring model rested on three complementary functions: trained field monitors, a dedicated data analysis team, and a communications centre with a monitoring hotline. The data analysis function enabled ZNWL to review submissions, identify inconsistencies, consolidate duplicate and continuation submissions, and develop an evidence base for this analysis; the communications centre and hotline gave monitors real-time support in the field.

Findings are assessed against Zambia's national legal and electoral framework together with regional and international gender instruments, including the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) Gender Checklist. The analysis below focuses on gender considerations in four main aspects: women as voters, as electoral officials, as candidates, party agents, and as monitors or observers, cutting across the pre-election, opening, voting, closing and counting phases. The findings are the basis of the recommendations to electoral stakeholders.

3. Legal and Institutional Context

The 2026 General Elections were held under the Constitution of Zambia, amended in December 2025, alongside the Electoral Process Act, the Electoral Commission of Zambia Act, the Public Order Act, the Societies Act, the Anti-Corruption Act, the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Acts, and the Access to Information Act; the conduct of candidates, parties and stakeholders is further regulated by the Electoral Code of Conduct. The most significant reform for this cycle was the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional Representation system reserving seats intended to improve the representation of women (40), youth (15) and persons with disabilities (5), a positive step that was, however, enacted without an accompanying law on the inclusivity, funding and accountability of political parties, which remain registered under the general-purpose Societies Act. The formula for allocating these seats is tied to a party's membership and to the outcome of the presidential vote.

ZNWL engaged the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) throughout the cycle, including through consultative stakeholder meetings, and sits on the ECZ's National Voter Education Committee. ECZ's own preparations were substantial: the Commission certified 8,786,300 voters (53.1% women, 46.9% men), of whom 46.3% were aged 18–34 and 20,162 were registered as persons with disabilities; gazetted new constituencies on 15 April 2026 following delimitation; recruited, trained and deployed approximately 81,174 election officials; established Conflict Management Committees at national and district level to mediate minor electoral disputes; and accredited monitors, party agents and media, though accreditation was delayed in some areas. ECZ further conducted candidate nominations in May 2026 for all positions.

4. Pre-Election Environment

ZNWL's own pre-election monitoring confirms this picture of substantial formal preparation by ECZ: 82.1% of monitors reported observing or hearing about ECZ preparations, and 78.9% reported women-targeted voter education, demonstrating significant investment in voter mobilisation and electoral preparedness ahead of polling day.

These positive preparations existed alongside concerns about the broader political environment: 52.3% of monitors reported observing or hearing about the distribution of inducements, 45% reported traditional or religious influence, and 42.3% reported campaign restrictions.

The pre-election environment of sexist language, character assassination and gender prejudicial views about women's capability for political leadership exposed women to forms of hostility and public mistrust. This affected their nominations by political parties and the conduct of campaigns. Consequently, the environment played a role in contributing to the exclusion of women from political leadership by discouraging women from contesting elections, participating in campaigns, publicly expressing political views and being voted for.

5. Opening of Polling Stations

The opening of polling stations was generally positive: 99.6% of observations reported that monitors were permitted to observe, 98.7% reported that necessary voting materials were available, 96.5% reported that voters could vote in secrecy, and 94.8% considered polling stations accessible, including to persons with disabilities. ZNWL welcomes these indicators as evidence of substantial procedural compliance.

Opening-Phase Indicator	National Rate
Monitors permitted to observe	99.6%
Necessary voting materials available	98.7%
Voters able to vote in secrecy	96.5%
Station accessible, incl. persons with disabilities	94.8%
Station safe from violence, particularly for women	95.3%
Concern for women's safety after dark	48.5% 3 provinces (Southern 59.5%, Central 53.7%, Lusaka 30.7%)

Table 1. Polling Station Opening.

The gender analysis presents a more complex picture behind these positive headline figures. While 95.3% of observations assessed polling stations as safe from violence or harm, particularly for women, almost half, 48.5%, expressed concerns about the safety of women after dark: 59.5% in Southern Province, 53.7% in Central Province, and 30.7% in Lusaka Province, the lowest of the three. Safety during daytime operations at polling stations does not necessarily mean women can participate safely throughout the electoral process: voting, counting and results processes can extend into the evening, creating risks associated with inadequate lighting, transport, crowd management and women's personal security. This may impact voter turnout and consequently deny women candidates potential votes.

The gender composition of the electoral and monitoring workforce at the polling stations that ZNWL has monitors was encouraging: women constituted 57.2% of electoral officers recorded by monitors (919 of 1,608) and 61.2% of observers/monitors (947 of 1,547). However, women's representation was less pronounced in senior decision-making roles: female Presiding Officers were recorded in only 77 of the 237 opening observations, indicating that women's representation thinned markedly at the more senior decision-making level even where their presence among front-line electoral officers and monitors was strong. Provincial data on Presiding Officers illustrates the same pattern in each of the three provinces:

Presiding Officer	Lusaka	Central	Southern
Male	57% (35/61)	74% (25/34)	79% (50/63)
Female	43% (26/61)	26% (9/34)	21% (13/63)

Table 2. Gender of Presiding Officers by province.

ZNWL reiterates that women's numerical participation must translate into meaningful participation and decision-making authority, rather than representation concentrated at operational levels.

Women police officers were present in 61.3% of the monitored polling stations in the 3 provinces. This is commendable as it provides the voters access to engage any of the gender regarding orderly and security concerns at polling stations.

6. Voting

The voting process was generally functional across monitored stations. Nevertheless, the data reveal important gaps: 3.7% of voting observations in the 3 provinces reported an incident that potentially prevented women from voting, such as violence at or near the polling station. Although the percentage appears relatively small, any incident preventing a woman from exercising her right to vote represents a direct failure of equal political participation.

ZNWL's monitors also identified substantial reliance on assistance for some voters. Among women who required assistance, 73.9% were assisted by Presiding Officers, while 26.1% were assisted by a family member or a person of their choice. Assistance is an important accommodation, but it also requires safeguards as there is a potential risk of undue influence, particularly for women who may have limited literacy, be voting for the first time, or face social pressure within households and communities. The reasons for assistance should therefore, be assessed and mitigated to minimise the concurrency and promote the secrecy of the vote.

Monitors additionally logged the total volume of voters assisted and turned away at their polling stations. Women accounted for a majority of every assisted-voter figure recorded and, more strikingly, for close to 60% of every turned-away figure across the three provinces:

Province	Total assisted	Women assisted (%)	Total turned away	Women turned away (%)
Central	540	299 (55.4%)	144	89 (61.8%)
Lusaka	1,840	824 (44.8%)	106	59 (55.7%)
Southern	1,385	807 (58.3%)	104	64 (61.5%)
Total, 3 provinces	3,765	1,930 (51.3%)	354	212 (59.9%)

Table 3. Voter assistance and voters turned away, by province.

Monitors attributed assistance mainly to physical support needs, literacy, age, disability, pregnancy and childcare, while turned-away cases were most often linked to voters not appearing on the register at the polling station or expired or invalid identification. This points to a continuing need for voter education targeted specifically at women, including on where and how to confirm registration ahead of polling day.

7. Closing and Counting

Most polling stations closed between approximately 18:30 and 21:00 hours, depending on the number of voters remaining and the completion of voting procedures, with counting commencing once ECZ officials had completed the prescribed polling and closing procedures. The closing and counting process was, in most monitored locations, procedurally functional: 99.1% of monitors reported that they were permitted to observe counting, and 99.1% reported that ballot-box seals were intact. ZNWL recognises these as important safeguards for electoral integrity.

Closing & Counting Indicator	National Rate
Permitted to observe counting	99.1%
Ballot-box seals intact	99.1%
Disputes over ballot marking	15.3%
Requests for recounts	17.9%
Results posted immediately after counting	67.7%
Women party agents present	90.2%

Table 4. Closing and counting.

The counting process also presented significant areas of concern: 15.3% of observations reported disputes over ballot marking, while 17.9% reported requests for recounts. Results transparency was another concern; only 67.7% of valid observations reported that results were posted immediately after counting, one of the most significant transparency gaps identified in the monitoring data. Such disputes, if not handled well, may escalate to physical conflict and cause insecurity for women at polling stations.

Women were strongly represented among party agents, present in 90.2% of monitored counting processes, a positive development. However, women's presence must be accompanied by equal protection of their procedural rights. ZNWL documented an incident, at Chilieka Primary in Musaya Southern Province, involving a female candidate whose lawful right to observe and monitor the counting of her own contest was overridden under pressure. While this represents one detailed incident rather than a prevalence statistic, it demonstrates how informal pressure can undermine the formal rights of women candidates even when electoral procedures are technically in place.

8. Immediate Post-Election Developments: Suspension of Counting

A day following voting, the ECZ issued a statement suspending the counting and announcement of election results countrywide, pursuant to Section 67(3) of the Electoral Process Act No. 35 of 2016, citing incidents of violence against polling staff and the theft of ballot papers. Some stakeholders expressed concern that ECZ did not isolate the affected areas so counting and announcement could continue in unaffected areas. The suspension was, however, lifted a few hours later.

During the period of suspension, presidential candidates from two parties separately declared themselves winners of the election, despite the ECZ being the constitutionally and legally mandated institution responsible for officially verifying and declaring presidential election results. ZNWL notes this development as directly affecting electoral integrity and public confidence in the results process, and reiterates that only the ECZ is empowered in law to declare election outcomes.

ZNWL notes that the suspension and candidate declarations as winners of the elections could endanger the security of the country as official results may be at variance with the candidates claimed Parallel Voter Tabulations (PVT) processes. This could escalate to physical conflict and endanger the lives of women candidates and voters.

9. Critical Incidents affecting women

ZNWL monitors recorded 46 critical incidents across the 3 provinces of which women were the main victims. Reported incidents included harassment, intimidation, obstruction of monitors, interference with observation,

disputes around counting, pressure on election officials, and situations involving groups of people gathering around polling stations.

ZNWL's [13 August 2026 statement](#)¹ already set out its concerns about threats, assaults and obstruction of accredited election monitors. Therefore, this subsection highlights what the subsequent monitoring data confirm about that pattern, and what it means for women's inclusion in the electoral process.

Field reports collected through the critical-incident confirm those earlier concerns: monitors being pushed out of polling stations, having phones or ZNWL vests confiscated and, in at least one case, being prevented entirely from witnessing a count. Women constituted the majority of ZNWL's monitoring workforce (61.2% of monitors recorded), obstruction of monitors is, in a substantial share of cases, also an obstruction of women's professional participation in the electoral process, and it weakens the independent scrutiny that helps safeguard women's interests elsewhere in this statement, particularly during counting and results posting.

10. Conclusion

ZNWL's assessment is that the 2026 General Elections were largely functional and orderly in the polling locations monitored, with high levels of monitor access, ballot secrecy, accessibility, intact ballot-box seals and observation of counting. However, these positive procedural indicators should not obscure the gendered vulnerabilities documented throughout the electoral cycle. Women participated in significant numbers as voters, electoral officials, party agents and election monitors, yet women also experienced safety concerns, barriers to voting, gendered abuse, obstruction as monitors, and disproportionate representation among identified victims of critical incidents.

The 2026 elections monitoring exercise produces one central gender lesson: **women's numerical participation in elections does not automatically translate into equal safety, equal influence or equal protection of political rights**. This demonstrates that representation alone cannot be used as the measure of women's electoral inclusion. The relevant question is whether women can participate safely, freely, meaningfully and without gender-based intimidation or disadvantage. ZNWL therefore calls for future electoral programming to move from a narrow focus on the number of women participating towards measuring substantive equality, safety, influence and protection from violence against women in elections.

ZNWL remains committed to advancing women's equal and meaningful participation in Zambia's democratic processes and calls on the ECZ, the Zambia Police Service, political parties, candidates, civil society organisations and all other stakeholders to use the lessons of the 2026 elections to strengthen the protection of women voters, candidates, electoral officials, party agents and observers. The electoral process does not end when the last ballot is counted; the responsibility to protect democratic participation, uphold women's rights and address violations continues beyond Election Day.

11. Recommendations

11.1 The Electoral Commission of Zambia and Security Institutions

- Intensify targeted voter education programmes focused on women ahead of future elections, to close the knowledge gaps that left many women turned away or unable to vote.
- Strengthen safeguards against undue influence where voters require assistance, while expanding voter education and ballot familiarisation for communities with low literacy.

¹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e-no6vt-OBkmoY70ZxPbjBktZbjTP9Nf/view?usp=drive_link

- Work with law enforcement to address violence against women in elections across the cycle, including harassment directed at women as voters, candidates, party agents or monitors.

11.2 Government and Parliament

- Increase the constitutional quota of women at Parliamentary level, and review the presidential-vote-based formula for distributing proportional-representation seats.
- Enact a gender-responsive political parties' law requiring inclusive leadership and candidate selection, equitable campaign resources, protection from gender-based violence, disaggregated reporting, independent oversight and penalties for non-compliance, addressing the current gap in which parties are regulated only under the general-purpose Societies Act.

11.3 Political Parties

- Develop gender inclusion measures to improve women's access to leadership positions and adoption as candidates, including gender-responsive candidate selection processes.
- Support cross-gender funding of campaigns, including for women candidates.
- Adopt and enforce zero-tolerance policies on political and gender-based violence, harassment and hate speech, including online abuse, with confidential reporting, survivor-centred protection, impartial investigations, effective sanctions and public, sex-disaggregated case data.

11.4 Civil Society

- Conduct targeted voter education to ensure all categories of voters have the information they need.
- Advocate for increased quotas for women, youth and persons with disabilities in constituency and ward-based elections.
- Advocate for a political parties' law that improves the inclusion of marginalised citizens, women, youth and persons with disabilities, in political leadership.

11.5 Media

- Ensure fair and consistent coverage of women candidates and women voters when reporting on electoral processes and governance issues.

11.6 Development Partners

- Support partners across the electoral cycle, including voter registration, voter education, and the recruitment and deployment of poll staff and monitors on voting day.

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