



EU support for women's political participation and leadership under the EU's Gender Action Plan

A case study on Zambia



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Women's political representation and leadership in Zambia

This case study examines EU support for women's political participation in Zambia during the second Gender Action Plan (2016-2020). Both the implementation of the second and the new, third action plan have coincided with Zambia's general elections as well as domestic gender equality reforms passed by the Patriotic Front (PF) and United Party for National Development (UPND) governments, respectively. The analysis is divided into three parts. The first part provides an overview of women's political participation and leadership in Zambia. The second part examines what the European Union and EU member states have done to advance women's political representation in the country. The third and final part concludes the analysis and offers recommendations for the implementation of the new Gender Action Plan (GAP III).

The overall state of women political representation in Zambia is concerning, with the country failing to meet continental and international benchmarks laid out in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa

(Maputo Protocol), and the South African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development. Although women make up 50.5 percent of Zambia's population as well as the majority of voters, they remain systematically underrepresented in politics (see Table 1).¹

Trends in Women's Representation in Parliament, Local Government, and National Government²

Period	Women in Local Government	Total Seats in Local Government	women in Parliament	Total Parliamentary Seats	Women in Cabinet	Total Cabinet Positions
2021 -2026	141	1,858	21	156	5	24
2016-2021	126	1,624	26	156	9	22

Despite this overall pattern of marginalization, women's parliamentary representation has increased incrementally since the early 1990s, when the country reverted to multiparty democracy after

twenty-seven years of one-party rule. During the first democratic elections held in 1991, women won 7 percent of the seats; this percentage increased

1 Electoral Commission of Zambia, "2021 Registered Voters by Gender." Available [here](#).

2 Numbers still to be verified. Current figures provided by the Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL).

to 14 percent in 2006 and 17 percent in 2016.³ By 2016, women also held 40 percent of positions in the executive cabinet. Yet women's political representation once again decreased following the most recent August 2021 election, with women now holding 13 percent of parliamentary seats and 21 percent of cabinet positions. Women's representation in local government has remained steady at 8 percent. This most recent decrease in women's political representation was driven by several factors, including violence ahead of the polls and the challenges that candidates in rural areas faced in verifying the academic credentials needed to run for political office.⁴ In Zambia, violence has often increased in the past ahead of crucial elections that led to a change of government, as happened in both 2011 and 2021. In both years, women's political representation decreased.

Women's underrepresentation in Zambian politics has had a negative effect on women's policy influence and gender-related development priorities, such as girls' education and women's financial inclusion. In a context of relative political exclusion, Zambian women's organizations have played a crucial role in pushing for gender equality reforms. The Non-governmental Gender Organisations' Coordinating Council (NGOCC), an umbrella body that includes 103 groups from all of Zambia's ten provinces, has been particularly influential. These civic actors have jointly lobbied legal reforms on women and girls' political rights, monitored the implementation of laws and policies on political inclusion, and facilitated women's political participation through community

mobilization initiatives, capacity-building for women aspirants, advocacy targeting political parties, and campaigns seeking to raise public awareness of the importance of voting for women. Yet despite their efforts, Zambian women's organizations operate on limited budgets that are financed entirely by external donors, which translates into low staff numbers, sustainability challenges, and limited capacity to reach more remote areas. The women's parliamentary caucus has also tried to make positive contributions to gender equality reforms, but it often lacks visibility and influence due to its limited financial and technical capacity.

Overall, the obstacles to women's representation in Zambia can be divided into three categories: structural barriers, legislative and policy challenges, and barriers related to electoral procedures and electoral processes. Zambia's patriarchal society represents a major structural barrier, traditionally assigning more power and resources to men than women. The resulting inequalities affect women's access to education, job opportunities, and career progression, which directly impact the skills and resources needed for political mobilization—especially in a country where politics are heavily monetized. Patriarchal norms also lead women voters to discriminate against women candidates in elections; in general, female candidates often face insults and ridicule.

A second set of challenges stems from the weaknesses in the legal and policy framework as well as the poor implementation of existing laws.

3 Geisler, G. (2006). "A Second Liberation: Lobbying for Women's Political Representation in Zambia, Botswana and Namibia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 1, p. 69-84. Available [here](#).

4 The 2016 constitution requires all candidates to have a Grade 12 certificate, and the only entity that can verify the authenticity of this document is the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) based in Lusaka. Prior to the elections, there had been a proposal to decentralize the verification of documents to the provinces and districts in order to facilitate the process, but this proposal was not accepted due to financial and logistical challenges.

This information is drawn from an April 2021 UNDP report on strategies and outreach activities to increase women and youth participation in elections commissioned by the EU funded Democracy Strengthening in Zambia programme, located in: European Commission and European External Action Service, "Gender Action Plan III – 2021-2025: Country Level Implementation Plan – CLIP ZAMBIA," 2021.

The male political leadership lacks commitment to implementing Zambia's progressive constitutional provisions on inclusive governance. Within political parties, older men, mostly from the dominant ethnic regions dominate decision making structures. Although some of the main political parties are developing gender equality plans, women's exclusion has continued as the plans are yet to be adopted and implemented by the respective political parties. For example, Zambian parties have failed to implement mandatory quotas for women: the two main parties – the PF and the UPND – have both announced a goal of ensuring 40 percent female representation in key internal structures, but have failed to realize this goal in practice. Only one woman contested the presidency in the 20²¹ election under the banner of the New Heritage Party, securing 0.17% of the vote and placing seven out of sixteen candidates.

Third, electoral procedures managed by the electoral management body, the police, and the department responsible for issuing national identity and voter cards also disadvantage women. For instance, the police sometimes fail to curtail election-related violence, especially violence committed by ruling party cadres. This creates a fearful environment for women voters just before and during the elections.⁶ Long distances to polling stations, poor election infrastructure (especially for the physically challenged), the rushed distribution of national identity cards, and lack of civic education further impede women's ability to vote on election day.

In this environment, women who have served in national and local government usually share certain

characteristics. In most cases, they have not only opted to defy the patriarchal norms but also have supportive male allies within their homes and their political party and some of them are tempted to utilize non-conventional campaigning tools as their male counterparts, such as handing out money and goods to voters. They also tend to be educated, have financial resources and mobilization skills, and have previously served in leading roles in civil society, the private sector, or in government.⁷ The most politically disadvantaged women, on the other hand, are those with disabilities and young women. The 2021 election, which has shifted power to a party formed and led by ethnic minority groups, has opened new opportunities to women from these communities, who had been disadvantaged politically for many years and now have higher chances of being appointed to positions of influence.

5 The PF currently has 18 women in its central committee out of a total of 54 members. The UPND counts 18 women among 70 members of its National Management Committee.

6 Juliet Kaira Chibuta, Golden Nachibinga, Faggy Chibanga, Victoria Phiri, "Gender Analysis Report of the 2016 General Elections," (Lusaka: Zambia National Women's Lobby, 2016) Available [here](#).

7 This assessment is based on a review of the nine women Cabinet Ministers that served in the Patriotic Front government as well as interviews conducted with women politicians, party leaders, and NGO actors. Out of the nine that served in the PF cabinet, one previously served as NGOCC Chairperson, one served as head of an international bank, one was a leading broadcaster, and another one was the first female professor of virology in Zambia.

EU support to women's political representation and leadership

The EU delegation and EU member states—particularly Germany, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden—have played a significant role in supporting gender equality in Zambia. The EU has channeled its support through different organizations, including the UN system (mainly UNDP), international development organizations, as well as local civil society groups. However, most of its funding has been skewed towards non-political processes or actors. A brief overview of past funding trends illustrates this

pattern. Between 2016 and 2020, the EU delegation spent 33.8 million euros on seven gender programmes in Zambia. Of these seven only one focused specifically on women's political participation. Instead, four focused on preventing and responding to gender-based violence, one focused on women's economic empowerment, and another on gender-sensitive water management. Table 2 highlights the programmes and their budgetary allocations.

Table 2: Gender Programmes funded by the EU (2016 - 2020)⁸

Receipient Organisation	Amount (Euros)	Focus/Name
BBC Media Action LBG	2 million	Natwampane: Coming Together to Stop Sexual and Gender Based Violence
Lifeline/Childline Zambia	500,000	Access to Psycho-Social Counselling for Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
Kirkens Nodhjelp Forening	9 million	From Trauma to Resilience: Reducing SGBV through Norm Change and Survivors increased Access to SGBV Care and Justice
World Vision Zambia	9.25 million	PREVENT! Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Survivor Support project
Non-Governmental Organisation Coordinating Council	1 million	Socio-economic empowerment project
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)	12 million	Enhanced sustainable and gender-sensitive agricultural water management and irrigation systems for smallholder farmers in selected districts of the Lower Kafue sub-catchment
Zambian National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) ⁹	313,844	Women's political participation through capacity building of candidates, advocacy for their adoption by respective political parties and engagement of the community to support female leaders in the 2016 general elections and beyond .

⁸ European Commission, "Evaluation of the EU's External Action Support to Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment (2010-2018): Final Report, Volume IV - Case Studies," November 2020. Available [here](#).

⁹ This funding was made through the Zambia Accountability Programme (ZAP).

EU member states have followed a similar pattern, mostly targeting their gender equality support—which totaled 44 million euros between 2016 and 2021—to non-political programmes. Table 3 highlights the contributions by Sweden and Finland while Table 4 shows the contributions made by Ireland and Germany. Overall, Sweden allocated 27 million euros to gender programmes in Zambia over the course of this period.¹⁰ It is followed by Finland with a total of 12 million euros, Ireland with 5.4

million euros, and Germany with 654,000 euros in gender equality spending. Looking at the EU delegation and EU member states together, it becomes clear that out of a total of 78 million euros spent on gender equality, only about 6.6 million euros or 9 percent was spent on increasing women's political participation—behind spending on gender-based violence, women's economic empowerment, health and sanitation, and social protection (see Figure 1).

Table 3: Gender programmes funded by Sweden and Finland (2016 - 2024) ^{11 12}

EU State	Amount (Euros)	Recipient Organisation	Focus Area
Sweden	5.5 million	NGOCC (and the Carter Center)	Women's political participation
	5 million	UNDP	GBV, Women's economic empowerment, social protection, health, justice
	11.5 million	SIDA/Other	Financial inclusion, women's economic empowerment
	5 million	National Legal Aid Clinic for Women	Support for women's legal rights and representation through legal information and outreach as well as legal aid
Finland	140,000	Women in Law and Development in Africa	Promoting women's participation in elections and democratic processes. Activities included training aspiring women candidates, training parties in gender mainstreaming, outreach to traditional leaders, and support for community sensitization on women's political participation.
	55,000	2410	Strengthening youth representation and meaningful participation in governance structures

¹⁰ Note that Sweden has also committed some funds up to 2024, which are added to this calculation.

¹¹ Figures provided to the author by the respective embassies.

¹² It is important to note that the figures on Swedish and Finnish funding (table 3) cover both the GAP II and GAP III, as opposed to table 2 and 4 with data from the EU and Germany, which cover only GAP II. A comparison between these tables should thus be conducted with care.

	300,000	Chipata District Farmers' Association	Participatory and rights-based social accountability through the collaboration of established community farming structures; economic empowerment
	100,000	Mumwa Crafts Association	Economic empowerment
	673,302	Demo Finland	Women in Politics. Zambia National Women's Lobby in partnership with Demo Finland has supported women's participation in politics since 2013. The support has focused on capacity building women politicians through training on various areas of need at local level, enhanced women's cross-party cooperation by establishing permanent dialogue platforms for political parties' women's wings, trained political parties leadership and the women's wings and supported political parties in drafting gender equality plans. Further, there has also international mentoring of Zambian women politicians by Finnish politicians as well as exchange learning visit to Rwanda.
	380,454	Demo Finland	Disability & political participation. Together with Disability Rights Watch and the Zambian National Women's Lobby, Demo Finland is conducting training workshops on political participation for women and men with disabilities, producing information materials, creating a network for women and men with disabilities in politics, training political party leaders and supporting political parties to develop inclusive plans and conducting disability audits of political parties, among other activities. This project has been implemented since 2020. Earlier in 2016, the partners conducted a disability assessment to identify the areas of need and develop strategies to improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities.
	9.25 million	UN Joint Programme on Social Protection II	Support to vulnerable members of society to directly reduce poverty and gender disparities in human development outcomes; social protection

	1 million	National Institute for Health and Welfare of Finland	Health
	150,000	Entrepreneurship and Technology Park Limited	Pilot project for improving livelihoods through solar powered irrigation and market access for smallholder female and youth farmers in selected province; economic empowerment

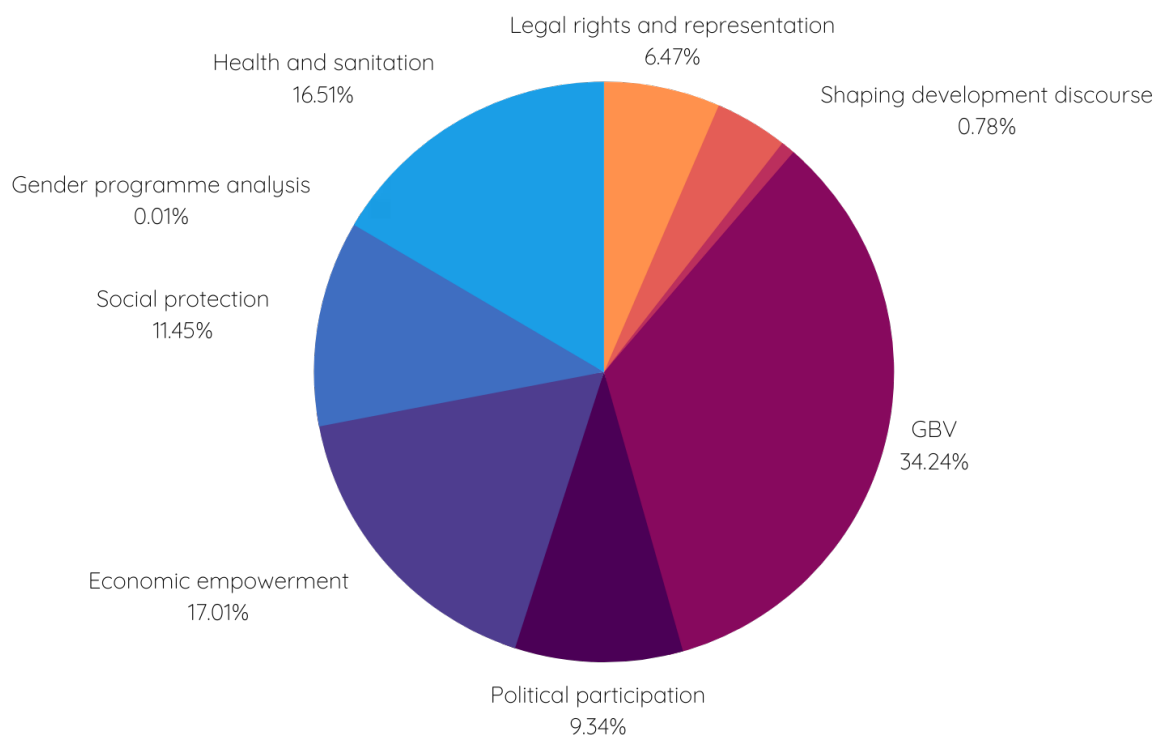
Table 4: Gender Programmes funded by Ireland and Germany (2016 - 2021)¹³

EU State	Amount (Euros)	Recipient Organisations	Focus Area
Ireland	1.5 million	UNDP	GBV, women's economic empowerment, social protection, health
	300,000	UNDP - Democracy Strengthening Project.	Political representation. This is a donor basket fund supporting the Electoral Commission and civil society actors involved in strengthening democracy in Zambia. As such, the allocated amount was not entirely spent on women's participation.
	2 million	Campaign for Female Education	Girls' education
	1.2 million	Zambia Open Community Schools	Girls' education
	480,000	Restless	Facilitating the voice of the youth on development issues; girls' education
Germany	200,000	Zambia National Women's Lobby and Zambia Congress of Trade Unions	Women's political participation; women's participation in trade union leadership
	137,000	NGOs	Citizens' democratic engagement and citizens' journalism
	34,000	NGOs	Preventing gender-based violence

¹³ Figures for Ireland's financial contribution were provided to the author by the Irish embassy. For Germany, allocations were shared by Frederich Ebert Stiftung and GiZ in Zambia.

	26,000	NGOs	Lobbying for the adoption of an expanded Bill of Rights
	89,000	Local Authority	Enhanced participation in local authority governance
	22,000	Various	Sanitation and Covid 19
	400	Smallholder farmers in selected agriculture camps	Women's economic empowerment
	9,000	NGOs	Gender programme analysis
	137,000	Paralegals	Judicial representation

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of gender funds by the EU delegation and EU member states¹⁴



¹⁴ "Gender Programme Analysis" refers to research and consultancies related to gender equality. "Shaping Development Discourse" includes activities aimed at increasing youth participation in the allocation of development funding as well as citizen journalism.

A closer look at EU member states' support for women's political participation in Zambia shows that their funding has primarily gone to women's civil society organizations, specifically the Non-governmental Gender Organisations' Coordinating Council (NGOCC) and the Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL). As indicated in Table 3 above, Sweden has provided a total of 5.5 million euros to the NGOCC for activities related to women's political participation. The NGOCC spent half of these funds on capacity building for female candidates from all political parties, and half on sensitizing and encouraging women to seek out leadership positions, be it in schools, ward development committees, or in other subnational and national political structures.¹⁵ Recently the NGOCC also embarked on a campaign encouraging women to participate in literacy programmes through night classes, after observing how women's political participation has been hindered by the 2016 constitutional clause requiring those contesting elections at all levels to at least have a Grade 12 school certificate.¹⁶ The Zambia National Women's Lobby, on the other hand, has received support through Demo Finland, Germany (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung), as well as the NGOCC, of which it is a member.¹⁷ Besides covering internal administrative expenses, it spent most of this funding on capacity building for female candidates,¹⁸ political party leadership and women's wings, cross party cooperation among 9 political parties locally and with Finish political parties, local and international mentorship, followed by organizational development for smaller women's organisations, community awareness-raising, and networking initiatives. Less funding went to lobbying for legal reforms or implementation and

the provision of campaign materials for female candidates. Of the 7.3 million euros of total EU and EU member state funding for women's political representation, only 2 percent was allocated to actions targeting political parties.¹⁹ Women's rights advocates have also directly engaged with party leaders on the issue.²⁰

15 This budget breakdown was provided by the Programmes Office at NGOCC.

16 Author's Interview with NGOCC Programmes Manager conducted on 29th September, 2021.

17 Author's Interview with ZNWL Programmes Officer conducted on 25th August, 2021.

18 The author did not get permission to show the actual budgeted amounts.

19 See footnote 17

20 The 2 percent is part of the WILDAF project funded by Finland cited in Table 3.

Theories of change in EU-funded programmes

The primary actors implementing EU-funded programs focused on advancing women's political participation, like the NGOCC and ZNWL, have not explicitly articulated a theory of change. In its Theory of Change, ZNWL as an organization that seeks to advance the participation and representation of women and girls in decision making to promote gender equality has identified factors for women's poor participation as to low levels of education, lack of confidence, lack of financial resources, limited knowledge, patriarchal cultural beliefs, political violence and low awareness amongst community members on the importance of women being involved in leadership. Therefore, ZNWL conducts advocacy and lobbying targeted at various stakeholders including government, political parties, traditional and religious leaders and general community members. It also builds the capacity of women in order to enable them to influence decisions on developmental issues.

However, their efforts appear to be aimed at closing gender gaps in access to education and skill training that hold back women's political participation in a patriarchal society. For example, the ZNWL targets female candidates and female elected MPs, mayors, council chairpersons and councillors with capacity-building, based on the recognition that women often have fewer opportunities to access such training and networks. The underlying assumption is that training can help close those gender gaps as well as change the perceptions of male party gatekeepers and voters. Support in the form of campaign materials, including t-shirts, Chitenge materials, and educational materials, even more directly seeks to address women's resource constraints. Given that

women often have more limited access to high-earning professions, donor networks, and family assets, such initiatives try to level the playing field by providing targeted material support. Civil society organizations have also carried out activities that seek to shift societal norms related to women in politics, with the aim of challenging voter gender stereotypes that may fuel resistance to women's political participation.

However, these interventions so far have not always met advocates' expectations. As noted above, women's representation in parliament has only increased by seven percent since 1991, making Zambia one of the countries with the lowest female representation in the SADC region. In contrast, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Tanzania have on average more than 30 percent female representation in their upper and lower houses of parliament.²¹ This pattern suggests that different strategies may be needed. For instance, EU funding to date has failed to support meaningful activities focused on dismantling the patriarchal and exclusionary practices within political parties. More funds and efforts are required to push for a power shift within these institutions, particularly through the adoption of internal quotas. In the meantime, it is crucial to ensure that political parties adhere to soft quotas that they have already agreed to, but failed to implement. It is also critical to recognize that men occupying positions of power in political parties have amassed significant wealth and resources. As a result, capacity building needs to provide women with skills and advice on how to challenge power dynamics within parties even in the absence of comparable financial resources. New strategies

21 SADC, "Women in Politics & Decision-Making," Available [here](#).

should further take advantage of the high number of female voters. For example, norm-changing programmes could seek to challenge stereotypes about women candidates, drawing on research about the drivers of voters' current reluctance to vote for women.

Violence is another urgent barrier to gender equality in politics, and one that current aid programs have mostly neglected. The incoming government has announced steps to address the problem, though it is too early to assess their results. Development partners should support the new government's efforts by devising robust strategies to provide security to female aspirants and candidates, for example through training and awareness-raising initiatives that target the police, the judiciary, and the Electoral Commission, or through codes of conducts pushing political parties to quell violence within their ranks. The 2021 election also showed that women withdrew from the election race due to a lack of logistical support. NGOs such as ZNWL have tried to mitigate this problem, but they were unsuccessful in addressing the government's failure to decentralize the verification of candidates' academic credentials—in part because they lacked the resources and capacity to take the government to court.

Lessons learnt

In addition to pioneering new strategies, aid actors need to build on the lessons learned over the past several years. One of the key lessons highlighted by local actors is that interventions to improve women's political representation have to start as soon as the new electoral cycle begins and should be sustained throughout, rather than taking the form of one-off activities.²² Future activities should also complement capacity-building for female aspirants and candidates with logistical and legal support, to ensure that women are not excluded due to bureaucratic or legal hurdles.

Another important lesson is to target support for women's political participation more strategically. On the one hand, every woman can play a role in Zambia's governance, and international as well as local organisations should try to engage as many women as possible, especially as voters. On the other hand, there is a need to intentionally identify and recruit already influential women leaders to join politics, given that women with previous experience in business, civil society, and other professional fields may have a greater chance of being selected as candidates and winning elections. It also matters which political parties women opt to join: their chances of election are much lower if they compete for small political parties that cannot mobilise countrywide. In the long run, however, the priority should be to push for internal political party reforms that will make it easier for all women (and other marginalized groups) to participate on an equal basis. Finally, drawing men into the movement for gender equality in politics is crucial, given that women that have successfully entered politics have often benefited from male support.

All these strategies require strong local implementing partners. Development partners often cite local organizations' limited capacity to absorb funding, manage projects, and coordinate activities as a significant hurdle. One way of addressing this problem would be to build deliberate partnerships between the stronger and weaker implementing partners. The Ministry of Gender, which has been scrapped by the incoming government, also lacks capacity, with no representation in the various provinces and districts. Going forward, establishing an effective national institutional framework for gender equality will be essential and should be an advocacy priority of the women's movement.

22 This lesson was shared by respondents in implementing organisations in their conversations with the author.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

It has been 30 years since Zambia's transition to multiparty democracy, yet women's political representation in the country remains low. The impetus that Zambian women gained after the 1995 World Conference for Women in Beijing seems to have waned amidst legislative, sociocultural, and policy hurdles. Over the past several years, the European Union as well as several EU member states have provided financial and technical support to various gender equality programmes in the country. During the GAP II implementation period (and the beginning of the GAP III period), this funding amounted to 78 million euros. Most of this funding (35 percent) was spent on preventing and responding to gender-based violence. In contrast, only 9 percent was allocated to programmes focused on women's political participation, with Sweden, Finland, and Germany acting as the primary donors in this domain.²³ A close review of the budgets and activities of the two main NGO beneficiaries of this funding shows that they focused primarily on training female aspirants, candidates, and elected officials, followed by support for the organizational development of smaller women's groups and awareness-raising campaigns.

Recommendations

Going forward, there are several steps the EU Delegation and EU member states can take to ensure that funding allocated under GAP III helps bolster women's political mobilization and representation in

Zambia:

- **Ensure sufficient, timely, and sustained funding:** Development partners should allocate more resources to programmes aimed at improving women's political participation. Such support needs to be allocated at the beginning of each electoral cycle and sustained over time.
- **Devise new strategies to increase women's participation in politics, including internal party reform:** Donors as well as their local implementing partners need to devise innovative strategies that tackle power imbalances in political parties. For instance, capacity building programmes should focus on providing women with skills to challenge power dynamics within political parties while also pushing for internal quotas.
- **Evaluate norm changing activities:** Development partners should review the community sensitization and norm change interventions that are currently being undertaken by implementing partners. For instance, we need more research investigating why registered female voters often support and elect male rather than female candidates and tracking why voters opted to support women candidates in areas where women were elected.
- **Support activities to curb violence:** Development partners should fund and promote interventions aimed at curbing political violence, which is on the rise and affects women's partic-

²³ The EU-funded ZAP programme focused also on women's political participation. In the period 2016-2018, ZNWL received 313,844 euros from the EU and 350,000 from UK Department for International Development (DFID).

ipation in politics. Funding should target capacity-building for the Zambian police, judiciary, the Electoral Commission of Zambia, and political party leaders and cadres.

- **Advocate for legal reform:** The EU and its local partners should support relevant legal reforms that can bolster women's political inclusion, especially electoral reforms that would shift the country away from a first-past-the-post electoral system to a mixed-member proportional representation system that is more favorable for women candidates and other marginalized groups.
- **Continue investing in capacity-building and networking:** Development partners should continue to provide capacity-building support to local civil society organizations and scale up such interventions at the subnational level. Synergies should be built between the stronger and weaker partners to facilitate more transfers of skills.
- **Support a national institutional framework for gender equality:** The EU should support the new government in establishing an institutional framework that can effectively and efficiently coordinate gender equality policies and interventions.



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