

Focus on: South Africa

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE FROM A GENDER LENS

A series of write up from experts in the field reflecting on the role of women in last elections.

— 1996
— 2009
— 2017
— 2024



About the Author

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE THEMBISILE MAHUWA

Thembisile Mahuwa is an award-winning lawyer, human rights advocate, and community leader dedicated to justice, policy reform, and youth empowerment. With a strong background in law, stakeholder relations, and policy-making, she has won 100% of her cases in the past two years, including high-profile and pro bono cases at the UNISA Law Clinic. She serves as the Director of the Aido Network Youth International Chapter, heads the African Lawyers Alliance (ALA) Knowledge Hub, and is a board member of multiple organizations, including BlackGirlsRead.



Reflections on the Election Super Cycle from a Gender Lens: The Enduring Struggle for Women's Political Ascendancy in South Africa

The persistent underrepresentation of women in executive political leadership remains a glaring global concern, particularly across Africa, where entrenched patriarchal structures continue to impede gender parity in governance. While legislative representation has seen notable advancements, the highest echelons of political power remain largely inaccessible to women. However, Namibia has recently shattered historical barriers by electing its first female President, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, who previously served as the nation's Deputy President. This momentous achievement underscores the capacity of women to lead at the highest levels of government.

However, barriers to access persist in other parts of Africa. In South Africa for instance despite progressive constitutional framework and robust democratic institutions, the country continues to lag behind in electing a female head of state.

The ANC Elective Conference: A Missed Inflection Point for Women's Leadership

A pivotal moment in South Africa's political landscape was the 2017 African National Congress (ANC) Elective Conference, where Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma vied for the presidency of the ruling party. Given her extensive political pedigree—including her tenure as Chairperson of the African Union Commission—her candidacy represented a formidable opportunity to disrupt the male-dominated power structure. However, despite her qualifications and the symbolic significance of her leadership bid, she was ultimately defeated by Cyril Ramaphosa.

This outcome was not merely an electoral event but rather a broader reflection of the structural and systemic constraints that continue to marginalise women in political leadership. Despite the ANC's longstanding rhetoric on gender equity, its highest office has remained an impenetrable bastion of male dominance. Women within the party have played instrumental roles in legislative and policy development, yet the presidency—both of the ANC and of the Republic—has persistently eluded them.

The Political Status Quo: Male-Dominated Party Leadership

At present, all major political parties in South Africa, including the ANC, the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party, are helmed by men. This sustained pattern of male leadership reinforces a political culture in which women, despite their presence within party structures, remain relegated to secondary roles. Even in parties that purport to uphold gender parity, the preponderance of executive decision-making power continues to reside with men.

This phenomenon is neither unique to South Africa nor incidental—it is a systemic issue rooted in historical exclusionary practices and socio-political norms that condition society to perceive male leadership as the default. This is particularly disconcerting in a nation that prides itself on constitutional democracy and progressive policy frameworks.

Despite the fact that women constitute the majority of the electorate and are central to political mobilisation, the presidency remains elusive to them.

The Absence of a Prospective Female Presidential Candidate

The most conspicuous consequence of male-dominated party leadership is the dearth of a viable female presidential candidate. Given that the primary pathway to the presidency is through party leadership, the lack of women at the helm of major political organisations has effectively precluded them from serious presidential contention.

However, this absence is not a reflection of a lack of qualified and competent women, but rather a manifestation of systemic barriers that continue to obstruct their political advancement.

Women in South Africa have long demonstrated their capacity to lead, yet they remain sidelined when it comes to the highest office. The issue is not a deficiency in leadership acumen, governance expertise, or strategic foresight—rather, it is the enduring monopolisation of political power by men that curtails women’s ascent to the presidency. Despite a wealth of experienced female politicians across the ideological spectrum, none have been positioned as legitimate contenders for the presidency due to institutionalised gatekeeping within party structures.

Structural Imperatives for Transformative Change

To rectify this enduring gender disparity, decisive and structural interventions are required:

1. Institutional Commitment to Executive Gender Parity – While South Africa has made strides in increasing female representation in parliament and cabinet, these efforts must extend to the highest levels of executive authority, ensuring that women are not merely included in governance but are also empowered to lead.
2. Deliberate Capacity Development of Female Presidential Candidates – Political parties must actively cultivate and endorse women as presidential candidates, rather than confining them to subordinate roles such as deputies and ministers.
3. Dismantling Gendered Perceptions of Leadership – The societal conditioning that equates leadership with masculinity must be dismantled through civic education, media representation, and institutional policies that normalise women in executive roles.
4. Equitable Access to Political Capital – Women in politics require equal access to financial resources, political networks, and strategic mentorship, enabling them to competitively contest for and secure top leadership positions.

Conclusion

South Africa has yet to witness a woman ascend to the presidency, and the current political trajectory suggests that without radical structural reform, this reality will persist. Although Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma’s 2017 candidacy signified progress, the systemic

barriers preventing women from reaching the pinnacle of political leadership remain formidable.

Namibia has demonstrated that women's political leadership is not only possible but also inevitable when institutional and societal support systems are in place. It is incumbent upon South Africa to emulate and accelerate such progress. Women must not merely be considered contributors to the political process—they must be recognised and positioned as its rightful leaders. The continued absence of a female president is not due to a lack of capable women; it is due to the political entrenchment of male hegemony. Until this imbalance is rectified, the discourse on gender equity in South African politics will remain fundamentally incomplete.

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