

Women's perspectives on electoral violence: A case study of Chadiza constituency, Zambia (2011–2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores women's perspectives on electoral violence in Chadiza Constituency, Zambia, between 2011 and 2021. The study aimed to (1) explore how women understand and experience electoral violence, (2) identify factors that expose women to risk during election periods, and (3) understand the implications of electoral violence for women's political participation. A qualitative case study design was used, guided by a constructivist philosophical assumption. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document review involving female registered voters in Chadiza Constituency and thematically analysed. The findings show that women experience electoral violence in physical, psychological, economic, and symbolic forms, often linked to party competition, youth militias, and unequal power relations. Fear of intimidation and social stigma discourages many women from active political engagement, though some demonstrate resilience through community networks and civic education. The study concludes that electoral violence narrows democratic inclusion for women. It recommends strengthening voter education, community-based peace initiatives, and gender-sensitive electoral security to enhance women's safe participation in politics.

Keywords: Case Study, Civic Education, Chadiza Constituency, Constructivism, Electoral Violence, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

Electoral violence is a key obstacle to inclusive democracy. Beyond ballot-box stuffing and large public clashes, violence surrounding elections takes varied, often subtle, gendered forms: intimidation, economic coercion, sexual harassment, and the silencing of women's voices. In Zambia, the 2011 to 2021 electoral cycles prompted widespread attention to rising political tensions and episodes of violence across regions. National analyses indicate that electoral violence intensified from 2006 through the 2016 elections, with particular spikes in highly contested areas and among youth party cadres; these national trends provide a backdrop for constituency-level experiences such as those reported in Chadiza (Kawila et al., 2023).

Globally, electoral processes are mandated to act as a peaceful mechanism through which citizens take active engagement in governance as well as express political preferences (Sishuwa, 2021). However, Zywicki (2024) observed that in majority of emerging democracies, elections have largely been accompanied by various forms of violence. These ignore democratic consolidation and weaken public trust in political institutions. While much scholarly and policy attention has focused on physical violence and large-scale confrontations between rival political groups, there is growing recognition that electoral violence also manifests in more subtle and gendered ways. Women often experience electoral violence differently from men due to entrenched social norms, unequal power relations, and structural barriers that limit their participation in politics. In the words of LeBas (2020), these dynamics often leads to women confronting targeted harassment, social intimidation, and reputational attacks aimed at discouraging their engagement as voters, activists, candidates, or election officials.

Krook and Sanín (2020) asserts that in African governments, the persistence of patriarchal political cultures further complicates women's participation in electoral processes. Women who attempt to assert themselves in political spaces frequently encounter hostility that ranges from verbal abuse and character assassination to threats of physical harm. Such experiences not only undermine women's individual rights but also weaken the broader goals of inclusive governance and gender equality in democratic systems. Electoral violence therefore carries implications that extend beyond immediate political competition, affecting the long-term representation of women and their ability to influence decision-making processes.

Within Zambia, Kawila et al (2023) observed that multiparty democracy has generally been characterized by relatively peaceful electoral transitions; however, periods of intense political competition have often generated localized

tensions and confrontations. These tensions are frequently amplified during campaign periods when political mobilization is heightened and party cadres compete for territorial influence and voter loyalty. Although national-level assessments have documented incidents of violence, intimidation, and political harassment, the lived experiences of women at the constituency level remain less visible in scholarly discourse. To be specific, rural constituencies like Chadiza present unique socio-political environments where traditional authority structures, community networks, and party mobilization practices intersect to shape electoral dynamics.

Chadiza Constituency, located in Eastern Province, offers a useful case study because it experienced contested local politics across from 2011 to 2021 and because recent qualitative research such as Kawila et al. (2023) conducted their study in urban area, gathered voters' accounts of electoral events during that decade (Siachiwena & Wahman, 2024). The case study conducted in Chadiza elicited rich, first-hand perspectives from local voters (mainly women) on perspective and experience of women on electoral violence, factors exposes women to risks due to violence and implications of electoral violence on women participation in elections. This article synthesises constituency testimonies with national reports to build a gendered understanding of electoral violence in Chadiza (Chishimba & Chulu 2024:4) Several Zambian studies conducted recently for instance in Kanyama constituency identifies form of electoral violence against women but focused on urban setting rather than women lived experience in rural area. However, little is understood how women in Chadiza Constituency cope with resistance or negotiate electoral violence as well as what social networks or approaches that may be used to mitigate its negative outcome. Therefore, addressing this gap would centre women voices in electoral violence research unlike subsuming them under general observations not only that, it would help to provide content specific insights, inform policy and interventions that are responsive to women articulated needs and contribute to theoretical understanding of agency, resilience and structural barriers in a rural Africa electoral context.

1.1 Research Objective

- i. Explore how women understand and experience electoral violence
- ii. Identify factors that expose women to risk during elections
- iii. Understand implications of electoral violence for women political participation

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of electoral violence remains a persistent challenge in many developing democracies, especially across sub-Saharan Africa. In countries like Zambia, where democratic consolidation continues to evolve, electoral periods are often marred by tension, unrest, and at times, violent clashes. Electoral violence ranging from intimidation, destruction of property, physical assault, to even fatalities poses a threat not only to democratic processes but also to national peace and development (Zywicki, 2024:2). This literature review seeks to explore the scholarly discourse surrounding electoral violence with a focus on identifying key elements associated with its occurrence in the Chadiza constituency between 2011 and 2021. Chadiza, a rural constituency located in Zambia's Eastern Province, has experienced varying degrees of electoral contestation since the re-introduction of multiparty democracy in 1991. However, the period from 2011 to 2021 is particularly significant due to intensified political competition, the rise of youth participation (and militancy), and increasing concerns over electoral fairness. A focused examination of this context provides valuable insights into micro-level electoral dynamics that often escape broader national analyses.

Key to analysis of this exploration is the adoption of the Greed and Grievance Theory, which provides a dual lens for interpreting motivations behind electoral violence. The theory, initially developed in conflict studies (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), distinguishes between violence motivated by material gain (greed) and that arising from perceived marginalization or injustice (grievance). This theoretical framing allows for an analysis of how socio-economic factors, ethnic cleavages, youth unemployment, and political manipulation contribute to electoral unrest in specific constituencies like Chadiza. Moreover, the literature review is guided by three core research objectives: (1) Explore how women understand and experience electoral violence (2) Identify factors that expose women to risk during elections (3) Understand implications of electoral violence for women political participation

These objectives provide the structure for organizing the reviewed literature and formulation of this entire article. This review thus sets the stage for a rich, grounded, and context-specific understanding of electoral violence as a social phenomenon shaped by interactions between political actors, community members, institutions, and historical narratives. Electoral violence, as a concept, occupies a complex and multifaceted space within political science and conflict studies. Scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors have offered varying definitions and interpretations based on context, scale, and the actors involved. In general terms, electoral violence refers to any act of violence physical, psychological, or structural that is aimed at influencing the electoral process, its outcomes, or its participants (Fischer, 2019:17). This section explores key conceptualizations of electoral violence, its typologies, and its distinguishing features, while framing its relevance to the Zambian and Chadiza constituency context.

According to Höglund (2019, p. 11), electoral violence includes all acts that seek to determine the outcomes of elections through threats, coercion, or actual harm. These acts may occur before, during, or after the election and may target voters, candidates, election officials, or even electoral infrastructure. The International IDEA (2021) expands this by identifying electoral violence as politically motivated violence intended to influence the process and outcomes of elections, either by changing voter behavior or deterring participation. Importantly, electoral violence does not occur in a vacuum. It often mirrors deeper structural issues such as ethnic tension, economic inequality, political exclusion, and weak institutional capacity. Hence, it may be seen both as a symptom and as a catalyst of broader political dysfunction.

Scholars generally categorize electoral violence into three primary forms: pre-election, election-day, and post-election violence (Birch et al. 2020, p. 12). Pre-election violence includes intimidation, threats, and disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing candidate selection, discouraging voter registration, or silencing dissent. In Chadiza, reports of harassment of opposition supporters during campaign periods fall into this category. Further typologies consider the actors involved. Electoral violence may be perpetrated by state actors (e.g., police, military), non-state actors (e.g., party cadres, militias), or even ordinary citizens. Höglund (2019, p. 15) distinguish between elite-instigated violence driven by political actors seeking power and popular violence, often spontaneous, emerging from grassroots discontent. In Chadiza, there are indications of both forms, especially during tense electoral contests.

Conceptually, it is important to distinguish between the structural causes and immediate triggers of electoral violence. Structural causes refer to longstanding political, social, and economic factors that create fertile ground for conflict. These include poverty, youth unemployment, lack of trust in electoral institutions, ethnic divisions, and political exclusion. Triggers, meanwhile, are specific events or actions that ignite tensions such as inflammatory political rhetoric, disputed results, or police brutality during campaigns (LeBas, 2020, p. 2). In Chadiza, the interaction of structural vulnerabilities (e.g., rural poverty, low literacy levels) and immediate triggers (e.g., aggressive campaign speeches, biased administration of electoral rules) often explains the outbreak of violence during electoral periods. There is distinctive line between political and electoral violence.

Chadiza has not experienced large-scale political violence akin to civil war. However, electoral violence especially during hotly contested parliamentary elections has threatened social cohesion, disrupted livelihoods, and undermined democratic participation. Electoral violence has significant implications for human security. It erodes public trust in democratic institutions, undermines rule of law, and discourages political participation. For marginalized groups particularly women and youth the threat of violence can mean exclusion from political processes altogether (Krook & Sanin, 2020). In rural constituencies like Chadiza, where political violence can be localized but intense, such threats deepen cycles of fear, disengagement, and apathy. Furthermore, the perception that violence is a necessary part of political competition can entrench a culture of impunity and normalize coercive tactics.

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Greed and Grievance Theory

A robust theoretical framework is essential in analyzing the complex phenomenon of electoral violence. In this article, the Greed and Grievance theory offers a compelling lens through which the causes, motivations, and manifestations of electoral violence can be explored, particularly within the context of Chadiza Constituency between 2011 and 2021. Originally developed by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) in the study of civil wars, the theory has since been adapted to other forms of conflict, including electoral violence in democratic and semi-democratic states. This section examines the foundational ideas of the theory, its critiques, and its application to the context of electoral violence in Zambia, with specific reference to Chadiza.

2.1.2 Origins of the Greed and Grievance Theory

The Greed and Grievance theory was first introduced to explain the causes of civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa. In their research, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) posited that rebellion and armed conflict are often driven less by political ideology or historical injustices (grievances) and more by economic motivations and the opportunity to profit (greed). This argument was both controversial and innovative, challenging the dominant narrative that conflicts arise primarily from social or political marginalization.

The theory suggests that individuals or groups weigh the costs and benefits of violent engagement. When the perceived rewards such as access to resources, political power, or control over lucrative territories outweigh the risks, conflict becomes more likely. Greed-driven violence is thus rational and strategic, occurring in environments where state control is weak, resources are exploitable, and opportunities for gain exist. In contrast, the grievance component of the theory emphasizes socio-political and economic inequalities. These may include ethnic or regional discrimination, poor governance, repression, land disputes, poverty, or exclusion from political processes. Grievance-driven violence emerges when populations believe that violence is the only recourse to address long-standing injustices. While initially developed for civil wars, these concepts have been extrapolated to electoral contexts, where political competition mimics many of the features of civil conflict namely, zero-sum competition over power and resources, manipulation of ethnic and identity narratives, and the use of violence as a strategy.

2.1.3 Electoral Violence through the Lens of Greed

Applying the concept of “greed” to electoral violence involves understanding the political and economic incentives that compel individuals or groups to use violence to influence electoral outcomes. Politicians in fragile democracies often see access to state power as a direct route to personal enrichment or patronage networks. This is particularly evident in systems where public resources are not managed transparently and where political office becomes a means to accumulate wealth (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

In Chadiza, political competition for parliamentary seats is intense, not merely for ideological representation but because elected officials gain influence over resource allocation, public contracts, and development projects. The possibility of securing these benefits can motivate candidates and their supporters to use coercive tactics such as intimidating rivals, bribing electoral officers, or inciting violence among youth to secure victory. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) show that in many African democracies, young people engage in electoral violence as a form of political entrepreneurship, seeking short-term economic gains in exchange for loyalty to powerful figures.

2.1.4 Electoral Violence as Expression of Grievance

The grievance dimension of the theory is equally relevant in understanding electoral violence in Chadiza. Many communities in the constituency face structural inequalities such as lack of infrastructure, limited access to education, unemployment, and perceptions of ethnic or regional marginalization. These conditions breed resentment and distrust of political elites. When communities feel excluded from meaningful participation in governance or believe that the electoral system is manipulated in favor of certain candidates or regions, violence may be seen as a legitimate response. Grievance-based violence often takes the form of protest, riots, or destruction of election-related materials especially when electoral outcomes are disputed or perceived as unfair.

2.1.5 Intersection of Greed and Grievance

Importantly, many scholars argue that greed and grievance are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they often interact and reinforce each other. In electoral settings, political actors may manipulate legitimate grievances for personal gain mobilizing ethnic or regional sentiments to incite violence that benefits their campaign (Mulubale, 2017). This hybrid approach is particularly relevant in Zambia, where politics is deeply interwoven with ethnic affiliations and regional loyalties. In Chadiza, candidates have occasionally used rhetoric that plays on historical grievances or socioeconomic frustration to galvanize support while simultaneously offering material incentives to cadres. Thus, violence is both emotionally and materially motivated a blend of outrage and opportunism. LeBas (2020) emphasizes that understanding electoral violence requires a dual lens: acknowledging how systemic inequalities and historical injustices provide the fuel, while political opportunism provides the spark. In this context, the Greed and Grievance framework allows for an integrated understanding of both structural and agency-based explanations of violence.

2.1.6 Critiques of the Theory

While influential, the Greed and Grievance theory is not without its criticisms. One of the main critiques is its oversimplification of complex conflicts into binary categories (Ballentine & Sherman, 2003, p. 16). Critics argue that the theory underestimates the ideological, cultural, and psychological dimensions of violence, focusing instead on rational calculations of cost and benefit.

2.1.7 Justification for Using the Framework in Chadiza

Despite these critiques, the Greed and Grievance framework remains valuable for this study due to its flexibility and explanatory power. It provides a structured way to analyze both individual and collective motivations for violence, while allowing room for contextual interpretation. In Chadiza, the framework helps unpack why youth may be drawn to violent political mobilization (greed), and why communities may tolerate or even support such violence when they feel politically or economically marginalized (grievance). The theory also provides a bridge between micro-level experiences and macro-level structures aligning well with the case study design and qualitative methodology of this research. By situating the analysis within the Greed and Grievance framework, this study seeks to move beyond deterministic explanations of electoral violence, offering a nuanced, empirically grounded understanding of the phenomena as it plays out in rural Zambia.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Women’s Understanding and Experience of Electoral Violence

Empirical scholarship demonstrates that women’s understanding of electoral violence extends beyond physical confrontation to include psychological intimidation, social exclusion, and economic coercion. The African Union report [AU] of 2021 described electoral violence as acts or threats intended to influence electoral outcomes, yet evidence shows that women often interpret violence in relational and gendered ways. In many African contexts, women describe electoral violence as including verbal abuse, reputational attacks, domestic pressure, and restrictions on movement

during campaign periods. These forms of violence, though less visible than physical clashes, significantly shape women's political experiences and sense of safety.

Birch et al. (2020, p. 17) argues that electoral integrity is undermined not only by overt conflict but also by systematic intimidation that disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including women. Similarly, IDEA (2021, p. 42) finds that women frequently experience harassment at rallies, polling stations, and within digital spaces, leading them to associate elections with insecurity rather than democratic opportunity. Sishuwa (2021, p. 19), examining Zambia's political environment, highlights how partisan polarization and political cadreism create atmospheres of fear that affect women's willingness to engage publicly in political discourse. Fischer (2019, p. 21) further observes that women tend to internalize threats differently from men, often prioritizing family safety and social harmony, which shapes their perception of risk during electoral cycles.

Moreover, Chessman and Klaas (2018) suggests that women's lived experiences reveal a continuum of violence that includes both direct attacks and subtle coercive pressures embedded in patriarchal social systems. This broader understanding challenges narrow event-based definitions of electoral violence and underscores the need to incorporate gender-sensitive perspectives in assessing electoral processes.

2.2.2 Factors That Expose Women to Risk during Elections

The literature identifies structural, sociocultural, and institutional factors that increase women's vulnerability during elections. Structurally, entrenched patriarchal norms limit women's political agency and normalize their marginalization in public decision-making (Paalo, 2017). Where political competition is intense and regulatory frameworks are weak, women are more likely to face intimidation without adequate institutional protection. Birch et al. (2020) notes that weak enforcement of electoral laws and limited accountability mechanisms embolden perpetrators of gender-based electoral violence.

Sociocultural dynamics also heighten women's exposure to risk. Krook and Sanin (2016) demonstrate that political actors often manipulate gender stereotypes to delegitimize women candidates, portraying them as morally unfit or incapable leaders. Such narratives not only incite hostility but also legitimize harassment. Fischer (2019) emphasizes that community-level pressures, including fear of social ostracism and domestic repercussions, further constrain women's political engagement. In many settings, women's participation in rallies or political meetings may be interpreted as defiance of gender norms, exposing them to backlash.

Economic vulnerability compounds these risks. IDEA (2021) reports that women's limited access to financial resources reduces their ability to secure personal safety or mount competitive campaigns, increasing susceptibility to coercion and vote manipulation. Additionally, in contexts with histories of armed conflict or political militarization, violence may become normalized as a campaign strategy. Blattman and Annan (2014) argue that exposure to conflict increases the likelihood that political actors will employ intimidation tactics, disproportionately affecting civilian populations, including women. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) similarly links weak democratic institutions and poor governance performance with heightened electoral insecurity, creating environments where women are especially at risk.

2.2.3 Implications of Electoral Violence for Women's Political Participation

Electoral violence has significant short- and long-term implications for women's political participation. Empirical studies consistently show that insecurity discourages women from voting, contesting elections, or engaging in campaign activities. Birch et al. (2020) finds that perceived threats reduce voter turnout among marginalized groups, particularly women who often prioritize personal and family safety. Sishuwa (2021) observes that repeated cycles of political tension and violence in Zambia have discouraged women from seeking elective office, reinforcing gender disparities in political representation.

Beyond immediate participation, the psychological impact of violence disturbs women's political engagement. Fischer (2019) notes that persistent intimidation fosters fear, mistrust, and withdrawal from civic engagement. IDEA (2021) further emphasizes that when women perceive electoral institutions as incapable of protecting them, confidence in democratic processes diminishes. This disengagement not only affects individual participation but also weakens broader democratic consolidation.

At another level, Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) argues that exclusion of women through intimidation undermines the inclusiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance. When half the population faces barriers to participation, policy outcomes are less representative and democratic accountability suffers. Krook and Sanin (2020) add that sustained gendered violence entrenches patriarchal political cultures, making future reforms more difficult. Similarly, Blattman and Annan (2014) suggest that environments characterized by violence create cycles of fear that can persist beyond election periods, discouraging sustained civic involvement.

Overall, the empirical literature indicates that women's experiences of electoral violence are multifaceted, rooted in structural inequalities, and consequential for democratic participation. Women interpret electoral violence broadly, encompassing physical, psychological, and structural harms (Kawila et al., 2023). Structural patriarchy, weak

institutions, economic vulnerability, and political militarization increase women's exposure to risk. The implications extend beyond reduced voter turnout to long-term democratic deficits, including diminished representation, weakened trust in institutions, and entrenched gender inequality (Fischer, 2019). These findings collectively highlight the importance of gender-responsive electoral reforms to safeguard women's political participation.

III. METHODOLOGY

The primary local evidence came from face to face interviews and Focus Group discussions through a case study and value laden qualitative research approach guided by constructivism philosophical assumption conducted in Chadiza that interviewed voters about their perspective from 2011 to 2021 elections. The study used homogenous purposive sampling to select 15 female participants from political arena, police service and health sector out of the total population of female registered voters in Chadiza Constituency. This means that the authors focused on participants with similar or specified characteristics having interest in electoral violence. At the same time capture diverse voices of young and older voters above 18 years of age, party supporters and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) (Coomb's, 2022, p. 7). To situate local findings, the analysis draws on national election assessments, gender analyses, and peer-reviewed studies of electoral violence in Zambia. This mixed approach reorient constituency detail with national context as presented in the findings section that proceeds. The research project was granted ethical approval by the University of Zambia for Policy Studies Ethics Committee reference no.: HSSREC-2024-APR-006. The interview schedule was semi-structured, and questions were organised around the themes identified for the main inspection report, namely Causes, Understanding, Enforcement and Prevention.

Participants were also given the opportunity to share details of their experience and any other issues that they felt relevant to help mitigate electoral violence in this area. Survivors of electoral violence were more difficult to recruit than the other participants of the study. In part, this was because the authors targeted to interview participants, who were adult (over 18 years of age) voters at the time of interview, and had experienced and participated in elections conducted by ECZ from 2011 to 2021 in Chadiza constituency in Eastern province in Zambia near Malawi border, with the population of slightly above 45,000. Ethical constraints meant we were unable to interview young people aged 17 or under. However, on speaking to CSO working with client base made up by adult people who had experienced 2011 to 2021 elections helped to reach the required study saturation. The women shared personal and visceral accounts of their experiences, and some were passionately articulate about how police (and policymakers) could better facilitate justice. The interview transcripts were coded and themes imaged from patterns of coded data. The structure of participants sample was as shown in the table below:

Table 1
Sample of Participants' Brief Profiles

Pseudonym	Profile
FP 1:	A 36 year old secondary School teacher, holder of first degree. She had participated in elections conducted by ECZ twice one as a presiding officer and the other as a district trainer. At the time of interview she had live in Chadiza for more than 10years.
FP 2:	A 75 years old politician. Participated in elections conducted by ECZ from the time she was 25 years. Served as a MP and Provincial deputy minister.
FP 3	A 32 years old health personnel. At the time of interview she had lived in Chadiza for more than 21yeras. A worker at general hospital.
FP 4:	A 49 years old woman, working under CSO and she had lived in Chadiza at the time of interview for more than 35 years.
FGD	A Focus Group Discussion 2 consisted of eight civic education teachers from five different wards met at Resource centre after an identified meeting. (1male and 7 female)
FGD 2	A focus Group Discussion 3 consisted of eight ward councilor (4 male, 4 female)

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

A key finding in this research was that all participants interviewed pointed to the reflection that electoral violence was very much witnessed in the rural constituency of Chadiza in Eastern province of Zambia and negatively affected young and old women political participation in line with Sishuwa (2021). This was the case in both one-to-one and individual interviews and focus group discussions. This is in line with other research conducted at national level and in urban areas that found electoral violence contribute to low participation of people in politics (Kawila et al. 2023) However, participants found the legal system and wider societal discourse around electoral violence mitigation in Zambia less effective because of re-occurring incidences of violence around election period that has took different forms.

4.1.1 Women Perspective and Experiences of Electoral Violence

Forms of electoral violence experienced by women in Chadiza reported multiple, overlapping forms of electoral violence experienced across 2011 to 2021. These can be grouped as: Direct physical intimidation and threats, several women recounted encounters with intimidating groups and threats of physical harm when attempting to attend rallies or political meetings, particularly during the hotly contested 2016 campaign. A female participant mentions that:

“Joining politics as a women requires you to become thick skinned, men turn to think you are a prostitute and they become disrespectful by use of vulgar language, sexual assault worst still women are even physically abused.” (FP 2-01.08.25)

Such threats often came from loosely organised party youth cadres and occurred near public venues and transportation modes. These accounts echo national findings that political competition and youth mobilisation were associated with higher incidences of electoral violence in 2016 (Kawila et al., 2023). A participant from the named political part explains that:

“People feel that if their tribesman doesn’t win, then development will not reach them. This belief has fueled resentment and even led to physical confrontations.” (FP4-01.08.25)

Economic coercion and voter-buying pressure, women described being offered money, food, or other goods in exchange for voting for particular candidates or facing social/economic penalties if they rejected offers. For women who are economically vulnerable especially smallholder farmers, market traders, or caretakers these transactions were coercive, limiting the freedom of political choice. A female participate in focus group discussion two mentioned that:

“We have ambitions to join politics and compete against men but we do not have financial support and our spouses cannot allow us.” (FGD 2-01.08.25)

Meanwhile, another female participant from focus group discussion three noted that:

“Men do not want to be challenged once challenged they become violent and this is what make most women to withdraw from political arena.” (FGD 3-01.08.25)

National gender analyses of the 2021 polls emphasise how economic incentives and pressures shape women’s voting behaviour and create arenas for contested interactions between campaigners and voters (Mulubale, 2017). One participant explains:

“During election we receive many visitors that offers us a variate of gifts like T-shirt, chitenge materials, caps and many other gifts to make us vote for them. Immediate after elections period they disappear” (FP7-01.08.2025).

Another female participant noted that:

“Before, we didn’t know our power. Now we challenge candidates to talk about issues, not just give us chitenge.” (FP2, 01.08.2025)

Psychological intimidation and social threats, beyond physical risk, many women described fear of social ostracism, reputational harm, or family pressure if they expressed political views contrary to Birch et al. (2020). This included verbal threats; gossip campaigns, and targeted shaming subtle forms of violence that are highly effective in tightly knit rural communities like Chadiza. Such social sanctions can be more powerful than physical violence because they threaten women’s everyday security and relationships (Chishimba & Chulu, 2024:54). This is evident by the sentiments passed by a female participant below:

“We hear things on Facebook that anger us, but we don’t know if it’s true.” (FP1-01.08.25)

Gender-based and sexual harassment, although less commonly reported publicly due to stigma, the Chadiza data included references to sexualised harassment at political events and the use of sexual threats to intimidate women politically active in campaigns. National studies of political violence against women in Zambia document similar tactics sexual harassment and gendered insults that deter women from visible political engagement (IDEA, 2021:34)

Structural exclusion and institutional bias, women reported feeling sidelined by party leadership, with candidate lists and campaign resources favouring men. While not always violent in an immediate sense, structural exclusion produces political marginalisation that functions as a form of structural violence by denying women equal participation and protection within political institutions. EU and civil society analyses of women’s political representation in Zambia highlight systemic obstacles to women’s leadership at party and state levels (Paalo, 2017).

Eventually, Women’s narratives in Chadiza reveal three important features of how electoral violence is perceived; Normalization and minimisation; sixty percent (60%) of the 15 female participants suggested that certain forms of harassment had become “part of politics” and were not worth formally reporting either because doing so seemed futile or because reporting might provoke retaliation. This confirms what Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) explained. This normalization reduces the apparent scale of gendered violence and makes it less likely to be captured by formal monitoring systems.

Relational framing; forty percent (40%) of the 15 female participants often described violence in relational term, threats were meaningful because of who delivered them (party agents, relatives, employers), and the fear they caused was mediated by personal economic and social ties. This means that interventions that ignore social networks will

struggle to protect women effectively. This actually is in tandem with Sishuwa (2021). Like the saying goes, ‘you cannot bite the finger that feeds you’. This notion has made violation of women’s rights unreported to the legal systems.

While forty-five percent (45%) of the 15 female participants, mentioned trade-offs between safety and voice; women who were politically active, especially those aspiring to leadership roles or campaigning for candidates, faced explicit trade-offs greater visibility increased influence but also heightened exposure to physical and reputational attacks. Several women described choosing to withdraw from public campaigning to preserve family safety or livelihood decisions that have long-term consequences for gender parity in political representation. Although Höglund (2009) had a different view by pointing to economic status and culture. However, it is easy to see that economic status and culture are tools used to propel gender based electoral violence.

4.1.2 Factors that expose Women to Risk during Elections

Honestly, women in Chadiza and national analyses point to several interacting drivers that produced the observed patterns of electoral violence:

High-stakes local competition, in Chadiza, closely fought races raised the stakes for victory, turning contests into zero-sum struggles where parties mobilised aggressive tactics to secure votes. When material or symbolic gains from political success are perceived as large, actors may deploy intimidation to influence outcomes. This dynamic was visible nationally in the run-up to 2016 and persisted into 2021. These align with Kawila et al (2023) who noted that youth mobilisation and party cadres, many violent incidents involved youth cadres who were mobilised by parties to demonstrate strength or to patrol campaign events. In some instances, those cadres engaged in harassment or intimidation of perceived opponents, including women who attended rival rallies. Indeed study by Sishuwa (2021) confirms electoral violence in Zambia have emphasised the role of young party supporters in escalating conflict.

Economic precarity and clientelist incentives, economic weakness among many households in Chadiza made voter-buying and clientelist tactics particularly effective. Women who head households or run small businesses often felt pressure to accept incentives or face indirect punishment. In line with Paalo (2017) as Gender Links and other observers note, economic leverage is a potent mechanism for influencing women’s electoral behaviour. Local sociocultural norms and gender hierarchies, patriarchal norms shape what is considered “appropriate” conduct for women in public life. In Chadiza, the perception that public political life is a masculine domain contributed to social sanctions against politically outspoken women and reduced community tolerance for their participation. The result is a double bind: women face both the general hazards of electoral competition and gender-specific sanctions conforming to Chishimba and Chulu (2024, p. 2). Weak protective and accountability mechanisms, women described lack of timely protection from authorities when incidents occurred and limited trust in formal complaint mechanisms. National election observer reports pointed to gaps in protection and the difficulty of holding perpetrators accountable during moments of intense political competition.

4.1.3 Implications of Electoral Violence for Women Participation

The findings from this study suggest that women’s limited participation in politics in Chadiza Constituency between 2011 and 2021 has far-reaching consequences for women themselves, their communities, and the broader democratic process. When women refrain from engaging in politics due to fears of electoral violence, harassment, or social backlash, their voices are less visible in decision-making arenas where priorities are set and resources allocated. As a result, policies and development initiatives may insufficiently reflect the everyday realities and needs of women, particularly in areas such as maternal health, child welfare, access to education, and livelihood support. This under representation can contribute to development outcomes that are less equitable and less responsive to the full population.

At the social level, Krook and Sanin (2020) denotes that women’s non-participation can reinforce traditional gender norms that frame politics as a male-dominated sphere. The persistence of such norms may normalize the exclusion of women from leadership and public debate, thereby limiting progress toward gender equality. In Chadiza, participants’ perspectives indicate that when women opt out of political engagement, it is sometimes interpreted by communities as a confirmation that politics is unsuitable for women. This perception can discourage other women and girls from aspiring to leadership roles, producing an inter-generational cycle of political marginalization. Over time, this cycle reduces the diversity of viewpoints in political spaces and weakens the principle of inclusive representation.

The consequences are also democratic in nature. Democracy relies on broad participation and the representation of different social groups. When women, who constitute a substantial portion of the electorate, are underrepresented among candidates, party structures, and civic forums, the legitimacy of democratic institutions may be questioned. In support, Kawila et al. (2023) highlighted that a political system that does not adequately include women risks being perceived as less fair and fewer representatives. Furthermore, the absence of women from political dialogue can narrow the range of conflict-management approaches. Some respondents in this study associated women’s participation with greater emphasis on negotiation, community engagement, and social cohesion. While such associations should not essentialism women’s roles, they highlight that diverse participation can enrich peace-building and problem-solving strategies.

Economically, UN Women (2019) states that limited political participation may also reduce women's access to networks, information, and opportunities that often flow through political engagement. Participation in politics can enhance leadership skills, visibility, and influence, which may translate into broader socio-economic empowerment. When women remain on the margins, these potential benefits are unevenly distributed, and existing inequalities can be sustained. Overall, the discussion indicates that women's non-participation in politics in Chadiza Constituency is not merely an individual choice but is closely linked to structural and contextual factors, including the threat or experience of electoral violence. In line with Mulabale (2017) confronting these barriers is therefore essential not only for protecting women's rights but also for strengthening democratic governance. Creating safer political environments, promoting gender-sensitive civic education, and supporting women's leadership pathways could help mitigate these consequences and foster a more inclusive political landscape.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to explore women's perspectives and lived experiences of electoral violence, identify factors that place women at risk during election periods, and understand how such violence shapes their political participation. The findings show that women experience electoral violence in ways that are often gendered, subtle, and under-reported, ranging from intimidation and social pressure to exclusion from decision-making spaces. Risk is heightened by factors such as unequal power relations, limited economic resources, partisan polarization, and weak community protection systems. These conditions make women more vulnerable before, during, and after elections.

The study further concludes that electoral violence has lasting consequences for women's political engagement. Fear, trauma, and mistrust in political processes discourage many capable women from voting, campaigning, or seeking leadership roles. As a result, women's voices remain underrepresented in democratic processes. Perhaps, addressing electoral violence therefore requires gender-responsive civic education, stronger institutional safeguards, and community-level support systems that affirm women's political rights. Creating safer electoral environments is not only a protection issue but also a democratic necessity for inclusive and credible elections.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on women's perspectives in Chadiza and corroborating national evidence, the following interventions could reduce gendered electoral violence and support women's political inclusion: Gender-sensitive early warning and reporting mechanisms, strengthen community-level reporting channels that are accessible to women (hot-lines, safe reporting centres), and ensure rapid response teams that include female officers. Observer missions and the Electoral Commission should mainstream gender in monitoring frameworks. Targeted protection for women candidates and campaigners, parties and the Electoral Commission should develop protocols to protect female candidates and campaigners, including safe transport, security at events, and codes of conduct for party cadres. Internal party disciplinary systems must be enforced to deter harassment.

Economic empowerment coupled with civic education, addressing the economic vulnerabilities that make voter-buying effective requires programmes that combine livelihood support for women with civic education on rights and the harms of transactional politics. Community dialogue can help shift normative acceptance of coercive practices. Support women's collective organising, invest in women's groups and networks that provide mutual protection and political training. When women act collectively they gain bargaining power and can negotiate safer political participation in local contexts. Legal and accountability reforms strengthen prosecution and accountability for electoral offences, including gendered harassment. Legal awareness campaigns can help women understand avenues for redress and encourage reporting. National election bodies and judiciary mechanisms must be resourced to act effectively during election windows.

Declaration of Interest

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