Barriers to effective inclusion of voters with visual impairment in the electoral and voting processes in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The thrust of this study was to determine the barriers faced by voters with visual impairment in the electoral and voting process in Zimbabwe. The study was carried out in five provinces of the Zimbabwe. The qualitative research paradigm was used. The interpretive research design was used in line with the research philosophy identified. Opportunity sampling procedures were utilised and data were generated using interviews. The study established that voters with visual impairment feared for their lives because law enforcement agencies did not provide safety guarantees in the event of politically-motivated violence erupting. It also established that contrary to provisions of the constitution, privacy was not provided for in the voting process. The study also found out that where voters with visual impairment needed assistance, the choice of who should assist them needed to come from them, and not any other person. Specialised assistance during voting was also not forthcoming. The study also revealed that the only voting format used which is normal print is not disability-friendly. Existing legislation on electoral issues was found to be not comprehensive enough. Some polling stations were not easily accessible. The study recommended comprehensive needs analysis and the introduction of alternative voting formats such as Braille, enlarged print, magnification sheets, and computer-based software was long overdue. Law enforcement agencies should guarantee the safety of voters with visual impairment in the event of political violence breaking out. In addition, electoral authorities should also revisit the issue of privacy during voting. Lastly the need for comprehensive electoral legislation catering for voters with visual impairment was required.

Key words: barrier, Braille, inclusion, magnification sheets, visual impairment, electoral process

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006) makes guarantees to the political rights of people with disabilities among other rights to ensure that member countries who were signatories to the convention comply with its provisions. Despite these guarantees, a number of barriers continue to interfere with the effective implementation of this noble convention. This paper focuses on the barriers to effective inclusion of voters with visual impairment in the electoral and voting processes in Zimbabwe with the aim of suggesting strategies that can assist in effectively dealing with these barriers.
Background to the problem

A number of barriers continue to stand in the way, thereby, stifling the effective participation of voters with visual impairment in the electoral process. The researcher was privileged to have taken part in a number of elections in different capacities in Zimbabwe. These capacities entailed being a presiding officer as well as a polling officer for local authority and national elections, and referendums. While performing the duties attached to these roles, the researcher noted with concern how voters with visual impairment were being short changed by the existing electoral system and structures. Literature also seems to confirm the observations of the researcher. These grey areas largely prompted the researcher to find out more about the electoral system and the provisions for the visually impaired people.

According to the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH) (2008), some of the grey areas in the Zimbabwe electoral process include:

- Lack of privacy in the voting process.
- Being assisted to vote by total strangers.
- Lack of Braille ballots or enlarged print for easy reading.
- Unavailability of magnifying material.
- Inaccessible polling stations.
- Being prevented from voting for different reasons.
- Lack of information on the electoral procedures.
- Lack of trained personnel to help people with visual impairment.
- Lack of transport to polling stations.
- Fear of political violence on the part of the visually impaired.

Some people with visual impairment cannot read conventional print and cannot therefore, access vital information. The visually impaired tend to rely on other people to tell them what is taking place in the political arena. This distorts information and sometimes resulted in unnecessary apprehension and out-of-context understanding of otherwise normal situations. Due to this anomaly, what people with visual impairment hear is polarised, tends to be dramatised and blown out of proportion. According to (NASCOH, 2008), violence, for example, assumed exaggerated proportions when taken in the context of people with visual impairment. The visually impaired might resent participating in the voting process because they see it as unsafe for them to do so, considering the challenges involved in defending themselves or in running away from violent scenes (NASCOH, 2008).

According to NASCOH, (2010), there were 700,000 potential voters with disabilities in the 2008 general elections. This number also included those with visual impairment as part of the population of people with disabilities. Statistics relating to only those with visual impairment could not be obtained. Out of these, 25.6% of people with disabilities managed to vote, 75% of the potential voters failed to exercise their right to vote due to physical barriers, lack of information and attitudinal barriers. The actual statistics indicated that:

- 36.7% were not registered to vote.
- 16.5% were not willing to vote.
- 11.75% were afraid of political violence (NASCOH, 2010).

Other reasons included lack of transport to take people with disabilities to polling stations, ill informed community beliefs such as that people with disabilities were not supposed to vote, lack of resources required to carry out political campaigns and lack of appropriate formats for the visually impaired in particular (NASCOH, 2010).

The 25.66% who managed to vote raised complaints. These complaints had to do with
lack of privacy in the voting process, being assisted by representatives of contesting parties, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) officers and police officers. Other complaints were on voting materials that were not in the format accessible to visually impaired people such as Braille or enlarged print. Inaccessibility of the built environment and the furniture used were also issues of great concern. It was also found out that in Zimbabwe, Braille was a mystery and was reserved for those who did special education (NASCOH, 2010). This position was unfortunate and at variance with what was on the ground, since, Braille is commonly being taught in a number of schools and many people with visual impairment are using it to communicate.

In addition, many people with visual impairment in Zimbabwe do not have birth certificates, national identity cards or passports to enable them to register as voters (NASCOH, 2010). They could not access voter education and, therefore, cannot vote for candidates of their choice or for themselves. People with visual impairment could not even afford to challenge the status quo and to stand as candidates themselves. They could not even be trained or be accredited as observers of elections. The political rights of people with visual impairment have been disregarded to the extent that they cannot be voted into public office or hold positions of authority (Government of Western Australia, 2011).

**Research questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What challenges are faced by people with visual impairment in the electoral and voting process in Zimbabwe?
2. To what extent have electoral authorities been able to address the barriers faced by people with visual impairment in the electoral process?
3. What strategies can be used to address the barriers faced by people with visual impairment in the electoral process?

**Review of related literature**

**Conceptual framework**

This study used the conceptual framework of inclusion. Inclusion is a relatively new paradigm shift in the lives of people with disabilities where the major focus is on ensuring that they participate in all activities of society as full and equally valuable members of society without being unnecessarily discriminated against by anyone. According to Chimhenga and Munemo (2011), inclusion is the principle applied to accommodate all human beings, thus the full spectrum of diverse abilities, within one system, in such a manner that all involved can be assured of successful, equal and quality participation in real life experiences.

**Barriers to inclusion of voters with visual impairment in the electoral process**

A number of barriers continue to stand in the way of electoral involvement and inclusion of people with visual impairment in decision making and governance issues.
The experience of Jim Dickson of the American Association of People With Disabilities could be an eye opener to barriers faced by the visually impaired. Jim was blind. He had this to say:

“Once after my wife cast my ballot, she said to me Jim, I know you love me. Now, I know you trust me because you think I am marking this ballot for that idiot”.

Jim further went on to express his reservations about whether, on two occasions in Massachusetts and California, while relying on a polling officer to have his vote cast, the polling officer had attempted to change his mind about whom he wanted to vote for. He did not know if his vote was cast according to his wishes. There is therefore a major barrier for blind people in that there is always a level of uncertainty when another person marks their ballots.

Another major impediment to effective access and inclusion to the electoral process, is that people with visual impairment face challenges in exercising their right to vote through laws that disenfranchise them. The challenge with disenfranchisement is that it prevents people from exercising their rights by law without assessment of their capacity to vote (ibid). The other problem is that sometimes out of ignorance, relatives or carers make decisions not to assist people with disabilities who need help in registering to vote, based on the erroneous belief that the person lacks the capacity to vote (Flick, 2007).

Other barriers include the problem of accessing or entering the building for those with mobility and orientation challenges. Actual marking of ballots can also present serious challenges. Reading visual displays or printed ballots and understanding them is another difficulty for those with low vision (Smith, 2014.). Communication challenges with polling officers can also arise. For visually impaired persons with additional or multiple disabilities such as hearing impairment, obtaining auditory feedback can also deter potential voters from exercising their right to vote. The actual voting process can also prove to be physically exhausting.

A blind information technology specialist and electrical engineer, argued that due to inadequate or malfunctioning voting machines, people with visual impairment were shortchanged (Runyan, 2007). People with visual impairment have to ask for assistance, thereby compromising the privacy of their vote (Runyan, 2007) spent most of his working career developing user friendly assistive technology for the visually impaired. Accordingly, policy makers and other stakeholders should, therefore, refrain from imposing unnecessary obstacles to the participation of people with visual impairment in the electoral process. Instead they should be pre-occupied with strategies to modernise the electoral process, thus making voting more accessible to people with visual impairment.

The Help America Vote Act (2002) mandated that all polling places should have an accessible method of voting that provided for privacy and independence. The Direct Recording Electronic voting machines were then regarded as the solution to providing accessible voting. What is on the ground does not match what can be considered as the best practices or arrangement. Gillian, Piner and Michael (2005) state that the voting process involved critical issues such as:

(a) Logistics of getting to and from a polling station.
(b) Queuing and signing in to vote.
(c) Interactions with poll workers.
(d) Reading and comprehending instructions on how to use a machine or ballot.
(e) Completing the ballot correctly to show voter intention.
(f) Reviewing the ballot for any errors.
(g) Casting the vote in a way that ensured that it would be counted.
The Zimbabwean scenario

In Zimbabwe, it appears that there is flagrant violation of some of the provisions indicated above and yet there are 1.3 million people with disabilities (DFID, 2007). According to a Disability Sensitisation Workshop for Election Authorities in Zimbabwe Programme (RDEZP) (2010), the routes to polling stations, were found to be too long, resulting in lack of easy accessibility. This was also worsened by the lack of disability friendly directional signs to polling stations. In addition, there were inaccessible parking space for vehicles and wheelchairs. At the polling stations themselves, there were hazardous curbs, steps, stairs, inaccessible entrances and walk ways. There were also narrow doors, high thresholds, complex door knobs and handles. Signs and instructions were not in disability friendly formats, for example enlarged print, Braille and others. Protruding objects and overhead clearance are also a major stumbling block for the visually impaired voter.

In a Disability Sensitisation Report, NASCOH (2010) points out that there were serious challenges on voting furniture. Polling booths were too high or too narrow to allow for easy mobility and orientation of individuals with visual impairment. Voting furniture was clearly not disability-friendly. Electoral laws in Zimbabwe are either not user-friendly or not there. In such a case, they became a barrier. Electoral laws and policies of a country can create an enabling and protective environment for people with disabilities to exercise their constitutional right to vote (RDEPZ, 2010). Electoral laws therefore need to be well organised if they are to play their intended role.

Voting procedures in Zimbabwe remain a major stumbling block that requires to be revamped. Assisted voting by election officers, the police, and party representatives violate the principle of secrecy of voting and are therefore a barrier that needs to be attended to. Voting information that is not in the appropriate format is also a hurdle that requires concerted effort to address. Dearth of knowledge related to Zimbabwe necessitated the study.

Litigation on electoral rights of visually impaired people

In the United States district court for the Northern District of California, a class action lawsuit was filed on 25 July 2013. In the lawsuit, the county of Alameda was sued for discriminating against people who were blind and visually impaired (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013). In America, the issue of voting privately and independently is a fundamental human right. The Alameda County was, therefore, accused of denying voters with disabilities this human right since it failed to ensure that voting machines with accessible features were functioning properly on Election Day (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013). The lawsuit, then sought to compel the County of Alameda to make sure that blind and visually impaired voters were in a position to exercise their right to privately and independently vote through the use of accessible voting machines during elections. This lawsuit was filed by the California Council of the Blind and five blind registered voters. The plaintiffs were represented by the Disability Rights Advocates which is a non-profit making disability rights legal centre which specialises in high-impact class actions (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013).

A number of the blind voters in Alameda County had experienced several challenges with the audio and tactile features of voting machines during the November 2012 General Elections. When the poll workers were unable to address the problems encountered, blind voters had to be helped by other people as opposed to voting independently. Some of the affected voters had to go to other polling stations, something which was inconvenient and uncalled for, had the necessary checks and balances been carried out before polling day. These experiences were very
unfair on the part of the visually impaired because they had to share with other people their preferred voting choice, where other voters choices remained their secret. One of the complainants, who resided in Union City indicated that it was frustrating to find problems with voting machines at his designated poll-site as well as an alternate site during the November 2012 General Election. These barriers prevented him from voting independently on Election Day.

In the USA they use voting machines equipped with tactile controls and text to speech audio software that enabled voters with disabilities to privately enter their ballot selections during elections. If functioning effectively, these machines read the information on screen ballots and allowed blind voters to independently input ballot choices using tactile controls (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013). In the USA, July 26, 2013 happened to be the 23rd anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was a milestone in the history of people with disabilities. However, people who were blind and visually impaired, continued to be shortchanged in their struggle to attain equal access to a fundamental right clearly enshrined in the constitution and that is the right to vote.

The President of the California Council of the Blind indicated that, it was surprising that on the eve of the 23rd anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, people who were blind and visually impaired were still fighting for equal rights to something as basic as voting. Technology existed to make voting fully accessible to people who are visually impaired (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013).

Another complainant, who was blind and a registered voter, expressed the view that as an American, he wanted to fully participate in the democratic process and vote independently and privately in public elections as sighted peers did (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013). Unless clear steps are taken to ensure that machines are fully functioning, the problems encountered by the blind and visually impaired voters continue unabated. Effectiveness in this area could be difficult to achieve if electoral authorities failed to ensure the following before the Election Day:

- Training electoral officials on the appropriate set-up and use of the machines.
- Inducting visually impaired voters on the use of the machines.
- Testing the machines to ensure their functioning prior to use of the machines to the public on Election Day.
- Reliable access to technical support services by poll workers to handle and manage concerns as they arose on Election Day.

(Disability Rights Advocates, 2013).

Voters with disabilities generally had lower turnout levels for elections compared to their peers without disabilities (Disability Rights Advocates, 2013). Thus, forcing voters to dictate their votes to third parties only aggravated the problem through discouraging people with disabilities from voting.

Related studies

People with visual impairment find themselves in some kind of a dilemma. Watson (1988:147) observed that:

“People with disabilities had been viewed as tragic victims of some unfortunate accident or disease, as people who do not function normally”

Thus, this erroneous thinking has sadly been transferred to electoral issues for people with visual impairment resulting in their exclusion in governance and electoral issues. For a blind person who cannot read Braille, access to printed material has traditionally been mediated through other people for example a family member, friend, helper or organisation. A number of studies have been
carried out on the role of various electoral issues on people with visual impairment and a number of critical issues on this subject are identified and discussed below.

In one study, Piner and Byrne (2010), it was established that visually impaired voters took significantly longer than sighted voters, that is, 31 minutes compared to 5 minutes to complete an identical ballot respectively. The study also found that, both the sighted voters and visually impaired voters experienced similar voting error rates (roughly 2%). The sighted and visually impaired voters also experienced similar ratings of satisfaction with the voting method used.

The same study also found that 115 of the visually impaired voters had never used Braille for voting purposes. Only 40% reported being proficient Braille readers. A limited number of visually impaired subjects were also reported to have indicated that given an option, 34% would prefer to use Braille in the event of a Braille interface having been made available over an audio interface. The majority of these respondents were also quite experienced in the use of computers. On the other hand, the study also established that older people were less skilled in the use of computers. Visually impaired voters also rated themselves more competent than sighted people in terms of computer expertise.

In Zimbabwe, unlike other countries, it still remains to be established through a feasibility study, the number of people with visual impairment who are able to use the computer for purposes of voting. In another study by Williamson, Wright, Schander, Stockfield and Bow (2001), one participant in Australia indicated that regarding important information on elections, people with visual impairment were provided with a tape recording of the policies of the various parties and their candidates and he felt that a lot had changed for the better in this regard.

NASCOH Annual Sensitisation Report (2010) notes that the option to be assisted by polling officers needed to be left open and may be made available to those who really needed it. The Report alluded to the fact that in Zimbabwe, it took 30 years for people with visual impairment to be accorded a right which other people took for granted. This was evidenced by the striking down of section 60 of the Electoral Act of Zimbabwe in January 2010 which had up to then provided for an individual with visual impairment to be assisted to vote by a presiding officer, two election officers and a policeman and representatives of contesting parties. However, it is disheartening to observe that despite this historical annulment of a part of the Electoral Act, no definite procedures have been put in place to allow for independent voting by people with visual impairment. It is unfortunate that people with visual impairment are regarded as apolitical. Current electoral laws in Zimbabwe do not help the situation either. There is virtually no protection offered to cushion people with visual impairment from a number of electoral challenges, hence the need for this study.

Study methodology

The Advocacy and Participatory Worldview Research Philosophy (APWRP)

The researcher applied the APWRP research philosophy. A research philosophy is essentially a belief about the way in which data about a phenomenon should be gathered, analysed and used (Creswell, 2006). The APWRP philosophy arose in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of proponents who strongly felt that the positivists and post-positivists imposed structural laws and theories that did not take into cognisance marginalised groups of society. People with visual impairment have had a history of marginalisation for a long time mainly because those in authority believe that it is unnecessary to waste resources on a minority (Chakuchichi and Kaputa, 2002).
The qualitative research paradigm

The qualitative research paradigm was employed for the study because of its relevance to the issues under study. Qualitative research is an approach which recognises that meaning emerges through interaction and is not standardised from person to person as in quantitative research (Merriam, 1998). The researcher focuses on specific issues without predetermined categorised analysis. The qualitative research paradigm is multi method in focus involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The interpretive research design

This research made use of the interpretive research design. The major goal was to gain insight, expose the depth, richness and complexity inherent in the phenomenon. The interpretive design primarily focuses on disclosing “meaning making practices”. Interpretive research is distinctive in its approach to research design, concept formation, data analysis and standards of assessment (Flick, 2007). In relation to the study and in general, the major characteristics of this design are that it is holistic; believes in open communication; complex and broad; subjective; the basis of knowing meaning and discovery; it has shared interpretation; focuses on individual interpretation; is unique and the basic element of analysis is words (Tichapondwa, 2013).

Target population

The target population for the study comprised of people with visual impairment who qualified to vote in elections in Zimbabwe. These were over the age of eighteen. It also involved the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and advocacy groups of and for people with visual impairment.

Sampling and sampling procedure

Opportunity sampling was applied. This is a non-probability sampling technique, where participants are selected based on naturally occurring groups (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Data were gathered from people who were easily available and willing to participate based on convenience. Opportunity sampling is normally used to study hard to access groups of people. Visually impaired voters are not a homogenous group. One may not easily find them concentrated at a particular place hence the researcher opted for opportunity sampling.

A sample of 50 individuals with visual impairment was selected and interviewed from five provinces in Zimbabwe (Bulawayo, Masvingo, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West and Harare). In addition, officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission were interviewed as well, as part of the sample. Three officials who were representatives of advocacy groups of and for people with visual impairment were also interviewed and therefore formed part of the sample. A sample of 50 adults comprising of 31 males and 19 females was drawn from the five (5) provinces of Zimbabwe.

Data generation procedures

Best and Kahn (1993) observed that data collection is the process of disciplined inquiry through gathering and analysis of empirical data. This study used interviews to generate data.

Interviews

The researcher carried out interviews with individuals with visual impairment as well as an official from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and officials who were representatives of organisations of people with visual impairment. Appointments were made to visit these individuals at their work places depending on the time that was most
convenient to the participants. Interviews entailed generating data through face-to-face interactions with participants.

Interviews have several strengths (Creswell, 2007; Borg and Gall, 1996). Through the use of interviews, the researcher was assured that no data was omitted; easily clarified the data being given when he/she suspected that a participant was giving false information through non-verbal cues for example facial expressions and voice tone; obtained data from a cross section of participants such as the illiterate, the aged and the young; created a conducive environment; participants provided useful supplementary information by way of spontaneous reactions, something which cannot be done under other conditions; face-to-face interaction facilitated verbatim recording of responses, which provides useful feedback that can be further probed and clarified; the researcher cross-checked the data if it was truly authentic; and enabled to use a recording device (that is a tape recorder). This helped the interviewer to concentrate on listening carefully and probing the interviewee. The use of a recording device effectively dealt with the problem of asking questions and recording responses simultaneously.

Interviews also had weaknesses. However, the researcher crafted advance strategies for managing the disadvantages. In order to counter the challenge of interviewing and recording manually, negatively affecting the flow of the interactions, the researcher complemented this process by recording the whole interview. This helped later in identifying specific areas or details that could have been missed during the interview process. The researcher also kept focus of the essence of the interview to avoid getting carried away unnecessarily. The researcher did his best to refrain from being influenced by the personal attributes of participants and informants. Concerning the challenge posed by the degree of anonymity emanating from interviews resulting in a possibility of participants and informants withholding data, the researcher dealt with this aspect by assuring the participants and informants that the data generated was only for purposes of the study and that their identities could not be known since in the study pseudonyms were used.

Findings of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No confidentiality is guaranteed</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality is guaranteed</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited confidentiality</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>2</td>
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Confidentiality in the Voting Process (N=50)

One major theme that came out of the study is that there was lack of confidentiality in the voting process on the part of visually impaired voters. The popular view was that confidentiality was not guaranteed, especially on the aspect of how they voted or the choice of who they voted for. Only a few participants indicated that confidentiality was guaranteed. A negligible number said that there was only limited confidentiality while only two were not sure. Those who indicated that there was some measure of secrecy in the voting process justified their views on the grounds that since they were helped to vote by their assistants whom they were more accustomed to and trusted, then there was some guarantee of secrecy. The justification however, remained debatable judging from the commonly accepted view and understanding of what secrecy entailed. One expressed reservations at the whole process when he indicated his dismay at having been congratulated for having voted “correctly” because he had voted for a particular party that suited the police officer who had earlier assisted him. Tackson, a street beggar indicated that:

“Sometimes you cannot even trust your own spouse or children to cast the vote on
your behalf because spouses and children as human beings have their own vested interests too and could temper with your choice.”

The absence of confidentiality in the voting process was a major outstanding issue for visually impaired voters. They clearly wanted an arrangement where they were allowed to vote in private without help from anyone and it appears this may not happen in the near future. The need for confidentiality cannot be over-emphasised, since it is long overdue.

Choice of person preferred to assist (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person preferred to assist</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presiding Officer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polling Officer</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sighted guide or personal assistant</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myself</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
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When asked about whom they preferred to assist them to vote, given a choice, the majority of the visually impaired participants indicated that they would prefer their assistant mainly because these were people who were ‘neutral’ and someone known to them and it was easier to trust this person as opposed to a stranger. They also indicated that this person was more close to them. A few opted for their assistant on the grounds that they were provided for by law. A few others indicated police officers on the grounds that they are employees of law enforcement agencies who took oath and were bound by the official secrecy act, and were most likely to uphold secrecy more knowledgeably, reliably and competently as opposed to their assistant, who may be unknowledgeable.

Some had doubts about trusting law enforcement officers based on past experiences where police officers became overzealous and demonstrated bias towards certain parties at the expense of others. The example of one respondent alluded to earlier on who had been informally congratulated for voting for a particular party after the elections confirmed the fears of visually impaired voters in not trusting people they did not know. Some indicated that they would not need to be assisted by anyone but wanted to do the voting process on their own. This view came mainly from university students who felt that they were empowered enough to do it on their own if appropriate resources such as voting templates were availed. Raviro, a university student had this to say:

“Why should I be assisted by anyone when I can do it on my own? Authorities should copy from Namibia where I was once an observer in their elections.”

Chari, a housewife said:

“I do not even trust my assistant, not even my spouse because they may have their own interests and place the X where I did not instruct them to.”

The indications on the person preferred to help for voting purposes was clearly that of the assistant or sighted guide. Participants trusted this person especially on the grounds that this was someone they knew and who they could trust with confidential or sensitive information. Some who felt that they were more empowered e.g. university students and other highly literate people with visual impairment preferred to do the voting on their own if the system allowed this. Law enforcement officers were generally not trusted to assist in the voting process.

Guarantees of safety by the police (N=50)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No guarantees at all</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited guarantees (e.g. night patrols)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Concerning the issue of guarantees for the safety of visually impaired voters by law enforcement agencies, an overwhelming majority of the participants and informants indicated that the police did not give any guarantees of protection in the event that violence broke out. Just a few indicated that there were limited guarantees through night patrols in selected areas during the election period. Tsitsi, the school teacher said that:

“Police officers should educate people on the dangers of violence. In addition, when on patrol and if there was need to interact with visually impaired people, it was important for them to identify themselves so that we do not question their authenticity.”

Shelton, a university student indicated that:

“The police do not protect anyone. At this institution when violence erupts, we normally get refugee in the building set aside for all issues to do with students with disabilities that is The Disability Resource Centre and so far this has worked to our advantage.”

Tanaka, a street beggar had this to say:

“Besides the general assurances given to anyone else by the police, there are no special assurances or guarantees of protection from the police and this exposed us.”

The general impression was that the police did not give any guarantees to visually impaired voters whenever there was a threat of violence or any other risk. Visually impaired voters were normally expected to take care of their own safety in the event of risks to do with violence. These risks increase the vulnerability of the visually impaired people to political violence.

Voter format

The official from the ZEC indicated and confirmed that to date only one voting format had been used that is the ordinary or clear print. This format had been used without taking cognisance of the individual preferences of voters with visual impairment based on needs that were properly assessed. Due to the limitations created by the use of one format, voters with visual impairment were being assisted to vote against their will. This was also being done in violation of a constitutional provision. No other voting format was available for use by people with visual impairment. This was a gross violation of rights that were clearly enshrined in the country’s statutes.

Mr. Don said that:

“It was difficult to cater for every category of visual impairment. On the issue of those who would need to make use of Braille, we would need to find out how many needed this facility based on particular polling stations or wards.”

The issue of the voting format was one that electoral authorities could not afford to ignore. The visually impaired participants argued that revising the voting format demanded the coming together of different stakeholders such as academics, other organisations, civic society and the ZEC if clear inroads were to be registered. Regarding barriers in the electoral process, many of the informants indicated the lack of an appropriate voting format. Absence of Braille or enlarged print constituted one of the most serious barriers. An almost similar number also indicated that lack of information on voter education issues was a major stumbling block in the electoral process. A few participants mentioned being assisted to vote by sighted guides as a barrier as well since it compromised their secrecy and independence.
Tsitsi, the teacher noted that: “Involvement of people with visual impairment in electoral issues is limited, there is no maximum participation up to the highest level and this is a real drawback.”

Tariro, a street vendor said: “Authorities should refrain from unjustified discrimination of visually impaired voters. Instead, people with visual impairment should be included in the whole process as observers, polling officers, presiding officers and administrators.”

John, a general hand at a school of the Blind commented that: “Information should be availed in Braille or enlarged print. In addition, the introduction of a Braille ballot is long overdue.”

Josephat, a street beggar stated that: “One of our major challenges is that politicians use us to gain mileage. The playing field should be leveled.”

Themba, a lecturer also observed that: “I am concerned that politicians take advantage of vulnerable sighted people whom they instruct to fake visual impairment so that they can be assisted to vote for particular parties and the number of people who vote for them will increase.”

Dennis, a lawyer by profession said that: “The lack of effective legal guarantees for the visually impaired was a major barrier and serious drawback.”

Electoral authorities need to address the issue of the voter format to include people with visual impairment. Most people with visual impairment voiced their serious concern at the absence of an inclusive voter format for people with visual impairment.

Political violence

Regarding political violence, the majority of the participants indicated that violence placed them at serious risk of their safety. Many of them were worried that with the exception of the last elections in July 2013, previous elections compromised their safety to a very large extent. Many of the visually impaired people cited the electoral atmosphere of the 2008 elections in which they indicated that some people with visual impairment were injured in the disturbances. Evelyn, an unemployed single mother said that:

“If political violence breaks out, the risk of running towards the source of the violence was high especially when considering the fact that during disturbances or riots the sighted forgot about the plight of visually impaired people. You will be left on your own as others consider only their own safety as important”.

Some of the participants gave harrowing experiences of how they narrowly escaped injury or death as a result of political violence. Christian, who worked as a temporary teacher shared his experience:

“As I was running away to safety, I fell into a ditch. As a result I suffered a dislocation and had to be rescued by other villagers who heard my calls for help. I won’t forget that encounter because I had to get treatment and physiotherapy at a local hospital for about three months.”

Political violence therefore exposed visually impaired people to numerous forms of risk including serious injury or even death. The risk of visually impaired voters being intimidated into choices contrary to what they wanted could not be ruled out.
Conclusions

The study established that there were several barriers that hindered the effective inclusion of people with visual impairment in the electoral process. Some of these include inappropriate voter formats, lack of guarantees of protection in the event that violence broke out, lack of confidentiality when voting, electoral officials who were unable to help due to lack of or limited expertise, lack of vital information, unfavourable terrain especially in rural areas, polling stations that were too far away from each other making it difficult for mobility and orientation purposes and others. A lot still needs to be done to manage the outstanding concerns. Solutions to these barriers demand a multi-stakeholder approach that is led by the government of Zimbabwe.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations could go a long way in addressing some of the challenges experienced:

1. The ZEC should put in place clear strategies to ensure that they reach out to voters with visual impairment with voter information that is packaged in formats that are accessible and user-friendly to the visually impaired such as in Braille, enlarged print and appropriate information technology.
2. There is also need for a comprehensive needs analysis by the ZEC to establish all the major and peripheral needs of voters with visual impairment.
3. The ZEC must seriously consider embracing qualified people with or without visual impairment or other disabilities in their structures. This will enable participation of people with visual impairment in areas that concern them. Other specialists who might not necessarily have a disability can also be considered with a view to engaging them and then take advantage of their expertise.
4. The ZEC also should carry out more focused research on how best people with visual impairment can be effectively included in the electoral process from grassroots level up to the Commission level.
5. The ZEC should also empower voters with visual impairment by introducing alternative voting formats other than ordinary print which they were literally forcing on people with visual impairment to use regardless of varying individual needs and preferences.

References


