



**Zimbabwean politics:  
Very Constrained and Confined.  
The lack of middle-class young women's  
voices in political discourse\***

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## 1. Introduction

Women's participation in the political arena has always been fraught with tension and even the right to vote was a hard fought battle across the world. That struggle took over a hundred years with New Zealand being the first self-governing country in the world to give women the right to vote in 1893. However it still did not allow them to stand for parliamentary elections. A year later, the colony of South Australia gave women, both, the right to vote and the right to stand for election. In contrast, women in Saudi Arabia were only accorded the right very recently - in 2011 and women eventually got the opportunity to vote in their elections this year (2016).

In Zimbabwe, it was only after 1957 that "a qualified right to vote was gradually extended over the years to black women" and the right for women to stand for election was only allowed in 1978, two years before Independence.

Despite significant policy changes around the world, the political arena, where women play a significant role, continues to be a hostile environment. Yet it is in this space, that women get "to be active participants in determining development agendas." It is important to understand that the "exclusion of women from decision-making bodies limits the possibilities for entrenching the principles of democracy in a society, hindering economic development and discouraging the attainment of gender equality. If men monopolize the political process, passing laws which affect society at large, the decision-making process does not always balance the interests of the male and female populations. As noted in the Millennium Development Goals, women's equal participation with men in power and decision making is part of their fundamental right to participate in political life, and at the core of gender equality and women's empowerment."<sup>1</sup>

The participation of women in the political arena in Zimbabwe continues to be at best, minimal, for a variety of reasons, including cultural and religious beliefs that dictate that structures of leadership at governance level should be confined to men. Women

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<sup>1</sup> *Obstacles to Womens Participation in Parliament*, Nadezhda Shvedova

who enter that space are considered women of questionable character, i.e. single women and divorced women or women married to weak men who cannot keep them in check. In actual fact, the political arena - both at local council level and Parliamentary level seem fertile ground for the perpetuation of stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes.

This discourages women from entering these decision making institutions and those women courageous and strong enough to do so, must be able to withstand the intense scrutiny and pressure of holding public office, particularly because they are held to higher standards than their male counterparts. This has thankfully been debunked over the years as powerful, 'respectable' and capable women have held positions in politics worldwide. Unfortunately the way women continue to be perceived, even in this space, has changed very little as the way they do their hair, the clothes they wear and their marital status still crops up in narratives and discourses fuelled by the media. There is rarely or sometimes no interest in their political ideology, their parliamentary contributions or their commitment to governance and public office.

Historically, in the sub Saharan Africa region, it was revealed in 1987, that women only occupy a total of 6% of the total legislature<sup>2</sup> and there were not more than four women in ministerial positions: thus it can be concluded, that, with most of the positions occupied by men, this led women to distance themselves from politics and take care of their own affairs. This has changed more recently as women have increasingly taken up top positions with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf becoming the first African female president of Liberia in 2006, Joyce Banda following suit (2012 -2014), Catherine Samba-Panza being sworn in 2014 as interim president of the Central African Republic (CAR), and Pumuzile Mlambo Ngcuka (2005 -2008) and Joice Mujuru (2004-2014) becoming Vice Presidents of South Africa and Zimbabwe respectfully. Women in parliament have also taken centre stage with Rwanda cited for being the beacon of success, not just in Africa, but in the world, with 64% female representation. Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa have more than 40% each, and Mozambique, Angola,

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<sup>2</sup> Geisler, G (1995), *Troubled Sisterhood: Women and Politics in Southern Africa: Case Studies from Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana*. African Affairs, 94: 377, 545-578

Tanzania and Uganda following with women occupying over 35% of all parliamentary seats and Zimbabwe close behind with 34%.

The increase in the number of women in the Legislature is in part, due to the intense lobbying effort of the women's movements across the continent and the world insisting on the inclusion of women in decision making processes. Starting with the UN Beijing conference on women in 1995, where delegates called on their governments to include 30% female representation<sup>3</sup> in their governments, this then ensured that this is reflected in international and regional instruments, as in, for example, The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women UN Resolution 1325 (2000), the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development. However, a survey on women's participation in politics in 34 African countries by Afrobarometer<sup>4</sup>, notes that, while countries such as Rwanda and South Africa may have numerically significant women's parliamentary representation, some of the world's worst performers are also on the continent. For example, women have only 6.2% representation in Swaziland, 6.7% in Nigeria and 8.4% in Benin.

There is a misconception that women do not want to participate in politics either as voters or as candidates in Zimbabwe. This is partly because women are categorised as a homogenous group of "just women". There are different types of women, young, old, urban, rural, rich, poor, married, single, educated, not educated and everything else in between, thus we cannot generalise. Women generally have not participated in politics, primarily because of the violence and intimidation that is associated with African politics but also because of a lack of education, skills and experience as well as financial resources to run political campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

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\* Prepared by Kudakwashe Chitsike and Tinotenda Chishiri

<sup>3</sup> ZANU PF as a party has this quota stipulated in their constitution but it is not adhered to.

<sup>4</sup> [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org) a research group that measures public perceptions of socioeconomic and political issues in Africa

<sup>5</sup> RAU & TWT (2014), *Does Encouraging Women to Register and Vote Make a Difference? A Preliminary Report on Women's Experiences with the 2013 Elections*. Report prepared by Caroline Kache, Researcher

This, however, may be changing with the growth of the middle-class, especially the women. In Africa, Zimbabwe has an envied history of educating its population, and women have been quick on the uptake to seize the opportunities: significant numbers of women have acquired higher education, and women are represented in senior management positions in both government and the private sector. However, there is little research devoted to understanding middle-class women's participation in politics other than in the realm of formal representation.

This paper takes a preliminary look at middle-class young women under 35, to ascertain their views of politics in Zimbabwe today. These are educated and professional women holding jobs in the corporate sector, civil society or running their own businesses. They have strong opinions on politics and at the same time are cautious in engaging in active politics even though they have the financial means, the educational backing and the skills to do so.

### ***1.2 Women and Institutional Reform***

This paper is the first of a series of reports on women's views on institutional reform. The focus of this research is to lay out the views of middle-class women under 35, on politics and how they see their role in the current political developments and in the future.

In conversations held as focus group discussions and individual interviews, the women were initially hesitant about talking about politics, asking what the information was going to be used for and concern about the use of their names. This is consistent with the way politics plays out in Zimbabwe: the reluctance to publicly discuss issues of governance are mired in fear and judgement. Any criticism of government and the ruling party immediately earns one the label of as belonging to the opposition and this could bring irreparable damage to one's reputation, as well as the possibility of physical harm to self and family.

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[RAU]. March 2014. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit and The Women's Trust; RAU (2014), *Women and Elections in Zimbabwe: Insights from the Afrobarometer*. August 2014. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit; RAU & TWT (2014), *Do elections in Zimbabwe favour the rural woman? Analysis of a survey on women's participation in the 2013 elections*. December 2014. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit and The Women's Trust.

The decision to seek out middle-class women from different sectors was because they are a section of society that is not often called upon to give their views on politics and therefore these views are largely unknown. In development circles the spotlight focuses on women who are considered marginalised, in the rural areas or in the high density suburbs of the urban areas.

### **1.3 Middle-class in Africa**

The definition of middle-class, according to the World Bank,<sup>6</sup> is anyone earning between US\$2 and US\$20 a day, and generally able to buy the things they need. The middle-class is defined as anyone able to own a television a refrigerator and a car, as well as being able send their children to private schools, and can afford to allocate a budget to leisure and entertainment.

The African Development Bank (AfDB),<sup>7</sup> in a 2011 report, defined middle-class similarly to the World Bank, as those living between US\$2 and US\$20 a day. This includes the ‘floating middle’, i.e. households living on US\$2-4/day, who might be knocked back into poverty in the event of a severe economic shock. The AfDB study, using this definition, suggested that roughly one-third of Africa’s population was middle-class. StandardChartered<sup>8</sup> defines this class as those that spend at least half of their income on goods and services beyond just food and basic necessities. The Pew Research Center<sup>9</sup>, states that only 6% of Africans qualify as middle-class, which it defines as those earning US\$10-US\$20 a day.

The term middle-class is skewed in Zimbabwe as a result of poor economic policies over the years which have rendered the middle-class almost non-existent. Tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs<sup>10</sup> and have resorted to vending, albeit some selling high end goods, such as Brazilian weaves, shoes, handbags and jewellery. Ac-

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<sup>6</sup> <http://blogs.worldbank.org/futuredevelopment/making-middle-class-africa>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/article/africas-middle-class-triples-to-more-than-310m-over-past-30-years-due-to-economic-growth-and-rising-job-culture-reports-afdb-7986/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sc.com/BeyondBorders/africa-middle-class/>

<sup>9</sup> [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org) an American nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.

<sup>10</sup> <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-06-massive-zim-job-losses-in-wake-of-court-ruling>

ording to *The Economist*<sup>11</sup>, specifically reporting on continental trends generally, but which also rings true for Zimbabwe: “Africa has failed to develop industries that generate lots of employment and pay good wages. Only a few countries manufacture very much, largely because national markets are small and barriers to trading within Africa are huge.”

The ownership of a car, television set or smart phone are also not a clear indication of class in Zimbabwe, as the majority of the urban folk have multiples of these items. As Cheeseman has pointed out,<sup>12</sup> defining class in Africa is very difficult in the absence of good statistical data, and, in Zimbabwe, there are conflicts between different data sets. Whereas the 2012 Census estimates that over 85% of Zimbabweans are employed, and includes only those not actually engaged in any form of income-generation as “unemployed, respondents in opinion surveys, such as the Afrobarometer, suggest that citizens, both male and female, see higher percentages of people as unemployed.

Nevertheless, and despite the difficulties in defining class in Africa, this paper is focused on the traditional definition of middle-class, and all the women interviewed fitted into this profile: they live in the low density suburbs and were professional educated women. This group are mostly second generation middle-class as the majority of them are the “born-frees”, and received a private primary and secondary school education and tertiary education at universities in South African or the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> They are, however, the most vulnerable in failing to give their children the same privileges they received because of the economic downturn, which, ironically, is linked to the politics that they are reluctant to engage in.

Traditionally, the middle-class has played an important role in politics because they are better educated and have some economic power, and therefore they can demand

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21676774-africans-are-mainly-rich-or-poor-not-middle-class-should-worry>

<sup>12</sup> Cheeseman, N (2014), *Does the African middle class defend democracy? Evidence from Kenya*. Working Paper No. 150. Afrobarometer.

<sup>13</sup> The “born frees”, are people born after 1980, who did not live through colonisation and considered free of racial segregation and its consequences.

for greater accountability within government. This obviously includes women, but they are not included in the development agenda in Africa, as they are not seen to be connected to the grassroots, yet they are a demographic group that needs to be engaged.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Methodology**

The research was carried out using two methodologies to gather data for the assessment, i.e. informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) using guiding questions. The FGDs were recorded and transcribed. Verbal permission was sought to record the conversations; this was purely for capturing data.

The information gathered was then classified into the different thematic areas and the report was compiled.

A literature view was carried out but as the topic focused specifically on Zimbabwean middle class women, there was little found. General information on women's political participation was used as the foundation of this research.

## **3. Politics and the Middle-class Women**

In Zimbabwe, towards 1980, the independence era<sup>15</sup>, many women entered politics because of the promise of gender equality, and a significant number of women joined the liberation struggle, with many of them even becoming guerilla fighters. The promise of equality dwindled after Independence and women were sidelined from any decision making processes. During this period, however, the women's movement mobilised and managed to get the Legal Age of Majority Act passed in 1982. This was the first piece of legislation recognising equality between the sexes and the foundation of the gender-sensitive legislation and, eventually, the inclusion of many gender-sensitive provisions in the Constitution of 2013. During this immediate post-Independence period non-governmental organisations such as the Women's Action

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<sup>14</sup> Win, E, 2013, 'Not Very Poor, Powerless and Pregnant - The African Woman Forgotten by Development' - IDS Bulletin 35.4 Repositioning Feminisms in Development

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, G (1995), *Troubled Sisterhood: Women and Politics in Southern Africa: Case Studies from Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana*. African Affairs, 94: 377, 545-578

Group were formed to bring the women's concerns to the table. There have been many successes and failures since then.

The women's movement has generally been made up of activists and feminists who strongly believe in gender equality and equity. These are frequently described as troublemakers as they are opinionated and are not afraid to voice their views. These women are from different educational and financial backgrounds and may be viewed as the middle-class, but here our focus is women outside the mainstream women's movement.

### ***3.1 Meaning of politics***

The women acknowledged that politics in general and politics in Zimbabwe have different meaning and consequences. General politics is about governance, be it in the home, church and other social spaces as well as the governance of the nation. However, when talking about politics in Zimbabwe, it is mainly about the two main political parties, ZANU PF and MDC-T, and how both these parties relate to each other in their quest to be the dominant force. This relationship between the two political parties results in violence within and out, and, at times, involves innocent people who get caught up in the fray. The violent nature of politics was said to be the biggest reason why women do not engage in politics. They mentioned that they have careers, and children to protect, and do not want their names associated with violence of any sort, whether it be hate speech, physical violence or intimidation.

The political landscape of Zimbabwe has always been threatening, with harmful consequences for people entering this sector which explains the wariness by citizens to be involved in or to even speak about politics except in safe spaces. Politics has a strong association with corruption and nepotism, and, for women who are trying to chart a way in the professions, this association was not palatable. Zimbabwean politics is associated with theft on a large scale:

*'Stealing of resources, stealing of opportunities, stealing of everything. It is about exclusion and discrimination. It can happen either because you*

*belong to the other side or you are with this side or it can be because of your sex or your gender, it can be because of your social standing.'*<sup>7</sup>

Political patronage was seen as an issue across political parties. It is important to stress here that although there are more than 18 political parties in Zimbabwe, 3 of them led by women, the conversation centred around ZANU PF and MDC T. The other political parties were hardly known and the women were of the opinion that these smaller parties need to be more visible and have messages that appeal to the different demographics.

Another feature of politics in Zimbabwe is elections. The country works itself into a manic prior to an election year and immediately after the results have been announced we go back to our lives irregardless of whether the outcome reflected the will of the people or not, and then there is the wait to go through the same process 5 years later. Having lived in other countries, some of the women were disillusioned by politics in Zimbabwe and stated that, unless the whole system changes, there was very little chance of them taking an interest either as voters and candidates. This lack of interest was challenged by some of the other participants of the FGD, who stated that Zimbabweans complain a lot and expect other people to fix their problems, and hence do not take part in national processes. This challenge was especially for the middle-class, both men and women.

How do we expect to change the system if we are constantly watching from the sidelines and not participating?

The majority of the women who participated, who have never voted, for a variety of reasons which includes the above mentioned lack of interest in politics, also cited the chaotic registration process which was noticeable in 2013, so they feel their votes don't count because it has always been ZANU PF and it will always be, and, finally, that 'It's not the people who vote that count. It's the people who count the votes.'<sup>16</sup> Those that did vote stated that they voted because they believed that their vote count-

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<sup>16</sup> Urban legend attributes this quote to Joseph Stalin

ed and it was their constitutional right to do so. They believed that this is what the liberation war was about: thousands of people died to enable Zimbabweans to vote, and, in their view, this was paramount and they will continue to be so. As long as they are in the country during elections, they will vote. Here it is worth noting that a campaign to encourage women to register and vote in the 2013 elections was hugely successful, but it did rely on women-to-women canvassing and was largely targeted at rural women.<sup>17</sup>

With regard to voting in 2018, the women stated that, unless something drastically changes between now and then, they are not motivated to vote because they feel that there is a dearth of political leadership in Zimbabwe. One of the problems mentioned was that Zimbabweans don't know what leadership is and they know even less about democracy, and yet this is the system of government they say they want. Why? What is it about democracy that appeals to Zimbabweans? *"We are like the new muroora who comes into a family and is told this is how we do things and so she follows without asking questions."* The young women stated that they found this political system in place, the same system that ZANU PF inherited from the colonial government, so maybe it is now time to interrogate whether this system works for them, taking into consideration their education and experience and engagement in governance structures at a global level.

*"The current crop of political leaders are too focused on self and not about the nation. Everything they are doing is for their own political survival and the benefits that come with it."* Some of the women stated that the politicians have dirty hands, some even with blood on their hands, and voting for them means an endorsement of their deeds and they are not prepared for this. Some stated that politicians have forgotten that they are elected officials and they should know that they can be criticised, and should not respond with violence, and that criticism comes with the job.

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<sup>17</sup> See again RAU & TWT (2014), *Does Encouraging Women to Register and Vote Make a Difference? A Preliminary Report on Women's Experiences with the 2013 Elections*. Report prepared by Caroline Kache, Researcher [RAU]. March 2014. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit and The Women's Trust

It is clear that none of the political parties are targeting their messages to the middle-class, therefore there is no-one that appeals to them and this will most likely result in middle-class voter apathy. There is need to address the registration process as this was said to be one of the major reasons why these women did not vote. The women stated that they are professionals and busy people with families and cannot afford to spend 4 or 5 days queuing to register. The way to appeal to young people is through convenience. It was suggested that someone should come up with a voter registration *app*. This would result in a surge of urban young potential voters.

There is also an acute need of voter education in urban areas as some of the women indicated that they didn't know where to go to register and some did not know what channels to follow when they failed to register. There is an assumption that this is only required in the high density and rural areas. The issue of access was discussed, and realistically the women acknowledged that unless the voter education was packaged for their demographic group, they were unlikely to attend any meeting, bringing back the issue about the use of technology and social media. When asked what their most trusted source of information was, many said social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook and onlineprint newspapers, as well as word of mouth through family and friends.

Political parties need to do more to reach these women. They mentioned that the economic crisis is at everyone's door and everyone is feeling the pinch and some now want to engage and others have started to engage. This is why Pastor Evan Mawarire resonated with many of people in the middle-class. He spoke to a group that had always been detached from politics, but are now coming out and talking. Even if they are *keyboard activists*, they are making their opinions known, and this includes white, coloured and Indian Zimbabweans who have been silenced by the brutality they have witnessed amongst their social groupings. There were varying views on the **#thisflag** movement as other stated that they were followers of Evan and others distinguished their following by stating that they follow the flag and what he said about the flag, not him as Evan. They said his video restored national pride and the desire to get back to Zimbabwe's glory days.

The political parties are not inspiring confidence in the electorate. As mentioned before, only two political parties are considered as viable and the choice being between a *nonagenarian* and a *misgyonist* does not appeal to young middle-class women.

### **3.2 Evolution of Zimbabwean politics**

The women in this research said that as Zimbabweans we have a saviour mentality, constantly on the look out for someone to get us out of situations and in the meantime ‘*will make plan*’. This is one of the biggest challenges. Hence the Evan hero worshiping and subsequent disappointment by his departure ‘*who will lead the movement now?*’

Citizens are not looking for alternative ways to get the Zimbabwe they want, yet this should be the basis of any political or social movement. The enactment of the Constitution in 2013 gives Zimbabweans an opportunity to align all legislation to it, and if the country abides by it, it will achieve the Zimbabwe that is hoped for, where accountability, good governance and rule of law are respected. As a fairly young country there are many examples to look to and no reason for Zimbabwe to encounter the same pitfalls and that our beacon of hope should not only be the USA that has been independent for more than 250 years.

The **#thisflag** movement has brought about a shift in Zimbabwean politics.

As mentioned above, it spoke to a silent group and encouraged them to speak out about injustices and corruption because it was seen as a safe space. It came at a time when Zimbabweans were at their wits end about how to navigate the political developments and their effects on the economy. Politics is seen to be evolving in the sense that more people were able to speak up in the safety of their homes, though this is again evolving as the government is reacting with brutality last seen in 2007/8. But, at the same time, the justice system<sup>18</sup> is breaking away from the whims of the Executive and making sound Constitutional judgments in favour of citizens’ rights.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-31101-‘Brave’+Judge+strikes+down+ban+on+demos/news.aspx>

Zimbabweans are becoming active citizens where they have always been passive and accepted whatever the state doled out, and it is an interesting process to watch. Previously people would wait for elections and then wait for the next election, even if they thought that they were not free and fair. The problems were never addressed as a collective. The interesting aspect of this evolution is that it is not led by a political party. There are various views on Pastor Evan's role in this evolution, but the frustration with his failure to pay school fees, and to speak about it openly, inspired many people. He encouraged citizens to speak up and not be afraid, but then he upped and moved his family to the US and deflated the movement. What he ignited still remains in a different form whose end results we are yet to see.

Others disagreed saying nothing much has changed as the political leaders are not supporting citizens and meeting the demands set out, i.e. respecting the rule of law, ending corruption, accountability and good governance. With the status quo as it is, where is the evolution? Citizens are still very afraid, women more so, and this is evidenced by the dwindling numbers of protestors. The middle-class had stepped out with **#thisflag**, but they have now retreated. *'There is the National Election Reform Agenda (NERA). What is that? Where is the strategy document? Has it been made available to the public? If us as the middle-class have not seen or read, to understand, how are we going to engage with it?'* Everything is anecdotal, there is no substance. This was said to be across the board, **#thisflag**, **#Tajamuka**<sup>19</sup>, civil society and political parties. No one has a strategy to take the country forward.

### **3.3 Women's participation**

There have been women who have made contributions to women's participation in politics but besides the prominent figures, Grace Mugabe, Joice Mujuru and Jessie Majome (as stated by the Harare respondents), and Oppah Muchinguri and Mandi Chimeme (as stated by the Mutare respondents), the young women were not very aware of other women in the politics. They expressed disappointment with the majority of female politicians and therefore do not support them, but, at the same time,

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<sup>19</sup> These are non-partisan non violence citizens' movements that are speaking out about bad governance and injustices in Zimbabwe using social media as a mobilising tool. These two movement have called for stay-aways and held significant protests particularly in Harare.

acknowledged that the middle-class women are not interested in politics: *'how can we expect quality leadership if we ourselves are not prepared to take up these positions?'* There is need to invest in capacitation of women who are interested in politics and bring them to a level where they are confident and articulate. In the last few months, a new name has arisen that has ignited an interest in this group; Advocate Fadzayi Mahere, who is seen to be a thought leader and charting the way for young women in current affairs and politics. She resonates with them, as with some they are in the same social circles, having gone to the same school, or are in the same profession.

They spoke about the importance of having a voice as a woman, which starts in the home, to work, to church and then to the community and national level. Fadzayi Mahere has certainly shown how this can be done, even though it is a struggle for women to find their voice, to air their views, to say something, to be taken seriously from the student politics, all the way to national politics. The women that have succeeded in this arena on their own footing were considered very brave as they had to manoeuvre the political terrain with all the limitations and obstacles put in the way. A woman's success is usually measured by the man she is married to. This is the perception that the media feeds society particularly in politics. Mai Mugabe and Mai Mujuru gained prominence because of their husbands. Some of the women stated that for a woman to be vocal it depends on who is behind her, supporting her, i.e. her father and husband but also a supportive family including female members was said to go a long way in building confidence.

Many of the women stated that they wanted to participate in politics, more so in the demonstrations and stayaways that have been happening over the last few months, but, because they are married with children, they did not want to put themselves at risk of arrest or come to harm's way by suffering the effects of teargas or being hurt while participating. The single women who did not participate stated that they wanted to get married and needed to portray the image of a good woman in the hope of snagging a husband, as they said that men don't want to marry women that are politically active as they are considered to be of loose morals. The issue of stereotyping, mostly

by other women, be it, your sisters, mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, girlfriends, or colleagues place boundaries on a woman's behaviour and actions needs to stop.

Others do not participate because they did not believe in the cause, particularly in **#Tajamuka** because it always seems to end up in violence and looting. It was said that the messaging is not clear and needs to say more than Mugabe must go: there is more to the problems in Zimbabwe than Mugabe. *'Most people are concerned with the bread and butter issues at the moment, and, if Mugabe goes, who are we suggesting will replace him, and will this person be able to put food on the table?'* Others stated they will not participate in any political demonstration, be it for or against the current government. They are taking the wait and see attitude, waiting to take advantage of the situation when it changes. They would rather stay home and protect their children and their property.

It was stated that it is important for women to participate in politics as they get affected by the consequences of bad political decisions just as much as the men. The most common reason for lack of participation was fear, whether real or perceived, and there is need to confront it as it silences many women and men across the class and colour line. It was mentioned that there was even some level of fear when reading messages on Whatsapp, Twitter or Facebook which are of a political nature. Many said over the last few weeks, with the introduction of the Computer Crime and Cyber Crime Bill, they read and deleted messages rather than sharing them with colleagues and friends.

Women need to demand a seat at the decision making table and own the space because as 52% of the population, they deserve to be there. The question is where are these decision making tables? Are they in parliament or in the central committee?<sup>20</sup> It has been argued that having women just for the numbers is enough: as societies get used to seeing women in certain spaces more women will be encouraged to come into that space and go further and break the glass ceiling. On the other hand, what is the point of having many women who are not capable of making decisions? The world is not kind to women because of patriarchy. It permeates every aspect of a woman's life,

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<sup>20</sup>Win, E Feminist organising for women's human rights in Africa: Current and Emerging Issues

and, without addressing it no changes can come about. This was agreed upon across the board, with all the women agreeing that patriarchy is the biggest stumbling block for women at all levels, family, church, work and national politics.

#### **4. Young women's engagement in the current political developments**

It is important for young women to participate in politics and aspire to be the change they want to see in politics and get themselves voted into power. It is not possible to change politics or any other matter if one does not engage with it. However abhorrent politics is, a way must be found to bring about the changes required. The young middle-class women agreed that they had sidelined themselves, but now is not the time to be a bystander. *'If you are going to wait for the environment to be conducive for you to see what you want you might be waiting for a long time. It is important to do what you can, what you are comfortable with but it is important to do something.'* The women spoken to in this study, were in one way or the other in key strategic places in business, the corporate sector and in civil society and are influential, and they insist on getting women's voices heard at all levels as this also has an effect on politics.

They stated that they do not believe that reforms will happen, as Jonathan Moyo<sup>21</sup> said: *'They want to say put in electoral reforms so you lose and we win. And we are saying no.'* The women stated that elections will not bring about the required changes so something else: something new has to be tried to secure the future and the future of their children.

More comprehensive engagement is required to include all sectors of society. This includes those holding government positions. The situation is dire for everyone. There is need to engage with local government. Very few of the women knew their local ward councillor and they have not engaged with them or attended any community meeting. There is a sense that as long as their families are okay with their amenities: as long as they have boreholes and water tanks, generators and inverters, their children go to good schools, and there is food on the table, they will not engage. This however is a

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.chronicle.co.zw/zanu-pf-will-never-reform-itself-out-of-power-prof-moyo-declares/>

tenuous situation that could change drastically with the unstable political situation and resultant economic crisis.

## **5. Conclusion**

Middle-class women stated that the existing political parties do not appeal to the middle-class because they do not lead from the front; the leaders themselves were rarely seen at the demonstrations they called for. They will not engage until and unless the political parties present themselves in a manner that eliminates the concerns of the middle-class women about political participation, particularly the use of violence in politics. Parties speak non-violence but they do not practice it. The nature of the party politics is nauseating, and, as much as one would like to participate, it means they have to choose a political party, and running as an independent is an exercise in futility. Joining a political party, particularly one whose ideology you don't believe in, involves a lot of self compromise that the women do not want - they emphasised that the loss of integrity was said to be not worth it. They however acknowledged that the women in politics at the moment are very brave and should be supported as they have faced a lot of challenges to be where they are today.

Even though these women are educated, and in the middle-class, they still are burdened with patriarchy and suffer from being excluded from certain discussions. This is merely because they are women, and should not be seen or heard in certain spaces with the political arena being one them. These women are determined to make a name for themselves in their respective professions, and, unless they are drawn out of their shell by political parties that speak their language, and coaxed enough to demand to be heard, they will continue to be speaking from the backseat where politics is involved.