



How do class, place and affection for democracy affect women's participation in politics?

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A recent report by RAU on young middle-class women suggested that this group of citizens were disillusioned with main stream politics. Political violence was a major reason for avoiding active involvement, but they also mentioned the poor leadership in political parties and also because of the ways that politics is conducted.

In Africa, survey research suggests that there are actually few differences between men and women: women are more likely to support one-party states and are generally more ambivalent in their views. In Zimbabwe, research suggests similar attitudes amongst women, but also reveals marked differences between rural and urban women, as well as differences due to age. It may also be that there are differences due to social class, but this is an area that is poorly researched, as Everjoice Win has pointed out.

It is a conventional position that the middle-classes are the staunchest defenders of democracy, but recent research in Zimbabwe suggests that this is not the case in Zimbabwe. In this study, the educated, employed and urban, who may be crudely described as “middle-class”, were shown to be mostly uninvolved in the socio-political life of the country, and were described as “disconnected democrats” (RAU. 2015). Did this apply equally to men and women, especially as women are frequently argued to exercise less agency than men?

This notion was tested in a study using the most recent Afrobarometer data on Zimbabwe from Round 6 (2014). Two basic propositions were tested in this study:

- Middle-class women will be more likely to support democracy and opposition political parties;
- Middle-class women will be more likely to show higher frequencies of social capital, political participation, and political efficacy.

Two sets of indices were derived in order to test these hypotheses; an index for social class and a series of indices for political participation based on an earlier study (RAU. 2015). These were *social capital*, *political efficacy*, *political participation*, *support for democracy*, and *freedom from fear*. The rationale for the last index was the frequent reference to risk aversion in Zimbabweans for public activities due to fears about political violence.

To test these hypotheses a number of indices were constructed from the questions in the Afrobarometer. One was an index of social class, and, using this index, 21% of the 1,200

women could arguably be classified as *middle-class*. Four other indices were then constructed:

- *social capital* (involvement in community groups and activities);
- *political efficacy* (contacting MPs or local councillors, or joining with others to raise an issue);
- *political participation* (participation in socio-political activities such as elections or working for political parties);
- *support for democracy*;
- *freedom from fear*.

The first interesting set of findings came from the description of the overall sample of 1,200 women. They reported very low rates of participation generally. On *social capital*, apart from belonging to a religious group (49%), the majority did not belong to a community group, attend community meetings or join others to raise an issue, and hardly anyone reported actions that could be described as *Political efficacy*. A majority (69%) support democracy, but also the majority were dissatisfied with Zimbabwe's form of democracy. The *freedom from fear* index showed that the majority of women (83%) were careful about what they say in public, and a large percentage (44%) feared political intimidation or violence. Finally, the majority reported being close to a political party, but a quarter (26%) refused to answer the question.

Generally women support democracy, but few are actively participating. A majority (83%) are careful about what they say in public, and no different to men, and a large percentage (44%) fear political violence and intimidation. The majority do not belong to a community group or attend community meetings, and hardly any of the women report any kind of action, except voting, that could be described as either *political efficacy* or *political participation*. In most respects, women seem little different to their male counterparts.

When it came to testing the effects of *social class*, the results were very interesting. There were virtually no differences between *middle-class* women and other groups of women. The pattern described above is not related to social class: whatever facilitates or inhibits political and social participation by women is not about class. And if class is not a factor, then is the more frequently raised criterion of residence – rural as opposed to urban – more applicable in understanding women's participation?

Again the findings were interesting. Urban women were no more likely to be socially and politically active than rural women. As was the case for the class comparison, no differences were found between rural and urban women for *Social Capital*, *Political Efficacy*, *Support for Democracy* or *Fear*. As regards political affiliation, rural women were significantly more likely to support ZANU PF than urban women, but were no different in the probability that they did not vote or refused to say which party they supported.

However, the majority of women did say that they supported democracy, and so did this mean anything against the findings that they seem to do little to foster democracy? When a comparison was made between those women that said they supported democracy and those that did not, then differences emerged.

Those that support democracy are significantly more likely to be creating *Social Capital*, but, of course, the association could be operating in the opposite direction: people active in creating *Social Capital* are more likely to support democracy. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there were significant differences in the two groups in *Political Participation*, although the trend

towards women becoming less involved the more overt the involvement became. Women supporting democracy were nonetheless much more likely to get involved in all forms of political life, even down to actively working for political parties and party candidates.

Interestingly, when political party affiliation is compared between the two groups, those expressing support for MDC-T are drawn from the *No Support for Democracy* group, and *Support for Democracy* is associated with support for ZANU PF. However, the difference became clear when age was factored in. When this was done, it was found that young women are more likely to refuse to disclose their political affiliation and to be “middle-class”, and support for ZANU PF is more likely to come from older women. The refusal to state one’s political affiliation, which 26% of women do consistently, must be seen however in the context of Zimbabwean politics and the views about the fear that participation in politics brings.

In conclusion, does it matter that middle-class women are little different to other women in their support for democracy when the evidence suggests that any women who support democracy are more likely to be active citizens? Some years ago John Gay suggested that there may be a virtuous cycle for the protection and enhancement of democracy, and, at base, this requires active citizens. Zimbabwean women that support democracy are more likely to show the characteristics that support this virtuous cycle and probably irrespective of their political affiliation. The often violent climate that exemplifies Zimbabwean politics must be a serious inhibitor of women’s participation, but, if this can be eliminated, as it should be, then these results suggest that women’s participation in the socio-political life of Zimbabwe will be substantial.