



MIDDLE CLASS MEN AND ZIMBABWEAN POLITICS: A CASE OF SOCIAL COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS*

The middle class has been a growing class within Africa over the past 10 years with growth ranging from 4.4% to 6.2% owing to their growing economies¹. After a period of substantial decline from the 1990s, there were signs of this being the process too in Zimbabwe following the period after the signing of the Global Political Agreement between the warring parties, Zanu PF and the MDC when the US dollar became the official trading currency. Since 2013, this trend seems to be in reverse with the dramatic decline in the economy and the closing of many companies and businesses, and the massive informalisation of the economy.

Since the middle class is conventionally seen as the major defenders of liberal democracy, their role in Zimbabwe is worth understanding, but a recent study suggested that this might not be the case (RAU. 2015).² In a highly patriarchal society such as Zimbabwe, the role of middle class women may take on an additionally important role, but a more recent study suggested that neither social class nor residence – rural or urban – were indicative of women’s participation in the political life of the country (RAU.2016).³ The defining criterion for women’s voice and participation was the strength of their belief in democracy. However, with nearly 70% of Zimbabwe’s population under the age of 35 years, the role of the young may become very important in determining the direction of the country’s politics, and hence the role of young women needs to be understood.

The Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) conducted a [study on middle class women](#) under the age of 35,⁴ (defined as university educated, employed and earning above \$600 per month as per the World Bank definition)⁵ that aimed at investigating what the views of this forgotten

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¹The Economist. “Africa’s Middle Class : Few and Far Between.” <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21676774-africans-are-mainly-rich-or-poor-not-middle-class-should-worry>

² RAU (2015), *Citizenship, Active Citizenship & Social Capital in Zimbabwe: a Statistical Study*. May 2015, Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit.

³ RAU (2015), *Citizenship, Active Citizenship & Social Capital in Zimbabwe: a Statistical Study*. May 2015, Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit.

⁴ RAU (2016), *Zimbabwean politics: Very Constrained and Confined. The lack of middle-class young women’s voices in political discourse*. September 2016. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit.

⁵ <http://blogs.worldbank.org/futuredevelopment/making-middle-class-africa>

class has regarding politics in Zimbabwe and most importantly their participation. Focus group discussions and individual interviews were held with middle class women and one was held with middle class men. The focus group with the men was for comparative purposes to ascertain if their views were different. Both sexes had similar views and opinions on some issues but differed on others based on gender and societal norms.

Meaning of politics.

Both the men and women were of the same view that politics in Zimbabwe had negative connotations attached to it. For the women, politics in Zimbabwe is associated with violent contestations for power between the two main parties, MDC and ZANU-PF: hence their reluctance to participate in political processes. They were more concerned about the violence and keeping their families safe from harm. For the men, however, fear was not the biggest deterrent in their lack of participation, but it was their need to fulfil their gender role of being the provider. Therefore they were more concerned with bread and butter issues and providing for their families. They referred to this as a “social cost benefit analysis” whereby they had to determine *what gives me the quickest return for me and my family with the lowest risk.* Therefore, the men opted to stay out of politics and focus on providing for their families as a means of necessity because they did not see the benefit of participating.

If I join political activism, yes it's good, but its no quick return.

The men were also discouraged from participating particularly in development processes because of the politicisation of such processes, and they cited the example of some council meeting that turn into political rallies. Both the men and women do not see any benefit of politics except to those who are beneficiaries of the system. Both referred to the issue of corruption and nepotism characterising Zimbabwean politics with it benefitting only a few at the expense of the rest of the population.

You must subscribe to their ideology, to their party, be a card carrying member for you to benefit and this is the nonsense that a lot of us then turn around and say I don't need to benefit from patronage.

Both the men and women felt very disconnected from public officials and the majority did not know who either their councillor or MP was, and had never attended any council meeting or political meeting. The reason cited for this was the archaic and outdated modes of communication and engagement used by the officials who made use of newspapers when notifying their constituents about meetings. Both groups stated that they read the news online and do not buy hard copies of newspapers which run the adverts.

Social media is the most widely used source of information currently mainly due to the convenience that it affords the user. Because of their busy lives they do not have time to attend meetings physically, and, therefore, they felt that politicians, civil servants and public

officials should adapt and move with times by making use of technology in engaging with their constituencies. They suggested communication via Whatsapp as the most effective modes to mobilise this demographic group.

Evolution of politics.

On the evolution of politics, both the men and women agreed that there has been a shift and change in Zimbabwean politics. Citizen's movements, such as #thisflag encouraged citizens to speak out, to which they as the middle class could relate, but they differed on how they viewed the departure of most influential leader of one of the movements, Evan Mawarire. The women attributed the anger many had over his departure to hero worshipping and a saviour mentality that Zimbabweans have where they expect someone to get them out of situations.

However, the men expressed great disappointment over his departure, saying that, being the founder and leader of the movement, it was his responsibility to stay and lead and they felt his departure was testament of bad leadership, a problem that has brought Zimbabwe to its current state. They felt that it was done selfishly and they likened this selfishness to that of Zimbabwean politicians which is done only for self-gain. The men also cited a lack of vision and leadership within the citizens' movements. Therefore they have not been motivated enough to fully take part in the movements and have instead preferred to focus on bread and butter issues. The men appeared to be more sceptical about the citizens' movements than the women.

Participation = Voting

In the studies on middle class women, it was quite apparent that voting is about as much participation as they are prepared to do, but, even then, many said that they they have never voted and had no intention of voting in the coming election. The main reasons given were what is the point when voting doesn't change the status quo: the result is predetermined and the process to register is too laborious.

In comparison, almost all the men in the focus group had gone out to vote. They stated that they go and vote because they want to exercise their right to do, and, although the process is rigged, it is necessary for the riggers to know that the public is aware of their shenanigans. When asked whether their wives were with them when they went to vote, one stated that his wife was present but she was turned away because she didn't have an ID document in her married name. Others stated that their wives were turned away because their names were not on the voters rolls, and still others stated that their wives were not registered. The women did not pursue the issues when turned away, they simply went home.

In conformity with the women, these men did not know their ward councillors and they had never been to a ward meeting or a political party rally.

Participation of women

The women in the study expressed interest in participating in politics but were discouraged from doing so because of the violence that is associated with Zimbabwean politics. They expressed fear of getting arrested or injured. The women also feared backlash from their families, particularly in-laws for those who were married, as it is considered taboo within the African culture for a woman to be heavily involved in political activities. Those who were single were worried that they would not be able to find potential partners because of their involvement in political activities.

The men stated that women were not engaging in political discussions *because their husbands are*. They attributed this to males being naturally more solution-oriented, and therefore the women were looking to them to fix the political solution. All these reasons given are a testament to the fact that patriarchy remains the biggest impediment to women's participation, and it all stems from socialisation. Although both these men and women live in urban areas, have good jobs and are highly educated, they still hold culturally-determined views of what men are supposed to do and what women are supposed to do: men feel it is their inherent duty to provide solutions to problems and women should focus on their caregiving roles. The men stated that if the issue of roles within the household is taken to a national level there would be no problems in Zimbabwe.

We are socialised differently and we are created differently. Men are natural leaders in the family set up, in the community setup and at national level. So women tend to look up to men to solve some of these problems.

Conclusion

Middle class men and women hold the same views predominantly with regards to political participation. They do not participate because of fear and because they do not see its benefit and would instead prefer to focus on bread and butter issues. They also felt very disconnected from their office bearers as well with majority not knowing who they were.

A solution suggested for this was that these office bearers must use more modern forms of communication in order to for them to be able to appeal to the middle class.

Patriarchy remains a huge barrier to the participation in politics by women which was reinforced by the men, who stated that women looked to the men to solve political problems, and this was the reason for women's lack of participation in politics.

There is a need for different strategies to be employed to encourage the participation of the middle class such as the use of social media to engage them. There is also need to overcome the barrier of patriarchy and realize that women have as much a right and capability to participate in developmental issues of the nation as men do.

