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## **Do middle-class women defend democracy?**

### **Executive Summary**

It is conventionally assumed that the middle class will be the strongest defenders of democracy, and therefore it might be assumed that middle class women would be similarly so. However, this does not seem to be true for Zimbabwe where the middle class, and particularly young middle class women, seem disengaged from political life.

### **Introduction**

It is a frequent assertion that the staunchest defenders of democracy come from the middle classes, underlining the advantages of education and formal employment. However, recent work in Zimbabwe suggested that this might be the case for the country.<sup>1</sup> Examining active citizenship amongst Zimbabweans, RAU's analysis indicated a group of citizens that could be described as "*disconnected democrats*", urban, educated and employed, but largely non-participant in the socio-political life of the country. Gender was not a factor, as also suggested by other work in Africa that showed women being little different to men in their political attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

However, class and gender were not an explicit aspect of this research and hence it was decided to look at women, class and active citizenship. Two hypotheses were advanced in order to test these relationships:

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

### **Approaches and Results**

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<sup>1</sup> RAU (2015), *Citizenship, Active Citizenship & Social Capital in Zimbabwe: a Statistical Study*. May 2015, Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit.

<sup>2</sup> Bratton, M., & Logan, C (2006), *Voters but not yet Citizens: The Weak Demand for Political Accountability in Africa's Unclaimed Democracies*. Working Paper No. 63. Afrobarometer.

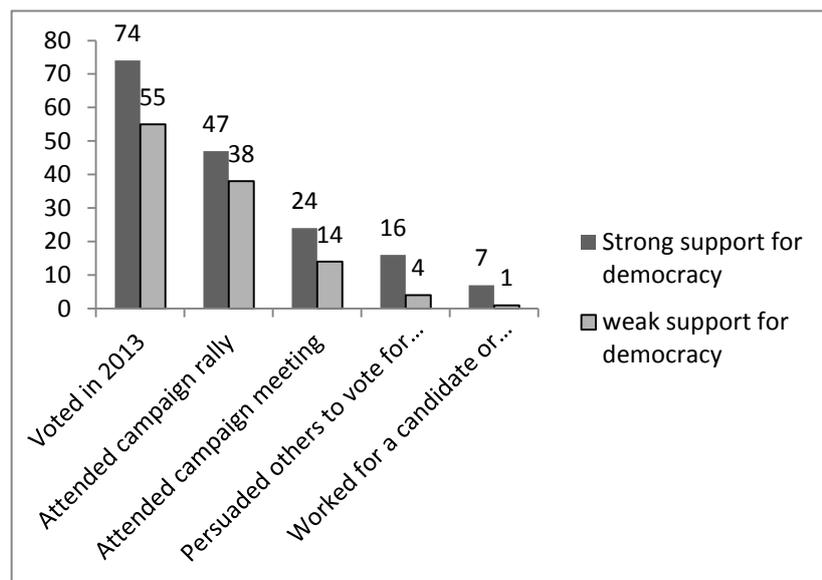
Two methods were used to examine these hypotheses. The first was a quantitative analysis of the last Afrobarometer (2014) survey on Zimbabwe, and the second was a qualitative study examining the views of young middle-class women.

The first study, based on the Afrobarometer data, provided a number of interesting findings. The major one was that only women that actively supported democracy were likely to report being active citizens – doing more than merely voting. Of course, it is impossible to decide on the direction of this relationship as it is merely an association: do women that support democracy become active citizens, or is active citizenship a pre-condition for supporting democracy.

Social class did not differentiate women: middle class women were no more likely to exhibit active citizenship than working class women. This was based on a simple class measure based on Lived Poverty – measures of how often women experienced being short of food or clean water, access to medical care, cooking fuel or cash income. – as well as wealth, employment and education. Of course this is an imprecise measure of class given the economic decline in the past 15 years or so, and many formerly middle class women might well have become unemployed and be experiencing lived poverty. Nonetheless, those that conformed to this measure of class were no different from those that did not.

However, generally the findings show that, apart from voting, Zimbabwean women do not show many of the characteristics of active citizenship, and those that do are also those in favour of democracy. Additionally, it was interesting that women that supported ZANU PF were more likely to support democracy than those supporting MDC-T, but, on closer analysis, this was likely to be a group of older and rural women., and a group that generally do support ZANU PF.

**Support for democracy & political participation**



The qualitative study of the young middle class women extended these findings further. In general, the young women found little attraction for participating in politics, and the following was their general consensus:

- Political participation has been reduced to a polarised contest between two main political parties;
- Political participation is associated with men and particular types of woman;
- Political participation is risky and violence too frequently a part of the political contest;
- Politics are strongly associated with corruption and nepotism;

*'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.'*

- Middle class women are not motivated to participate in elections, as registration is unnecessarily difficult;
- Leadership is a major problem and most current leaders do not inspire confidence, apart from the inevitable influence of patriarchy in choosing leaders;
- The active participation of women in politics is very difficult; those women that do frequently become labelled in disparaging ways, and requires making disadvantageous compromises;
- Overall, patriarchy was seen as the greatest stumbling block to women exercising agency, affecting their participation in politics, business, community, church and family.

## **Conclusions**

Zimbabwean women, like Zimbabwean men, do not show the characteristics of active citizens, and young middle class women in particular have strong reservations about participating in politics. These young women even avoided registering as voters or voting, rather using the time to catch up with family and friends. However, women that strongly support democracy, as opposed to one-party or military rule, can be described as active citizens, irrespective of their class. The young women want to participate but are failing to find spaces they are comfortable in to express themselves politically, and it is important for them to see that sitting out is also a political statement.

*'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.'*

## **Implications and Recommendations**

The polarised, and often violent, politics of Zimbabwe in the past (nearly) two decades seem to have a inhibitory effect on the voice and participation of Zimbabwean citizens, and especially on the middle class. Where the latter is concerned, this has had the effect of demobilising women and young women, and the group of women that should be in the forefront of pushing the feminist agenda are largely silent (or silenced).

However, for middle class women this may not merely be due to the political climate or patriarchy, but the consequence of being largely ignored by political parties, social movements and CSOs. Redressing this absence might be relatively simple:

- Engage middle class women in **their own spaces** – they don't do rallies or public meetings;
- Engage them women to women – build engagement around **their concerns'** provide them with information relevant to their concerns;
- Provide them with **strong mentors** – models are crucial, and not always those that are seen to be the bravest or most outspoken.