

SOME ARE EMPTY SHELLS WITHOUT GROUNDNUTS

Social Construction of Female Political Candidates in Urban Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Hellen Venganai and Charles Dube

Hellen Venganai is a lecturer in the Faculty of Social and Gender Transformative Sciences, Women's University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe

Charles Dube is a research fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University of the Free State

ABSTRACT

In view of the low levels of women's representation in political office in Zimbabwe after the 2018 elections, questions arise regarding whether young people can, or will support female candidates in future elections. The youth is seen as a critical group that may shape the future of politics in Zimbabwe. We conducted a qualitative study to explore the views young people have of female political candidates, through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with participants aged between 19 and 24 in the city of Masvingo. Drawing on social constructionism, poststructuralist feminism, and intersectionality analyses, the study found that young people in urban Masvingo have a predominantly negative perception of female candidates, although this is mediated by factors such as gender, class, sexuality, disability, and education. Nonetheless, some of the youth in Masvingo appear to be redefining or countering gendered societal norms and values, as they appear to accept women as political candidates.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; young people; politics; female political candidates

INTRODUCTION

Young people around the world are increasingly portrayed as game changers in the political arena (Pandian 2014; Desrues 2012). They also represent an important constituency in African, and indeed Zimbabwean politics, as 70% of the African population is under the age of 30, making it the youngest continent in the world

(Oinas, Onodera & Suurpää 2017). Zimbabwe is also a young country, with 62% of its population below the age of 25 years (UNFPA 2022). Yet, because of the gerontocracy which characterises African politics, young people continue to be marginalised in their quest to access political power (Oinas, Onodera & Suurpää 2017). Due to this marginalisation, previous elections in Zimbabwe were usually characterised by the voter apathy of young people. For instance, in the 2013 elections only 8.87% of youths in the age group 18-19 were registered to vote, while only 19.55% of those between 20 and 24 registered to vote (Hodzi 2014). This voter apathy on the part of young people has in some instances been attributed to political cynicism, the mistrust among some sections of the polity of the government and political leaders (Banwart 2007). In other instances, the chaotic voter registration systems have contributed to the under-registration of young people (Hodzi 2014). Yet in other countries such as Morocco and Egypt, young people have shifted the political landscape despite this supposed lack of interest in politics.

It is important to understand how young voters socially construct women politicians, including those aspiring to be in politics, considering the importance of candidate evaluation in influencing voter intentions (Banwart 2007). Naz et al. (2010) observe that as young people join the political arena, they will have the decision-making power that can either limit or support the process of women's empowerment in politics. Most studies on voting choices by young people have been conducted in non-African contexts, and have focused on whether they are likely to vote for young political candidates and leaders (Sevi 2021), female presidential candidates (Smith, Paul & Paul 2007), or women parliamentary candidates (Prihatini 2018). In the USA, for example, Gillespie & Spohn (1990) found that adolescent girls held positive views about women in politics and were likely to vote for them, while boys generally had negative perceptions and believed that women politicians lacked the qualifications needed to run the country. In a similar study in Ireland, Galligan & Knight (2011) established that young people aged between 18 and 29 were the most resistant to supporting women in politics. They attributed this to the influence of gendered nationalist and religious discourses. While these are significant studies, how young people in Africa (particularly in Zimbabwe) evaluate female candidates is an area that has not been given adequate research attention. This article is based on a study we conducted in 2018 with young women and men in the city of Masvingo in south-eastern Zimbabwe. The study followed the harmonised elections held in the country in July 2018 to elect the president, members of parliament, and councillors. We take note of a similar study by Zigomo (2022) which explores the experiences of women political candidates in Harare during the 2018 elections.

ZIMBABWE'S POST-MUGABE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The removal of Robert Mugabe from the presidency in November 2017 supposedly signalled a new era in politics, which became popularly referred to as the 'new dispensation'. However, the notion of the new dispensation seemingly carries different interpretations by different groups of the Zimbabwean population. On the one hand, the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), frames this post-Mugabe era as an opportunity to rejuvenate their party and run the country in more democratic ways. On the other hand, the main opposition coalition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance, considers this period as an opportunity for generational renewal in political leadership. The dominant narrative from the MDC Alliance suggests that the ruling party still represents old ideas, which, they argue, have failed to address the economic challenges the country has been experiencing for a very long time. The 2018 presidential elections thus became a battle between the 'old' and the 'new', considering the age difference between ZANU-PF's leader and Zimbabwe's current president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and the youthful Nelson Chamisa who led the opposition coalition.

Women's rights organisations and gender activists also had high expectations of the new dispensation. They demanded recognition of women as critical players in the post-Mugabe era. In particular, in the period leading to the 2018 elections they demanded more representation of women in politics. Following the announcement of election results, they called for the appointment of women to key cabinet positions that only male politicians had occupied since the country's independence in 1980. The cabinet appointments by President Mnangagwa seemed to respond to the latter demand because he appointed the first female Minister of Defence, who was also elevated to being the first female chairperson of ZANU-PF. However, women's political representation in Zimbabwe remains very low.

Of the 23 presidential candidates who contested in 2018, only four were women, and they failed to garner enough votes to make a significant impact. One of the 2018 female presidential candidates was Joice Mujuru, the former (and first female) deputy president in the late Robert Mugabe's regime. The other candidate was Dr Thokozani Khupe, once deputy prime minister during the unity government, and one of the deputy vice presidents of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) then led by the late Morgan Tsvangirai. Their poor performance in the elections was largely due to gender bias, a significant obstacle for women presidential candidates which has also been reported in the United States of America (Smith, Paul & Paul 2007). In terms of women's representation in the National Assembly, only 26 of the 210 contested

parliamentary seats went to women. However, other women entered parliament through proportional representation, as provided for in Zimbabwe's current constitution. Of those who contested local authority positions, 17% were women, while men constituted 83% of the 6 796 candidates (Hamandishe 2018). The two main political parties in the country fielded fewer than 10% female candidates, while Thokozani Khupe and Joice Mujuru's parties fielded 20% and 19% female candidates respectively. This low political representation of women is also mirrored in Masvingo province, where this study was done. In the 2018 elections, only 23 women out of 242 seats were voted into rural and urban council seats in Masvingo province (Butaumocho 2018). Two years earlier, Masvingo City Council had elected an all-male council, while the previous council had only one female councillor (*TellZim* 2016). Of the total of 136 (124 male and 12 female) candidates who contested 26 parliamentary seats in Masvingo, only two women, who stood in rural constituencies, were voted into the national assembly (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) 2018). This low level of female political representation is despite the fact that registered voters in the province comprised more women (57.77%) women than men (42.23%) (Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) 2018).

The current constitution promotes gender parity in all spheres, including politics. It also provides for a quota system which reserves 60 seats for women in Parliament through proportional representation. In the 2018 elections, six women in Masvingo Province were voted into the National Assembly through the women's quota (Veritas 2018). When the women's quota was implemented in 2013, it increased the number of women in Parliament from 16% to 34% (Hamandishe 2018). However, the quota will expire in 2023 if no constitutional amendment extends it. Should this happen, women's representation in Zimbabwe's Parliament is likely to drop significantly under the constituency-based electoral system which historically is seen as hostile to women contesting parliamentary seats (Gaidzanwa 2004; Hamandishe 2018).

Table 1. Election results for the Masvingo Province parliamentary candidates in the July 2018 election (Source: ZEC)

	Constituency	No. of male candidates	No. of female candidates	Name of Winner	Sex
1	Bikita East	4	-	Madhuku Johnson	M
2	Bikita South	6	-	Sithole Josiah	M
3	Bikita West	4	-	Musakwa Elia	M

4	Chiredzi East	2	-	Masiya Denford	M
5	Chiredzi North	2	1	Bhilla Royi	M
6	Chiredzi South	4	-	Gwanetsa Kalisto Killion	M
7	Chiredzi West	7	1	Musikavanhu Dumo Augustine	M
8	Chivi Central	6	-	Gwanongodza Ephraim	M
9	Chivi North	3	-	Tongofa Mathias	M
10	Chivi South	4	2	Zivhu Killer	M
11	Gutu Central	5	1	Chitando Wiston	M
12	Gutu East	2	1	Chikwama Berta	F
13	Gutu North	3	-	Simbanegavi Yeukai	M
14	Gutu South	6	-	Togarepi Pupurai	M
15	Gutu West	4	-	Paradza John	M
16	Masvingo Central	6	-	Mhere Edmond	M
17	Masvingo North	7	1	Marapira Davison	M
18	Masvingo South	7	-	Maronge Claudios	M
19	Masvingo Urban	8	1	Nyokanhete Jacob	M
20	Masvingo West	6	1	Chadzamira Ruvai Ezra	M
21	Mwenezi East	4	-	Omar Joosbi	M
22	Mwenezi West	3	1	Moyo Priscilla	F
23	Zaka Central	3	1	Svuure Davison	M
24	Zaka East	5	-	Gumbwanda Katson Ringirisai	M
25	Zaka North	7	1	Mavenyengwa Robson	M
26	Zaka West	6	-	Murambiwa Ophias	M

Earlier studies indicate that political violence and general male political hostility toward women candidates discourage women from participating in politics (Gaidzanwa 2004; Dziva, Makaye & Dube, 2013). Some blame the poor performance of female political candidates on an unequal playing field and lack of political will by their respective political parties. They see this under-representation of women as connected to patriarchal attitudes, which tend to promote stereotypical views of women as subordinate and therefore not socially qualified to assume positions of political leadership (Opare 2005; Mangezvo 2013). Others blame the negative representation or suppression of aspiring and existing female candidates in both mainstream and social media, and by influential male politicians (Gaidzanwa 2004; Bari 2005; Bauer 2015). While these factors have been documented in literature, the concern of this research was not how female politicians are portrayed by powerful institutions such as the media, or powerful male politicians. Rather, we were interested in engaging with how young men and women in urban areas (as voters and potential voters) perceive women already in politics or those aspiring to political positions.

In the 2018 harmonised elections, young people constituted approximately 60% of the 5.3 million registered voters (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission 2018), with the majority being females (ZESN 2018). The age group with the highest number of registered voters was those of 30–34 years, followed by the 20–24 year-old group. Against this background, there were speculations that the youth would play a decisive role in these elections with the potential to reshape the future political landscape in the country (Tshili 2017). These views had also been expressed in the 2013 elections, where the youth were considered by political parties and civic organisations as ‘swing voters’ worth competing for (Hodzi 2014). Reflecting on these dynamics from a gender perspective, one of the key questions that arise is: *How are young people’s perceptions of women in politics shaping, or being shaped by, broader societal norms and values in Masvingo?* In exploring this question, we were not trying to predict future trends in voting patterns or indeed the behaviour of young people. Instead, we were keen to gain vital insights into understanding young people’s perceptions of female candidates and the factors that influence those perceptions.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This paper is informed by social constructionism and poststructuralist feminism, perspectives that emphasise the influence of language or discourse in the production of meaning (Weedon 1987; Brickell 2006). In their analysis of gender as a category, these two sources suggest that what we consider as ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ male and female attributes are social constructions that ‘demand that

one accomplish either a socially acceptable maleness or femaleness' (Brickell 2006, p. 93). By attempting to focus on representations of women in politics, we do not suggest that this implies the objective 'truth' about them. Rather, we note that representations or constructions are very powerful tools through which gender stereotypes are created and reproduced. It is important to underscore that these social constructions do not remain abstract but have a material reality that may influence voting preferences, as shall be demonstrated later in the paper.

Poststructuralist feminists, in particular, also turn to the problematic category of women. They raise a concern about the construction of women as a universal and homogenous category. Feminist scholars such as Mohanty (2019) and Butler (1988) argue that gender as an analytical category should not only be about understanding the social construction of differences between women and men but should also extend to analysing differences within the category of women. Butler (1988, p. 524), for instance, argues that within the category of women, there are conceptions of a 'real woman' discursively constructed, in opposition to those who digress from prescribed gendered cultural scripts. In other words, what is considered the norm for women becomes the reference point for what is 'abnormal' behaviour for certain categories of women. In light of this, we paid attention to what our research participants framed as 'natural' or the norm about women and their participation in political and leadership roles.

Since we draw from poststructuralist feminist ideas, discourse becomes our primary unit of analysis (Gannon & Davies 2012). Noting that there are varied approaches to discourse analysis (Lynch 2007), we adopt the Foucauldian method. In particular, following Carabine (2001), our analysis of what participants said focused on the inter-relationship between different discourses; absences and silences; resistances and counter-discourses. We take note that language offers a 'range of ways of giving meaning to social reality, [and] various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity' (Weedon 1987, p. 25). As such, we pay attention to how the young people we interviewed positioned themselves in relation to 'popular and influential discourses' (Pattman 2010, p. 3) in their framing of different categories of women either as 'fit' or 'unfit' for political participation. Since we take an anti-essentialist approach to the category of women, we will incorporate an intersectional analysis by noting how participants speak about female political aspirants in relation to their varied differences (e.g., class, age, sexuality and disability) and the implication of this on whether they are framed positively or negatively. At the centre of the intersectional analytical frame is how people positioned at the intersection of disadvantage or marginalisation (for instance the women political candidates discussed in this article) experience inequalities that are constitutive of multiple social categories and factors which do not operate in isolation (Colley et al. 2022; Desbiolles 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The data informing this article was qualitative and comprised thirteen in-depth interviews and three mixed-sex focus group discussions, which were all tape-recorded and transcribed. We gathered data over two months. The age of our participants ranged from 19 to 24 years. Most of the participants were pursuing studies either at Masvingo Polytechnic (a local technical college) or at the Great Zimbabwe University. We selected our participants through snowballing and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allowed us to select young women and men with the characteristics relevant to the research, whereas snowball sampling allowed us to tap into the friendship networks of our initial participants (Bryman 2012). Snowball sampling was especially useful for us when we organised a focus group discussion (FGD) with participants from the more affluent suburb of Rhodene, who are usually behind their locked gates. The participants for the other two FGDs were from Rujeko and Mucheke, which are both high-density suburbs in Masvingo city. Using FGDs to generate data enabled us to analyse how participants either challenged, contradicted, or amplified each other's responses. In other words, FGDs allowed us to observe how meanings are constructed relationally (Gergen & Gergen 2007). Two focus groups had six participants each: one with three women and three men and the other with four women and two men. The third group had four women and three men. Interviews allowed us to explore participants' personal rather than censored group opinions (Morgan 1997; Wellings, Branigan & Mitchell 2000).

In framing this paper, we are cognisant of the subjective nature of qualitative research and its limitations. One of the limitations is that, while the small sample we worked with produced rich and detailed perspectives on young people, voting and female candidates in Masvingo, we may not generalise the results to the entire population of Zimbabwe. In this regard, the data we present in this article reflects the perspectives of young people in Masvingo but not necessarily the Zimbabwean population as a whole.

We observed standard ethical guidelines in our research by informing research participants about the nature and objective of the research while ensuring that their identities would be kept anonymous and the data kept confidential (Mouton 2001). Therefore, we use pseudonyms in this paper. This was explained in the consent forms that research participants completed, which stated that participants were free to decide whether or not to take part in the research, and were free to withdraw from the interviews or FGDs at any time. We also sought consent from participants to record the interviews and group discussions.

FINDINGS

Women as 'Incompetent' and 'Inexperienced'

While our participants presented themselves as educated young people who are knowledgeable about gender quality issues as espoused in the Constitution, they exhibited the normative assumption that only men can be political representatives. This was even evident when we asked gender-neutral questions, as indicated in the following excerpt from one of the focus groups:

Interviewer: If you were to vote, what qualities would you consider in a political candidate?

Lucia: I would consider if the person is capable of bringing change, especially in view of the current political and economic situation. Is he someone who can be a leader?

Interviewer: By 'he' you imply that you would vote for a male candidate?

Lucia: I just used that term because that is what we are used to.

Interviewer: What do you mean by what we are used to?

Tapiwa: Men are the ones who rule.

Interviewer: Recently there was a cabinet appointment and very few women were appointed as ministers. Why do you think few women ministers are appointed?

Ray: I think it's because very few women are interested in politics.

Marcelin: There is a general belief that a woman is not capable of leading the country. Only men can be leaders of a country.

It was ironic that Lucia, a female participant was the first to refer to a political candidate as *he* instead of *she*, adding that this is *what we are used to*. By 'we' she implied both women and society in general, while also demonstrating what she perceived to be the shared view with other members of the focus group. Tapiwa and Marcelin respectively amplify Lucia's response by declaring without question that, *men are the ones who rule* and *only men can be leaders of a country* which demonstrates their naturalisation of leadership and politics as male domains. While Ray suggests that most women are not in politics due to lack of interest, in another focus group, aspiring female candidates (though willing) were constructed as *undeserving* especially for the presidential post:

James: I believe a woman can be voted for, as long as they bring reform and they have good principles. Anyone can lead the nation regardless of their sex. In fact, if there was a deserving woman we would have given them the position of president. Unfortunately, no one [female] was deserving.

Interviewer: *What makes a candidate a deserving one?*

James: *A deserving candidate [laughing], let's leave that one.*

Interviewer: *That question is what brought me here to you. May you elaborate?*

Obert: *People enter into politics for different reasons. Some are not there to win but to cause confusion to the election process.*

Simba: *I would vote for someone who has a sense of direction. That is why no women presidential candidate garnered majority votes.*

While James begins by giving the impression that women should be equal contenders for political posts, he immediately, though implicitly, suggests that they lack *good principles* and are *undeserving*. His view is quickly supported by other male participants who add that women political candidates have no *sense of direction* and only participate in politics to *cause confusion*. Interestingly, the young women in this particular focus group did not attempt to challenge these narratives put forward by their male counterparts, which could suggest that they also believe that women should not be voted into political office. In one of the individual in-depth interviews, a male participant even claimed that, *90% of the (Zimbabwean) nation believes that it can never be ruled by a woman*, adding that *even fellow women entertain that belief*. Sometimes participants used euphemistic language to stress this. For instance, one male participant in another focus group tried to portray himself as embracing gender equality in politics when he said *equal rights [in politics] are good*, but immediately added, *but we may end up having makanda asina nzungu*. This local Shona linguistic expression, *makanda asina nzungu*, literally refers to 'empty shells without nuts', which he used to symbolically construct some women entering politics as lacking substance and value. By implicitly presenting women as lacking political substance, he was constructing men as being more deserving because they presumably possess political acumen. This position was however queried by the female participants in the group.

In another focus group discussion, some male participants appeared to portray male politicians as not only natural but also as more objective leaders, as illustrated below:

John: *As a man, I know what both men and women want, I can balance. That is why you see that when male leaders visit a school they consider both boys and girls for whatever opportunity will be on offer. A woman would be biased in favour of girls.*

Matipa: *If it is the case that men like to balance out opportunities, how come we have very few women parliamentarians in Zimbabwe?*

Greg: *It is men who raise the [women] issues. I follow parliamentary debates, and men are the ones who present women's issues and the challenges faced by orphans.*

Patience: *The reason women's issues are raised by men is that these men come from homes where there are women. If a woman was to be a leader, she would also consider men's issues because where she comes from there are men. We are all humans and should be treated equally.*

While John and Greg attempt to represent male political leaders as egalitarian and more knowledgeable about the needs of both women and men, female participants challenged this view. They counter-constructed male politicians as unjust individuals who, unlike women, enjoy free political opportunities by virtue of their gender, yet have failed to promote gender equality and parity in parliament.

Women as 'Incapable', 'Under-resourced' and 'Under-qualified'

The way participants presented aspiring women politicians was not only in terms of gender but was also intertwined with their level of education and perceived social class. Responding to the question of who they considered to be a deserving leader, there was a unanimous view that a deserving candidate is one who had initiated community initiatives using their own money and one who *already has some personal property* before standing as an election candidate. Although this was in reference to both female and male aspiring candidates, some still maintained that men were more deserving because they were better off economically. One of the young women interviewed, for example, claimed, *A man can do better [as a political leader because] he understands that a road needs to be constructed this way because most men have cars.* In other words, firstly, she perceived women as lacking financially and materially. Secondly, she saw this lack as directly related to women's perceived inability to make sound decisions in leadership positions. This was reiterated by another woman in another separate interview:

Interviewer: *Did you vote for a woman, be it at the local government, parliamentary or presidential level?*

Nyembesi: *They [women candidates] were there but I could see that what they were promising was not realistic, especially at the local government level. I could tell that they were never going to fulfil those promises. So I could not go for that.*

Interviewer: *What were they promising?*

Nyembesi: *The issue of [building] bridges. Where I come from there is a dangerous bridge. So that woman candidate was promising that she would fix*

the bridge. The same bridge is used by schoolchildren when they go to school. In my view, it was not realistic that the bridge could be fixed. It has been like that for years. Maybe the MP can fix it, not a councillor. Even if she is genuine about fixing it, she does not have the resources.

From the above conversation, Nyembesi could not imagine that a woman councillor could *fix* a bridge, which male councillors presumably, have failed to fix '*for years*'. Taking a literal sense, she demonstrates that she subscribes to fixed gendered roles, where activities such as building bridges can only be confined to male duties. At the same time, she concluded that the female candidate in question was also incapable of being a councillor because she did not have personal wealth, even though the work of councillors and MPs is generally supported by government resources. The dominant view, therefore, was that women are of a lower economic and social class than men.

There were debates about whether women's education could increase their chances of being accepted in politics. Few participants believed that formal education was important if women candidates were to be taken seriously. Lucia, a female participant in one focus group, viewed women who have not had any formal education as both selfish and devoid of any leadership qualities. She declared that:

There is no way I will vote for someone who stopped school at Grade Zero. That person won't have any brains to map other people's future. Such a person may assume a leadership position for her selfish ambitions because she is not focused.

However, other participants in the group dismissed formal education as an unnecessary quality for a leadership position and argued that for most people, the ability to lead is an inborn trait. One male participant, Ray, while critical of formal education as a necessity for female candidates, was also cautious of the view that leadership is a natural characteristic for most people. For him, leadership qualities should not be assumed, but demonstrated through one's previous community development projects:

[A woman's] history can replace education. We don't want to disadvantage a person because of their lack of formal education. So I'm saying let the person show us a record of their achievement regardless of their level of education.

*Women with Disabilities seen as 'Lazy', 'Discriminating' and
'Lacking Capacity'*

We were also interested to see how participants also spoke about women with disabilities as potential political candidates, against the background of their marginalisation in the political sphere. In the 2018 elections, only one woman with a disability was elected to the Senate through the Electoral College, which was mandated to elect two senators with disabilities, one of whom must be a woman, to represent the interests of persons with disabilities in the Senate (Veritas 2018). In our study, the general view of the young men and women was that they would consider the type of disability that the candidate has, arguing that some disabilities might affect the ability to lead. Most said they would not vote for a person with mental health issues, whom they portrayed as not only unstable but also dangerous. One male participant, for example, said he 'cannot trust a bipolar person like that' because *[though] she may introduce sound policies but [she] may also come up with something that negatively affects a lot of people*. In support of this, a female participant shared a story of a certain woman in Jichidza (a rural area in Masvingo province) who was a teacher and the wife of the headmaster. She had some erratic mental illness and she killed someone with an axe.

In the focus group extract below, a debate ensued about whether or not they could vote for a visually impaired candidate. We had asked if they would vote for a woman living with disabilities:

Ray: Yes, I would, definitely.

Tapiwa: I disagree with you Ray. What is important is to consider the magnitude of disability, and how this might affect their capacity to execute their duties. I would not vote for someone who is visually impaired.

Lucia: I would vote even for a visually impaired candidate. The problem is that in general, our country does not accept being led by a person with a disability. This is regardless of the leadership qualities of the candidate. In this regard, such people may not gather adequate votes to win an election.

Marcelin: I would vote for him/her because disability doesn't mean inability. As long as the person has the requisite qualities for a given post, I don't think there will be a problem in voting for them.

John: Even if a person is visually impaired, he can lead well because he or she will have people to assist them in reading important documents.

Tapiwa: But since the leader won't see what their assistant will be reading don't you think they can be manipulated and deceived? You may not know the kind of people you will be working with. Politics is a dirty game, and if

those with physical sight do not understand the kind of people they deal with, what more of someone with a visual impairment! We may end up distorting the functions of our country because of voting for a president who is a visually impaired person.

While the majority appeared to construct visually impaired people as capable of assuming political positions, Tapiwa represents them as incapable, since they would have to rely on the services of assistants who would have to read certain documents on their behalf.

Nonetheless, overall the participants demonstrated society's hesitancy to vote for people living with disabilities, regardless of their sex. Instead of participants boldly saying, they *would* vote for them, they said they *may* vote for them, which expressed their reservations. Some argued that political candidates with disabilities were likely to be biased towards their interests at the expense of the interests of the general population. This was made apparent by two women in one of the focus groups:

Grace: I would not vote for someone who would say since I'm the first president with [a] disability I will prioritise issues of people with disabilities.

Chipo: I realised there is something very stressful about these people with disabilities. You will not be surprised to learn that their manifesto may state that, once voted into office, I will make sure that school-going children with disabilities do not pay [school] fees. There is no free lunch! Last year when I was on attachment at the Ministry of Women Affairs, there came this man who was in a wheelchair. I asked how I could assist him and he said 'We are here so that you can write us a letter that authorises us to be given houses for free'. Then I said, yes I understand the situation you are in, but why do you want to be given a house for free? Then he said, 'because we are disabled'. I told him that the Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises could assist him with a loan which he could use to start a project like breeding chickens. I said to him he could then use the profit to send his children to school and buy a house. Then he said to me, 'No, what I'm saying is the government must give us houses and residential stands free of charge'. So, policies that are brought by these people who say they have disabilities are not fair to everyone.

In the above excerpt, Chipo, in particular, is quite critical of people with disabilities, whom she constructs as *lazy* individuals who only want *free* things. These assumptions are also reflected in the manifestos of political parties in southern Africa which present women with disabilities as objects of charity, due

to the traditional belief that persons with disabilities cannot assume political and social responsibilities (Rugoho, Mapeta & Maphosa 2020). Interestingly, none of the participants we spoke to questioned whether those without disabilities were addressing the interests of those with disabilities. In other words, it was assumed that the so-called able-bodied candidates would naturally design better and more inclusive policies than candidates with disabilities. This is similar to the way men were naturalised as better leaders who would cater for the interests of both men and women.

Women as 'Incomplete', 'Rebellious' and/or 'Promiscuous'

In the interviews and focus groups we conducted, we witnessed how certain women were presented and spoken about as the 'Other'. Responses from participants demonstrated that 'not every female is a real woman' (Trinh & Trinh, 1989, p. 97) fit to occupy a political position. 'Unacceptable' versions of femininity were constructed, not only in relation to acceptable femininities but also in relation to masculinities. Asked about what they would consider if they were to vote for a female candidate, some male participants pointed out that they would consider 'her dress code' because they are convinced this reveals her true character. They elaborated that they would not vote for women who wore tight-fitting clothes and short dresses or skirts. In other interviews, some female participants also raised issues about how a woman's hairstyle might even negatively affect her political chances. For example, 22-year-old Martha revealed that:

[Although] I did vote for a woman councillor, but even during [election] campaigns, I could hear people saying, 'look at this woman candidate's hairstyle [she was dreadlocked]. Do you think you can be led by a woman who has dreadlocks? Imagine a woman who has the guts to keep dreadlocks! Can't you see that this is a man's job? In addition, the dreadlocked woman candidate runs a shebeen. We can't be led by such a person. A man can run a shebeen and still be a councillor but not a woman'.

In Zimbabwe, the title 'dread' is often used to address men with dreadlocks. Even if many women are getting dreadlocked, there is still a wide association of dreadlocks with men who take cannabis. Hence, Martha's emotive statement *Imagine a woman who has guts to keep dreadlock!* projects a woman with dreadlocks as a rebellious character who should not be taken as a serious political candidate. Only a few participants argued that women who aspire to be politicians should not be judged by their outward appearance but by how competently perform their duties.

In the different interviews and group discussions, there was a level of tolerance for married women who may want to venture into politics. As demonstrated in the extract below, a divorced woman was constructed as a preferred political candidate to a woman who has never married.

Interviewer: *To what extent do you consider a woman's marital status to be important?*

George: *I don't think it is very important. Currently, divorce rates are high, and it might not be the woman's problem that led to the divorce. In that regard, we can't use divorce as a reason not to vote for a woman candidate. She might have good leadership qualities.*

Max: *It depends. If the woman is given to marrying and divorcing multiple times then she cannot be a leader. But if she only married and divorced once and is in a stable relationship then she can be voted for.*

While George suggests that a woman's marital status was of no importance to whether he would consider her for a political position, his answer instead confirms that he considers this very important. For example, he immediately speaks in support of divorced women who might have divorced *once*. Implicit in George's and Max's responses is that getting married first is the expected norm for any woman who might consider a political career. Max's added emphasis that even if one has been divorced, she should at least be in a *stable* relationship to get people to vote for her, presents single women (even without mentioning them) as *unfit* and *incomplete* to stand for any political position. This also emerged in our interviews with female participants, as exemplified in the following separate interview extracts, where the negative constructions of unmarried women were amplified.

Chido: *Culturally, even if you are a grown-up woman, as long as you are not married people will not respect you. They will always point at you and say 'That one who does not have a husband'. Even we ladies are at the forefront in saying such remarks.*

Priscilla: *The last time I voted there was a woman candidate. However, people did not vote for her. She was not married, she was a single mother. So people said, 'this woman is a prostitute. We can't be led by a prostitute'. People believe in voting for a candidate who will be exemplary to the community.*

These descriptions of single women as 'prostitutes' or 'promiscuous' and therefore lacking societal respect reinforces gender normative cultural discourses of 'proper' or 'respectful' women. It seems there was a consensus that unmarried women ought to be punished by blocking their political aspirations, even though their

promiscuity was imagined rather than a necessarily true reflection of their sexual lives. None of the participants in either the interviews or focus group discussions appeared critical of this negative portrayal of single women, which suggests that they (the participants) also align themselves with these discursive constructions.

Similar findings have been found in other research done on women political candidates in southern Africa, where marital status has been a significant barrier for women in politics. For instance, Hamandishe (2018) noted that during the Zimbabwean 2018 election campaign season, unmarried female candidates were not only demeaned but became victims of misogyny and sexism. It was common for unmarried female political aspirants to be labelled 'prostitutes', mainly by men. A study by Zigomo (2022) in Harare also revealed similar findings where younger unmarried women political candidates were portrayed as morally loose. Similarly, Geisler (2004), also reports how the 'prostitute' label is often extended to outspoken female politicians as well as former female freedom guerrillas who participated in the liberation struggle in southern Africa.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the findings of this study that young people generally preferred male to female candidates. This is similar to findings in Indonesia where Prihatini (2018) found that 75% of the young people in their study were more inclined to vote for male parliamentarians. Unlike the USA where young people were likely to vote for female senate candidates but not female presidential candidates (Smith, Paul & Paul 2007), in our study there was no significant difference. Instead, young people's constructions of women political candidates were about appropriations of gender, culture, sexuality, class and disability. Thus, where they expressed some preference for women, it was conditional. For most participants, they employed patriarchal, social, and political discourses (Bari 2005) which they used to justify their constructions of women as unfit to be political representatives.

Gender subjectivities and identities were articulated in ways that challenge the representation of women as a homogenous category, where each suffers the same challenges as the next. In other words, participants pitted various modes of femininities against each other. For instance, single women were symbolically constructed as 'incomplete' and sexually 'loose' and therefore undeserving of being in the political arena. Similarly, women (and men) living with disabilities were also generally perceived as incomplete, biased and incapable. These perceptions reinforced these categories of women as politically inferior to divorced and married women who were implicitly framed in a positive light as potential candidates for whom young people could vote.

In many ways, our findings resonate with earlier conclusions by Geisler (2004, p. 173) that in southern Africa, women's interest in political positions is considered an anomaly. As such they are unfairly judged 'on male-defined notions of morality on the one hand and a questioning of professionalism and integrity on the other', expectations that ironically are not imposed on male political candidates.

The negative representations of women living with disabilities can be explained by the invisibility of this category of people in political campaign material and mainstream media (Benjamin et al. 2021) and political parties' manifestos (Rugoho et al. 2020). This feeds into medical and welfare models of disability, both of which construct persons with disabilities as ill or ailing, and objects of charity. Critical feminist disability perspectives problematise this normative negative stereotyping of persons with disabilities where they are not only pathologised but also 'collectively imagined as defective and excluded from an equal place in the social order' (Garland-Thomson 2005, p. 1560). An intersectionality analysis of our findings reveals the double marginalisation of women with disabilities in politics due to both their gender and their disability. We suggest that to promote inclusivity, there must be deliberate efforts to present campaign material depicting various categories of women in terms of age, disability, class, etc. as deserving of taking up political positions. This is critical if we consider the conclusions by Bauer (2015, p. 691) that, 'campaign communication activates stereotypes when they otherwise might not be activated, thereby diminishing support for female candidates'.

One factor that has been cited as hindering women's participation in politics is their lack of access to and ownership of material resources in a context where 'politics is increasingly becoming commercialised' (Bari 2005, p. 5). This was reaffirmed in our findings, where some participants presented aspiring female politicians as belonging to a lower economic ladder than their male counterparts, even though this was not based on fact but on gendered assumptions, which they took for granted.

The findings also show that while many studies focus on voters' perceptions of women in general, young people in urban Masvingo do not operate with a fixed homogenous category of women. As such, their construction of different women was mediated by factors such as gender, class, sexuality, disability, and education levels. More importantly, there are nuances regarding the opinions expressed by young people in the interviews. On the one hand, some participants demonstrate very negative perceptions about women politicians by reaffirming popular gendered sexist discourses and stereotypical attitudes, constructing women political candidates as the inferior 'Other'. These perceptions echo normative gender roles where women tend to be relegated to the private sphere as a way of preventing them from participating in politics. Yet conversely, other young

women and young men seem more open to having women in political positions, which could signify a rejection of traditional social and cultural patriarchal norms amongst some young people. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, this demonstrates that some young people have agency and are not passive dupes of pre-existing norms, values, and discourses (Butler 1988) which govern what women can or cannot do in the political sphere. In other words, some of these young people appear to be redefining or countering gendered societal norms and values as they seem to be more accepting of women political candidates.

CONCLUSION

While elections and the processes associated with them are principally political domains, social practices regarding definitions of a woman, together with her supposed capabilities and weaknesses, strongly inform the positions that women can occupy. The stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes enshrined in such social practices often intersect with and inform a general political hostility towards women candidates. This militates against women political candidates' participation in politics in general and parliamentary elections in particular. Young people in Masvingo are not immune to these historically ingrained stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes. While some young people may be open to supporting female political candidates, their perceptions of the political capacity of women as political representatives are largely products of their social orientation. Thus, our findings highlight that despite their knowledge of women's equal constitutional rights to political office, young people still struggle to disentangle themselves from the normative assumptions that only men can occupy political spaces. At play here is the intersection of, and tension between, stereotypes and knowledge of gender equality.

Despite their consciousness of women's political rights, most of the young people we interviewed believed that there is a political ceiling which female political candidates cannot penetrate. Most young men in our research believed that this ceiling is influenced by a lack of political substance among the women candidates in presidential elections. In contradistinction, the majority of the young men in the study preferred male political candidates whom they saw as being more politically objective and substantive and natural leaders than women. The study also reveals young people's beliefs that the assumption of political positions should be tied to the personal material resources that a political candidate possesses. Women cannot assume parliamentary positions since, the young people argued, they do not have personal wealth. Some of these responses demonstrate the young people's limited knowledge of resources for the development of constituencies. Nonetheless, we use the responses about women's political candidates and

personal material resources to corroborate existing scholarly findings about the efficacy and capacity of women to drive meaningful development through political representation.

Religion also has its role in influencing what young people perceive as the 'right' space for women. In this regard, the political space is generally not regarded as a space for women. Ironically, even when there are more women voters than men, the chances of them electing women into parliamentary offices remain slim. This irony extends to the political alliances that the largely male and ruling party-political candidates in Zimbabwe carve out with religious leaders, through which the latter mobilise both men and women to support certain political candidates. Women can vote but cannot be voted for.

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