Virtue, Motherhood and Femininity: Women’s Political Legitimacy in Zimbabwe

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Why are so few women being elected to positions of leadership in Zimbabwe? This article provides insights into the barriers that women face getting elected. In documenting the experiences of 11 female candidates who ran in the July 2018 elections in Harare, the article argues that intersectional axes of discrimination based on gender, age, class, party identification and marital status became significant barriers for these women in getting elected. The article draws on ethnographic material consisting of in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation and media analysis. The article concludes that the growing feminist scholarship on intersectionality which originated in the United States needs to go beyond the factors of race, class and gender, to include age, marital status and party identification particularly when considering the experiences of women of colour in the global South as reflected in the case of Zimbabwe.

Keywords: women; political legitimacy; intersectionality; Zimbabwe; southern Africa; elections

Introduction

Why are so few women being elected to positions of leadership? The topic of women’s representation in politics has generated much scholarly interest for some time now, in southern Africa and worldwide. In southern Africa, the growing breadth of literature on women and politics has highlighted the historical roles women have played during periods of transition. Yet despite the critical roles women have played historically, they have been, and continue to be, under-represented in political decision-making within the SADC region. As a result, over the years many professional women have retreated from mainstream politics and those who have remained have largely been confined to the women’s wings of political organizations.
their political party structures as praise singers and ardent party supporters with little, if any, decision-making capacity within their parties.³

Although quotas have yielded some significant results over the years in increasing women’s representation in countries such as South Africa and Rwanda, the representation of women in influential positions of leadership on the continent remains relatively low.⁴ Zimbabwe is a case in point. The country has policies aimed at proportional representation by reserving 60 out of 270 seats in its parliament for women. By 2013 a third of the country’s parliament was female, ranking Zimbabwe alongside countries like Rwanda as one of the few countries to have a high representation of women in parliament.⁵ Despite such gains Zimbabwean politics is still very much male-dominated, with men occupying the vast majority of influential leadership roles. Thus, while quotas have increased the number of women in parliament, they remain in less influential roles.

Further to this, another hindrance to women’s representation, despite the high number of women who do run, is the obstacles they face in getting elected to office. Often, this is a question of numbers rather than influence. In its most recent general election in July 2018, Zimbabwe had a significant number of women running for office in both the National Assembly and local councils. These elections seemed to mark a milestone for the women’s movement in Zimbabwe, particularly in the struggle for women’s increased political participation and representation in what is predominantly a patriarchal society. Further to this, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) announced that 54 per cent of the population registered to vote were female voters.⁶ The country was awash with optimism regarding the outcome of the election for the women who had bravely signed up to run. Despite this initial optimism, very few of these women made it into parliament. With four out of the 23 presidential candidates in the July 2018 election being female, and with many more women running for positions in parliament and the local council in Harare, none of the presidential female candidates did as well as their male counterparts and only five of the 81 women who ran as parliamentary candidates in the city of Harare made it into parliament.⁷

What can account for so few women making it into positions of political leadership when so many ran, and in the face of such optimism and hope? Much of the research into what went wrong for women in this election, and many of the proposed solutions being proffered into rectifying this gender imbalance ahead of the 2023 elections, have pointed to the need for even more policy measures such as voter education programmes, advocacy initiatives and the enforcement of government and party quotas.⁸ Yet such recommendations maintain the focus on the instruments of government and legislature, such as more effective enforcement and implementation of quota systems, as proposed solutions to enhancing women’s representation: a focus which, as already noted, seems limited in its impact as little is actually changing on the ground.

In this article I argue that one of the reasons this is so is that women are often treated as a homogenous grouping within these top-down prescriptive approaches, while the differences between them, which often lead to their discrimination at various levels, are overlooked. In

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³ Geisler, ‘Troubled Sisterhood’, p. 546.
⁴ Geisler, Women and the Remaking of Politics, p. 69.
⁵ UN Women, ‘Women Make Up More than One Third of Zimbabwe’s New Parliament’ (2013), 4 September 2013, available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/9/zimbabwe-women-mps-sworn-in, retrieved 7 January 2021.
⁶ Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) Statistics (2018), cited in T. Reeler, T. Chishiri, and R. Musikiwa, A Gender Audit of the 2018 Elections, Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) report, September 2018, p. 5.
⁷ T. Reeler, T. Chishiri and R. Musikiwa, A Gender Audit of the 2018 Elections, Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) Report, September 2018; Zimbabwe Gender Commission, ‘Zimbabwe Gender Commission (ZGC) Preliminary Election Monitoring Report on the 2018 Harmonised Elections’ (2018), available at https://zgc.co.zw/reports-publications/, retrieved 7 January 2022, p. 1.
⁸ Reeler et al., Gender Audit.
so doing these prescriptive approaches, although aimed at gender empowerment and mainstreaming, inadvertently end up reinforcing the same barriers they seek to overcome. I build upon a growing literature on intersectionality that has challenged policymakers to go beyond treating women as a homogenous group with a single identity and to consider how other constructs such as race and class can make their experience in politics varied and, more importantly, form ‘intersecting axes of discrimination’ for women, thereby limiting their involvement and lowering their representation. Though the literature on intersectionality developed from western studies on black feminism, this literature has gained resonance in black (and mainstream) feminist studies globally, including southern Africa.

In building on this literature, this article, based on the experiences of a group of female political candidates who ran for office in Zimbabwe’s 2018 election, makes the empirical contribution that factors beyond race and class – namely age, marital status and party identification – form further intersectional axes of discrimination for women, significantly limiting their chances of getting elected to office. This is largely due to cultural, social and patriarchal norms which have been significantly shaped by the country’s historical trajectory. It is important to state that it is not so much the cultural and social norms themselves that are the focus of this article, but rather the instrumentalisation of these norms, particularly by rival party groups, to delegitimise and/or discredit female candidates from oppositional or less established parties. To this end, there have been some significant continuities and discontinuities over the past three decades since the country’s independence from colonial rule.

**Continuities and Discontinuities**

One significant continuity has been the unchanging nature of patriarchal norms in Harare despite the city’s rapid industrialisation and urbanisation over the years. Consequently, women in politics have had to face an additional barrier in getting elected alongside the barrier that candidates from oppositional party groups or less established parties have to face regardless of gender. Harare has remained one of the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) strongholds since the late 1990s, when ZANU(PF) faced massive opposition in the cities due to economic mismanagement, intimidation of opposition groups, farm invasions and economic collapse. Thus, if one is campaigning in Harare as an MDC candidate one’s chances of winning are significantly higher than if one is campaigning for a rival party group or a less established party, regardless of gender. However, when we factor in gender, women candidates tend to be subjected to threats, intimidation tactics and public shaming, yet even this varies among women depending on their marital status and age, coupled with their party identification. This is why an intersectional approach is necessary, as it sheds light on these various axes of discrimination based not just on gender, race and class alone but other factors such as party identification, marital status and age.

A significant discontinuity, however, is in regard to femininities, particularly how these femininities have evolved over time since independence. For the most part, the older women who have dominated the main party structures since the 1980s and 1990s have been very

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9 J. Puar, ‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage and Affective Politics, *Belo Horizonte*, 8, 2 (2013), pp. 371–90; S. Salem, ‘Intersectionality and Its Discontents: Intersectionality as Travelling Theory’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 25, 4 (2018), pp. 403–18; R. Kuperberg, ‘Intersectional Violence Against Women in Politics’, *Politics & Gender*, 14, 4, (2018), p. 687.

10 S. Hassim, ‘The Dual Politics of Representation: Women and Electoral Politics in South Africa’, *South African Journal of Political Studies*, 26, 2 (1999), pp. 201–12.

11 B. Raftopoulos, ‘The Crisis in Zimbabwe, 1889–2008’, in B. Raftopoulos and A. Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe. A History from the Precolonial Period to 2008* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2009), pp. 201–32.
much confined to the women’s wings of their parties. These domesticated yet heroic femininities have historically been shaped by the liberation struggle, where women undertook the significant tasks of cooking, cleaning and even fighting alongside their male counterparts. However, in more recent years, particularly since the late 1990s and early 2000s, new femininities have been emerging comprised of younger, entrepreneurial, professional women. This has largely been due to changing cultural and social norms in Harare, which have resulted from a combination of factors, namely neoliberalism, the growing pressures of globalisation, rapid industrialisation and urbanisation as well as the significant and steady increase in evangelical Christianity, namely neo-Pentecostalism. The convergence of these forces have significantly shaped and reshaped femininities in the capital city of Harare for decades since independence.

In light of these continuities and discontinuities, culture, and cultural norms, are therefore not static, rigid and unchanging and nor should we think of them in that way. As cultural and social norms have shifted and evolved in Harare, new femininities have emerged that have in some ways presented more opportunities to women by enhancing their political involvement and visibility while in other ways offered them less by paradoxically reinforcing gendered stereotypes about a woman’s ‘place’ being in the home or limited to the private realm rather than the public realm of politics. The empirical evidence presented in this article demonstrates that, while cultural norms are used in politics to legitimise some women, these same cultural norms are used to delegitimise others. Women in politics in Harare are thus mainly cast into two binary categories. Older women, mostly married, are portrayed as being virtuous and morally upright by being labelled as ‘motherly’, warm, nurturing and matronly. Other, younger and mostly unmarried women in politics are portrayed as having loose morals in being labelled as ‘whores’, ‘prostitutes’, or ‘failures in life’ simply because they are divorced, single and/or childless. It is therefore the ways in which these cultural norms are instrumentalised, and to what end, which is the focus of this article, particularly when it comes to legitimising and delegitimising women in politics.

In looking at the experiences of a group of female political candidates who ran in Harare during the 2018 elections, this article presents insights drawn from intersectionality theory to help us better understand the complex barriers that women face in getting elected to positions of leadership. Using qualitative data based on the experiences of 11 female candidates as well as focus groups of party supporters and voters, this article argues that factors such as gender, age, class, marital status and party identification formed intersectional structures of discrimination for these candidates, and that policies aimed at increasing women’s representation will need to reflect on and take into account these intersectional structures of discrimination to become more effective.

**Beyond Numerical Representation**

The factors that account for the low representation of women in politics in the literature are varied and can be broadly grouped into two categories: supply and demand. I argue here that such understandings are inadequate. The supply side approach focuses on the small numbers of women putting themselves forward to run for positions of leadership, attributing this to

12 G. Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics*, p. 105–12.
13 See R. Mate, ‘Wombs as God’s Laboratories: Pentecostal Discourses of Femininity in Zimbabwe’, *Africa*, 72, 4 (2002), pp. 549–68. While the full impact that neo-Pentecostalism is having in shaping these femininities is an area for further research, it is still a significant factor. All but a couple of the young professional women I interviewed for this article identified themselves as Pentecostals, and the two who did not identify themselves in this way nevertheless attended Pentecostal services occasionally or identified with some of the post-feminist ethos of the faith, particularly as it related to women’s empowerment, increased political involvement, entrepreneurship and gender equality.
women often being less resourced, less educated and hence ‘less qualified’ than their male counterparts, or preferring to stay at home and look after their children rather than advance their political careers.14 Much of this literature has fed into policy options targeted at voter education programmes and various empowerment initiatives for women. The literature on the demand side, which makes up the vast majority of the literature on women’s representation, has focused more on aspects to do with party selection processes that discriminate against women, voters’ preconceptions that make them less willing to vote for women during elections, and/or the political systems of countries which either hinder or enhance women’s representation.15 In considering the party selection processes and patriarchal norms within parties that prevent women from advancing, we must further consider the internal gender dynamics within political parties, where preference is placed on male candidates rather than female candidates at primaries to appeal to voters, and where significant obstacles are placed before women within party structures, often confining them to the women’s wings and more subordinate roles. Naturally, this literature has generated policy to do with party quotas and gender mainstreaming within parties, which, as noted, has proved less than effective.

In seeking to move beyond these simplistic understandings of women’s representation, my argument here builds upon the notion of intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw, a black feminist in the United States, to highlight the differences among women of colour.16 Intersectionality theorists emphasise the differences among women by highlighting the multiple and intersectional identities women have that make their lived experiences distinct. According to Puar, ‘the theory of intersectionality argues that all identities are lived and experienced as intersectional – in such a way that identity categories themselves are cut through and unstable – and that all subjects are intersectional whether or not they recognise themselves as such’.17 Collins and Chepp define intersectionality as:

an assemblage of ideas and practices that maintain that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and similar phenomena cannot be analytically understood in isolation from one another; instead, these constructs signal an intersecting constellation of power relationships that produce unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups positioned within them.18

Intersectionality theorists therefore argue against homogeneity within feminist studies by challenging us not to think of women as having a single homogenous identity but multiple identities which cause them to be impacted by intersectional structures of discrimination based on factors such as their race, class, age, religion and ethnicity, to name a few.

When we consider women in politics we see that ‘their experiences in politics are not limited to their gender alone’ but to intersections between gender, class, age, ethnicity and

14 P. Norris, ‘Women’s Legislative Participation in Western Europe’, West European Politics, 8, 4, (1985), pp. 90–101; M. Krook, ‘Why are Fewer Women than Men Elected? Gender and the Dynamics of Candidate Selection’, Political Studies Review, 8 (2010), pp. 155–68; R. Gordon, ‘Legislation and Educational Policy in Zimbabwe: The State and the Reproduction of Patriarchy’, Gender & Education, 8, 2, (1996), pp. 215–30.
15 D. Stockemer, ‘Women’s Parliamentary Representation in Africa: The Impact of Democracy and Corruption on the Number of Female Deputies in National Parliaments’, Political Studies, 59, 3, (2011), pp. 693–712; Krook, ‘Why are Fewer Women than Men Elected?’; M. Yoon, ‘Explaining Women’s Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Legislative Studies Quarterly, 29, 3 (2004), pp. 447–68; M. Yoon, ‘Democratization and Women’s Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Democratization, 8, 2 (2001), pp. 169–90.
16 K. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalising the Intersection of Race & Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, University of Chicago Legal Forum (1989), pp. 139–67.
17 Puar, ‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’, p. 373.
18 P. Collins and V. Chepp, ‘Intersectionality’ (2013), p. 58, cited in F. Tormos, ‘Intersectional Solidarity’, Politics, Groups, and Identities, 5, 4 (2017), p. 708.
other such constructs which open them up to ‘intersecting axes of discrimination’, thereby making their experiences different.\textsuperscript{19} For example, previous studies have shown how ‘a central feature of South African women’s politics in the 1990s has been the notion of difference – of race, age, location, and ethnicity’.\textsuperscript{20} Intersecting identities have also led to divergent views in the experiences of women politicians in the Pacific Islands.\textsuperscript{21} In Zimbabwe, young single women candidates were accused of being promiscuous and as such were discredited in the political arena, while divorced women were denigrated as being failures in life who were deemed incompetent for political office. In the rest of this article I will highlight these intersections in more detail using data collected over this election period.

**Methodology**

This article is based on ethnographic material gathered through in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation, conducted in the capital city of Harare\textsuperscript{22} where most of the female candidates ran, before, during and after the electoral period from June 2017 to November 2018.\textsuperscript{23}

In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 female political candidates who were running for office. These female candidates were predominantly young, ranging from the ages of 21 to 46.\textsuperscript{24} They came from a diverse range of fields and professions such as accounting, education, agriculture, business and law. The candidates also varied in terms of their marital status: four were single, four were married and three were divorced (and/or single mothers). The candidates were campaigning in five different constituencies within Harare, namely Harare Central, Harare West, Harare East, Mount Pleasant and Hatfield. The 11 female candidates interviewed included one from each of the three main political parties, namely MDC Tsvangirai (MDC–T), MDC Alliance and ZANU(PF). The remaining eight female candidates were independents.

Five focus groups were also conducted with male and female political party supporters of the main political parties ZANU(PF), MDC Alliance and MDC–T, as well as with voters from diverse backgrounds and across different demographics. They ranged between three and ten participants for each focus group. Members selected for focus group interviewing were split into two age groups: youths aged from 18 to 40 years and post-youths aged 40 years and above. Care was further taken to ensure where possible that participants were representative of equal proportions of gender, from a diverse number of professions including working professionals, those who were unemployed or self-employed, retired, pensioners, and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and political affiliations (whether ZANU(PF), MDC, or other political party supporters or neutral). Interviewing voters was mainly conducted to get their perceptions of the female political candidates who were running in the election and what roles, duties or functions they generally expected their female political representatives to carry out within the nation.

\textsuperscript{19} Kuperberg, ‘Intersectional Violence Against Women in Politics’, p. 687.
\textsuperscript{20} Hassim, ‘The Dual Politics of Representation’, p. 202; S. Hassim and A. Gouws, ‘Redefining the Public Space: Women’s Organisations, Gender Consciousness and Civil Society in South Africa’, *Politikon South African Journal of Political Studies*, 25, 2 (1998), pp. 53–76.
\textsuperscript{21} J. Corbett and A. Liki, ‘Intersecting Identities, Divergent Views: Interpreting the Experiences of Women Politicians in the Pacific Islands’, *Politics & Gender*, 11 (2015), pp. 320–44.
\textsuperscript{22} Interview data was collected from all five sectors of the capital city of Harare: Harare North, South, West, East and Central. All interviews for this article were conducted by the author.
\textsuperscript{23} Elections took place on 31 July 2018, but I documented the women’s accounts as they prepared and campaigned for close to a year before the actual election date and in the months and weeks leading up to the election as well as a few months after the election.
\textsuperscript{24} In Zimbabwe the official youth bracket is defined as 18 to 40 years of age, hence most of these women would be considered youths.
Further to this, participant observation was conducted to note how constituents and supporters related to women candidates at campaign events and political rallies, and media analysis was conducted to note how the local media portrayed women in politics, particularly women in political leadership. This encompassed things like how women in politics were visually represented, photographed or captioned by the media, and the words and language which was used to describe them by the media. Online observation was also conducted by monitoring the news feeds on the social media public pages of female candidates and prominent women in politics. In such cases care has been taken to anonymise the identity of online participants. Attention was also paid to how female political candidates represented themselves, and the words and language they used to refer to themselves in the public eye, in the media, in political speeches and public addresses during their campaigns, and most importantly the cultural connotations and meanings behind those words.

A discourse and thematic analysis was conducted with the qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation. The core questions explored were: How were the campaign experiences of the women candidates similar and in what ways did they differ between candidates? What barriers did these women face? How were they perceived by voters? How were they represented in the media and how did they represent themselves? Throughout the data collection process, some patterns began to emerge in respect to the intersectional axes of discrimination these women were facing, based not only on their gender but on their age, class, marital status and party identification. As a disclaimer, I am not suggesting that people’s voting behaviour and voting patterns will tell us anything about how they feel about women candidates or their attitudes and perceptions towards them. What I am suggesting is that election periods and voting times do open up significant opportunities for insightful conversations into how people feel about and perceive female candidates, parliamentarians and women in politics generally, and this article is based on such insights.

Due to the volatile nature of the political environment in Zimbabwe and the sensitivity of issues to do with gender, sexuality and politics, anonymity has at times also been given to some of the female candidates interviewed who requested it, particularly when they were sharing sensitive information, in order to protect their identities.

2018: A Different Election for Women?

Going into the elections there was a sense of high optimism in Harare. This was the first election in which four women ran for the presidency: Joice Mujuru of the People’s Rainbow Coalition (PRC), Thokozani Khupe of the MDC–T, Melba Dzapasi of the #1980 Freedom Movement Party and Violet Mariyacha of the United Democracy Movement (UDM) party. On 6 July 2018, during a ZESN election debate with the four female presidential candidates, one prominent female MP for Harare West, Jessie Majome, proudly commended the women for running and went on to state that ‘they had made history and made Zimbabwean women proud’. At the same event, a young male MDC–T supporter of Thokozani Khupe, commented that he would vote for a female president, indicating that female leaders, whom he deemed to be more ‘motherly’, would possibly offer a better alternative to the male leaders of the country. In the same vein, a young female candidate running for council as an independent, Sarudzai Muringisi, an accountant by profession, optimistically stated during an interview at one of her campaign runs in Marlborough on 17 July 2018 that people

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25 Jessie Majome, ZESN event ‘Making Elections Make Sense’, Harare, 6 July 2018.
26 ‘John’ (real name withheld), mid 30s security guard at United Theological College (UTC), focus group discussion, Harare, July 2018.
she had come across ‘were so embracing of women candidates this time around as they were
tired of the men and felt women would change things’. 27

Another first in this election, and a source of optimism for women, was that there were a
number of young professional women running as independent candidates at both National
Assembly and council levels, rare in a city historically dominated by the two main political
parties, MDC and ZANU(PF). 28 Historically, the first notable female who successfully
contested as an independent candidate was Margaret Dongo, who ran for Harare South
constituency in 1995 against Vivian Mwashita, a female ZANU(PF) candidate. Dongo only
won in a rerun later that year after first incurring defeat. With such a history in regard to
independent female candidates, the significance of having a handful of young professional
females as independent candidates in this election cannot be understated.

Despite the initial optimism that women would do well, the election results proved
otherwise. First, at local government level, Harare achieved one of the lowest percentages of
female councillors in comparison to the other nine provinces in the country at only 14 per
cent; this was an even lower percentage than in 2013, where the percentage of female
councillors was 20.5 per cent (see Table 1). Second, at National Assembly level, only 26 per
cent of the candidates who ran in the July 2018 elections in the province of Harare were
female (see Figure 1) and out of this cohort only six per cent were elected. 29 This six per
cent was made up of MDC Alliance candidates. The general pattern was that the MDC
Alliance generally came first, followed by ZANU(PF), with independent candidates or
candidates from other parties taking third place. The female candidates interviewed for this
article generally came third after the two main political parties, MDC and ZANU(PF). For
instance, in Harare Central, independent Linda Masarire came third with 2,261 votes,
Misheck Mangwende from ZANU(PF) came second with 5,632 votes and Zwizwai Murisi
of MDC Alliance came first with 10,876 votes. Similarly, in Mount Pleasant, independent

| province                  | percentage of female councillors (2018) | percentage of female councillors (2013) |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Bulawayo                  | 28%                                    | 27.6%                                   |
| Matebeleland South        | 19%                                    | 21.1%                                   |
| Matebeleland North        | 18%                                    | 18.2%                                   |
| Mashonaland West          | 17%                                    | 20.2%                                   |
| Midlands                  | 17%                                    | 18.2%                                   |
| Manicaland                | 15%                                    | 13.1%                                   |
| Harare                    | 14%                                    | 20.5%                                   |
| Mashonaland East          | 13%                                    | 16.3%                                   |
| Masvingo                  | 10%                                    | 7.4%                                    |
| Mashonaland Central       | 6%                                     | 14.3%                                   |

Adapted from T. Zvaraya, P. Maposa and C. Morna., ‘Zimbabwe Gender in the 2013 Local Government Elections’ (2013), p. 8, available at (DOC) Zimbabwe Gender In the Elections 2013 | Tapiwa Zvaraya - Academia.edu, retrieved 12 November 2019.

27 Interview with Sarudzai Muringisi, independent candidate in the People’s Own Voice (POVO) coalition, local council, Ward 14, Harare West, Harare, 17 July 2018.

28 C. Dendere, ‘Young Zimbabwean Women Lead the Way with New Methods of Electioneering’, Africa Portal, 19 July 2018, available at https://www.africaportal.org/features/young-zimbabwean-women-lead-way-new-ways-electioneering/, retrieved 10 November 2019. It is worth mentioning that the number of female candidates running, particularly for the National Assembly, was still disproportionately lower than men compared to all ten provinces making up Zimbabwe. There were a total of 81 women running for the Assembly as compared to 237 men. Until 2018, the 2000 parliamentary elections had the highest number of female candidates in any election in this regard, with 55 women contesting, but these women were from the main political parties. Only 25 per cent of these women made it into parliament; see R. Gaidzanwa, ‘Gender, Women and Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe’, EISA Research Report, 8 (2004), p. 20.

29 The MDC Alliance swept up 28 seats of Harare’s total of 29 constituencies, with ZANU(PF) winning one seat (Harare South constituency). Notable here is that only five of the MDC Alliance candidates elected to the National Assembly were female, and they were the only women elected to the Assembly from Harare.
Fadzayi Mahere came third with 4,388 votes, Passade Jaison from ZANU(PF) came second with 5,295 votes, and Samuel Banda from MDC Alliance came first with 9,357 votes.

At the presidential level, none of the four female candidates made it into office. When the votes were tallied the two most prominent female candidates, Thokozani Khupe (MDC–T) and Joice Mujuru (PRC), who garnered 3,019 and 1,688 votes respectively, were far behind their male counterparts within the two main political parties: Nelson Chamisa (MDC Alliance) and Emmerson Mnangagwa (ZANU[PF]), who garnered 548,889 and 204,710 votes respectively. In general, however, the results show that all the independent presidential candidates did badly regardless of gender (see Table 2).

From the results we can see that women clearly did not perform as well as expected, but it is through an in-depth analysis of their experiences that we can get deeper insights into why this was so. Having given a brief summary of the results, this article will now present an intersectional analysis of why women did not do so well in this election, based on the experiences of the women candidates themselves. In this section, we will see how gender, age, class, marital status and party identification, against the backdrop of patriarchal and cultural norms, formed intersectional structures of discrimination for women candidates who ran in this election.

**Intersectional Axes of Discrimination**

Sitting in a restaurant just a few weeks after the election, Joanah Mamombe reflected on her campaign experience as a 25-year-old single woman who ran for the National Assembly in Harare West constituency. The incumbent MP of this constituency was also a woman – Jessie Majome, a lawyer of 46, who had by then served two consecutive terms in Harare West as a representative of the MDC–T party, which then became the MDC Alliance. Majome had intended to run for a third term, but pulled out as an MDC Alliance candidate and opted to run independently just a few days short of the primaries, leaving her main rival,
Mamombe, as the party’s main candidate. While Majome may have felt somewhat threatened by her younger rival, who boasted an impressive pedigree in her own right after years in the youth wings of the party structures and as a biologist by profession, it was inconsistencies within the party’s internal processes that Majome cited as the main reason behind her withdrawal. In reflecting back on her campaign experience, Mamombe expressed her disappointment at the way in which the older women in the women’s movement and in the party structures were more supportive of her rival, Majome. Though Mamombe’s candidature was refreshing for the party’s younger membership as it chimed with the theme of generational renewal which the party was highlighting in its campaign messaging, for Mamombe, her youth seemed a liability for many of the older women in the women’s movement and the party structures as it was associated with incompetence and inexperience, as she explained during our interview:

I will tell you that my campaign wasn’t the same as other people’s campaigns. In the fact that when I decided to throw in a CV [sic] for a primary election in Harare West, you understand there was a sitting MP, Jessie Fungai Majome, who was the incumbent at that time. So, you know, she’s a known lawyer, she’s a known MP… So a lot of people were actually shocked; why did I put in my CV? So this came with a lot of challenges, especially within the women’s movement. So Jessie was being protected by these older women within the movement, civic society and also within political movements as well, like even within my party MDC – older women would be like, ‘no, why should we give [a] chance to this young woman, she still has opportunities, she can be an MP maybe next election’. I mean patriarchy is there but for my campaign there was a lot of backlash within the matriarchy system. Like to say, you know, the disadvantages that come with being a young woman. Because you have less experience, you have less networking, and things like that. So this

| candidate                | sex | party                                             | votes   |
|--------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------------------|---------|
| 1 Makamba Busha          | m   | Free Zimbabwe Congress                           | 1,007   |
| 2 Nelson Chamisa         | m   | Movement for Democratic Change–Alliance          | 548,889 |
| 3 Washington Chikanga    | m   | Rebuild Zimbabwe                                 | 834     |
| 4 Melbah Dzapasi         | f   | #1980 Freedom Movement Zimbabwe                 | 147     |
| 5 Peter Gaya             | m   | United Democratic Front                          | 148     |
| 6 Kwanlele Hlabangana    | m   | Republicans Party of Zimbabwe                    | 345     |
| 7 Blessing Kasiyamhuru   | m   | Zimbabwe Partnership for Prosperity              | 652     |
| 8 Thokozani Khupe        | f   | Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai        | 3,019   |
| 9 Lovemore Madhuku       | m   | National Constitutional Assembly                 | 303     |
| 10 Steers Mangoma        | m   | Coalition of Democrats                           | 213     |
| 11 Noah Manyika          | m   | Build Zimbabwe Alliance                         | 611     |
| 12 Tonderai Chiguvaire   | m   | People’s Progressive Party                       | 97      |
| 13 Violet Mhanyachu      | f   | United Democratic Movement                       | 89      |
| 14 Divine Mhambi-Hove     | m   | National Alliance of Patriotic and Democratic Zimbabweans | 92  |
| 15 Emmerson Mnangagwa    | m   | Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) | 204,710 |
| 16 Nkosana Moyo          | m   | Alliance for the People’s Agenda                 | 1,577   |
| 17 Taurai Mteki          | m   | Independent                                      | 158     |
| 18 Tawonezi Mugadza      | m   | Bethel Christian Party                           | 572     |
| 19 Joice Mujuru          | f   | People’s Rainbow Coalition                       | 1,688   |
| 20 Peter Munyanduri      | m   | New Patriotic Front                              | 219     |
| 21 Ambrose Mutinhiri     | m   | National Patriotic Front                         | 208     |
| 22 Shumba Daniel         | m   | United Democratic Alliance                       | 222     |
| 23 Peter Wilson          | m   | Democratic Opposition Party                      | 170     |

Table 2. Election results for the 23 presidential candidates in the July 2018 elections

30 R. Chidza, ‘I Was Pushed Out: Majome’, NewsDay (14 May 2018), available at: https://www.newsdaily.co.zw/2018/05/i-was-pushed-out-majome/, retrieved 8 October 2021.
31 Ibid.
32 The interviewee means here that she submitted her curriculum vitae for the position.
really affected my campaign and also seeing some women that I thought they would rally behind me, they would support me and, you know, at the end of the day they were against me, actually tweeting and Facebooking that they were behind Jessie and would support Jessie not myself. So it was kind of like demotivating and demoralising.\(^{33}\)

Mamombe may have felt that the older women in the movement and party structures would not have been supportive of her for running in a constituency within which there was another female incumbent, and may therefore have felt that her candidature was lacking in solidarity with the women’s movement. But Mamombe’s comment also reveals some of the generational tensions within the party structures, between younger women who are trying to advance and older women who have been there much longer and who do not want to lose their positions. This presents significant barriers for the younger women looking to advance their political careers, and creates a matriarchal system within the party structures that discriminates against them. For us to understand this better we need to reflect on the social and cultural norms associated with age. In Shona culture, where the elders are revered, respected and honoured, and the young often placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, there is a tendency to favour the old as more competent and experienced. However, Mamombe’s growing popularity and support from the younger membership of her party demonstrate that even these cultural norms and values are changing and evolving, particularly among some sections of the population, mainly the young. Yet, in politics, age-associated norms continue to be instrumentalised to limit the advancement of highly qualified younger women into higher levels of leadership within their party structures. The intersections between gender, age and cultural norms have therefore combined to present a significant barrier for younger women in politics.

Interestingly, when we look at the intersections between gender, age and patriarchal norms, we see that while Majome’s age was somewhat of an advantage for her among the older women in the women’s movement and party structures when compared to her younger female rival, it became another disqualifying factor for her particularly when compared to one of her male counterparts, Nelson Chamisa, the presidential candidate of the MDC Alliance. Though Chamisa belongs to the same generation as Majome, he was considered by the party as being ‘young enough to run’ while Majome was considered ‘too old’. During an interview, Majome relayed her frustration at this:

I’m of the same generation – I’m six years older than [Chamisa], I’m of Chamisa’s age group. How come Chamisa is young at 40? He is old too then and he’s not a youth also because youths are 35-year-olds. So tell me, really seriously, where is the fundamental difference between my age and Chamisa’s age? How many terms has Nelson Chamisa run? He’s done four terms. I did two. It has nothing to do with that, because if you look, it was an issue that was created for me in Harare West to just try and justify and try and find some narrative to kick me out.\(^{34}\)

Majome’s experience demonstrates the intersectional structures of discrimination for women in politics based on their gender and age in a patriarchal society.

The intersections between gender, class and party identification were also evident in this election with one of the women candidates, Fadzayi Mahere, whose relatively affluent upbringing along with her single status (an aspect which we will discuss more later) became one of the central focuses of her campaign. During her campaign experience as an

\(^{33}\) Interview with Joanah Mamombe, candidate for the National Assembly, MDC Alliance, Harare West Constituency, Harare, 21 August 2018.

\(^{34}\) Interview with Jessie Majome, independent candidate for National Assembly, Harare West Constituency, Harare, 17 August 2018.
independent running for the National Assembly in Mount Pleasant consistency, rumours circulated that Mahere was the daughter of a high-ranking politburo member of the ZANU(PF) party, as displayed in a comment from a young male MDC Alliance supporter and political activist:

The history of Mahere is a bit difficult. It makes her not credible to a lot of people. Okay, yes, she might advocate for change and all that but I don’t believe Mahere is herself. I believe there are some forces handling Mahere somewhere somehow. I don’t believe she’s clear. Whatever is behind her I don’t believe she is genuine… and looking at her background then there is a problem. Her father is in government, there’s a bit of intelligence operations there and… she’s not clean to me. I would listen to her but I wouldn’t deal with her that much. Mahere – the father is ZANU, the father is CIO [Central Intelligence Organisation], he’s ZANU. She’s benefited from the regime, she has been taken to the best schools because her father is ZANU. So today [if] she says Mugabe is not good that’s a game. I think those are political games.35

In an interview in a small café, Mahere debunked this myth by stating that her father was actually a civil servant and had never been a high-ranking official in the politburo. For her this rumour was just a way to delegitimise her campaign by making her seem like a pawn in a man’s game, there to do her father’s (and more specifically ZANU[P]F’s) bidding and not her own, a perception which she felt that all women in politics were subjected to:

Definitely. Like you’re your dad’s decoy so it’s like you don’t have a mind of your own, because you’re a woman you’re just someone’s pawn. I do think that a lot of the politics in this country when they relate to women, it’s always, you know, you’re pushing your husband’s agenda, you’re pushing your dad’s agenda… you can never be your own. People don’t trust that you’ve got, you know, a voice and thoughts of your own.36

Having grown up in the leafy middle-class suburb of Mount Pleasant, attended a private school and been given opportunities to travel abroad and obtain extensive qualifications, 35-year-old advocate Fadzayi Mahere was considered a member of the elite by some. They did not see why a woman of her stature and professionalism would bother running for office, particularly in an environment where it is often docile and subservient women who are prevalent in party structures and politics more generally. When we consider class and party identification further here, we see that there is a perception that to be privileged is to be ZANU(P), as one could only have gained access to good education and certain privileges by being connected to the ruling party. Furthermore, the suspicion and mistrust of independents was not limited to female candidates like Mahere; male independent candidates who were interviewed also spoke of a similar experience.37 This suspicion and mistrust of independents is due to the polarised and binary existence of ZANU and MDC in Zimbabwean politics. From Mahere’s experience, however, we can see that although party identification matters for all political candidates regardless of gender, party identification accentuated by gender and class plays even more of a significant role in discrediting female candidates.

Of the 11 female candidates interviewed, one did get elected on an MDC Alliance party ticket: Joanah Mamombe. Hence party identification mattered a great deal. However, once these women get elected on the party ticket they have little decision-making capacity in their

35 Interview with Ben, political party activist, Tajamuka/Sesjikile campaign, MDC Alliance. Bulawayo, 5 August 2017.
36 Interview with Fadzayi Mahere, National Assembly candidate, Mount Pleasant constituency. Harare, 8 September 2017.
37 Interview with Marshall Shonhai, independent candidate, local council, Highfield constituency. Harare, 13 July 2018.
parties, as they largely fall prey to a male agenda. This is another reason why the other women interviewed chose to go at it alone, an aspect which I will discuss further later. However, as pointed out, when they choose to run independently their chances are slim. As we have seen with Mahere's experience, women who run independently or under less established parties are viewed with suspicion and mistrust, much like their male counterparts. What differs in the experience of women in this regard, however, is that they are labelled as ‘prostitutes’ (mahure) while their male counterparts are not, an aspect which I will discuss below.38

In considering the intersections between gender and party identification further, we see that the presence of docile and subservient women in party structures has further fed into the perception that politics is ‘dirty’ in Zimbabwe, and that for a woman to be in politics, she has had to have ‘slept her way to the top’.39 Two young female candidates who ran within the bigger parties revealed in interviews that there was a public perception that they had slept with the leaders of their respective parties to advance themselves politically. Joanah Mamombe, candidate for the MDC Alliance, recalled:

One of the mornings I woke up to a headline in a H-Metro Newspaper and NewsDay, to say Mamombe on front page you know being accused or allegedly in a relationship with Nelson Chamisa, you know things like that… I would have expected the older women, these women who have been in the movements through and through to have been defending my name… It didn’t happen in my case, people left people laughing [at me] on Twitter, cartooning me to say ‘the side chick of Chamisa’.40

ZANU(PF) candidate Tafadzwa Sihlahla recounted a similar experience:

When I won the primary elections, people would say ‘just because you’re sleeping with Terence Mukupe that’s why he backed you’, within the party. So you’re getting to a place where people don’t think that you put effort. People just think that because you are a woman, you can’t work with a man and not be thought to have sexual relationships with him. Even when you’re working with other men you know they would like to touch you even in campaign teams and you’d like think, ‘is this the norm?’ Even part of the electorate they’ll be like, ‘I want to sleep with you before you get into office. Once you’re in office we won’t get the chance’. So those are some issues that you really go through and quite unfortunately we are still a long way to ending this because our society doesn’t have a place for women in politics. Because in certain circles people will expect you to sleep with them to get certain things. It’s not like it’s not there, it’s a public secret.41

When we consider the implications of this for the 60 seats reserved in parliament for women, we can see how such allegations about sexual relationships create the perception that the women appointed to fill the quota are simply party pawns. The assumption is that many of them got there not by merit but through their relationships with influential men within their respective party structures, and hence are there to do their bidding instead of

38 Notably another candidate, Linda Masarire, who ran under the less established party MDC–T, fell prey to the same treatment in being viewed with suspicion and mistrust and like Fadzayi was labelled as a prostitute (hure) and a ‘sellout’ or ZANU plant. Other women who ran as independents, such as Dudu Nyirongo and Kudzai Mubaiwa, also noted how the voters they interacted with urged them to join one of the main parties to have a better chance of winning. They mentioned how distrustful the public was of them running as independents, something which their male counterparts were also subjected to.

39 Again, this is not something that was new to this election, nor was it unique to Zimbabwe. In documenting the experiences of women candidates in previous elections in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia, Geisler (‘Troubled Sisterhood’, p. 571) states that women in political party structures have generally been perceived by the public as either docile or promiscuous.

40 Interview with Joanah Mamombe.

41 Interview with Tafadzwa Sihlahla, local council candidate, ZANU(PF), Harare East constituency. Harare, 3 September 2018.
representing the interests of women or having decision-making capacity in their own right. This is in line with the patriarchal norms that govern Shona society, in which women’s political roles have historically been ‘mediated by men’.

It is further reflected in the personal experience of Esther Zimundi, at 21 one of the youngest female candidates to run in the election, and who left the MDC party and opted to run as an independent for this reason:

I had several encounters where I was almost raped. I think it’s four or five times by different men in MDC… When they see young women, when they see girls dealing in politics and it’s actually a very sad thing that is happening in Zimbabwean politics; they don’t see you as someone who is wanting change as well, they don’t see you as someone who is capable of bringing about change, they don’t see you as someone who is able to advocate for change. When they see you they will actually be fighting over you to see who can sleep with you first… And actually a lot of girls in political parties, they are objects. I know of certain women, girls actually, who slept with the whole Standing Committee – those are the ones who pull the strings. I know that there are a whole lot of women who actually had to sell their bodies to males, to their counterparts, so that they can get elected, so that they can actually run for primary elections for them to win and get into parliament but it will backfire later on because you can’t speak out in parliament, you are literally controlled. So then I decided to leave.

Zimundi’s comment reveals the frustration not only that young females experience in being viewed as mere sex objects and not being taken seriously, but that young women have with the bureaucracy and tightly controlled nature of operations within the party structures that place significant constraints on them. Similar concerns about being in the party structures were voiced by an older and more experienced female candidate, Jessie Majome, running for the National Assembly in Harare West for the first time as an independent candidate after having previously been in the MDC Alliance party. Though Majome did not report sexual harassment or abuse while she had been in the party, she did point out that she had felt more controlled and constrained by the party when she had run under the party name in previous elections.

Tendayi Mpala, a young professional female candidate who ran as an independent in Marlborough for the Harare City Council during the July 2018 elections, stated during an interview that people were surprised she was running because of her qualifications. According to Mpala, men and women within her constituency would often say to her during her campaign ‘you are a woman, you’ve already made it in life, why are you bothering to run for council?’ Such comments indicated that they were not used to female candidates with qualifications like hers running for office. Yet it is because of the bureaucracy and the patriarchy within the more established party structures that these women opt to run independently or in less well-known and established parties, where their chances of winning are slim. Independent female candidates like Mpala, Majome, Zimundi and Mahere felt they could be more effective outside the political party structures than within by avoiding all the bureaucracy and the stigma associated with women within political parties.

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42 E. Schmidt, Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870–1939 (London, James Currey, 1992), p. 289.
43 Interview with Esther Zimudzi, independent candidate for local council, Hatfield constituency. Harare, 3 July 2018.
44 Interview with Jessie Majome.
45 Interview with Tendayi Mpala, independent candidate for local council, Harare West Constituency. Harare, 12 July 2018.
46 It is also worth mentioning that they ran in protest at the hegemony of the MDC Alliance party in Harare and the bipartisan nature of MDC-ZANU(PF) politics which has dominated the country for decades. They were presenting an alternative, a ‘third way’, for the Harare citizenry, which had become disillusioned and fatigued by MDC-ZANU(PF) politics and the general underperformance of both at National Assembly and local government levels.
The experience of the women candidates also differed considerably based on their marital status. Married women, on the surface, generally seemed to be perceived as being more dignified and respectable than their single or divorced counterparts. For instance, one 25-year-old single female candidate, Tafadzwa Sihlahla, who ran for local council in Harare East constituency, stated during an interview: ‘I had challenges. Because you would find people saying, “you are not even married. You don’t even own a house. How do you want to be a councillor?” So people feel that someone who is married is a little bit more dignified. That’s what they feel’.47

As we saw earlier through the accounts of Joanah Mamombe, Tafadzwa Sihlahla and Esther Zimundi, young single women were also perceived as promiscuous, ‘loose’ or immoral, with sexual advances at times being made towards them, a fairly common experience for the young single female candidates interviewed. A conspicuous example of this was a poster image, created by supporters of the MDC Alliance party and widely circulated online, targeting a young single female candidate, Fadzayi Mahere. Mahere was standing against an MDC Alliance male candidate, Samuel Banda, for Mount Pleasant Constituency in Harare North. It is a campaign poster for Mahere, showing her dressed in a formal black suit, but with the text, ‘Vote Mahere’, doctored to read ‘Don’t vote mahure [“prostitute”] – 30 year no husband! ZANU project!!!’48 In being labelled prostitutes, single women like Mahere are delegitimised in the public eye and this becomes a way of excluding them from the realm of politics. These hostile attitudes cross over into other spheres of society and into the disciplines of music, arts, literature and drama, where women who do not conform to traditional gender roles, mainly young single working-class women in the city, are often stereotyped as prostitutes or women of loose morals.49 This hostility towards single independent women dates back to the colonial era: one such infamous incident was that of the Harare Bus Boycott and the Carter House Rapes in which, during the raiding of Carter House Girl’s hostel on 17 September 1956, 16 young single working-class women were systematically raped. According to Scarnecchia, the attacks were mainly aimed at challenging these women’s mobility and economic independence in a male-dominated hostile urban environment.50

Candidates who were single mothers also fell prey to the same scrutiny and misconceptions, with Linda Masarire and Thokozani Khupe labelled as prostitutes when they were publicly challenging Nelson Chamisa’s legitimacy in being the rightful leader of the MDC–T party.51 It is worth noting that this hostility in labelling single women prostitutes tends to come to the fore when they are perceived to be challenging male leadership and authority, and hence violating patriarchal norms.52

47 Interview with Tafadzwa Sihlahla, ZANU(PF) local council candidate, Harare East constituency. Harare, 3 September 2018.
48 The image can be found here: https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/cyber-violence-makes-internet-use-gendered-issue, 13 August 2018, last retrieved on 14 February 2022.
49 See: S. Naidoo and C. Pfukwa, ‘Representations of Women in Zimbabwean Contemporary Music’, Muziki, 6, 2 (2009), pp. 145–53; and T. Chari, ‘Representation of Women in Male-Produced “Urban Grooves” Music in Zimbabwe’, Muziki, 5, 1 (2008), pp. 92–110.
50 Scarnecchia, ‘Poor Women and Nationalist Politics’, p. 306.
51 Interview with Linda Masarire, MDC–T candidate for National Assembly, Harare Central constituency. Harare, 28 August 2018. See also A. Chibamu, ‘MDC–T Name, Logo Fight: Supreme Court Upholds Chamisa Appeal; Orders Case Back to High Court’, 23 May 2018, available at: https://www.newzimbabwe.com/mdc-t-name-logo-fight-supreme-court-uph olds-chamisa-appeal-orders-case-back-to-high-court/, retrieved 8 October 2019; and A. Chibamu, ‘Activists in MDC–T Regalia Charge Khupe; Chant ‘Hure! Hure! Hure!’’, 23 May 2018, available at: https://www.newzimbabwe.com/mdc-t-name-logo-fight-supreme-court-uph olds-chamisa-appeal-orders-case-back-to-high-court/, retrieved 8 October 2019.
52 Such patriarchal norms have historical resonance dating back to the colonial period, with one infamous incident being that of the ‘Carter House Rapes’ in which 16 young single women in a girl’s hostel were systematically raped during a raid during the 1956 bus boycotts. According to Scarnecchia, ‘Poor Women & Nationalist Politics’, p. 306, the attacks were mainly aimed at challenging these women’s mobility and economic independence in a male-dominated hostile urban environment.
While the single female candidates were viewed as immoral and somewhat ‘incomplete’, the divorced female candidates were viewed as failures or irresponsible because their marriages had dissolved.53 This is most evident in the experience of ‘Jane’, a divorced female candidate:

I’m divorced. So being divorced, I had a guy say to me … well he asked me ‘are you married?’ Then I said no. Then I was like ‘I’m divorced’. Then he was like ‘oh well, if you cannot run the affairs of your home then what makes you think that you can run council?’ Then another man who was close who heard it was like, ‘you know what don’t worry I’m actually happy that you’re divorced because that means you’ve got more time on your hands to do this’ [laughs]. But I’ve got other colleagues who’ve also gone through a lot of harassment on social media about being a woman, you know, someone actually said to Dudu – the other girl – ‘are you married?’ And she said yes, happily, then he was like ‘ah okay definitely you now have my vote because if you’re single or divorced it means you’ve failed in life’ [laughs]. But the men are not going through any of that. Some are divorced, some are single, but the men are not going through any of that, they are never asked but with us, it’s an issue, you know. So yeah, it’s been interesting to see how people view women and also women in politics.54

Jane’s experience is consistent with those of other single and divorced female candidates from both this election and previous elections in other southern African countries, mainly Zambia.55 Her experience not only reflects the patriarchal norms in society and in politics, where men are not held to the same standard as women, but reflects a differentiation between the experiences of divorced women and their married counterparts. It is important to understand that divorced, single women and single mothers are anomalies in Shona society, which upholds the traditional family structure and family values where men are the head of the household or the head of the family unit.56 In such a society women must be under the headship, custodianship and authority of their husbands (or male figureheads). Women who are not under this custodianship are viewed as ‘loose cannons’ in society, and non-conforming to societal ideals, values and norms. Hence such women challenge those traditional gender roles and norms of what the family unit ‘should’ be, as well as a woman’s place in it.

The married female candidates with children, on the other hand, were treated with a measure of dignity and respect, and attributed characteristics of being ‘motherly’, ‘nurturing’ and ‘warm’. Some of these candidates even played on these stereotypes during their campaigns by playing the ‘mum card’. For instance, one female presidential candidate proudly introduced herself during a public meeting I attended as a mother and indicated that the country needed healing like that of a mother when she stated:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I’m Violet Mariyacha, a mother, politician, human rights activist, businesswoman, songwriter, singer and author. I am running as a presidential candidate for the United Democracy Movement because, as a mother, I saw that Zimbabwe needs help like that of a mother. The economy [sic] situation as it is, is so bad and Zimbabwe needs healing and a mum can do that. Thank you.57

53 Interviews with candidates ‘Jane’ (real name withheld) and Jessie Majome, Harare, July and August 2018.
54 Interview with ‘Jane’, Harare, July 2018.
55 See: P. Chigumadzi, ‘In Zimbabwe, The Enduring Fear of Single Women’, New York Times, 2 July 2018; Geisler, ‘Troubled Sisterhood’, p. 568, on the similar experiences of divorced female candidates and politicians in previous elections and in politics more generally in Zambia.
56 Though it is to be noted that even these norms have evolved over time with shifting socio-cultural and economic dynamics over the years, such as migration and the AIDS epidemic, resulting in the family structure changing with more female-headed households. See P. Musekiwa, ‘Livelihood Strategies of Female Headed-Households: The Case of Magaso Village, Mutoko District in Zimbabwe’ (Master’s thesis, University of Fort Hare, 2013).
57 Violet Mariyacha, United Democratic Movement (UDM) presidential candidate, ZESN election public debate, Harare, 5 July 2018.
In a similar vein, during an interview, one young married female candidate in Harare Central, Kudzai Mubaiwa, mentioned that she leveraged the fact that she was a married woman with children in her campaign by posting pictures of herself with her child on Mother’s Day on her social media (Twitter) profile, to desirable effect:

I was very deliberate on things, like on Mother’s Day – I put in a picture with my little daughter, I’ve got a little baby, I was carrying her, to give a matronly feel and I said ‘Happy Mother’s Day to all the women who have little kids’, and whatnot, and that was one of the posts that was engaged [with] the most on social media and it was by men and women, ‘mother we are with you’ and whatnot … I saw some really disastrous candidates, who are male and married, winning in places where some young brilliant single women would have done a fairly better job.58

However, playing the ‘mum card’ can backfire. Such women are still not deemed equal to their male counterparts. In being stereotyped as ‘good mothers and wives’, these women are often relegated to the private sphere of the home and told to ‘stay out of politics and go home and take care of their husbands’.59 Such associations between women and the home therefore reinforce the domestication of women and work to exclude them from the public sphere of politics. The same is true in other spheres of society where women face similar treatment.60

The frequent depiction of women in political leadership as maternal care-givers, nurturers and advisors have been modelled by the nation’s first ladies. This was perhaps best demonstrated in an image of First Lady Auxillia Mnangagwa captured by The Herald a few weeks after the July 2018 elections. In the photograph she was shown on a state visit to Parirenyatwa Hospital in Harare, accompanied by Health and Childcare Minister Dr Obadiah Moyo, carrying out some of her maternal roles in advising the head nurse on duty at the hospital. The newspaper caption read ‘First Lady Auxillia Mnangagwa gives motherly advice to sister-in-charge Beauty Gurajena’.61 What is to be noted here is that while these maternal roles do give women a significant measure of influence in politics in making them highly visible, this increased visibility does not in any way denote equality, as these women are seen carrying out domesticated roles which are subordinate to their male counterparts.

Conclusion

The growing field of black feminist scholarship on intersectionality has provided a useful lens through which to explore the intersecting axes of discrimination that women face in politics, which serve as significant barriers to them being elected to office. However, as useful as such intersectional perspectives are, they tend to focus on the factors of race, class, and gender. While these are important, particularly in reflecting on the experiences of women of colour in the global north and the metropole, I argue that they are not entirely

58 Interview with Kudzai Mubaiwa, independent candidate for local council, Harare Central constituency, Harare, August 2018.
59 Ibid. This relegation of women to the private sphere has persisted since colonial rule when state subsidies to married housing accommodation controlled the mobility of women in the urban townships who were often left in the custodianship of their husbands. See Schmidt, ‘Peasants, Traders and Wives’; and T. Barnes, ‘The Fight for Control of African Women’s Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939’, Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 17, 3 (1992), pp. 586–608.
60 Stereotypical representations of women as home-dwellers in the local music industry by male musicians, for instance, has Naidoo and Pfukwa aptly arguing that, ‘as male singers (and sometimes female singers) remind women of their domesticity, they try to persuade women into submitting to identities already fostered for them that do not threaten the position of men in society’. See Naidoo and Pfukwa, ‘Representations of Women in Zimbabwean Contemporary Music’, p. 150.
61 E. Chikwati, ‘First Lady Raps Rude Nurses’, 20 November 2018, available at: https://www.herald.co.zw/first-lady-raps-rude-nurses/, retrieved 6 October 2019.
reflective of the experiences of women of colour in the global south. Yet even in the global south, the government proportional representation legislature and policy-making that exists has also tended to err on the side of treating women as a homogenous grouping, overlooking the differences among women. This, I have argued, is one reason for the failure of such measures. By reflecting on the experiences of female political candidates in Zimbabwe’s most recent election in July 2018, this article has demonstrated how other significant factors beyond race and class – namely age, marital status, and party identification – also form intersectional axes of discrimination for women in the southern hemisphere: first hindering women’s chances of election to public office, and then, for those women who are elected, preventing them from progressing up the hierarchies of office.

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Interviewees

Duduzile Nyirongo, political candidate (Council), Independent, Harare Central
Esther Zimudzi, political candidate (Council), Independent, Hatfield
Fadzayi Mahere, political candidate (National Assembly), Independent, Mt Pleasant
Jessie Majome, political candidate (National Assembly), Independent, Harare West
Joanah Mamombe, political candidate (National Assembly), MDC–Alliance, Harare West
Kudzai Mubaiwa, political candidate (Council), Independent, Harare Central
Linda Masarire, political candidate (National Assembly), MDC–T, Harare Central
Marshall Shonhai, political candidate (Council), Independent, Highfields
Rufaro Kaseke, political candidate (Council), Independent, Chitungwiza
Sarudzai Muringisi, political candidate (Council), Independent, Harare West
Tafadzwa Sihlahla, political candidate (Council), ZANU(PF), Harare East
Tendaiy Mpala, political candidate (Council), Independent, Harare West
Vimbayi Musvaburi, political candidate (National Assembly), Independent, Bulawayo South

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