



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Unveiling layers of inclusion in political spaces: A multidimensional exploration of inclusion in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. It examines representation and intersectionality to explore how diverse perspectives among different interest groups in society contribute to a more comprehensive and equitable political landscape in Zimbabwe. Additionally, it investigates the role of digital inclusion, and community empowerment in fostering genuine participation. The study dissects the layers of inclusion required for a strong democratic system with an emphasis on youth involvement and the value of civic education. Through emphasising transparency, accountability, and a global perspective, this research article provides a holistic understanding of how political spaces can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure the active engagement of all citizens. The study is informed by the theory of intersectionality and offers a deep understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to influence individuals' experiences of political representation and participation. Through applying the intersectionality theory, the study examines how individuals with intersecting identities face unique barriers and challenges when it comes to accessing and engaging with political spaces. It reveals how privilege and power systems interact and function within political frameworks, influencing the opportunities and experiences that various groups have. To achieve the main goal, the study employs a qualitative approach to examine the dimensions of inclusion within political spaces in Zimbabwe. The qualitative constituent involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, including politicians, community leaders, and purported relegated groups, to gather insights into their experiences and perceptions of inclusion. Additionally, a survey was conducted among a representative sample of the population to gather data on their attitudes toward political inclusion and their level of engagement in political processes. This enabled a broader understanding of the overall landscape of inclusivity.

Key words: Inclusion, representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, youth involvement

INTRODUCTION

Unveiling the Multifaceted Landscape of Political Inclusion

This article explores inclusion in Zimbabwean political spheres from several angles, revealing the intricate relationships that enable a truly equitable and inclusive system. A sturdy democracy is contingent upon the principle of political inclusivity, which guarantees the full engagement of every citizen in shaping the political arena (Biswas, 2023; Dahl, 1989). Nevertheless, the notion of inclusivity in political domains surpasses mere representation, delving deeper into recognising the constraints of traditional frameworks that often prioritise numerical representation over the diverse experiences of various groups (Phillips, 2011). Hence, the political climate that exists in Zimbabwe now demands a careful analysis that goes beyond crude notions of inclusivity.

While representation ensuring a diverse array of voices are represented in governance is undoubtedly essential (Alegría & Cheng, 2023; Mansbridge, 1999), a more thorough comprehension is essential. This research delves into the concept of intersectionality, a theoretical structure that acknowledges how different facets of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to mould individuals' encounters within political spheres. Examining inclusivity from this angle helps us identify the unique difficulties faced by people whose identities are intersecting and marginalised, ensuring that their voices are heard.

Our study transcends traditional forms of involvement, examining the role of digital inclusivity in nurturing authentic engagement. With the emergence of technology, digital platforms provide new pathways for political engagement,

particularly for marginalised groups who may encounter conventional barriers to entry. Furthermore, the investigation explores the importance of community empowerment in fostering a sense of ownership and active citizenship. Communities that have historically been marginalised can be empowered, and by doing so, the government can foster an atmosphere in which different points of view are valued and actively incorporated into the democratic process.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the necessity of involving the youth in the political arena. Young people are a critical generation with the potential to shape the future of the political environment (White, 2010). Encouraging adolescent engagement and providing essential civic education can enable the government to raise a generation of knowledgeable and involved citizens (Westheimer, 2002). This holistic strategy, which includes representation, intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth participation, and civic education, aims to "reveal the layers of inclusivity" that are necessary for Zimbabwe's democracy to thrive. Emphasising the need for openness, accountability, and a global perspective, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political environments can evolve to embrace diversity and ensure everyone's active involvement. This exploration seeks to address the following central questions:

1. In what ways do Zimbabwe's political systems support or undermine the representation of various voices and points of view?
2. How do factors such as community empowerment, digital access, and intersectionality affect the engagement of underrepresented people in political spheres?

3. How can the promotion of youth engagement and civic education contribute to fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment in Zimbabwe?

BACKGROUND

The conventional interpretation of Zimbabwe's historical landscape suggests that the subordination of women, children, and youth has been deeply rooted in the country's sociocultural foundations. Societal gender roles have traditionally separated tasks typically associated with women, such as cooking, food processing, cleaning, preparation, and assisting men with agricultural work, from those typically associated with men, like clearing land and ploughing the fields (Mazonde & Carmichael, 2016; Tarusikirwa, 2017; Mupangwa, 2023). This gender-based segregation manifested in the colonial government where the 1975 parliament of Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) had 16 ministers and 66 legislators, of which only one was female, Mrs. Hatson from Hillside (Gudhlanga, 2013). It was only in the Rhodesia-Zimbabwe parliament in 1979 that four black women were elected to a parliament of one hundred legislators (Gaidzanwa, 2019). This exclusion from active involvement in governance marked a significant departure from the pre-colonial period when women enjoyed less substantial political power.

The liberation struggle in Zimbabwe facilitated positive changes in male-female relations. The national liberation wars of African countries, including Zimbabwe (Second Chimurenga), helped to reshape and insert women's and youth military and political agency into the nationalist narrative (Chaminuka, 2022; Kufakurinani & Nyambara, 2022; Mazambani, 2022). The participation of women and youth in national liberation efforts

was viewed by many as a precursor to a broader agenda of cultural emancipation. It is documented the government of the time cast women in the role of consumers rather than producers of the new nationalist culture (Kajta, 2022; Law, 2020). The post-colonial period from 1980 coincided with the global feminist movement, where women challenged their subservient roles as mothers and wives (Kombo, 2012). The Second Chimurenga provided a platform for women and the youth to challenge colonial views that confined them to subservient roles.

The post-independence period ushered in a new era where women and the youth, having participated in the liberation struggle, renegotiated their roles and statuses. Prominent women and young politicians were included in the new political leadership as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2021; Lotwel, Ongori & Gervasio, 2021). For instance, Joyce Mujuru was appointed Minister of Youth, Sport, and Recreation in 1980 and later became Minister of Community Development and Women's Affairs in 1981. Mujuru, along with other leaders and organisations like the Women's Action Group (WAG), played a crucial role in passing laws that benefitted women, such as the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 and the Equal Pay Act of 1982 (Jung, 2022; Lotwel et al., 2021). The government also introduced the Matrimonial Property Rights Act in 1985, which allowed women to own property and provided protection in cases of divorce (Mhuru, 2023). Additionally, the introduction of universal education at independence ensured that previously marginalised women could access education, improving their chances of participating in the public sphere.

Women are increasingly involved in the leadership of party structures in both ZANU PF and MDC (now Citizens Coalition for

Change), the two dominant political parties in Zimbabwe. Both parties strive to adhere to a policy of at least 30% women in leadership positions (Munamati, 2023). The Government of National Unity (GNU), established by the Global Political Agreement in 2008, included women leaders such as Joyce Mujuru as Vice President and Thokozani Khupe as Deputy Prime Minister. Margaret Dongo, a former ZANU-PF member of parliament, is notable for her independent stance (Zigomo, 2022). She quit the party to contest as an independent candidate, winning the Harare South seat and challenging the ruling party's policies. Her actions exemplify the evolving role of women in Zimbabwean politics, where they are increasingly asserting their independence and challenging traditional norms (Marevesa, 2019).

In contemporary Zimbabwe, media and digital spaces have become pivotal in shaping political discourse and participation. The advent of social media platforms and increased internet penetration has provided marginalised groups, including women and youth, with new avenues to voice their concerns and mobilise for political action (Zeng, 2023). Digital access has enabled these groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information, allowing for more diverse and inclusive representation in political arenas (Chirwa et al 2023). Intersectionality plays a crucial role here, as digital platforms amplify the voices of those at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalisation, such as women of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals. Community empowerment initiatives, often facilitated through online campaigns and digital literacy programmes, have further enhanced the political engagement of these groups (Chirwa et al., 2023). Hence, this study is concerned with the state of an inclusive and equitable political environment that ensures that the voices of all citizens are heard and valued in political processes.

Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework for Unveiling Layers of Inclusion

The theory of intersectionality provides a powerful lens for analysing the complexities of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Developed by feminist scholars like Crenshaw (1989), it critiques traditional approaches that view social identities (race, class, gender, etc.) as independent categories. Intersectionality posits that these identities intersect and interact, shaping individuals' experiences in unique ways (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This framework is crucial for understanding how seemingly separate categories can combine to create distinct forms of marginalisation within political spaces. For example, a young woman from a rural area might face challenges due to her age and gender. However, intersectionality acknowledges that these factors do not operate independently. Her rural socioeconomic background might further limit her access to political information and resources compared to her urban counterpart. This explains the Zimbabwe political landscape which is divided along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and geography (Ndlovu, 2019). Furthermore, intersectionality moves beyond simply ensuring representation based on individual identities. While having diverse voices in government is important (Mansbridge, 1999), it does not guarantee that everyone within those identity groups has equal access and influence. A Black woman politician, for instance, might still face challenges within a male-dominated political system, even if she increases overall racial representation. Intersectionality helps us to understand these internal power dynamics and the specific barriers faced by those with overlapping marginalised identities. Exploring how various identities intersect with power structures, intersectionality reveals how political institutions can benefit certain

groups while marginalising others (Lazar, 2023). For example, political systems that rely largely on conventional media channels may disadvantage people who lack access to these platforms, possibly removing voices from rural or low-income regions.

Intersectionality is not just a critical tool for analysis; it also serves as a framework for designing inclusive political practices (Greer et al., 2023). Understanding how various identities intersect and influence experiences enables the development of targeted strategies to address the specific needs of marginalised groups. For instance, promoting digital inclusion initiatives can empower those who might face traditional barriers to political participation due to geographic location or socio-economic status.

The theoretical idea of intersectionality provides a good framework for studying the processes of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. Considering the complex interplay between multiple social categories, intersectionality provides a robust framework for proposing solutions to cultivate inclusivity and increase political participation in Zimbabwe (Morrill & Comas-Diaz, 2022; Zigomo, 2022). Intersectional analysis also demonstrates that men from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. This reality should be juxtaposed with the policy positions enshrined in the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution, such as Sections 60 and 80, which aim to ensure that minority groups are represented without prejudice (Dziva, 2018; Zigomo, 2022). Through leveraging intersectionality as an analytical tool, Zimbabwe can develop a deeper understanding of the unique difficulties faced by marginalised groups, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and participatory political

environment. Our study, therefore, illuminates the myriad issues and prospects associated with establishing a political milieu that is genuinely inclusive and representative of the entire community.

The Concept of Political Inclusion

The concept of political inclusion has been extensively explored within the democratic theory, emphasising the importance of citizen participation in shaping the political landscape (Dahl, 1989; Sivalo, 2023). However, this study argues that conventional approaches often focus solely on numerical representation, neglecting the lived experiences of diverse groups. This gap in conventional approaches underscores the need to delve deeper into the contextual drivers of political inclusion and exclusion within the political arena.

The research conducted by Mansbridge (1999) serves to emphasise the crucial importance of incorporating a wide array of voices within governmental structures; nonetheless, a more profound comprehension of this topic is deemed necessary for a comprehensive understanding. Conventional frameworks and perspectives may fail to fully acknowledge and address the specific and intricate obstacles encountered by individuals who possess multiple intersecting marginalised identities, as evidenced by the works of Diggs (2022), Alegría and Cheng (2023), and Slaughter and Brown (2022). To illustrate, Crenshaw's (1989) investigation delves into the various forms of discrimination uniquely experienced by black women because of the complex interplay between race and gender. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study identifies and explains how these interconnected aspects of identity affect individuals' ability to engage with and participate in the political arenas of Zimbabwe.

This article stresses the crucial significance of youth involvement, a topic examined by White (2010). White underscores the capacity of young individuals to influence the forthcoming political environment. Nevertheless, there is a need to comprehend the most effective methods to promote youth engagement and provide them with the requisite expertise. Our paper, through a focus on civic education, intends to address this gap. Westheimer's (2002) research accentuates the significance of civic education in nurturing well-informed and involved citizens. Expanding on this understanding, our research delves into understanding how civic education initiatives in Zimbabwe can be customised to stimulate youth participation and enhance a more comprehensive political framework.

Digital Inclusion in Politics

Expanding beyond the conventional modes of participation as explored in the seminal work of Coppock (2003), our study delves into the intricate role played by digital inclusion in contemporary society. While Coppock primarily concentrates on the digital disparities and challenges related to access to information, a critical aspect, our study pushes the boundaries further by delving into the nuanced ways in which digital platforms can be harnessed to facilitate authentic political involvement. This is especially pertinent for groups at the margins of society who often encounter formidable obstacles to conventional forms of participation. An illustrative case is presented in a study conducted by Chadwick (2017), which probes into the transformative potential of social media in the realm of political mobilisation. Building upon this foundational knowledge, our research explores the specific ways in which enhancing digital inclusion in the context of Zimbabwe serves to amplify the voices of marginalised populations and

cultivate a more inclusive and participatory political environment.

For users, the internet serves two primary purposes which are communication and resource sharing. The Internet is a resource that entertains in addition to education and information. It speeds up networking, transactions, and conversation involvement as a communication tool. To transition to a digital or information society as a nation, adoption and increased usage of digital technology are vital. Three possible outcomes from digital media were discussed by Livingstone and Helsper (2007): (1) the sceptical view that using the Internet adds to the instability of the public sphere; (2) the middle view that Internet communication enhances and supports traditional political participation; and (3) the optimistic view that suggests using the Internet creates new avenues for participation. The Internet has democratised communication and information sources while also facilitating citizen involvement, leading to a better-educated public (Livingstone & Helsper 2007). In addition to providing numerous opportunities for social support and network expansion or maintenance, it also can improve democracy, foster social cohesion, and boost participation. The Internet has empowered citizens by providing more options, facilitating significant new civic practices, and greatly enhancing attention and involvement online.

Our research builds upon existing scholarship by offering a multidimensional exploration of political inclusion in Zimbabwe. It goes beyond representation to examine intersectionality, digital inclusion, community empowerment, youth involvement, and civic education. Through analysing these features, this study sheds light on the multi-layered nature of inclusion in Zimbabwe's political context. Through the submission of insights into these underexplored aspects, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic society.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were used in this study to extract research data. Semi-structured interviews with important stakeholders, such as activists, political figures, and people of marginalised communities, were conducted as part of the qualitative methodology. Convenience and purposive sampling were used in conjunction with these interviews to guarantee a representative and varied sample. To preserve the interviewees' privacy and promote open communication, their identities were kept anonymous due to the delicate nature of the subjects covered, especially those on politics. An essential component of this qualitative method was key informant interviews. The experiences and viewpoints of those directly involved in or impacted by Zimbabwean politics were insightfully revealed through these interviews. Reviewing reports and communications from different interest groups was one of the key data collection methods, providing a wealth of contextual information. Structured surveys were utilised to collect data to corroborate the qualitative findings and offer a more comprehensive framework. These surveys aimed to determine the degree of inclusion in decision-making processes as well as the demographic makeup of political institutions. The survey data made it possible to put a number on the involvement and representation of various demographic groups in political institutions. After data saturation was achieved, the researchers saw that participants were bringing up the same topics repeatedly. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative interview data, which entailed classifying the data and locating significant themes and patterns. This method made it easier to thoroughly analyse the stories and experiences that the respondents provided, which led to a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of the

underlying dynamics. During the research procedure, ethical issues were of the utmost importance. All participants gave their informed consent, and precautions were taken to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Given the delicate nature of the research issue, the study complied with ethical norms to safeguard the participants' rights and welfare.

DISCUSSION

Gender and Youth Representation in Political Institutions

Women's political representation continues to dwindle despite efforts by gender-based civic organisations lobbying for equal representation. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as of the August 2023 harmonised elections, 60 women were among the 280 individuals elected to the parliament. There were substantially fewer women nominated to run in the elections of 2023. Just 68 of the 633 candidates who have registered to contest for the 210 parliamentary seats are women. ZANU-PF fielded 23 candidates out of 68; the CCC fielded 20, and the other 25 came from various minority parties (Mutero et al., 2023). This demonstrates how underrepresented women were in all political parties. Despite constitutional provisions mandating gender equality, women continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making bodies. The findings reveal a troubling pattern of persistent underrepresentation of women in political parties. This automatically undermines their representation of their ideas, policies, and accomplishments as they automatically fall out in parliament.

Women candidates were excluded in part due to a lack of funding. Since the previous elections, the cost of running for

office has increased twentyfold. It was increased from USD 50 to USD 1000 for candidates running for parliament (Mutero et al., 2023). The female presidential contender Linda Masarira was unable to acquire the necessary funds in time to contest at the last minute. The exclusion of Linda Masarira due to her inability to acquire the necessary funds in time highlights the currency issues as a factor of exclusion. The electoral committee required payment of USD in an economy where ordinary citizens earned in local currency. Similarly, Elisabeth Valerio, a female presidential candidate from the United Zimbabwe Alliance (UZA), faced significant challenges during her political campaign. Initially, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) excluded her from the presidential race due to the late submission of her nomination papers and late payment of nomination fees. Valeri took the matter to court and won her case, forcing ZEC to accept her nomination papers. This incident underscores the systematic financial and procedural barriers that women face in Zimbabwean politics (Matshaka & Murambadoro, 2024; Mutingwende, 2023).

Various issues cultivate the widespread exclusion of women from the Zimbabwean political landscape, including male domination and patriarchy, gender identity and sexuality, cultural roles, location, and level of education (Chirawu, 2023). Male dominance in Zimbabwean politics has also extended to media and digital platforms. The media intentionally focuses on male political leaders as exemplified in the previous Zimbabwean harmonised election. Scholars have noted the trend of discriminating against female politicians on social media platforms, challenging their representation, and falling out in parliament (Ncube & Yemurai, 2020).

Responding to a question on the challenges women face in pursuing political careers, and how they can be addressed, a study respondent emphasised the same:

“ The media needs to stop focusing solely on male politicians and also give women candidates equal coverage. Social media can be a breeding ground for negativity, especially towards women in politics. We need campaigns to challenge these online stereotypes and create a safer space for women to engage in political discourse.

This trend in media unintentionally perpetuates traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Digital social media replicate the patriarchal attitudes that reinforce sexist attitudes towards women and are used to abuse women. For example, Linda Masarira a female politician intellectually challenged Hopewell Chino'no a seasoned journalist on social media platform X. Instead of engaging her intellectually, the journalist body shamed the female politician, and his followers ridiculed Linda. There were many other incidents where female politicians were attacked on social media over personal matters such as their marital status, age, and private sexual history. Fadzayi Mahere, a former member of the opposition party was repeatedly attacked by trolls for not having a husband and children. If women are unmarried, single parents, or widowed, they are presented as immoral and rebellious, and therefore unfit to be politicians. Fuelled by this prejudice, the persistent attacks make political participation less safe for women and deter them from running for public office (Mutero et al. 2023). Within any electoral procedure, the media possesses considerable power in moulding public opinion and promoting political discussions. Adopting gender-sensitive reporting techniques, challenging ingrained stereotypes, and

amplifying the voices of women could have had a crucial impact on promoting a more inclusive political arena.

Exclusion is also evident among youth. The Zimbabwean government has made efforts to promote youth participation in politics through initiatives such as the National Youth Policy. However, young people still face barriers such as limited access to resources, political patronage systems, and age-based discrimination. The resource model of participation is one of the most well-known theories of political engagement. This paradigm holds that a person's capacity to engage in political arenas depends on their time, money, resources, and civic knowledge. Attending political events in person, such as neighbourhood meetings, rallies, and elections, requires time. Money is also necessary for political contributions and for covering participation-related expenses like childcare and travel. In Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential elections, 52% of youths under 30 reported having cast a ballot. Additionally, youth attendance at rallies during the 2018 election was 18% lower compared to adult attendance at the same rallies (ZESN, 2023). Scholars have long highlighted the lack of meaningful youth participation in policy-making processes contributes to their marginalisation (Masuku & Macheke 2021). In response to a question related to challenges that young people face in engaging with and influencing the political process, one participant had this to say:

“Funding for youth-led political initiatives is scarce, and political parties often treat us like pawns in their games. Age should not be a barrier. We have fresh ideas and a lot of energy, but the system seems rigged against us.

This shows that youth are not taken seriously in politics even though the country boasts of a youthful demography, as revealed by the fact that more than 60% of its approximately 15 million inhabitants are below the age of 25, as reported by the United Nations Population Fund (2023). Nevertheless, this demographic composition fails to manifest itself within the realms of politics, where young individuals encounter a multitude of obstacles hindering their involvement and engagement. Scholars have bemoaned this lack of representation highlighting that it hinders their engagement due to challenges like political interference and marginalisation in decision-making processes (Yingi, 2023). The recently concluded 2023 Harmonised election demonstrates this phenomenon, with only 35 youthful candidates attaining positions in the National Assembly, which is the lower chamber of the Parliament. Within this group, 17 candidates were elected through direct means, 10 candidates gained seats via the allocation of the Youth Quota, and an additional eight candidates secured positions through the Women's Quota (ZESN, 2023). The proportion that makes up 12.5% of the 280-member National Assembly is not proportional to the demographic reality in which more than 60% of Zimbabwe's population is composed of young people. In an interview, a respondent remarked that:

“Our voices as youths are shut out of decision-making processes, and the 2023 harmonised elections are a prime example. Just 35 youth representatives in parliament? That's nowhere near close to reflecting youth representation. We need a system that empowers young people to run for office without relying on quotas or political patronage. Give us a fair shot, and we will show you what we can do. Look at how well youths did in the ZANU-PF primary election.

This statement shows that the youth are interested in politics but sometimes do not have an equal opportunity to participate as politicians. They are only used as pawns to rally voters behind other political candidates.

Ethnicity in Zimbabwean and Persons with Disability Representation

Ethnic minorities, particularly those from marginalised regions such as Matabeleland, face challenges in accessing political representation. The dominance of certain ethnic groups in political parties and institutions can limit the representation of minority voices. One of the residents of Bulawayo in Matabeleland where a minority ethnic group in Zimbabwe is based remarked that:

“ There is disconnect between the political elite and ethnic minorities. We face hurdles like limited access to resources and institutional barriers that make it difficult to even compete for office. People from Matabeleland are invisible in real Zimbabwean politics. Political parties are dominated by certain ethnicities, and our voices get lost in the shuffle. Look at Matabeleland, a region rich in history and culture, yet underrepresented in government. It's like a system designed to keep certain groups in power. Being a woman from a minority group makes life even more complicated. We need a system that promotes genuine representation, not just token representation.

The interviewee's thoughts align nicely with intersectionality, as her ethnicity influenced her goal of political representation in addition to her identity as a woman. Similarly, representation of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) is also low. The political participation of persons with disabilities remains low due to physical barriers, lack of accessible

infrastructure, and societal stigma. Efforts to promote PWD inclusion, such as the Disability Act, have been hindered by implementation challenges and inadequate resources and this has also limited their political participation in the political arena. Scholars like Bhawal and Salimath, (2022) have bemoaned the lack of accessible infrastructure, societal stigma, and implementation despite legal efforts. One representative of the PWD hinted that:

“ Funding for initiatives promoting PWD inclusion is scarce, and resources haven't kept pace with the legal framework. As PWD, we deserve a seat at the table, not on the sidelines, not to let able-bodied people make decisions for us as if they understand us.

In addition, poor accessibility of public spaces further excludes the disabled from participating in political events. Also, in many cases, caregivers make many of the decisions that impact the disabled in their daily lives, so if caregivers are not active in political and civic spaces this in turn prevents youth with disability from engaging in politics.

Digital Divide in Zimbabwe

There is a need to improve digital access in Zimbabwe to ensure that everyone has affordable internet access and devices. This tackles a layer of exclusion by bringing more voices into the political conversation. Currently, data costs and limited internet infrastructure are preventing participation, particularly in rural areas. Internet access in Zimbabwe is limited, with only 34.8% of the population having internet access as of early 2023 (Mutanda, 2024). This limited access is exacerbated by economic challenges and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Saidi, 2023). There is a disparity in terms of access to the Internet between urban and rural areas. For instance, while 67% of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas,

internet saturation is significantly lower in these regions compared to urban areas, with only 26% of rural residents using social media regularly compared to 67% in urban areas (Mutanda, 2024). The digital divide highlights the challenges faced by rural populations in accessing political information and participating in digital political discourse. Despite these challenges, digital platforms remain a crucial outlet for political participation, especially for marginalised groups who can use these platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information. One member of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services, hinted that the crisis arises from the absence of market competition within the telecommunications sector attributed to the high entry barriers faced by new firms. Such a situation hinders competitive forces and optimal pricing strategies.

The current digital divide illumines vulnerabilities intersect with the internet governance framework in Zimbabwe a case in point is the ban on the use of Starlink (an internet provider) which could provide affordable data and improved internet access. The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) ordered that those who were using Starlink would face arrest since it was unauthorised (Madenga, 2021). Because they wanted a third party to be engaged, the government made it difficult for Starlink services to register. Later, they gave the third-party contract to Wicknell Chivhayo, a controversial and purportedly corrupt businessman. Given that social media is the sole unrestricted public forum for individuals to engage in political discourse without apprehension of repercussions, and a platform for both residents and those in the diaspora to engage, the government needs to commit fully to ensuring universal and

affordable internet connectivity for all citizens. This obligation is compounded by the acknowledgement that technology and online resources are now widely acknowledged as basic human rights (Moyo, 2019).

Political participation in Zimbabwe also intersects with authoritarianism. The government of Zimbabwe has a significant impact on internet access and usage within the country. State-ordered internet shutdowns have been utilised as a form of digital authoritarianism. Mare (2020) observed the same in his paper titled: Internet Shutdowns in Africa: State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns and Digital Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. Shutting down the internet hinders active political participation. A case in point is when the WhatsApp platform was partially closed for nearly 4 hours in July 2016, subsequently followed by a complete shutdown of all internet services for a full week in January 2019. In July 2016, POTRAZ issued a stern written warning to ordinary citizens appeared in one leading local newspaper saying:

“ We would like all Zimbabweans to know that we are completely against this behaviour and therefore advise that anyone generating, passing on, or sharing such abusive and subversive materials which are tantamount to criminal behaviour will be disconnected and the law will take its course (Chigogo, 2016).

Remarkably, both events coincided with internal turmoil within the incumbent party, ZANU-PF (Mare, 2019). These shutdowns were prompted by a resurgence of social and digital activism in reaction to constraints on civic space and democratic expression (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). The government employed a law-and-order strategy to impede political engagement (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018).

The confluence of internet connectivity, utilisation, exorbitant data expenses, and inadequate infrastructure impede involvement in political discussions and democratic procedures, especially in rural areas. This predicament is compounded by the absence of competitive dynamics in the telecommunication industry, intersecting with elevated costs and restricted availability. The utilisation of the internet directly influences political engagement and community participation, encroaching upon the fundamental human entitlement to access information and express viewpoints online. Despite acknowledging technology as an essential human prerogative, the authorities persist in prioritising regulation over digital liberties, thereby intensifying the digital disparity and undermining democratic values.

Addressing the digital divide in Zimbabwe requires concerted efforts to ensure universal and affordable internet connectivity, along with safeguarding digital rights and freedoms. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for fostering political participation, democratic expression, and inclusive governance in the country.

CONCLUSION

Towards a Democratic System

Intersectional analysis demonstrates that men hailing from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently confront multiple layers of discrimination, leading to constrained political prospects. The examination of intersectionality exposes disparities in political portrayal among women belonging to diverse ethnic groups. In contrast, young individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds come across substantial impediments to engaging in political activities, encompassing restricted educational opportunities, job prospects, and

social connections. The concept of intersectionality brings to light the cumulative impacts of age and socioeconomic standing on the exclusion from political processes. Likewise, ethnic minority populations residing in marginalised areas like Matabeleland encounter institutional obstacles to political representation owing to past marginalisation and political turmoil.

The analysis of intersectionality accentuates the significance of tackling regional variances in political inclusivity. The study shows that a robust democratic system thrives on multiple layers of inclusion, ensuring a tapestry of voices and perspectives is woven into the fabric of political participation. Respect for diversity is essential to encourage political engagement as it facilitates inclusiveness and the embrace of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Within the realm of democratic education, fostering respect for diversity stands as a key objective, particularly within societies characterised by cultural pluralism. However, this is not the scenario in Zimbabwe, where matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are frequently politicised, resulting in discord rather than cohesion. Exploring how attitudes and biases impact women, youths, and those with disabilities can assist policymakers and politicians in cultivating an appreciation for differences, thus enhancing levels of participation.

The study recommends that the 'we versus them' mentality among Zimbabwean leaders needs to change. Discussion and idea-sharing in the political sphere are essential to the health of any democracy. It is critical to have spaces where everybody, regardless of political affiliation, feels free to express themselves. The new political generation that will shape the future, should incorporate diversity, and use technology to heal rather than exacerbate divisions.

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