



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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African feminist activism and democracy: Social media publics and Zimbabwean women in politics online

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ABSTRACT

“We need to begin our questioning, activism and theorising from the spaces from which we are dying,” Funmi Olonisakin.

The political landscape in Zimbabwe is largely a post-colonial hetero-patriarchal domain that pushes women politicians to the border of politics. Constraints in civic engagement and political participation that is characteristic of a shrinking democracy and exclusionary public sphere subsist. The 2023 election and its campaign period has shown that the socio-economic and political landscape is unpredictable with serious threats to women’s participation in politics. The lives of Zimbabwean women in politics are continually subjected to multiple forms of violence online and offline. Meanwhile, African feminist activism in the country has seemingly taken several steps back. Zimbabwean feminist activists risk being co-opted into the hetero-patriarchal socio-political structures. There is evidence of a considerable disconnect between feminist/gender activists and women in politics that needs to be addressed. In Senegal and South Africa among other countries, protests by younger generations of feminists have addressed this divide through innovations in protest strategies resulting in the re-formation of radical politics (Dieng, 2023; Hassim, 2023). With social media at the disposal of the younger generation of women politicians the movement is set on a revolutionary trajectory. The sustained social media presence of the new crop of women politicians has created active intimate and counter-publics who engage in vital Zimbabwean political dialogue. The new crop of women politicians referred to here are younger women politicians who unlike their predecessors are very active on social media and have no liberation war experience. The study locates social media as a provenance for Zimbabwean feminist activist revolutionising and democracy initiatives. Theoretically, I posit that the contentions around women’s political participation and violations against Zimbabwean women in politics are revealing of intricacies in African feminism and the coloniality of gender and how these, together with theories of the public sphere can further feminist activism. The study will utilise online ethnography of purposively selected Facebook posts and Tweets by Zimbabwean women in politics, feminist activists and/or gender organisations.

Key words: women in politics, African feminist activism, social media, publics, democracy

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwean political landscape continues to be unpredictable especially with the just ended disputed 2023 elections. Statistics indicate that women's participation in politics is decreasing steadily. A research by Women Lead Africa shows the steady decline in women's representation in the National Assembly with figures of women directly elected via the first-past-the-post system being 15% in 2008; 12% in 2013; 11.9% in 2018 and 10.5% in 2023. A lot has happened in the obtaining period with a transition from the Robert Mugabe regime which ended in November 2017 to the current ED Mnangagwa reign which is under scrutiny after the recent harmonised elections. The Robert Mugabe regime was characterised by violence against women in politics which gender activists among other stakeholders had hoped would come to an end at the behest of the 'Second Republic' that came into power after the coercive removal of Mugabe. 2017 marked the dawn of a new era of politics in Zimbabwe with the populace having high hopes for democratisation including women's equal participation in politics. However, a number of events quashed most of these hopes as women in politics continued to be discriminated against and subjected to many forms of violence online and offline. Brutal examples of violence against women in politics include the alleged abduction and sexual abuse of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC-formerly MDC Alliance) trio – Joanna Mamombe, Cecilia Chimhiri and Netsai Marowa by state security agents in May 2020 and the gruesome murder of CCC activist Moreblessing Ali. Violence against women in politics does not only happen to opposition party members but also happens internally within political parties including the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-

Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). ZANU PF women politicians have long been labelled prostitutes with narratives of rape, sexual harassment and promiscuity stretching back to the liberation struggle. The stereotype of prostitution among women politicians has continued unabated.

The proliferation of social media has to a larger extent exacerbated the violence against women with 'generic trolls' and 'gender trolls' bullying women in politics and continuously subjecting them to structural violence online. Trolls are online bullies who attack people or cause trouble by posting derogatory comments and they thrive on social media largely because of the anonymous nature with which one can engage on the platforms. In the Zimbabwean social media scape even well-known individuals using known accounts participate in trolling. For example, George Charamba the presidential spokesperson using the moniker 'Jamwanda' called Fadzai Mahere "Nyembesi" (a prostitute) on Twitter. A number of researches speak to this and show that structural violence online and offline may be linked to women's withdrawal from political participation. There are a number of initiatives that civic organisations have spearheaded and continue to lead but more still needs to be done. Recently Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and/or gender organisations including UN Women, Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe and Women and Law in Southern Africa among others launched the #EndViolenceVoteForHerCampaign in order to encourage the populace to vote for women candidates. The campaign included video content with women from various spheres of influence campaigning through addressing the constraints to gender equality in the political field. However, active engagement with the campaign online was rather low and suggestively

signals a disconnection between women in politics, gender and civic organisations in general. Women politicians could have taken advantage of the campaign and retweeted about it to rally votes from their supporters. The campaign videos mostly included some prominent Zimbabwean personalities who are not politicians which could possibly have alienated the women politicians it sought to garner support for. NGOs in Zimbabwe have played a huge role in matters affecting women in general and have carried out successful campaigns such as the 16 days of activism against gender based violence but when it comes to politics most of their involvement is relatively covert. This may likely be because of the constraints that civic organisations and NGOs face in the country but may also be due to the sensitivity of politics in the country. More often than not NGOs have to tread carefully. Civic organisations' activities are hampered by statutes such as The Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill which 'will give the government unjustifiable control over civil society groups' (International Federation for Human Rights, 2023).

Other feminist scholars have argued that women's civic organisations/NGOs pay lip service to women's participation in politics and are mostly enthusiastic and pro-active on occasions like the instalment of a new government (Mama, 2020). This seems to have been the case among gender organisations in Zimbabwe who expressed hopes for gender parity when the new government came into power. These hopes were extinguished at the onset of violence against women in politics. Thus, women's civic organisations have since been pushed out and necessarily have to organise from the border of Zimbabwean politics resulting in the weakening of the movement's capacity. In a study I carried

out on *African feminist and postcolonial ecologies: Communion of black womanhood in academic and activist narratives in Zimbabwe*, I found out that most activists in the country prefer covertly non-confrontational approaches to gender struggles and many have resorted to working within the country's traditional, albeit heteropatriarchal structures. Most of them have had to work with traditional leaders such as chiefs and village heads so as to make headway in a rather conservative society that has gatekeeping structures at every turn.

In some instances of political upheaval where women in politics or women with political links are violated, gender organisations' responses are conflicted and to a certain extent subtly selective for reasons that could vary from internal-censorship and fear of political and cultural correctness. Cases in point are on the CCC trio's alleged abduction and arbitrary arrest after being accused of faking their abduction and the case of the ailing Marry Chiwenga, the Vice President's former wife who was made to attend court proceedings while critically ill. Normally, NGOs and civic organisations issue statements against unfair treatment or abuse of women. These statements are shared on their websites and across media platforms including social media. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe as the mother body of women's rights organisations in the country usually takes the initiative and their cautious approach was apparent in both matters. Social media publics decried the 'silence' of women's organisations in the Marry Chiwenga case which was highly sensitive because of the nature of accusations against her and because she was the spouse of the Vice President. If anything, the uproar by social media publics on the women's organisations' minimal to non-existent response in such cases is a clear sign that

they are watching and social media could actually be a vibrant platform that civic organisations can tap into on a larger scale. Whatever the reasons for the gap between women’s civic organisations and women in politics may be, it is apparent that it needs to be bridged aside from the normal stakeholder workshops where they often engage offline. This is not to undermine the invaluable role that gender organisations play in the country but necessarily reflects on the need for solid sustainable structures for vibrant online and offline democratic feminist organising in the country.

AFRICAN FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

African feminist activism remains an innate militant movement that serves as a robust archive and repository of African women’s resistance to all forms of racial, gendered and classist domination. As African feminist activism continues offline the digital public sphere has become a viable vehicle for the movement and for women to fight back. This is especially because the digital media landscape has facilitated the transmission of domination and oppression of women across offline and online spaces. This is a double edged sword in the sense that the transmission, while diminishing women on one hand also offers them a new platform for activism and resistance that can facilitate their emancipation while also enriching the movement. Where offline activism has posed physical barriers for women politicians and women in general, online activism has been enabled by the democratic and free space of individual expression and self-representation offered by digital media.

Funmi Olonisakin (in Magadla, 2020) articulates the magnitude of this in the words, “We need to begin our questioning, activism and theorising from the spaces from which we are dying” which I adopt to address Zimbabwean women in politics’ confrontations with structural violence online. It is important to highlight that women politicians’ sustained social media presence has created active intimate and counter-publics who engage in vital Zimbabwean political discourse including gender inequalities. Furthermore, the digital sphere enhances connections for African feminists across a wide range of geographies thereby enabling the capacity for furthering transnational organising and quick responses (Dieng, Haastrup and Kang, 2023). A case in point are the global responses to Tsitsi Dangarembga’s arbitrary arrest which she posted on her Twitter account. Dangarembga was arrested together with fellow activist Julie Barnes for ‘inciting violence’ through staging a protest calling for political reform. The arrest happened in 2020 during a highly charged political climate characterised by arrests of activists and journalists including Hopewell Chin’ono (Chingono, 2023). Her tweets garnered immediate global outcries that somewhat disarmed the state and possibly saved her from the worst possible fate. This was a rare feat that proves the potency of social media and its publics. Dangarembga’s and Barnes’ conviction has since been overturned by the High Court of Zimbabwe. Thus, the movement can capitalise on the power of digital convergences and African feminist synergies to further local and transnational activism.

Research on digital activism across the globe has shown the effectiveness of alternative public spheres, more so for the furtherance of feminist political agendas and democracy in constrained

political environments (Tonnessen & Al-Nagar, 2023; Ndengue, Atsem & Maveun, 2023; Molyneux et. al, 2021, Nyabola, 2018). The typical public sphere as propounded by Habermas (1992) is exclusionary and favours educated and political elites who may well be guardians of 'thin democracies' (Barber, 2004). The general citizens hardly partake in discourses to do with their governance and are normally represented by these elites. This poses racial, classist and gendered exclusions with little concern for the poor, the women and people of diverse races and ethnicities. Thus, diverse political ideas and feminisms are most likely to thrive in the digital sphere where there are infinite possibilities for counter-publics and intimate publics. Where counter-publics constitute "parallel discursive arenas where subordinate groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Felski 1992: 123) intimate publics are imagined communities brought together through linkages facilitated within scenes of collective representation (Berlant & Prosser, 2011).

Opposition parties in Zimbabwe, especially CCC thrive in these alternative public spheres as they are alienated from mainstream media and have an oppositional political representation agenda from that of the ruling party. Similarly, women in politics and civic organisations have the advantage of creating alternative public spheres as they become foregrounded as alternative arenas of public trust, information and representation (Fenton, 2010). Nonetheless, this study reveals that political polarisation may have an impact on the extent to which the alternative public sphere offers more traction to and trust in women politicians. Where the CCC party thrives in the alternative sphere, so

does the party's women. In addition to that, the alternative public sphere offered by social media favours the younger generation of women in politics who, unlike their counterparts and predecessors in the ruling party whose history goes back to the liberation struggle, are adept at using digital technologies. The ruling party also has a young generation of women politicians who are competitively using social media against the opposition parties. Thus, in addition to class and gender, generation is critical to understanding protests and activism in the digital era (Dieng, 2023).

To understand the contextualisation of African feminist activism on social media especially in the Zimbabwean context, I foreground gender and coloniality which has a bearing on gender relations in Zimbabwe. Studies on gender relations in Zimbabwe have revealed that the country is largely patriarchal and riddled with gender inequalities across all spheres of society (Mateveke & Chikafa, 2020; Gwatirisa & Ncube, 2020). Lugones' coloniality of gender (2008) speaks to the role of coloniality in the entrenchment of patriarchal logic. Lugones' theoretical postulation of the coloniality of gender is grounded in her interest in the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality in postcolonial contexts as it relates to men's indifference to their female counterparts' struggles despite the fact that both men and women in the post colony suffered colonial exploitation and oppression. Her theory is formulated through a discursive trajectory that brings intersectionality and decolonial thought to bear on Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power which is based on the argument that all power is structured on relations of domination, exploitation and conflict as social actors fight over control of sex, labour, collective authority

and subjectivity/inter-subjectivity, and their resources and products (Quijano, 2008). The coloniality of power is premised on the workings of global, Eurocentred capitalist power and modernity whose 'civilising' perspective negates the humanity of the colonised man as 'not-human-as-not-man' and the colonised woman as 'not-human-as-not-woman' (Lugones, 2008; 2010). Thus, Lugones' coloniality of gender questions capitalist modernity and the colonial imposition of gender whose ripple effects are felt to date.

Lugones' approach has close affinities with African feminisms which also critique racialised and capitalist gender oppression. African feminisms motivate for gender equality and men's co-operation by hailing the role played by African women together with their men in the struggle against colonialism and its attendant oppressions although the African men seem keen on being reductive of African women and the role they have played. This is particularly poignant in Zimbabwean politics where the weight of women's role in the liberation struggle depends on the narrative that the ruling party deems fit depending on the prevailing context. An example of this is the story of Joyce Mujuru, the former Vice President of Zimbabwe who was said to have shot down a helicopter during the liberation struggle but the narrative changed once she was deposed from power.

Political power dynamics in postcolonial contexts and in Zimbabwe in this instance only reflect the extent to which colonial modernity facilitates women's continued oppression especially in politics where democracy is in question. Women's position is retrogressively placed in the domestic sphere to the extent that women's participation in the public

(especially political) sphere is continually bridled by conservative traditions and cultures. Zimbabwean politics smirks of modern capitalist and patriarchal egocentrism where women in political circles are often reduced to servants and sexual objects of their male counterparts as exemplified by the first lady's women's initiatives and ZANU PF's Women's League. Often, women in the ruling party are groomed to push a second class citizen, patriarchal and community servant status where they kneel and curtsy before male leaders, cook traditional dishes and dance seductively at political gatherings. Attempts by women to get out of these strictures have often been met with physical, verbal and emotional abuse online and offline. It is historic that social media is offering Zimbabwean women in politics and women in general the platform to redefine and represent womanhood in the digital public sphere.

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Using online ethnography, I observed Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) profiles, of selected Zimbabwean women in politics in the three months leading to the August 2023 elections and the one month post-election period. I identified Facebook posts and tweets according to the diverse range of their messages, that is, general socio-political messages, advocacy messages and mobilisation messages. I selected younger Zimbabwean women politicians on the basis of their social media activities, their popularity or unpopularity and political party for balance. The selected women politicians are Fadzayi Mahere and Lynette Karenyi-Kore from the CCC party, Linda Masarira from the Labour Economists and African Democrats Party (LEAD) and Barbara

Rwodzi and Tatenda Mavetera from the ruling party ZANU PF. A future study which will be bigger will include more Zimbabwean women politicians and more political nuances. Except for Linda Masarira these women contested for election into the national assembly and won. They all have Facebook and X accounts. In some instances they post the same content on both platforms, especially in Mahere's case. Some of their Facebook content is restricted but their X accounts are public. I considered both platforms as important given that each platform has a different set of users who engage at different levels – X is thought to be more intellectual, elite and rigorous while Facebook is more open and relaxed and the so called ordinary people of varying intellectual levels are free to express themselves without the level of intellectual scrutiny that they may be subjected to on X.

Fadzayi Mahere (@advocatamahere on X, Fadzayi Mahere on Facebook) is a lawyer, lecturer and has been CCC's (formerly MDC Alliance) spokesperson until her recent election to the national assembly, representing Mt Pleasant constituency. She has 721.8k followers on X. Mahere's Facebook posts and tweets straddle socio-political messages, advocacy messages and mobilisation messages. She usually cross posts messages between the two platforms although her Facebook posts are more personal and intimate. She effectively uses Facebook to forge a virtually intimate relationship with her followers and identify with their interests such as music and sports among other trending issues. She also achieves virtual intimacy through the posting of her images in what I have termed the 'maswerasei posts' where she posts a picture of herself with the caption maswerasei (good afternoon) or 'happy Sunday everyone' on Sundays. These posts endear her to followers

who usually respond with likes and compliments or with responses to her greeting. These posts seem to serve the purpose of shedding the 'iron lady' politician look that makes followers also view her as an ordinary young woman going about her everyday business. In some of her pictures she is dressed in yellow, the CCC Party colour, as a campaign strategy. In addition to these she also shares videos of her gym sessions which usually come with motivational captions and are typical of popular online celebrity content. She also runs the 5am club in which she posts motivational messages on Facebook and X.

Mahere also uses the two profiles for her personal campaign and party political campaigns. She has shared on personal experiences like her prison experience which speaks more to the plight of women in politics and women in general. Her prison experience posts are accompanied by pictures of her in the green prison uniform and the red and white jersey. Through these she shares on the plight of women prisoners in the country's prisons and on the debilitating conditions which show loopholes in the country's correctional service and judicial system. Her posts are not self-centred and consciously stir public consciousness towards political and social inequalities as they affect fellow women like Moreblessing Ali, the CCC trio, and fellow male politicians such as the incarcerated Job Sikhala and Jacob Ngarivhume among others. In some posts, she includes pictures of offline campaign activities such as the #RegisterToVote pictures and videos, social commentary posts on prevailing social, economic and political events which she uses to campaign for her party and against the ruling party. In these posts she comments on the challenges faced in the country or the failures of the ruling party and ends with the hashtag #Zanupfmustgo or with phrase "We

Need New Leaders". She has also posted as the Spokesperson for her party where she relays information on the party's position on specific issues or planned activities.

Lynette Karenyi-Kore (@karenyikore on X, Lynette Karenyi-Kore on Facebook) is the elected Member of Parliament for Chikanga constituency and has held the position of MDC Alliance's second Vice President. She is also the Regional Deputy Treasurer General of Women's Academy For Africa (WAFA). She cross posts on X and Facebook but posts more on X where she has 61.6k followers. In the period under study she has largely posted her campaign activities and those of the party asking the people of Chikanga to vote for her and endorsing Nelson Chamisa for the presidency. Where Fadzayi Mahere seems to resonate more with the youth especially young women and girls, Karenyi-Kore cuts a motherly African feminist figure with her campaign posts reflecting family and community orientation. Her stock phrase in her campaign posts is 'Zimbabwe for Everyone'. She has shared her door to door campaigns in Chikanga and interviews with vendors selling wares at the market, widows and the elderly and has shown concern for the youth and addressed issues to do with drug abuse and unemployment. Her videos begin with greetings and a brief exposition, with a background gospel song by Dorcas Moyo, introducing the concerns covered in her interviews and end with an epilogue which is a promise to address concerns raised by interviewees. Comments on her Facebook posts and tweets show the social media public's appreciation of her as a humble, grounded motherly figure. She is mostly addressed as mama, an endearment and form of address reserved for mothers and respectable motherly women in Zimbabwean society. She also shares pictures of herself on X

with captions like 'Blessed Sunday everyone' on pictures and videos of herself during political rallies mingling with and sometimes dancing with party supporters. She presents herself as a humble figure who addresses her constituents' needs from the grassroots levels.

Linda Masarira (@lilomatic on X, Linda Tsungirirai Masarira on Facebook) is the president of the Labour Economists and African Democrats (LEAD) Party and a member of Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD). She ran for presidency in the 2018 elections but could not run in the 2023 elections because of failure to raise the nomination fee. Masarira is one of, if not, the most trolled Zimbabwean woman politician online (Mutongwiza, 2022). She is at the receiving end of 'hate politics' because she is thought to have associations with the ruling party ZANU PF instead of the preferred main opposition party CCC. She is viewed as an ugly duckling and is body shamed and accused of not bathing. Nonetheless, she has marked herself as a force to be reckoned with by standing her ground. She distinguishes herself as a human rights defender and feminist who fights for gender parity especially in the political field. Most of her posts are advocacy posts for women politicians. On 19 July she shared a video interview of herself done by Identities Media TV on the success of Elisabeth Valerio's successful court application to run for presidency in the 2023 elections. In the interview she smiles with tears of happiness for Valerio who became the only woman presidential candidate. Her X account is highly active with 95.8k followers. She uses the Twitter sphere to air her political views. Her political messages are sometimes controversial and even her position is conflicted. For example, on 7 October 2021 she tweeted that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) should raise nomination fees to a range of

US\$25000 to US\$50000 to “limit the number of fly by night chancers and opportunists causing confusion in the political economy by the unending mushrooming of briefcase political parties” only for her to fail to raise the US\$20000 nomination fees resulting in her exclusion from running for presidency this year. This was an oversight on her part for which social media publics mock her.

What is striking about her politically oriented posts is her sense of agency and incisiveness. She is an active citizen who proves herself by word and action although social media publics are wont to question her intentions. Her advocacy and mobilisation does not end online but is decisively accompanied by action. For example, she made a court challenge seeking the nullification of party lists for provincial councils and challenged the constitutionality of SI 114 which was gazetted on the eve of the nomination courts to allow both male and female candidates to be nominated for party lists as opposed to having each metropolitan province have a council where 10 women are elected to those positions through proportional representation. She shared the News Day article about it on her Facebook account. She has also unequivocally shared her opinion on the CCC leadership and categorically tweeted her reasons for not endorsing Nelson Chamisa in the 2023 elections. Aside from these rigorous posts she bravely posts pictures of herself on Twitter and Facebook and speaks about her personal mandate while also motivating her Facebook friends and followers. She shared one such heartfelt post on Facebook on 20 July 2023, the first paragraph of which reads; ‘One thing I have done in my life is to believe in me. Even when some people tried to bury me because I didn’t believe in their normative leverage strategies, they failed because I am a seed. A seed

does not die. It might germinate late, but it will germinate’. The post ended with encouragement for peaceful conflict resolution and the end of political violence during the campaigning period.

Barbara Rwodzi (@BarbaraRwodzi on X, Barbara Rwodzi on Facebook) is the ZANU PF Member of Parliament (MP) for Chirumhanzu and is the Minister of Tourism and Hospitality Industries. She is also a member of the Pan African Parliament (PAP). Rwodzi posts across Facebook and X and her X account is active with 19.4K followers. Rwodzi mainly posts about activities in her constituency and ministry. In the period under study she was doing the same. On 11 June 2023, she posted pictures of her meeting and visit to the Holy Cross Dam construction site. In the pictures she is standing with members of the construction team, mostly males, and blending in with them. Her posts and tweets are accompanied by the captions ‘Chirumhanzu inovakwa neVene vayo’ (Chirumhanzu is built by its owners) which is crafted from her party slogan Nyika inovakwa nevene vayo (the country is built by its owners) and mantra ‘Brick by brick, stone upon stone’, ‘simuka Chirumhanzu’ (stand up Chirumhanzu), and her mantra ‘impossible nothing’ and concludes with ‘May God Bless Our Zimbabwe’. She receives mixed responses including praises for her good work in her constituency and vulgar insults which she received when she posted an audio of herself insulting and threatening a police officer for removing her party posters. In some of her tweets and posts there are trolls who accuse her of having killed her husband and of being a loose woman.

Tatenda Mavetera (@TateMavetera on X, Tatenda M on Facebook) is the ZANU PF Member of Parliament for Chikomba West Constituency, the Minister of ICT, Postal and Courier Services

and the Young Women 4ED Spokesperson. She has 11.3k followers on X. Mavetera is also a former actress in the Zimbabwean soap opera Studio 263. In the three months before the 2023 elections Mavetera hardly posted with a tweet on 31 July with pictures of her rally in Chikomba West with the caption “Our numbers never like [sic] today in @chikombawest we appreciate the love and trust. President @edmnangagwa victory is certain.” She also tweeted about ZANU PF’s Bulawayo rally on 2 August. Responses to these tweets are mostly filled with vitriol against her party, her as a person and against the president. It seems she posted less because of the negative responses. I could not access her Facebook posts as she has restricted her access to her account to her friends only and does not use the follow option like her counterparts. Lately, she is posting her activities as the minister of ICT and does a lot of retweeting of party news and activities or mocking the opposition CCC.

SOCIAL MEDIA PUBLICS

The study of Zimbabwean women politicians’ social media engagements shows that social media publics favour opposition party women leaders over those from the ruling party, with the exception of Linda Masarira. The thrust of the posts of women in the opposition parties is more diverse and militant because they arguably are the underdogs in the Zimbabwean political landscape. Their counterparts in the ruling party’s posts reflect that they are in a comfort zone especially because they already were sitting MPs in the period under study and were assured of their party’s leverage. Rwodzi’s posts and social media public’s responses show that she is a powerful representative of women politicians with great potential who has, however, become

unpopular because of the arrogance and impunity reflected in her leaked audio which has made social media publics associate her with the male violence that is characteristic of her party. Rwodzi was particularly respected and celebrated for her gutsiness in the Pan African Parliament alongside South Africa’s Julius Malema in their fight for Southern African representation. She has also produced tangible results and has been commended for them in her constituency and ministry. She has a staunch group of social media supporters who encourage and support her. Tatenda Mavetera on the other hand has largely been degraded for being a mere actress who has not made her way into politics through merit. Thus, her posts in the period under study are rather timid although she seems to be developing thick skin after winning the elections and being appointed to the post of minister of ICT. Thus, she has potential to redeem herself.

The militancy and assertiveness of the opposition women politicians serve as a microcosm of how the social media presence of Zimbabwean women in politics and the typical thrust of their online communications can revolutionise African feminism in Zimbabwe and Africa. Their sustained online presence has proven that women in politics can no longer be ignored online and that in itself is a positive outcome for African feminism, democracy and equal representation of women in politics. An analysis of women politicians in the opposition party CCC reflects the mellowing of responses towards women politicians. For example, Karenyi-Kore’s X account hardly has any typical stereotyping and insults thrown at women politicians across all parties. She has successfully branded herself as a respectable womanly and motherly figure who people can easily call ‘mama’ without coercion, something close to what

Mateveke and Chikafa (2020) observe on Joyce Mujuru's (former Vice President of Zimbabwe under ZANU PF) treatment by social media publics. Responses to Karenyi-Kore's posts show that the people are ready to give her a chance to prove herself.

In instances like Mahere's, one notices that she has gained respect and trust over time because of her intellectual and strong character as she has successfully fought discrimination and trolling and balanced her private and public life online. For example, she was able to refute one Edmand Kudzayi's allegations of her having an affair with a married man. She used her legal acumen to challenge Kudzayi. She had the support of intimate publics including gender organisations who swiftly rose to her defense in what some termed selective sisterhood because Linda Masarira and Marry Mubaiwa did not have the same support (Nameda, 2022). Most of her activism posts on social media have been taken up in and outside Zimbabwe and raised awareness to political and gender atrocities. Her posts, among others, on the gruesome murder and rape of CCC activist Moreblessing Ali in May 2022 roused militant counter-publics who identified with Ali's demise because she was not only from the opposition party but she was an ordinary working class woman and mother whose plight many citizens could identify with. Ali's demise escalated political hostilities offline and online and resulted in the arrest of some CCC members who became known as the Nyatsime 7 and is still raging with hashtags demanding justice for her and the release of her lawyer, Job Sikhala, a former CCC Minister who was arrested for inciting violence while seeking to represent Ali. The impact of the #JusticeForMoreblessingAli and subsequent #FreeWiwa, #FreeJobSikhala hashtags pushed by Mahere and her party

colleagues is significant for feminist activism in Zimbabwe and reflects potential of the margin reached in the Cameroonian case of #JusticePourMirabelle (#JusticeForMirabelle). Mirabelle Lingoum was a working class woman who was falsely identified as the woman on a sex tape. She was abused online, raped and then died mysteriously (Ndengue, Atsem & Maveun, 2023). She had bravely shared her experience and side of the story on broadcast television and the hashtag #JusticePourMirabelle was taken up after her death together with protests. Ndengue, Atsem and Maveun (2023) highlight that the chain reactions to her case not only reflected the affective intersectionalities of classism and gender but stirred the resurgence of a radical transnational feminist tradition and challenged the authoritarian status quo.

The online activism about the CCC trio's alleged abduction, arrest and the accompanying trauma had a semblance of the success of the #JusticePourMirabelle campaign and protests as opposition online publics rallied behind them. Two members of the trio, Joanna Mamombe and Cecilia Chimbiri continued with their party duties and were successfully elected in the 2023 elections. They were also acquitted of allegations of faking their abduction while the state, through mainstream media decried the opposition party's politicisation of crime and also accused civil society and NGOs, some western embassies and alternative media of being the culprits working in cahoots with the opposition (Mugwadi, 2022).

Those women politicians who have personalised their campaigns on social media have gained the support of citizens online and offline. They have taken virtual encounters to the offline campaign sphere where they meet voters. Lynette Karenyi-Kore, like Mahere took

her campaign to the Chikanga neighbourhood and market place where she physically met with women selling their wares, youths and pensioners and listened to their grievances which she also shared online. This among other interactions not only furthered her personal and party campaigns but sold her image as a nurturing mother figure who the populace can identify with and trust with the leadership role. Her followers respond to her posts on X (formerly Twitter) with words of praise and encouragement. Other researches have shown that the competitive position of candidates also plays a role in the success of social media use (Enli & Skorgebo, 2013), and this is highly likely in personalised campaigns given the popularity of the CCC party and the women politicians who won the elections. Where ZANU PF women politicians are popular offline the younger generation of CCC politicians is popular online.

The social media users-cum-publics that serve as pillars for the support of women in politics and for the furtherance of the feminist movement in the country have also made huge contributions to the open mindedness that has characterised the reception of Zimbabwean women politicians online. The likes of Nyaradzo 'Nyari' Mashayamombe on X and her Identities Media TV channel which has 37k followers on Facebook, and UN Women Zimbabwe among other gender organisations' accounts have also cultivated online engagements that facilitate intimacies between social media publics and women in politics. Where the politicians are partisan they remain neutral and celebrate gender parity wins across political parties and advocate for requisite policy and constitutional changes. Influential online personalities such as Hopewell Chin'ono and Nick Mangwana among others are called to order when they

post misogynistic and hateful comments about women politicians. There is one significant incident when Chin'ono was taken to task over a not bathing insult targeted at Linda Masarira.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The support that women politicians from the opposition party have gained goes a long way in showing the inroads that have been made by women in politics in Zimbabwe. The other reason for the success is also a result of the CCC's reliance on social media platforms for their activities due to denial of access on national broadcast channels. Thus, the opposition has created its own intimate publics and use social media as a counter-public sphere against the dominance of the ruling party. Further research may be needed to establish whether instances of trolling on opposition women's participation comes from the generalised public or from rival party supporters. The acceptance of CCC women politicians online and offline may signal the gradual success of gender equality advocacy initiatives. Even Joanna Mamombe and Cecilia Chimberi who were trolled and insulted after accusations of having faked their abduction were successfully elected this year. They bravely maintained an online presence despite being trolled by misogynistic 'Varakashi' a group thus named because of their tendency to lambast opposition party politicians online. The 'Varakashi' phenomenon has arguably become popular in opposition political circles where ZANU PF women politicians are bashed and trolled online. Hence, most of the women ZANU PF candidates shy away from a viable online presence. However, women politicians from all political parties should brave online publics and represent themselves and their causes without

fear of intimidation. Like Mahere, Masarira and Rwodzi women politicians should invent online and offline strategies that protect them in their private and public lives and inspire local and transnational feminism.

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