Building a better democratic dialogue to make a real difference for women and girls

The **Women’s** Parliamentary Caucus of **Malawi**

2010 - 2013
Acknowledgements

This publication reflects the work of the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus of Malawi on the Building Better Democratic Dialogue project, carried out from April 2010 to March 2013.

The constituency activities and workshops that informed this report could not have happened without the determination and commitment of the Women’s Caucus, both as a group and as individual members.

The project was developed and managed by the Active Learning Centre (Scotland) and the Women’s Legal Resources Centre (Malawi), with invaluable support from the staff of the National Assembly of Malawi, and advice from the staff at the Ministry of Gender. Special thanks must go to Mabvuto Salirana, our logistics officer in Malawi, who makes everything happen.

It could not have happened without funding from the Scottish Government and the expert contribution from Members and staff of the Scottish Parliament. This support is testament to the special relationship our two countries have enjoyed since 1859.

Thanks are also due to the thousands of women and girls across Malawi who contributed their time, their life experiences and knowledge to the constituency activities and the case studies. We hope the project has made a small contribution to improving their future.

March 2013

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Foreword

Wednesday 26th February will be a day that is long remembered in Malawi’s history. For on that day, the National Assembly passed the Gender Equality Bill. Women are now equal with men, in the eyes of the law.

But there is still much work to do improve the lives of the women and girls of Malawi, in areas such as health, education, access to potable water, economic and social justice, and land reform. Every member of the Women’s Caucus will continue to campaign for the policies and investment required to bring about change, not for ourselves, but for those we represent.

The Building Democratic Dialogue project supported us in our efforts to consult with our constituents, to find out what really mattered to them in their homes, their villages and their districts.

In three years, we have met with thousands of women and girls, listened to their personal experiences and discussed how we could make things better together. Then we brought their concerns and ideas back here to our national parliament.

We also used the findings from these consultations to inform our discussions with civil society, donors and the Government of Malawi, so that it is not our voices that are heard in powerful places, but the voices of Malawi’s women and girls.

The project also encouraged peer support among women MPs, regardless of party differences, and by strengthening our skills and knowledge, helped us become more effective members of parliament.

Gender equality is not just about legislation and resources.

Public female role models, such as MPs and community leaders can also inspire a changing cultural framework in which traditional roles and responsibilities can be renegotiated.

Malawi is now one of few countries in the world that has a female President, and the presence of women in the National Assembly has increased from 5.65% in 1994 to 22.85% in 2009.

The challenge now is to ensure that we retain those women elected five years ago, while at the same time significantly increasing the number of women MPs.

Women across Africa are making progress socially, economically and politically and Malawi should be proud of its leading role. The appointment of Joyce Banda as Malawi’s first female President, and only the second ever female Head of State in Africa - is testament to that fact. It is no small achievement for the country, as well as for President Banda herself.

Importantly, women in positions of leadership provide strong role models for our young women and girls – and help them consider what they themselves can achieve and can aspire to.

And it’s vital that this message gets through, not just to women and girls, but also men. Men – and particularly fathers – should take note and take action. Men have a responsibility to ensure they do not put up obstacles and barriers in front of their daughters, sisters and mothers. Every woman must have fair and equal access to the opportunities they deserve – be this in education, work or whatever path they choose to pursue.

Malawi is Scotland’s historic ‘sister-nation’ and we in Scotland both value that relationship and are proud of it – especially in this year which marks the bi-centenary of the birth of David Livingstone.

Scottish-based organisations have been working here for many years to help improve the lives of the Malawian people where we can. Some of the projects funded by the Scottish Government, including this one, are aimed specifically at helping women and girls - saving lives, helping women to become more active in their communities and empowering them to take up opportunities in business and politics. We hope they will have an impact stretching decades into the future.

Scots are aware of our responsibilities to the wider world. That is why the Scottish Government is protecting spending on international development, in order to continue these important partnerships with our sisters and brothers in Malawi.

In doing this, we all – Scots and Malawians - can and must do more to put gender equity at the heart of development work, including setting a good example for others to follow. Together we can make a fairer world for all.
Gender equality and the empowerment of women reduces infant and maternal mortality, promotes health, increases education chances for generations to come, improves nutrition, and prevents HIV/AIDS. It raises living standards, secures social and economic justice, and can even help prevent conflict and promote peace.

Central to this change is securing more women in all levels of governance, as community leaders, councillors and parliamentarians.

Women in leadership roles raise aspiration among girls, and crucially bring new perspectives to law and policy making, as well as improving service delivery and strengthening the democratic process.

Malawi is still a very young democracy. Its first multi-party elections were in 1994, yet at the 2009 elections, 43 women were elected to the National Assembly, 22.8% of the parliamentary intake and slightly higher than the proportion of women elected to the UK Parliament in 2010 (21.7%). Soon after the election, the Active Learning Centre hosted a round table discussion in Lilongwe where newly elected women MPs, the Minister for Gender and her officials, came together with leading civil society activists and others to discuss how best to support the new Women’s Parliamentary Caucus, and by doing so empower women and girls.

It was agreed that there was a need for regular consultation with women to better understand their situation and develop appropriate policy responses. And that there needed to be a response to the widely held expectation that 22% women in parliament would ‘make a difference’.

The Building A Better Democratic Dialogue project, funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by the Active Learning Centre (Scotland), and the Women’s Legal Resources Centre (Malawi) in partnership with the Women’s Caucus, came directly from those discussions.

Its primary purpose was to help the Women’s Caucus take the appropriate political action based on evidence they had gathered from women across Malawi – democracy in action. It was also hoped the project would help women MPs tackle the entrenched tradition of MPs treating, but not consulting, and women singing praises, but not asking questions.

The project activities over three years included:

- Six community engagement meetings by MPs in their constituencies, involving primarily women and girls, but also traditional leaders, local officials and community organisations
- Six workshops where the Women’s Caucus reported back on their community engagement meetings, shared problems and identified solutions, either for collective action or as individual MPs. Each of the two-day workshops also had skills and knowledge capacity building modules to help strengthen the MPs’ effectiveness
- A series of constituency visits by the Active Learning Centre with MPs to capture the evidence from community engagement meetings in more detail

Since 2010, the 35 members of the Women’s Caucus who have taken part in the project have held 210 community engagement meetings with at least 12,000 people (65% women).

The focus of the meetings varied according to local concerns, or sometimes, national priorities. Issues discussed included access to safe drinking water, in particular the maintenance of boreholes, orphans missing out on school, reproductive health services, the impact of climate change and de-forestation on villages, the farm input subsidy programme, and microfinance for women.

Some meetings were more general and covered a range of concerns and meetings varied in size, from single-issue meetings of around 30 stakeholders, to large public meetings of 300 people.

After each round of community meetings, the MPs reported their findings at the workshops, and agreed how they could act together to achieve change.

There is no better tool for development than the empowerment of women and girls.
The workshops were held in the Parliament building, to emphasise the link between their constituency work and their Parliamentary activities.

In September 2011, the Women’s Caucus responded to the evidence gathered across Malawi by prioritising the challenges faced by their constituents. They set up four cross-party working groups to drive forward these concerns:

- Securing sustainable access to clean water
- Better access for poorer women to micro-loans and small business support
- Better reproductive health for all women and girls
- Securing gender equality in political representation

Since the task forces were set up, the MPs have used parliamentary debates, party meetings, the media, and discussions with government officials and development partners at a local and national level, to lobby for action.

The passing of the Gender Equality Bill in February 2013 covers some of the task force concerns, particularly in relation to reproductive health and equal opportunities.

The MPs continue to work with their constituents to find local solutions, from prioritising local development funds to microfinance for women, to working with village committees to plant woodlands.

And they lobby national organisations, from banks to international NGOs, to bring essential services and infrastructure to their villages and towns.

Our early evaluation suggests that the project has made a positive impact and has met its objectives:

- The members of the Women’s Caucus are now very confident at gathering the views of their constituents and taking these forward to influence public debate, legislation and policy
- The Women’s Caucus operates effectively across party lines, to articulate the concerns of all women and girls. This is no mean feat, given the tensions that naturally arise from the cut and thrust of party politics
- Thousand more citizens have been empowered through the community engagement meetings, and the role of women as leaders enhanced
- And the lessons learned from this project continue to be shared widely, through the media, government and civil society

There is still a long way to go. Women MPs face particular problems in overcoming long held cultural beliefs and traditions. Malawi is still, even with a woman President, a largely patriarchal society and women are seen as “mothers and wives” rather than leaders and agents of change. Citizens expect their member of parliament to play the role of a benevolent chief, so MPs continue to be bombarded by their constituents with requests to pay for funerals, maize or medicines.

The next year brings many challenges for Malawi’s women MPs, not least for each to win re-election in the 2014 elections. It could be argued that neither political parties or donors pay enough attention to retaining existing women MPs, so putting at risk the knowledge and experience that the current cohort of women have gained since 2009.

But Malawi’s 43 women MPs have shown that if a women MP can, then a woman can.
The Women’s Parliamentary Caucus of Malawi

Membership by region

**Northern Malawi**
- Hon Catherine Gotani Hara MP
- Hon Chimango Mughogho MP
- Hon Anita Thundu MP
- Hon Grace Chiumia MP
- Hon Beatrice Mwangonde MP
- Hon Agnes Chatipwa MP
- Hon Prof Eta Banda MP

**Central Malawi**
- Hon Dr Jean Kalilani MP
- Hon Theresa Mwale MP
- Hon Otria Moyo Jere MP
- Hon Eunice Chisale MP
- Hon Joyze Azzizi Banda MP
- Hon Rachael Zulu MP
- Hon Maureen Bondo MP
- Hon Jean Sendeza MP
- Hon Hyacinta Chikaonda MP
- Hon Agness Penumulungu MP
- Hon Christine Chiwoko MP
- Hon Delia Kankhwani MP
- Hon Grenner Gambatula MP
- Hon Halima Daudi MP

**Southern Malawi**
- Hon Grace Maseko MP
- Hon Anna Kachikho MP
- Hon Eunice Kazembe MP
- Hon Reen Kachere MP
- Hon Margaret Mauwa MP
- Hon Anne Lemani MP
- Hon Juliana Mphande MP
- Hon Cecilia Chazama MP
- Hon Berndetta Maliro MP
- Hon Gloria Ntopi MP
- Hon Mwalone Jangiya MP
- Hon Eunice Makangala MP
- Hon Jennifer Chilunga MP
- Hon Gertrude Maseko MP
- Hon Gladys Tembo MP
- Hon Philomena Kasambwe MP
- Hon Loney Chijere-Chirwa MP
- Hon Eunice Napoleon MP
- Hon Anita Kalinde MP
- Hon Nasrin Mia Pillane MP
- Hon Vera Chilewani MP
- Hon Patricia Kaliati MP

**Regional Districts**
- Mzimba North East
- Chitipa South
- Likoma Islands
- Nkhata Bay West
- Karonga North West
- Nkhotakota South East
- Nkhata Bay South
- Dowa Central
- Mchinji West
- Kasungu West
- Mchinji East
- Lilongwe Mpenu Nkhoma
- Mchinji North
- Lilongwe Kumachenga
- Lilongwe South West
- Dedza West
- Lilongwe City South East
- Lilongwe Mapuyu North
- Salima North West
- Kasungu North North East
- Dowa South East
- Zomba Changalume
- Phalombe North
- Chiradzulu South
- Neno South
- Chiradzulu North
- Zomba Thondwe
- Blantyre South West
- Blantyre North East
- Chikhwawa Central
- Nsanje South
- Machinga Likwenu
- Blantyre City Central
- Zomba Nsondole
- Balaka North
- Neno North
- Chiradzulu Central
- Zomba Chingale
- Thyolo South
- Thyolo North
- Balaka West
- Nsanje South West
- Mulanje West
Hon Cecilia Chazama’s family has had roots in her rural constituency for around 100 years. Everyone knows her.

“This is where I come from,” she says as she travels round her Blantyre North East constituency, which sits to the north of Blantyre, Malawi’s biggest city.

She knows every inch of the area, from the Lunzu township, which turns into a party hotspot after dark, to the most isolated corners where women’s lives have scarcely changed since their great grandmother’s time.

“Amayi Boma – women of the government” is the cry that goes out each time she stops to chat. “I need to be a jack of all trades,” she laughs as she is lobbied by teachers, village elders, and community-based organisations, all with a list of demands.

“I have been very careful to explain the role of an MP,” she says. “So I get very few cases of people asking me for money – they know that I cannot afford it, and more importantly, it is not my responsibility.”

“During my election campaign I was very careful to sensitise local NGOs that my role was to campaign for that development, to put pressure on Ministries, and local officials. To work with the chiefs and village elders to plan our priorities.”

When she stood for election in 2009, she had a clear manifesto.

“I made three pledges,” she explains. “To rehabilitate the Lunzu bridge, to get a new Community Day Secondary School and a Government health clinic”.

She is still negotiating with the Ministry of Education about the school. “At the moment pupils have to walk up to 18 kms to get to their nearest secondary school. Girls risk being abused when they have to walk these distances.”

She has secured the health clinic, and work on the bridge is complete.

“People said I was a crazy woman when I promised to get it fixed during the 2009 election campaign. Work started in 2010,” she laughs.

One of her passions is women’s reproductive health. She works with village women to encourage them to get tested for HIV/AIDS and cervical cancer.

“I just chip and chip away,” she says before hosting a meeting with around two hundred women and girls. “If we can get the public health message out to women and educate our girls – the sky’s the limit for them.”

It was the local chiefs who encouraged her to stand in 2009, after losing in the general election five years previously. “I stood as an independent in 2004 and lost,” she explains. “I wasn’t keen to stand again after the bitter campaign, but the chiefs said I should.”

“I hope to leave a legacy, so that the people know to use an MP, not as an individual but as a resource. When I first started doing consultation meetings, I was a bit skeptical. Our tradition is that people want things they can see, but now I understand that people also need to know things.

“We need to empower people, not treat them as children.”
Role of the Women’s Caucus

The overall goal of the Parliamentary Women’s Caucus in Malawi is to promote gender ideals and women empowerment in all legislative activities. However, its specific objectives are as follows:

- Advocating and lobbying for policies and pieces of legislation that promote gender mainstreaming and gender equity in all spheres of the Malawian society
- Promoting the gender agenda through facilitation of policy and legislative interventions on issues affecting women in the social, cultural, economic and political arena
- Facilitating the effective implementation of the national gender policy
- Promoting gender equality and equity at all levels of human development in Malawi
- Developing and establishing norms and standards that promote the effective participation of women in Parliament
- Sensitising all Parliamentarians on the principles, policies and regulatory frameworks governing gender equality and equity in order to facilitate their effective representative, legislative and oversight functions
- Providing a forum for discussion on matters affecting women in the country, regionally and internationally
- Facilitating networking with other organisations within and outside Malawi, in activities aimed at promoting women empowerment and the advancement of the gender agenda.

In order to realise its goals and objectives, the Caucus carries out its activities in line with the Strategic Plan of the Malawi National Assembly for the period 2010-2015; the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Government of Malawi’s overarching policy framework: the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS).

Activities and successes

Although it was set up in 2002, the Women’s Caucus was only formally recognised as a Committee in 2010. It got full recognition in the recently reviewed Standing Orders of the National Assembly. These are yet to be adopted by the House. Notwithstanding these procedural delays in placing the Women’s Caucus in the mainstream Parliamentary structures, the Caucus receives tremendous support from the Malawi Parliament and other development and co-operating partners such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Scottish Parliament, the Active Learning Centre (ALC), and the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

Specifically, the Women’s Caucus has been involved in a number of activities including:

- It has considered a number of policy issues and gender-related laws such as:
  - The Wills and Inheritance Bill
  - The Child and Protection Act
  - The Gender Equality Bill (which was recently successfully passed in Parliament)
  - The Land Bill
- The Women’s Caucus has held consultative meetings with different stakeholders in various sectors across Malawi and Members have familiarised themselves with their activities in relation to women and children
- The Caucus lobbied the Department of Reproductive Health and Ministry of Finance for an increase in the budget allocation on Family Planning in Malawi, to ensure that the problem of maternal mortality is reduced in the country
- The Women’s Caucus has built networks with many women within, and outside Malawi. Members have participated in international conferences and meetings on gender equality, as well as local ones, which contribute to the empowerment of women in Malawi
- Members have monitored activities that promote the economic empowerment of rural women; also activities that tackle the challenges of maternal health in rural areas and came up with recommendations
- The Members have carried consultative meetings with the community in their constituencies on the issues which affect women with the support of the Active Learning Centre focusing in particular on: gender equality in political representation; securing better access for poorer women to microloans; securing sustainable access to clean water and securing better reproductive health
- The Caucus has lobbied key stakeholders for inclusion in their programmes of women empowerment projects.
More than half of Malawi’s population is female – over seven million women and girls, most of them living in villages.

There has been some progress made in closing the gender gap between men and women in recent years.

The Government of Malawi’s latest Gender and Development Index (2011) shows that there is now gender parity with respect to primary and secondary school enrolments, with girls slightly surpassing boys. But many girls continue to drop out of school early, often because of early marriage or pregnancy.

And women still fare worse than men in most other social indicators, including health, tertiary education and literacy.

Urban plots and houses are almost all owned by men (80%) and the National Census of Agriculture and Livestock (2007) suggests that there are 6.7 million rural plots in Malawi. Men operate 4.4 million and women 2.3 million.

Malawi is rare, in that it has both matrilineal and patrilineal customary ownership systems, yet even in those districts where the matrilineal society dominates, men usually assume control over how the land is used, and how the money from the sale of produce is spent.

The Deceased Estates (Wills, Inheritance and Protection Act), passed in 2011 offers some protection to widows and children against property grabbing, and the proposed Land Bill will offer further protection, but there also needs to be significant societal changes if women are to claim their full rights.

Since 2011 the Women’s Legal Resources Centre has worked with the Active Learning Centre to support the Women’s Caucus to deliver the Building Better Democratic Dialogue project.

The women MPs have gathered a significant body of evidence about the issues that matter to their constituents, and not surprisingly the same concerns were expressed across the country, from Karonga in the North, to Nsanje in the South.

Women need access to microfinance, so that they can increase their household income, yet studies in microfinance have found that formal lenders prefer to give loans to households with “diversified asset portfolios and…diversified incomes”. This puts woman at a clear disadvantage.

Access to safe water is another issue that dominated the MPs community engagement meetings. Although official figures show Malawi to have 80% water supply coverage, Water Aid believes that the number of people with reliable access is far lower.

Women earn nearly 50% less than men in the informal economy – where most women earn a living.

Malawi has one of the lowest rates of contraceptive use among sexually active women aged 20-24 years old in the SADC region, at only 36.1% (SADC Gender Protocol 2012 Barometer).
Experience shows that boreholes and hand pumps break easily, often through vandalism. Spare parts go missing, and the men in a village are often reluctant to spend money on fixing a borehole, as “water is women’s work”.

A woman’s reproductive health is a big determinant in how her life will be. As HE President Banda wrote recently, “Women who can choose when to have children and how many they will have are more likely to complete their education, start small businesses and participate actively in society...This is why efforts to improve the lives of women and children reinforce efforts to strengthen our economy and reduce poverty.”

There are 675 deaths per 100,000 live births (DHS 2010) – with bleeding accounting for 40% (WHO)

The Gender Equality Bill, passed in February 2013, guarantees women access to reproductive health services, but the challenge remains to find the resources required to provide adequate health services for the millions of women and girls who require them.

Low levels of literacy, and limited autonomy within the family and community also limit most women’s ability to access reproductive health care, whether that is contraception or when in labour. And socio-cultural practices, such as Fisi(hyena) where a man sleeps with a girl or woman to remove the omen of death, are still a terrible reality for many women.

Progress in gender equality is inexorably intertwined with the political empowerment of women.

Malawi is a signatory of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, which has 28 targets with a deadline of 2015. One of those targets is to “endeavor to ensure that 50% of decision-making positions in all public and private sectors are held by women through the use of affirmative action measures.”

Malawi has made some progress with 22.8% women elected to Parliament in 2009, and the appointment of Her Excellency President Joyce Banda in April 2012, Africa’s second woman leader.

The successor to the 50-50 campaign, which involves government, civil society and development partners, is determined to increase the number of women elected to parliament and local government in the 2014 elections.

Central to that ambition must be the retention of the existing women MPs, whose skills, experience and knowledge gained over the last four years, are too valuable an asset for Malawi to lose.

The Women’s Legal Resources Centre was set up in 2006 to help facilitate access to legal, socio-political and economic justice for women and girls in Malawi.

We have a staff team of 29 and currently work in eight districts: Dedza, Balaka, Mangochi, Mwanza, Mzimba, Neno, Salima and Zomba on a range of actions.
Nowhere is the impact of deforestation more obvious than in Hon Nasrin Mia Pillane’s constituency.

The Balaka district in the Southern region is hot and dry, and years of felling trees for firewood and charcoal has led to damaging soil erosion. But with support from their MP, and commitment from their chief and village elders, the women of Sosolo village are slowly bringing their woodlands back to life.

“There are around 380 women who come together every Thursday to plant trees and care for them,” explains Nasrin as she drives towards a community meeting.

“It may seem a slow process, planting and growing trees, but we need to find sustainable solutions to the problems facing villagers here and across Malawi. I can bring soap and salt when I visit, this will meet the women’s short term needs, but it is through projects like this that we will develop our country.”

Nasrin is a very modern politician. After her election in 2009, she spent the next year mapping her constituency using her car’s GPS system and a simple piece of software designed by her husband, an IT expert.

“So now I can show local officials, donors and others exactly where the problems are in my constituency. My map shows where women have to walk several kilometres to the nearest maize mill, or borehole, so it makes it much easier to argue for new resources, and in the right place.”

Nasrin grew up in Balaka West. Her family home is on the outskirts of Balaka town, a thriving trading centre 130 kms north of Blantyre.

“I am very proud to represent the people I grew up with, although sometimes it is frustrating as I can’t make change happen quickly enough. And it is more difficult being a woman MP than it is for a man. I think people expect more from us.”

Water, that most basic commodity, is something Grenner Gambatula thinks about a lot.

Her constituency, in the Central region, is dominated by large tobacco estates and, as one chief explains, “NGOs won’t help because most people live on one of the tobacco estates, and are supposed to be near boreholes.”

The reality is somewhat different, with thousands of Grenner’s constituents forced to squeeze water out of the ground, from unprotected, natural wells. The dirty grey water needs boiling before use, but as Grenner explains, “many women don’t know this, so they cook with dirty water. And the children drink it straight from the ground. They have no option.”

Grenner has lobbied water NGOs, civil servants, even water engineers in the UK in her attempts to get more bore-holes in her area. “I am trying to put together a plan with the local people, to secure resources to make it easier for them to access safe water, but it is tough. My constituency is very large, so there are many villages without bore-holes.”

She has also spent a lot of time thinking about the challenges facing women MPs, compared to their male colleagues.

“I was born here in this constituency,” she explains, “but my husband was born in Thyolo, in the South.

“Before the 2009 elections, I had to convince the chiefs that I would not spend any money in my husband’s home village.”

“There are also higher expectations of a woman MP, and at the same time, it considered okay to insult women candidates during the campaign.”

“I am not regretting standing, in fact I love it. I feel I’m making an impact. But it can be slow, it can be frustrating. I believe women are geared to delivery. We have more to prove.”
Hon Chimango Mughogho MP  Chitipa South

“Life is very tough for many people, particularly women.”

It takes Chimango Mughogho eight hours to reach her Northern constituency from Lilongwe, with half the journey bumping over rough, rocky roads. And there is not a single mile of tarmac road in her Chitipa South constituency, home to 28,000 people.

“Life is very tough for many people, particularly women,” explains Chimango. There is only one small clinic here in the trading centre, so women in labour can travel 20 kms for help. It is 130 kms to the nearest district hospital, in Chitipa. “I want to see clinics in each of the four zones of my constituency, but my number one priority is water in each area. We need more boreholes. And teachers’ houses.”

The needs of the women at the Nthalire Napham group are even more basic. This community based organisation supports women with HIV/AIDS. “This is the group that needs most help,” says Chimango during one of her regular visits to their small office that she helped them secure.

“The ARV programme is good, but the women need good food if they are to survive, and many of their children are positive too, so they need to eat healthily. It is a struggle. I do what I can.”

One of her ideas is to encourage new ways of farming in her constituency. “Farming is the only way for us here in Chitipa South,” she explains, “that is why I am trying a model farm here at my home, working with local women.” “We are testing soya and different varieties of maize. And we hope to raise cows for milk”.

Chimango is a young politician, in her early thirties. Her father inspired her to get into politics. “It is challenging for women, particularly a young woman, to be a politician.

“But I get support from the people here. I work closely with the traditional leaders, local officials, and the people. I take their concerns to the parliament and the government. It is only by working together that we will develop.”

Hon Professor Eta Banda MP  Nkhata Bay South

“The work is done by the people, by the chiefs, the party leaders. It is a team. I feel privileged to be part of the team.”

Professor Eta Banda, the MP for Nkahata Bay South was a health professional before winning her seat in 2009. She brings the same rigour to her constituency work, as she did to her career.

“I did a baseline survey of the constituency in 2008, before the election,” she explains. “We then developed a five year plan with the chiefs and other stakeholders. Of course the list of actions is very long, sometimes things fall off, and new issues will emerge, but we keep plugging away at it.”

She is assiduous in consulting with all the stakeholders in her constituency, from the area’s three chiefs to young primary school teachers. They are as much the owners of the action list as their MP.

The list could be easily replicated across Malawi: microfinance projects, small bridges, building teachers’ houses (19 at the last count) and a clinic for HIV/AIDS. But perhaps the most striking of Professor Banda’s interventions is her scholarship fund for secondary school students.

Even the most basic secondary schools in Malawi – the government’s community day secondary schools - attract fees of around K10,000 – K15,000 (£20 - 25), which is beyond most village families.

The fees for the government boarding schools, where the brightest students go, are at least four times as much, an impossible sum for local widow Maria.

“I stand here to thank Professor Banda for what she has done. My two girls were selected to go to Bandawe Girls School, they are very intelligent but I could not afford to pay the fees,” she explains. “Professor Banda told me not to worry, her Foundation would give them scholarships. So now my girls are in Form 3.”

Professor Banda is embarrassed, but touched, by Maria’s gratitude. “Everyone says ‘zikomo Eta’” she explains, “but it is not Eta. The work is done by the people, by the chiefs, the party leaders. It is a team. I feel privileged to be part of the team.”
In May 1999 life in Scotland changed forever with the creation of a new Scottish Parliament.

The Parliament was different in many ways from the Westminster Parliament that had helped create it. The working hours, the unicameral system, the shape of the chamber, all gave the impression of a very modern legislature.

But perhaps most striking was the number of women - nearly 40% of the MSPs were female. I was one of those women, and had the honour of being the first woman ever elected to a Scottish Parliament.

From day one women were placed front and centre. However as women politicians we quickly learned that life was still not equal, or fair.

Attention quickly turned away from the policies and priorities of the women MSPs, to how they looked; their weight and how they spoke, rather than what they said. It was a period of intense scrutiny that very few of our male colleagues had to endure.

It did mean, however, that women from different parties came together to support each other, laying aside political differences to ensure that things moved forward.

Soon we were working together on policies such as domestic violence, childcare, breast-feeding and child poverty. For the first time women were able to drive forward an agenda for change from a woman’s perspective.

I came into Parliament with a background in community involvement and trade union representation. As a child I had grown up in a single parent family in a small rural town in the Scottish Borders, and my mother worked hard to give me the best chance possible. She was a millworker, and many thought I would follow in her footsteps. My mother had other ideas.

Like many women of her generation, she believed that girls, as well as boys, should realise their full potential and have a better standard of living than she had. She was my inspiration and I know that if I had been born fifty, even twenty years earlier, elected political office would not have been an option for me.
Malawi

In 2005 the Parliament decided to carry out an official visit to Malawi, and once again my life took an unexpected, but very welcome turn. From the first day that I set foot in Malawi, I felt at home.

Since then I have had the privilege of visiting many times and getting to know colleagues in the National Assembly. They have taken me to visit their constituencies, and they have visited mine. We have discussed at length the differences between our situations, but we have also recognised the similarities.

The unequal relationship that exists for women and men; the fact that women are expected to perform to a higher standard than their male colleagues, simply to be selected, never mind elected; the sometimes fraught relationship with the media.

We share the same passion to tackle issues of poverty and injustice and the frustration in making progress because of the bureaucracy that can sometimes bind parliaments and governments.

And, of course, the tension when your government or party wants you to do one thing, and your conscience tells you the other way is better.

Stark differences

The differences between our two countries are stark however. I never cease to be amazed that Malawi MPs are able to achieve as much as they do, given the little practical support they receive.

I had no personal wealth to help me get elected or to function as an MSP.

But our democratic system allows ordinary people to become MPs. I was paid a proper salary and had lots of practical and financial support, from the large parliamentary research department that provided me with detailed briefing on the most complex issues, to the allowances that enabled me to run a constituency office and employ staff to support me locally, and in the parliament.

Travelling round Malawi with parliamentary colleagues, I saw first hand how different things are. With no independent constituency office, MPs have to work from party offices, run by party supporters. And with limited support in Parliament, Malawi MPs must juggle the party flag with elected office in a way that we in Scotland do not.

The expectations from constituents, both before an election and after, are also very different. In Scotland there are now strict rules about election expenses and candidates are not able to offer any financial inducements; unlike during my grandparent’s time, when working people were often be told by their employers to vote for the candidate he supported.

In Malawi I have seen MPs being expected to distribute kwacha or maize in order to gain the support of chiefs and headmen, and so that of the villagers.

In Scotland if a constituent came to me in financial difficulties, I would put them in touch with the appropriate organisation for help. In Malawi an MP is expected to make a personal financial contribution to people in need.

In Scotland party affiliation is usually based on an ideology and shared values. Indeed, during my 12 years in the Scottish Parliament not one member crossed the floor.

In Malawi party ties seem less strong, perhaps because in policy terms there is often little difference between the parties.

Support for MPs

Scotland and Malawi operate in different worlds but if democracy is to thrive everywhere, and we are to empower women politically, then I firmly believe that politicians must have the necessary support they need to fulfil their duties.

Politicians would then be better able to represent all their constituents, and also better able to say no to their party when their conscience demands it.

Parliaments thrive when they are truly reflective of the society they represent, so any political system needs be able to support everyone who wants to be play an active role in their democracy, not only rich people.

I know, from working with them over the last few years, that the members of the Malawi Women’s Parliamentary Caucus have achieved much, often under very difficult circumstances.

Imagine how much more they could achieve if they enjoyed the practical support that I, as a member of the Scottish Parliament, took for granted. If I have learned anything in my time as a member of parliament it is that democracy can only take root with proper care and investment.

Karen Gillon was a Member of the Scottish Parliament from 1999 to 2011. As secretary of the Scottish branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association she was instrumental in building the links between the National Assembly of Malawi and the Scottish Parliament.
It is challenging enough for a woman MP to have to juggle the demands of her constituents, party interests and parliamentary responsibilities with her family life, without being asked to overturn, on her own, long-held cultural beliefs.

We also found, during the three years of the project, that Malawi’s women MPs are highly effective as leaders in their community and in the governance of their country. They may require technical and practical support – as all parliamentarians do, but they are at least as equal to their male colleagues in their skills and abilities.

We have set out five practical issues that we believe are worthy of further consideration by those interested in the political empowerment of women and the consolidation of democracy in Malawi, and elsewhere.

These are not prescriptions, rather ideas arising out of discussions with the Women’s Caucus and others and our own evaluation of the project.

Finally, as active participants in Scottish political life for 30 years, we have a personal observation to make.

Sustaining an effective multi-party democracy is a challenge for any nation – even those that have enjoyed its benefits for centuries, as we have in the UK.

Malawi’s multi-party democracy will be a mere 20 years old in 2014, when it holds only its fourth set of elections.

It faces economic, social and cultural challenges that would make even the most diligent British MP baulk.

Our work with the Women’s Caucus, both in the parliament and in their constituencies, suggest to us that the people of Malawi are well-served by their women MPs, and that they should be proud of these women who are doing all they can to effectively represent the people they serve.

**Better support for women MPs**

Parliamentarians in established multi-party democracies enjoy technical and financial support that is unheard of in most low-income countries, where democracy is still in its infancy and often fragile.

Each member of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) receives an annual allowance to allow them to employ staff for research and constituency casework, as well as an office in their constituency and one in the Parliament. In 2011, the expenses for the 129 MSPs totalled nearly £13 million.

Malawi MPs have no comparable support system, yet have to carry out a similar role to that of their colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, including to;

- Scrutinise and amend legislation and budgets
- Probe government policy
- Propose new bills
- Draft and deliver speeches and motions,
- Keep abreast of policy developments in-country and internationally
- Specialise in policy briefs
- Highlight constituents concerns
- Lobby development partners
- Work effectively with civil society, business and donors

Malawi MPs could be more effective if they benefited from a similar, if perhaps more modest, technical and staff support package as their parliamentary colleagues in Scotland, and other mature democracies do.

**Cross party working**

The Malawi Women’s Caucus has shown that women MPs can cross party divides and work together for the empowerment of all women and girls.

Even when they have to operate in a challenging political environment, such as the aftermath of the death of the late President Mutharika, the Women’s Caucus continue to work effectively together.

They share information, channel common interests and discuss policy issues, particularly those relating to women. This cross party work fosters good governance, and should be recognised as an important element in the development of Malawi’s young multi-party democracy.
While the Caucus enables the women to strategise together, it also supports them as individual MPs giving the women more faith in their abilities to influence Ministries, party structures and local leaders.

There is potential for strengthening the role of the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus post the 2014 tri-partite elections, particularly in its role in providing budget oversight, improving public service delivery, promoting gender-based or minority legislation, and ensuring such legislation is enforced. A stronger Women’s Caucus would also maintain the momentum in changing Malawi’s political culture.

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Development partners, and other relevant parties, could consider now, in advance of the 2014 elections, how best to support the Women’s Caucus to ensure that the new Caucus can play an effective role in the new legislature as soon as possible after the elections.

Local government post 2014

In 2014, Malawi will elect its first cohort of local councillors since 2000. This new tier of elected officials will have responsibility for local development as set out in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy 2.

Unlike in most other democracies, Malawi MPs have voting rights in their councils. Councillors have a duty to lobby their MP on local matters that need a national response, so the relationship between MPs and councillors will be key to achieving sustainable development and delivering pro-poor public services.

The members of the Women’s Caucus have, since 2009, all worked hard to consult and collaborate with their constituency stakeholders, from Traditional Authorities through to district officials and women in villages.

The introduction of a new tier of elected representatives, with the lead responsibility for local development, may cause tensions, particularly in the first stages of this new relationship. Areas of possible tension include: casework, visibility, development projects, inter and intra party relationships.

Development partners, and other relevant parties, could consider now, in advance of the 2014 elections, how best to support the new relationship between women MPs and women councillors so that the two groups work effectively together. Formal collaborative meetings between MPs and councillors is just one of the activities that could be considered for support.

Working with international organisations

International organisations, in particular large NGOs, play a significant role in delivering development in an MP’s constituency, from the provision of school meals to sinking boreholes and building of health clinics.

The relationship between individual MPs and the NGOs that deliver pro-poor services vary, with some very good, and a few so bad that MPs claim they are not consulted on where and how these services/projects are delivered, or kept updated on progress and impact.

There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that some international organisations do not even know the name of the MP for the constituency they are planning to work in.

Sustainable development requires consultation and collaboration between all partners to be successful. Donors and other funders could consider putting in place a protocol whereby an organisation would be obligated to provide an MP with a full briefing in advance of any activity in her constituency. In turn the MP agrees to share her knowledge and networks to ensure the project was in line with local and national priorities.

Retention of women MPs

Malawi’s 50-50 campaign, in advance of the 2009 elections, was successful in securing the country’s best ever female representation in the National Assembly – 22.8%, which is higher than the UK legislature, the “Mother of Parliaments”, achieved a year later (21.9%).

As the 2014 elections approach, and plans are being made for another campaign to recruit a large number of women parliamentary and local government candidates, the retention of the sitting women MPs may be overlooked. Yet international evidence suggests that there is a higher turnover rate of women parliamentarians than men.

As well as the usual support for women elected to parliament, such as capacity building, strengthening technical skills and support for cross-party caucuses, there is work to do to encourage political parties to support the retention of women.

Political parties could consider ways of ensuring that sitting women MPs are retained in future elections, such as guaranteeing that a sitting women MP will not be challenged at the party primaries, and that a woman replaces a sitting women in the event of a vacancy.
Mwalone Jangiya is the only woman in her party’s group of MPs. A former teacher, she represents a constituency in the Southern region of Malawi.

“My husband was a politician, and when he died during the primaries, the chiefs approached me to stand. It was a difficult decision for me, our culture usually underrates women, that’s a fact, but I am glad I stood. And I think the people are pleased too. I stay in the constituency, I am visible. I serve the people.”

One of the biggest challenges facing Mwalone is food security. “Famine is a big problem, our area can be dry, so maize can be scarce. This year I worked closely with local NGOs to feed around 1,000 under-fives in ten centres. The people are not sure of what an MP does, so they come to me when they are hungry. Where else would they go?”

Mwalone says one of her biggest achievements as an MP was to bring together opposing village headmen. “They were in different parties, so not working together. I told them that as the MP I work with everyone, we all have to work together.”

And she says she is a role model for young women and girls. “I tell them that I achieved what I have because of education. I am in Parliament because I was able to go to Balaka Secondary School.

“There is not a full girl’s secondary boarding school in my constituency, and I think there should be. One of the best ways to deal with secondary school drop out is by sending girls to boarding school. At home there are pressures on girls to do household chores instead of school work. At boarding school, it is about education and team work.”

Mwalone enjoys being an MP, despite its challenges. “I like meeting new people, learning new things. But it is hard, there is no job description. When I am in the constituency I start at 5.00 am and keeping going. I think we need more civic education to help people understand the role of an MP and the role of councillors.”

“And the 50-50 campaign in 2009 made a big difference for women candidates. It helped make us visible, and encouraged people to say ‘let’s work for the woman’.”

Hon Joyce Azzizi Banda MP LilongweMpenu Nkhoma

“If a woman is empowered, then they can protect their girl children, it makes a big difference to their lives and to the community.”

Joyce Azzizi Banda sees her job as MP for Lilongwe Npenu Nkhoma as a continuation of her former profession, a pharmacist in a government hospital.

“I enjoy working with people, helping them,” she explains. It was by working with people that she secured a network of boreholes for her constituency, which is an hour’s drive from the capital city centre.

“We needed more boreholes, so I mobilized the chiefs, we identified the problem areas, found out which NGOs were responsible, spoke to government officials and invited all the stakeholders to a meeting. This all takes time, but at the end of six months the money for new boreholes had been identified.”

She takes the same approach to microfinance. “Small loans make a big difference to women. The money empowers them to earn a living, and gives them a future. “Microloans make my job as an MP easier. If a woman is empowered, then they can protect their girl children, it makes a big difference to their lives and to the community. That is why I encouraged women to come together in small groups in microfinance clubs. Everyone makes a small contribution, and everyone can borrow from the fund.”

“My vision is for a big club.”

Like many of her colleagues in the Women’s Caucus, Joyce Azzizi has family connections in her constituency. “This is where my home village is,” she says. “And this is where my parents live.” Her son Charles is a big influence on her career too. “He encourages me in my political career. He is proud of me.”

The fate of women and girls is her passion. “I was a young widow. My husband was killed when our son was only six months old.”

“Women are so vulnerable. I know what that feels like, so now I try to do all I can for the women and girls in my constituency, working for them here, and in parliament.”
Useful contacts

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“My own experience has taught me that there is no limit to what women can do — from those who support their families in the hardest of circumstances to those who become ministers of gender affairs, health, finance, foreign affairs — or heads of state. If we are to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, we must do even better in tapping into women’s strength, women’s industry, and women’s wisdom.

This is not an issue confined to any one group of countries or societies. It is a universal issue.”

Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director, UN Women