

# A briefing note

November 2014



## Empowering women so that society thrives

It is now accepted that empowering women as political and social actors is necessary for the consolidation of democracy and development.

As Hillary Clinton said at the 2014 UN commemoration of International Women's Day, "When women succeed the world succeeds, when women and girls thrive, entire societies thrive. Just as women's rights are human rights, women's progress is human progress."

The Empowering Malawi Women as Leaders (EMWAL) project, funded by the Scottish Government, and supported by the Government of Malawi's Gender Ministry, was a cascade training project designed to identify and encourage as many women as possible to stand for Malawi's local government elections in 2014.

In Malawi's last local government elections in 2000, only 8.3 per cent of councillors elected were women (69 out of 842 wards). As local government is responsible for the delivery of public services, such as education, health and water, a strong women's voice at this level government is crucial for sustainable, and equitable development to take root.

The Active Learning Centre (ALC) from Scotland and the Women's Legal Resources Centre (WOLREC) from Malawi delivered the project. It benefitted greatly from an advisory group that included the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the NGO Gender Co-ordination Network and UN Women, which opened an office in Malawi in the autumn of 2012. And it was a key element of Malawi's 50:50 Strategy for the 2014 tripartite elections.

Learning from Malawi's 2009 50-50 campaign, and elsewhere, shows that an early lead time is essential for any programme to support women aspirants and candidates to be effective. That is why the project was designed to start two years before the May 2014 elections.

The project used a cascade-training model - a well-established form of adult learning, and one that is proven to work. It has the advantage of being able to increase exponentially those who benefit from training, and is cost effective.

The project drew its 41 democracy trainers from the Ministry of Gender's network of district community development staff and civil society. In order to cover the whole country, and its 28 districts, the project drew up 20 clusters, with a pair of trainers assigned to each one.

## A copy of EMWAL's external evaluation is available at:

[www.activelearningcentre.org](http://www.activelearningcentre.org) or email [info@activelearningcentre.org](mailto:info@activelearningcentre.org)  
[www.wolrec.org](http://www.wolrec.org) or email [info@wolrec.org](mailto:info@wolrec.org)

Each pair of trainers had to carry out four local training courses, for up to 100 women aspirants in their cluster over an 18-month period. This local training programme was supported by three Trainers for Trainers/review workshops (one held in each of Malawi's three regions), as well as on-going support from WOLREC and the Ministry of Gender.

The identification of women aspirants was challenging at first. As expected the first round of training included women who were clearly not going to take their interest any further, although no training is wasted.

The trainers also had to deal with difficult situations, e.g. when local leaders put forward women relatives who were neither qualified nor ready to contest as councillors.

An effective dialogue with the political parties was crucial to the success of the project. The national secretariats of the political parties were briefed about the project at the outset, and senior representatives from eight parties took part in a session at the second Training of Trainers in Blantyre.

Following this WOLREC oversaw a process where the training pairs held briefings with the local party officials, and this led directly to an improvement in the quality of the participants in the next three training rounds.

After discussion at the technical working group of the 50:50 Strategy, it was agreed to hold the final round of training after the candidates had been selected, to guarantee that every women candidate for the local government elections received training in her locality.

Over the course of the project around 1,700 women benefitted from training in every district of Malawi, but the percentage of women councillors only increased by a few points (from 8.3 to 12 per cent).

Alice Harding Shackelford, of UN Women Malawi reflects on some of the reasons for the poor performance of women candidates in the both the local and parliamentary elections in this briefing paper.

And as the decision about which women – and men – stand for election in a multi-party democracy is largely taken by political parties, it is hard to escape the conclusion that only legal quotas will achieve equality of representation, whether in Malawi or Scotland.

**Maggie Banda, Danny Phillips and Susan Dalgety**  
Blantyre and Glasgow, November 2014

## Reflections on Malawi's Tripartite Elections 2014

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From being the second country in Africa with a female President and 24% women in Parliament, Malawi now has one of the SADC lowest rates of political representation of women. Within the SADC region, as of now, only Botswana, Swaziland, Zambia and DRC have less numbers of women in Parliament.

The 2014 Tripartite Elections on 20th May 2014 resulted in 16% of women in Parliament (32 women) and 12% in local councils (56) and no female President or Vice-President. The National Assembly does, however, now have a female deputy speaker of parliament

For the record, in 2009, there were 234 female parliamentary candidates, while in 2014 there were 260 female candidates. A small increase in that regard is noticeable but not relevant. We congratulate the women elected and recognise that their professionalism and experience may bring new dimensions and perspectives to women's political participation.

### The country context underlines staggering figures:

- the highest number of child marriages in the world, where on average, one out of two girls in Malawi will be married by their eighteenth birthday
- one of the highest maternal mortality rates (460 per 100,000)
- 180 new HIV infections per day with 126 deaths
- girls' drop out rate stands at 15% between grades 5 and 8

These gender inequalities are impacting directly on the achievement of the MDGs, where 4 MDGs out of 8 will not be achieved (MDG 1,3,4 and 5).

Steady progress on women political participation had been made in Malawi: from 6% women members of Parliament in 1994 up to 24% in 2004 showing effective strategies and focus by private and public stakeholders. At the same time, political parties structures fell away enabling the progress of women at institutional level. The original draft of the Gender Equality Act (passed in 2013) included quotas for political parties but this was removed in the final version.

The number of independent candidates elected to the new Parliament and local councils is further evidence that political parties are not always effective in terms of representing political aspirations and mediating those at constituency and ward level. There are 25% independents in Parliament, of which 12 are female.

Political parties play a key role in ensuring women's political representation both in terms of capacity building and empowerment

as well as legitimising and incentivising women in the political sphere. In a conservative and patriarchal context such as Malawi, there is an imperative need to engage specific actions to address cultural and societal discrimination of women and their role in society. The way political parties embrace this commitment is key and it is clear that in Malawi at this time much work is required. In particular, quotas for women political representation are urgently needed.

Political manifestos did include increased attention to gender equality issues and some highlighted key critical areas such as the elimination of violence against women and girls, girls' education and economic empowerment. This will be very important for the work of then new Parliament providing entry points to further advance the gender equality agenda in Malawi.

Primaries are always a very important step in the electoral process and showed very clearly the challenges for female candidates. They resulted in only 20% candidates in Parliament and 22% candidates in local councils. No specific material assistance and training was provided to aspirants, except one intervention by the Active Learning Centre and Wolrec (with funding from the Scottish Government). More support is required well in advance in terms of capacity building, assertiveness and confidence. This has to be a regular process and not just a few months before elections.

In this regard, the United Nations signed in 2013 a joint programme with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare on the Political Empowerment of Women for four years, therefore including not only the 2014 tripartite elections but particularly preparation for subsequent elections. No external funding has been raised up to now for this and UNDP and UN Women have used their core funding to support activities up until now.

The 50 - 50 campaign – following the SADC Gender Protocol target of 50 - 50 men and women by 2015 - supported by civil society, government and the UN since 2000, kept very strong focus on Parliamentary and local councils elections, with no focus on the Presidential one (where there were two female candidates).

It provided strong lobbying and regular follow up with main political parties including a communiqué early last year signed by main political parties calling for increased attention and inclusion of women, as well as trainings for all female candidates for parliament and local councils. Financial and material support was also provided to all female candidates (after the primaries) for Parliament and local councils.

The campaign should have started earlier and been maintained as an ongoing programme after the 2009 elections. The campaign should have been better focused, ensuring clear messages to counterbalance the negative women's stereotype, donors and others could have supported much more of what was made available and a lot of reflection is being made in this regard. What is clear is that this is to be regular advocacy and capacity building effort, advocacy for quotas and revision of the electoral system are a must for Malawi.

Underscoring one of the development contradictions in Malawi. On one hand everyone recognises the girl child as key to development of this country. But how many donors are directly supporting women political participation and specific efforts in this regard? Not many! Education and the girl child is key but needs to go together with a politically friendly environment where efforts are harmonised, gender equality priorities are integrated and institutions are held to account.

Another reflection is on mainstream election work and the need to ensure that a 50:50 campaign or women political representation and inclusion is integrated from the start in all the electoral support process including the electoral bodies and the basket funding being set up by development partners under UNDP coordination. Dissociating the two, as in Malawi, helps strengthen the thinking that this is not part of election support, and more a partisan and subjective approach. All the donor countries have signed clear commitments in this regard, from the Universal Declaration of Human rights, CEDAW and last but not least the Millennium Declaration and MDGs. This must change!

The female President – who had taken over after the death of the President Mutharika in April 2012 - was running as a presidential candidate and at the same time heading a new political party breaking from the elected majority party. The animosity between those groups dominated the political debate running up to elections.

Having a female President brought clearly strong dynamic of prejudice and resistance to a women leading and much rhetoric was devoted to her being a woman more than substantial issues and decisions. When Dr. Joyce Banda announced she would attend the funeral of Mandela, a newspaper cartoon showed her as part of the women's group in the back cooking for the funeral, in a clear attempt to diminish her leadership and representational role.

Dr Banda also had to deal with extraordinary political baggage: first the blowback from her efforts in Macro Economic Adjustment and an IMF loan agreement which initially resulted in a fast and furious inflation of food and fuel prices, followed by the Cashgate scandal, the scope of which was broadly understood by most Malawians.

Interestingly there was a technological development in play, that is at least two of the new radio stations, and Zodiak Radio in particular, broadcast across two channels mainstream radio and mobile social media. Both were accessed by a highly engaged electorate, and the impact may have been seriously underestimated by the incumbents.

This kind of negative campaigning against her as President and candidate (as well as president of her political party) had impact much beyond her and her party. I am convinced that this impacted on the overall elections campaign where generally women have been voted against more than voted for. This looked very much like a vote of no confidence in women and not Dr. Joyce Banda. The campaign against Joyce Banda helped strengthen the negative stereotype about women and their capacity to lead. In this regard, the impact of the female president can be seen as negative.

How well the president played the gender card to ensure that women would join hands together more than dividing across political parties and legions will be left to history to judge, women came out as more divisive than cohesive, with tellingly no common message for the tripartite elections. Lost opportunity for sure!

The economic side of elections in terms of costs and financial investments for the campaign is a key factor that often plays against women who have less access to financial means and control over those. The use of handouts, including cash as a political tool must urgently be reviewed, and consideration about abolishing this practice as in other African counties should be strongly considered.

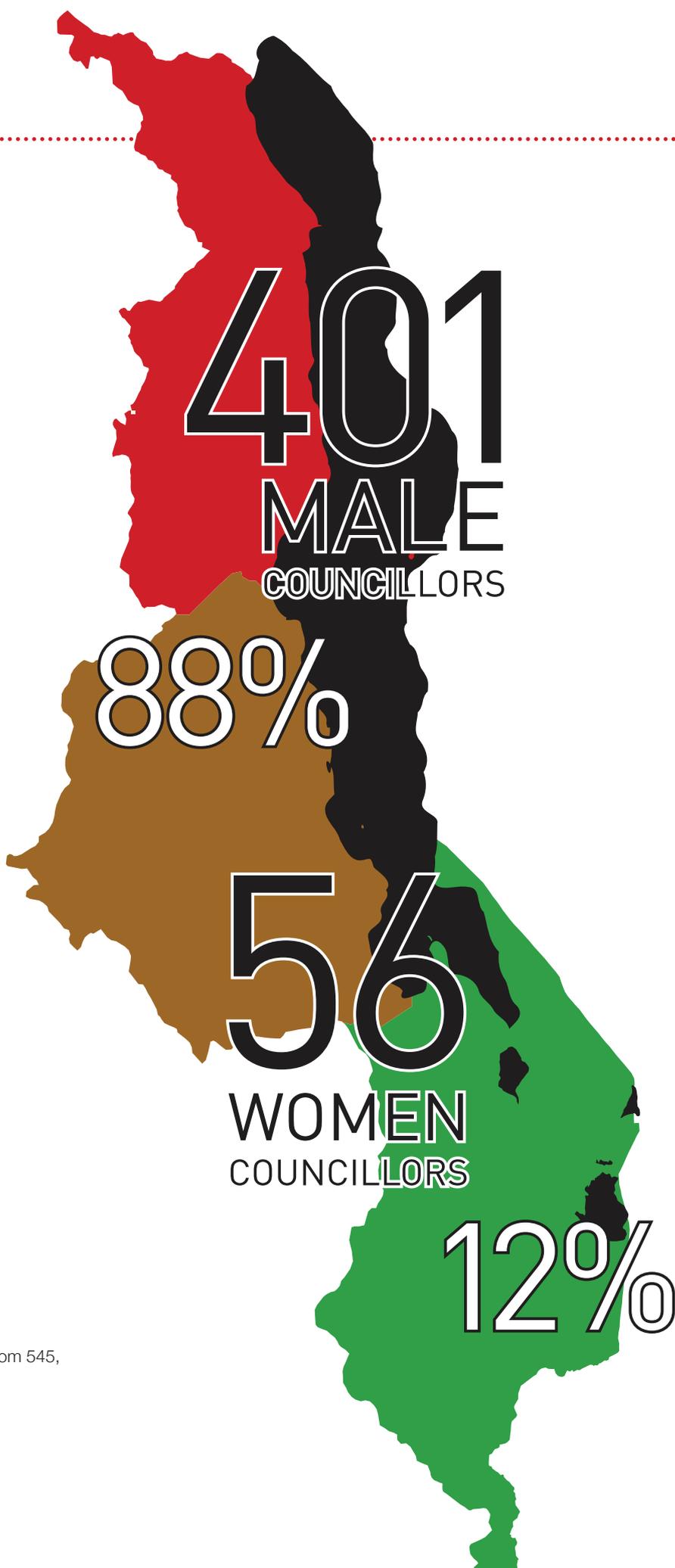
**Alice Harding Shackelford**  
**Lilongwe 16 June 2014**

### So many lessons learnt:

- Not all women support other women
- We must look for things that join us and not those that divide us
- Progressive steps are more sustainable and effective
- Accountability mechanism to ensure that both men and women contribute is required and affirmative actions are key in this regard
- Elections are to be seen as a process and not just as an event. Political empowerment requires long term investment!
- Women's political participation is a key component of electoral support
- Keep on focusing on these issues and never give up! It is right for women to be in decision-making and ensure they contribute to everyone's development.

Malawi local government 2014:  
A gender breakdown

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Printed and published by the Active Learning Centre, Room 545,  
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