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The State of Internal Democracy within Women's interest groups in Malawi

By Happy Mickson Kayuni¹

Abstract

Vibrant women's interest groups are to a larger extent a recent phenomenon in Malawi's socio-political history. Locally and internationally, the contribution of voluntary organisations (including women interests groups) in actively creating possible spaces for new democratic practices is well acknowledged. However studies have not adequately analyzed the extent or degree of the internal democracy in these women interests groups. Furthermore, studies that examines the implication of the absence or presence of internal democracy in such groups is largely missing. Consequently, this paper aims at analyzing the state of internal democracy in Malawian women's interest groups. In addition, the paper examines whether the formal and informal relationships within these organizations anchor the democratic values in tandem with the prevalent political space. Taking a qualitative approach, the analysis combines the use of primary and secondary data. Secondary data was collected through literature review of various kinds of documents such as organizations constitutions, mission statements, background information and reports. Primary data was collected through field interviews with women and men in women-led organizations. Sampling from a pool of organizations under the umbrella body, Gender NGO Coordination Network, organizations headed by women were purposely selected for the study on which this paper is based. The study findings show that the sampled women's interest groups in Malawi are inclined towards democratic structures but have operationally limited democratic practice.

Keywords: Qualitative, Malawi, Internal Democracy

Introduction

The era of multiparty democracy in the 1990s saw the mushrooming of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Malawi just like in most third wave democracies. The role played by the civil society in bringing about pluralistic politics raised hopes that NGOs² would further lead to increased standards of living for the masses. Globally, NGOs are viewed as being more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of poor communities, minorities and women. It is perhaps this track record that leads them to command more legitimacy in the eyes of the poor than do governmental structures. Within the broad range of NGOs, as a "third sector" existing between the realms of government and business are the women's interest groups. Much of the gender studies in the early 1990s focused on the state-NGO linkages and reinforced earlier findings of the democratic potential of this linkage (Ewig 1999). The studies however largely assumed that these NGOs practice a higher level of internal democracy. By focusing on women's

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² Although civil society and NGO are not necessarily the same, it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss this difference.

interest groups (also dubbed as Women NGOs) in Malawi, the paper explores the extent to which democratic practices are embedded in these selected organisations.

The first section defines and clarifies key concepts such as social movements upon which the women's interest groups are based. The next section discusses the theoretical perspectives from which the study draws its insights and this is followed by a section that focuses on the role of women's interest groups and their governance style. The concept of internal democracy and its applicability in this study is fully analyzed and discussed, especially its link to democracy consolidation, in the fifth section. The next section presents a methodological framework guiding the study. After methodology, the paper proceeds to provide a broad overview of women's interest groups in Malawi. This section presents the context that is followed up throughout the paper in the general analysis and discussion of internal democracy in Malawian women's interest groups. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting possible explanatory values to internal democracy in women's interest groups in Malawi.

The Conceptual Dilemma: Organized or Social Movements?

One of the challenges that confront studies on women movements is conceptual. The first is whether they should be regarded as social or organized movements (Diani 1992 in Banaszak, 2006). Social movements are defined as a mixture of informal networks and organizations that make clear "claims" that demand fundamental changes in the political, economic or social system, and are "outsiders" with respect to conventional politics, and utilize unconventional or protest tactics (Diani 1992 in Banaszak, 2006). In this regard, the question that confronts analysts of women movements, especially those that have been formally registered, is where they should be categorized. As an organized movement, they are supposed to be purely operating along formal lines but it is also clear that in practice, such an approach is unlikely to be effective for the women's interest groups that operate from a less powerful position. Some scholars tend to conceptualise women's interest groups as social movements because of their shared attributes of the organized movements. Ampofo *et al* (2004:688), highlights this problem by pointing out that "at the center of questions regarding the relevance and application of research on women's and gender studies in Africa" is mainly on how to name the relevant concepts. It should be mentioned that the concept "women interests" is not universally accepted. According to Molyneux (1985), women have numerous interests hence it is not proper to aggregate these interests but she argues that instead, women have "gender interests". Ray and Korteweg (1999: 48) observe that third world studies on women activism and organisation shows "a central dilemma" which they call "the dilemma of particularism versus universalism". According to them, "there are still too many individual case studies that heighten the perception of uniqueness and nonreplicability on the one hand, and too many studies that tend to assume that all women want the same thing". Molyneux's (1985) view of gender interests is explained by arguing that gender interests are more practical or strategic. In other words, gender interests are derived from the actions taken by women or men to ensure that there is equality in society. This view however has been discredited by several scholars who note that the definition of practical or strategic interests is blurred (Ray and Lind in Ray and Korteweg 1999: 50).

With such a bewilderment of conceptual debates, the next obvious challenge is the proper approach as well as relevant indicators to be utilized in assessing women's interest groups. Based on an analysis of several gender research methods in Africa, Ampofo *et al* (2004:688) point out that "recent research in African gender studies takes a multidisciplinary approach". In this

regard Banaszak argues that when we study women's movements we are therefore not analyzing clearly defined groups but rather a diffuse set of individuals, organizations and other informal groups that may have a bearing on various disciplines. The study of women's movements therefore focuses on multiple levels of a movement: (1) the micro level explores individual activists and their interactions; (2) the meso level examines groups and institutions, whether organized or spontaneous, and their interactions; finally (3) the macro level looks at the eclectic mix of challengers as a coherent whole often to examine over time trends or look comparatively across movements (Banaszak 2006). This study focuses on the first two levels of analysis. It should also be noted that the diffuse nature of social movements makes defining the boundaries of movements difficult, and increasingly movement scholars focus on these boundaries in interesting light. In this paper "Women's interest groups" as a term attempts to categorically lump together different types of organizations working exclusively for the welfare of women folk. As discussed above in relation to women organisations, there is no clear demarcation between social and organized movement hence for the purposes of this paper, they are assumed to be the same.

Theoretical Perspectives

Ampofo *et al*'s (2004:688) observation that gender studies in Africa takes a multidisciplinary approach also implies that the theoretical perspectives tend to overlap. Banaszak (2006), in his influential study, aptly points out that in analyzing the mobilization, activities, identity, and outcomes of women's movements, scholars often employ the three theoretical perspectives that dominate social movement research: *mobilizing structures*, *political opportunities*, and *ideational aspects*. These theoretical perspectives are not specific to a particular discipline but are more generic.

According to Banaszak (2006) *Mobilizing structures* are the formal and informal forms that social movements acquire as they develop. This understanding of mobilizing structures is also highlighted by McAdam *et al* (1996:3). Formal mobilizing structures within a movement include such things as the rules, norms and forms of organization within the movement. Informal structures include networks and the action repertoires that contribute to movement action. *Political opportunities* consist of the larger political environment; different aspects of this environment may provide spaces for women to mobilize or open targets that encourage the movement to act in certain ways, or windows of opportunity where the movement might be able to achieve certain action. On the other hand, political opportunities can also constrain women's movements. While the political environment has almost limitless characteristics that we can focus on, social movement scholars have tended to focus on political rules and institutions (both formal and informal), the characteristics of elites, alliances or political coalitions that act in the political sphere. In other words, Ray and Korteweg (1999: 53) point out that "women's movements are fundamentally shaped by political processes". Banaszak (2006) further states that the third theoretical focus of scholars has been on the social movement's *ideational elements* (or what Ferree and Mueller [2005:597] call "meaning work"). Ideational elements are those aspects of ideology, values, norms and beliefs that influence the social movement or its actions. Within the social movement itself, ideational elements particularly play key roles in two related processes. First, a central part of the mobilization and action of social movements involves the creation and maintenance of a movement *collective identity*, which occurs largely through ideational processes. Social movement identity is created by developing common ideas, norms

and values that define the movement (Bernstein 1997); important aspects of this process include demarking the goals and underlying ideology of the movement, delineating the source of the problems, and defining the difference between the movement and the “other”.

Whilst focusing on internal democracy of women's interest groups, this study is indirectly informed by two of these three theoretical aspects in the analysis i.e. mobilizing structures and ideational aspects. Specifically, in tandem with the elements of internal democracy discussed below, the paper critically analyses the extent to which the mobilization and ideational aspects conform to the criteria of internal democracy.

The Role of Women's interest groups and their Governance Style

The distinguishing commonality in women movements as viewed by Katzenstein and Mueller (1987: 5) is that these movements share a “transformational character”- a hope to “reformulate ... public life, the educational sphere, the work-place, and the home” (Margolis, 1993). These movements derive their mandate from the conviction that as majority proportion of the population, women ought to take lead in addressing their plight. As such, these movements are praised not only for their indispensable roles in the emancipation of women but also in ensuring that women participate in the developmental and political processes. Another scholar, Young (1993:157) emphasized that a key ingredient in the Women NGO is that of transformatory potential. The crucial element in transformatory thinking is the need to transform women's position in such a way that the advance will be sustained. Equally important is that women should themselves feel that they have been the agents of the transformation, that they have won this new space for action themselves. The assumption behind transformatory potential is that the process of women working together and solving problems on a trial and error basis, of learning by doing and also of learning to identify allies and forging alliances when needed, will lead to empowerment, both collective and individual.

Karl (1995) asserted that there can be no true people's participation in governance and development without the equal participation of women and men in all spheres of life and levels of decision making (Cited in Akpabio, 2000). Akpabio further notes that while international bodies and governments enunciate laws and provide the enabling environment for women's integration into national economies, women have been aiding in the integration process by forming themselves into women NGOs for the purposes of empowering themselves. It should be pointed out that the true meaning of the term women's movement is wider than the feminist movement (Beckwith 2000; Ferree and Mueller 2005 in Banaszak 2006). In fact the larger category of women's movements includes a number of other movements that mobilize women as a group with the articulated interests of the movement focusing on women.

Scholars have found that women's presence in traditionally male dominated institutions makes a difference in how those institutions reach decisions. Several studies (Gilligan 1982; Stivers 2002 in Barakso 2007) observes, women's leadership style, for example, has been found to differ from men's: Women appear more likely than men to seek consensus and solicit input from others, and are generally more likely to encourage participation. Even in politics, many researchers believe that women do politics differently from men. Chau, Clark, and Clark (in Margolis 1993), argue that women's approach to politics differs significantly from the current male-dominated style of decision making. Yet, as Barakso (2007) notes, these studies generally compare women's and men's behaviour in organizations that are not only numerically dominated by men but that were also initially formed by men. As important as it is to understand how

women behave in existing institutions, this approach may also obscure aspects of women's organizational behavior. Beckwith (2000) also notes that women also participate in other movements as women where the goals of these movements do not necessarily focus on women's interests but Banaszak (2006) argues that many of the advances made in understanding women's movements explain how women act and organize within other movements. In line with these studies while taking into account the Malawian context, the question to be addressed is that "Do the governing structures of organizations that women created and that women dominate reflect a common commitment to democratic styles of organizational leadership?" (adopted from Barakso, 2007).

Although Ndinda (2009) identifies and discusses several measures of women empowerment such as United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (focusing on gender disaggregated data) and the Gender Empowerment (GEM) Index. There is no general agreement on the best approach to measure empowerment (Dahlerup 2006). Beteta (2006) for instance criticizes the GEM approach and suggests her own approach. Within this context of lack of a common approach to empowerment, some have noted that empowerment is not something that can be done by outsiders "to" people. In other words development cooperation initiatives are doomed to fail if they seek to "empower women" but should create the conditions whereby women can become the agents of their own development and empowerment. The Beijing Platform for Action recognized that a key aspect to empowerment is women's participation in formal political structures and agreed to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making; and increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

All in all, the main target of Women's interest groups are the women and the girl-child, and their main objective is to emancipate the female folk, raise their living standards and fight against gender equality (Clark 2004). Women's interest groups co-ordinate and finance women's development programmes. They also help to mobilize the traditional strength of women, in order to promote their participation in the development of human and natural resources for sustainable livelihood, as well as in the political arena (Akpabio 2000). Based on empirical studies, the governance style of women-led organisation tends to be more democratic and participatory hence there is a greater potential for enhancing participatory democracy in their impact areas (Barakso 1997).

Internal Democracy of NGOs and Democracy Consolidation: Drawing the Line

Notwithstanding the various contentions in relation to the concept of democracy, it is generally regarded as a system of governance that encourages "the presence of institutions and procedures through which citizens can express preferences about policies and leaders as well as constraint on the exercise of power by the Chief Executive [and the guarantee of civil liberties]" (Eckstein and Gurr in Liston 2009:5). Internal democracy can be viewed as the extent to which organisational members promote and adhere to organisational procedures, values, norms, practices and systems that are democratic in nature.

The BBC World Service in 2006 carried out a global opinion poll of 37,572 people in 32 countries, indicating approval levels of various institutions. The findings showed that 60% of the respondents felt that NGOs have had a positive influence; this approval rate for NGOs was higher than that placed on the United Nations and the World Bank (quoted in Unerman and O'Dwyer 2006:306). With such a higher approval rate "it is somewhat surprising that little

research has been published” relating to NGO accountability or internal democracy (Unerman and O’Dwyer 2006:306). Consequently, as champions of democratic principles, one of the critical questions that confront NGOs is that of internal accountability and representation which has a bearing on the status of their own internal democracy. Identifying dimensions or aspects of internal democracy for NGOs is not clear cut however. Ensuring that there is proper internal accountability entails that an organisation must have credible formal lines of accountability. This has some implications. Formalizing an NGO may in some cases impinge on some of its core characteristics such flexibility and adaptability. As Shah (2006:1) points out, “we have only to look to Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement, Martin Luther King and the American Civil Rights movement, the Solidarity movements in Poland, Ukraine and the Czech Republic...they did not have clear, formal lines of accountability”. Shah further points out that those who argue against internal democracy argue that “internal democracy can be costly, bureaucratic and time-consuming, and cripple the effectiveness of an NGO”. Specifically, Warleigh (2001) observes that most NGOs do not practice internal democracy for practical reasons. Halpin (in Liston 2009:6) is critical of the arguments in favor of internal democracy by pointing out that “organizations that are based on solidarity rather than representation do not need internal democratic methods”.

One possible setback for internal democracy of NGOs is in relation to grass root representation. Aart Scholte (in Shah 2006:1) observes that “there is a tendency for civil society activism to be dominated by, ‘Western-styled, Western-funded NGOs led by Westernized elites’...they are capable of sustaining their support while springing from a very narrow cultural focus.” Ndgewa (1996) similarly points out that most NGOs manifest “elitist governance structures” that do not reflect the ability of a common person/member to effectively and meaningfully participate in championing particular values, ideas and aspirations. Kardam (1995) and Ford-Smith (1989) have raised the issue of uneven power between beneficiaries and the organisations themselves. They point out that in many cases, accountability is not generally directed toward the beneficiaries, but rather to the donors and their domestic political masters. Kardam further points out that the agency staff are rarely rewarded for being responsive to local conditions.

Despite these arguments and observations against focus on internal democracy, it doesn’t imply that internal democracy has no relevance. As Shah aptly points out, what is important is that “a balance needs to be struck” (Shah 2006:2). There are several reasons why internal democracy of NGOs should be seriously considered. The most credible motivation for internal democracy of NGOs is their immediate assumed political impact on the wider community or state. Dicklitch (1998) and Diamond (1999) argue that NGOs can positively contribute towards democratic consolidation if *they show that they practice* internal democracy. Specifically, Diamond (1999: 228) aptly points out that:

An organisation may be able to represent group interests, check the power of the state, and perform many other democratic functions even if it is not internally democratic. But if, in its own patterns of governance, it perpetuates norms that penalize dissent, exalt the leader over the group, and cloak the exercise of power, one thing it will not do is build a culture of democracy. If CSOs are to function as “large free schools for democracy” they must function democratically in their internal processes of decision-making and leadership selection.

While referring to De Tocqueville, Liston (2009:5) argues that voluntary organizations [civil society] “act as a learning environment for democratic attitudes and behaviors”. Using empirical evidence, Elden (1981: 50-51) found that “Democratisation at work is clearly linked to politically relevant variables beyond the organisation” which includes the state itself.

In spite of the debates surrounding measurement and indicators of internal democracy the core issues in analyzing the internal democracy on NGOs include extent of: representation (Barrow and Jennings, 2001); donor dependence (Hudock, 1999); and democratic values in the general internal governance structures (Unerman and O’Dwyer, 2006). For the purposes of this study, these elements of internal democracy are being examined as follows:

- *Analysis of the organizations’ statutes and how they are implemented in practice:* their objectives; composition, tenure, and selection of the boards; appointment and role of the secretariat.
- *Membership participation and influence:* how many meetings, decision-making processes, level of member contribution to the operations of the organizations, transparency of organisational decision-making, professionalism of staff, and role of coalitions in enhancing internal accountability.
- *Funding:* donor driven or not- whose interest are they pursuing? And its implications on representation

These elements of internal democracy are being analyzed (in this paper) not necessarily in specific but generic terms.

Methodology

The study on which this paper is based was carried out among women’s interest groups in Malawi using qualitative approach. Sampling was purposely done among organizations that promote women interests and are also headed by women Executive Directors. These organizations are also affiliates of the umbrella Gender NGO Coordination Network whose chairperson was also interviewed. Although these organizations have their headquarters in Lilongwe and Blantyre, they have sub offices in some districts in the country; a total of 12 organisations were sampled and participated in the study. Since most of these groups are also members of Human Rights Consultative Committee, this mother body was also one of the sampled organisations. Data collection was done primarily using in-depth interviewing techniques based on a properly constructed interview guide- targeting the Executive Director and other organisational members. In cases where it was difficult to meet the respondent, a slightly modified questionnaire was used and respondents sent the responses electronically. In this case only two organisations submitted their responses electronically. To ensure that there is consistency the questionnaire for the said two organisations were mainly based on the original interview guide but the modifications were necessary to suit the context of the said organisations. Secondary data involved reviewing of documents, mission statements, leaflets, publications and reports. Data was analyzed by a process of systematic comparison, aggregation and categorization of issues according to recurring themes; in line with the aim of the study. Since the two questionnaires were based on the interview guide, the same process applied to the analysis of the data collected through electronically submitted questionnaires.

Broad Overview of Women's interest groups in Malawi

The organizations that could be considered as exclusively working for the interests of women are not as many as the study expected, especially when categorized according to their thematic areas. It became clearer during the process of purposive sampling that 16 out of 41 NGOs entirely exist for the promotion of women interests as an area of specialty. Most of the organizations could be identified with a range of issues thereby raising curiosity about the availability of expertise in all issues. This could be appreciated by presenting two umbrella organizational bodies relevant to the sample.

The umbrella body, NGO Gender Coordination Network (NGOGCN) was established in 1998 by NGOs with Ministry of Gender in recognition of the Beijing and Malawi Platform for Action that obligated Malawi to start looking seriously at issues of gender and women. NGOGCN is a national body with a total membership of over forty (41 at the time of interview) yet these include organizations with some interest in women issues but are mainly involved with general programmes in food security, health and other developmental issues. 16 of the 41 organizations in the body are exclusively promoting women interests. Even certain positions in the umbrella body are occupied with individuals from organizations well known for their prominent role in general human rights rather than women interests per se.

The other umbrella body where women interests groups could be sampled from is the Council for Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi (CONGOMA). In the past membership to CONGOMA was voluntary hence an NGO could choose not to belong to it. With the NGO Act in place membership shifted from being voluntary to mandatory. The Act establishes the NGO Board as a regulatory authority for all the NGOs in Malawi. In order for the Board to register an NGO it requires a proof of membership with CONGOMA. With this background, sampling was deemed very challenging using membership of CONGOMA. There are hundreds of organizations in place and verifying their mandates within the limited time proved to be a cumbersome task. As such the study preferred the NGOGCN membership. However, the interesting finding is that as a prerequisite for registration with CONGOMA, all NGOs need to have a constitution as well as a Trustee/Board. This entails that all women interest organisations that were sampled needed to have these in place.

Background to the formation of women's interest groups in Malawi

Ampofo *et al* (2004:705), advise that “for scholars on the continent, the guiding principle in social science research on women and gender in sub-Saharan Africa is that it must remain sensitive to the social contexts and complexities of women's and men's lives”. Consequently, this section *partially* attempts at providing the context by focusing on the background to the formation of women's interest groups in the one party and multiparty era and its implication on their current operation.

During the one party state regime, it was not easy to establish a women movement that was not sanctioned by the ruling Malawi Congress Party. Almost all women interests were represented by the women's wing of the ruling party or party sponsored organisations such as Chitukuko Cha Amayi M'malawi (CCAM). Consequently very few organisations were established before the new democratic wind of change that started in 1992. For instance, one women organization, started as an underground movement by a group of disgruntled lawyers who were fed up with the oppressive one party state. All women organizations were established

after the transition process to address women needs. The availability of ready funds to champion women interests considered as having been oppressed for a long time coupled with global pressures on the emancipation of women could also be seen as driving forces towards the formation of some Women NGOs. For instance, the Beijing declaration, as explained above, played a crucial role in influencing the development of women's interest groups. It is clear therefore that most women movements in Malawi came to the fore when the political space became conducive for them to operate. Apart from this political opportunity, it is noteworthy that the formation of these movements has some commonalities:

1-these organisations were not entirely local- they are heavily influenced by international partnerships or affiliations especially those established at the Beijing Conference.

2-most of these organisations were formally registered soon after being established.

This is a significant observation if Banaszak's (2006) and McAdam *et al*'s (1996) analyses are to be considered. Banaszak (2006) and McAdam *et al* (1996) point out that mobilizing structures and ideational aspects develop as the movement also develops. This entails that the movement manifests peculiar norms and practices that are context and need specific if its international affiliation doesn't dominate. Whilst an international affiliation or partnership is important, the process of formation of Malawian women's interest groups points to the fact that the *collective identity* of Malawian women movements has not fully materialized. Similarly, the moment a movement takes a formal registration before internalizing of its practices, it is bound to lose track of fully comprehending what actually it wants to achieve. It is not surprising therefore that most Malawian women's interest groups are not specifically operating to cater for the "core" needs of women but are involved in numerous other activities. Interestingly, according to Berger (1992:285), these identities do not "emerge automatically" but they manifest or "are created in the process of struggle".

Internal Democracy of Malawian Women's interest groups

As already alluded to, the extent of internal democracy of the women's interest groups is being examined in the following areas: Staffing, membership levels, management style and its implication on internal democracy; decision making process; coalitions; and extent of professionalism.

Staffing levels, membership levels, management style and its implication on internal democracy

Structurally, all sampled organizations comprise of a Secretariat and board membership. The average number of staff at the Secretariat is about seven with the Executive Director, one or two programme staff and support staff such as accounts officer and administrative assistant. In 9 out of 12 organizations it is only one or two staff members that are categorized as senior staff, the rest being middle or junior staffs. Depending on the nature of their activities, this number at secretariat was largely deemed sufficient- it later emerged from interviews that this may not necessarily be the case. The study noted that only the senior member (whom in most cases is the Executive Director) tackles almost all the "core" organisational issues while the rest act as support staff. This entails that the senior staff is rarely found in office as she has to attend meetings and also make key decisions in the office at the same time. In the process it emerged from the interviews that women organisations, due to staffing problems, tend to focus more of

their attention on issues of their survival. In this case, the Executive Directors tend to prioritize on public relations issues (with the donors) and other related activities at the expense of specific women interests programmes that they are supposed to represent. Based on empirical studies, the governance style of women-led organisation tends to be more democratic and participatory hence there is a greater potential for enhancing participatory democracy in their impact areas (Barakso 1997).

According to the information provided during interviews, the general membership estimates runs at more than 500 for some and goes up 170,000 for others. Except in the case of the network organisations, this number of members was neither easily identified nor verified. In some cases, membership meant beneficiaries or impact areas while in other cases it meant those who were registered. Even in the case of registered members, a list was not readily available to be verified. In this case, it became apparent that the issue of membership is not seriously considered for all women's interest groups. They largely indicated that they represent interests of women and girls and beyond that, definite membership was largely elusive. These finding reflects the social verses organized movement debate as identified by Diani (in Banaszak, 2006). The women's interest groups in Malawi are still grappling with the problem of contextualizing their institutions within these schools of thought hence an element of identity crisis. On paper the organisations are legally required to operate as organized movements but in practice they are social movements hence this has an implication on internal democracy because social movements are not obliged to adhere to internal democratic processes while organized movements are expected to adhere to democratic processes.

According to interviews members contribute to the running of organizations through their participation in different activities. Some participate in annual General Assembly where they elect board members, implementing activities, and contributing funds through purchase of subsidized advocacy materials. The members' benefits include: recognition by the organization; acquisition of knowledge and expertise through trainings as well as allowances; access to implementation materials such as bicycles as well as information. It was also established that 9 of the 12 women's interest groups depend on unpaid members, the so called volunteers, for wider membership. All of them are national based with a few exceptions.

All in all, the issue of membership was not clearly explained in almost all the organisations. This has an implication on the issue of mobilization. The critical question that most stakeholders ask is "for whom do you speak?" By claiming that they speak or represent the women and yet at the same time fail to point out at a group that directly benefits or supports their activities entails that their bargaining power as an organisation can not be seriously considered. It can be deduced that the staffing problems and lack of clarity of membership negatively affects accountability and representativeness- the core elements of internal democracy. What is at stake is the observations of Dicklitch (1998) and Diamond (1999) that NGOs have the potential to positively contribute towards democratic consolidation if *they show that they practice* internal democracy.

Management of these organisations normally is defined as comprising of the Executive Director, Finance Officer, Projects Officer or similar titles depending on the orientation of the organization. Broadly, the roles of management include administration, fundraising, devising implementation strategy and advising the board. All organizations interviewed have a board of directors particularly because it is a requirement for registration under CONGOMA and NGO Act. The board provides policy direction to the organization, resource mobilization and financial oversight, staff appraisal for senior members and approves expenditure. In principle board

members are supposed to meet on a quarterly basis but this ranges from one organization to another. It emerged during interviews that 10 out of 12 board members were not meeting regularly as stipulated in their constitution. Practically the meetings depend on the availability of financial resources and most donors, according to the argument raised, is that they are not keen on funding such activities. Some organisations have come up with ways of dealing with this problem by ensuring that their various subcommittees or a few most active members meet on a regular basis- however, such meetings are less formal hence don't have the intended impact on the operation of the organisations.

Election of board members also leaves a lot to be desired. 10 out of 12 organizations indicated that board members are elected during the annual general assembly but lots of ties could be seen between board members and Executive Directors- they were either related or were close colleagues. Although all organizations indicated that they have Constitutions, almost all of them were not willing to release it (except for one organisation) and some staff members were ignorant of the contents of their own constitutions. It was clear that most of these Constitutions were formulated for the purpose of the registration and are currently not being complied. Many excuses were raised for not releasing the constitution. Some indicated that it was currently being refined hence not ready for the public while others indicated that they could release a copy of their constitution only with the approval of the board.

Taking into consideration that regular board meetings and an objective board is critical in establishing and reinforcing accountability, hence internal democracy, it is clear that this area is not seriously being taken into consideration. With a few exceptions, the very fact that the sampled organisations were not willing to release their constitutions (if they really have them), and also not being able to articulate its contents, clearly shows lack of willingness to enhance internal accountability mechanisms.

Failure of the board and members to effectively contribute to the running of the organisations has serious implications on democracy consolidation in the nation. As indicated by Liston (2009:5), it is expected that NGOs provide a podium to practice and inculcate democratic attitudes and behaviour that may later have an impact on the wider society. The implications here is that lack of this process may have an impact on democratic values of women movements in general in the nation.

Decision making process

Related to the issues of membership and management, is the decision-making process in these women's interest groups. The findings from the sampled organisations disagree with Barakso's (1997) observation that women's interest groups have greater potential for enhancing participatory democracy in their impact areas. According to the findings, the process of decision making varies from one organization to another. In some cases it is management that makes decisions or refers the issues to the boards. However, considering the size of most of these organizations, the role of the Executive Directors seems to be paramount- as the final authority. The relationship between the board members and the Executive Director is a major determining factor in how decisions are made. In 10 out of 12 organizations, Executive Directors are the founding members of the organizations and have major influence on the composition of the board. In such cases the board is only above the Director in principle but has little or no powers over the Directors. For instance, in one organization it was established that for the past three or four years the board had consistently called for leadership change to replace the Director but their efforts virtually failed because the Director is regarded as a founding member.

An extreme example of lack of clarity of separation of powers between the board and the Executive Director is worthy mentioning: In this organisation, the board felt that the Executive Director was not performing hence decided to fire her (after several warnings). The Executive Director, who also happens to be the founder of the organisation, responded by firing the board. The board refused to honor the Executive Director's decision hence the organisation is currently in a 'management stalemate'. The other surprising finding is that 11 out of 12 organizations interviewed indicated that they have disciplinary committees in place but these committees seem to be the same as management hence staff members do not have channels of appeal. It is the Directors who refers issue to the board and in most cases the decisions of management prevails. In some cases directors refers the issues to the board before management deliberates on them hence making the process of appeal not possible. This kind of practices are clearly undemocratic and entails that the potentiality to enhance democratic process in the wider polity as envisaged by Katzenstein and Mueller (1987: 5) and (Margolis, 1993) would not be possible.

The core issues of the organization are raised and handled during the annual general meetings. It was found that 11 out of 12 organizations refer to the annual general assemblies as representing the highest body of decision making that also enhances interaction of the organizations with their 'grassroot' members. It is during these forums that board members are elected. In principle members are supposed to bring reports and review the activities of the year including approving annual expenditure. These forums are very important for identification of the Secretariat with the members of the organization since the organization exists for its members. It is also during these assemblies that resolutions are made for the coming year. However some interesting observations were made concerning these meetings. Although the general assemblies are highly rated, there are several limitations to outcomes through this process. Firstly, these meetings often take a single day and looking at the number of agenda items, the level of input from the members is very limited. Secondly, apart from the time constraint, the assembly brings together people with different levels of influence together. Some members come from rural areas, others urban, some educated, others uneducated, some rich and others poor. With so many vast differences between participants it is not fair to state that all members charter the course of these organizations. Thirdly, it is not reasonable to assume that members should be pending issues for several months to raise them once a year. The atmosphere is also intimidating with the coming together of board members, Executive Directors and management team apart from several members from different parts of the country. In essence therefore, the forums could be seen as existing to legitimize certain decisions which might be regarded as 'stage managed'. The annual general meetings would be regarded as critical for democratically aggregating the views of the organisation's members hence their transformatory potential (Young 1993:157). The way these annual meetings are conducted, with stifling of popular participation entails that the perceived transformational potential is lost.

Coalitions

Apparently all women's interest groups are in a formal coalition, the NGO Gender Coordination Network (NGOGCN). For instance, all members belong to a specific thematic group of the NGOGCN where they are involved in various activities that are in line with their own NGOs' objectives. The members benefit from the resources from these groups and some of them gain funding through networks than individual NGOs. Some donors fund the Coalitions which in turn disburse grants to member organizations. The level of funding an organization receives outside the Coalition seems to determine the role it should play in the Coalition. Better

funded organizations tend not to be actively involved with Coalition activities. The organizations which struggle to get funding find solace in the coalitions since they are able to use the little funds available for their own survival.

The Coalition however has the potential to play a critical role in enhancing internal accountability systems (thus internal democracy) in the women's interest groups. The mandatory meetings, reports and subsidized or free training programmes ensure that the participating organisations critically examine their practices and methods. This is more apparent when Coalition members share ideas and learn from each other. Although not fully attaining the desired results, 11 out of 12 organisations pointed out that the Coalition has greatly assisted them to re-examine their internal practices. However, the major drawback is that the well-established organisations tend to dominate the Coalition at the expense of emerging ones. This ultimately defeats the idea of promoting internal democratic practices within the women interests' organisations. This concern relates to the observations raised by Kardam (1995) and Ford-Smith (1989) who state that uneven power relations may negatively affect some organisations and individuals who work together in scenarios such as coalitions.

The process of identifying and attracting financial resources in an organization has also a bearing on decision making process in organizations. All women's interest groups depend almost entirely on donor funding. In attempts to live within their limits most organizations have remained very small and yet that also means entirely depending on one or two individuals for survival. This in turn reinforces the ownership over funds in as much as on decision making process. It seems reasonable to suggest that women groups with stable inflow of funds are more likely to develop better democratic systems than those with erratic funds dependent on a few individuals.

Extent of professionalism

The way an organization attracts and retains high caliber professional staff will shape the way the organization operates internally. In this case professionalism entails high level of skill, competence or character (normally manifested by a well trained individual) to adhere and promote ethical and organisational standards. A higher level of professionalism guarantees adherence to internal democratic principles and ideational elements or standards of the organisation i.e. those aspects of ideology, values, norms and beliefs that influence the women movement. The study found that women who were not founding members of their organizations were more confident in the future and also manifested a higher level of professionalism. They confidently declared that their organization was more likely to survive despite the absence of the founders. They had firm belief and conviction from the practice and experience which had already been embraced. In contrast, women founding members seemed less optimistic about the prospects of the organizational survival in their absence. This means that women who have been recruited after the founding members left have a process view based on organizational systems as opposed to an individualistic view by long serving members. Consequently, the former would employ personalistic styles of leadership which are likely to be less democratic than their counterparts who more likely have high respect for values inherited. Organisations led by the founding members could be labeled as elitist in nature hence subscribe to the observations of Ndgeva (1996) that most current African NGOs manifest "elitist governance structures" that do not support democratic values.

In relation to organisational image, the founding members, who are Executive Directors, are well known to the public for their role in the fight for women rights. Despite this positive

public image, these directors are not keen on enhancing internal democracy. A positive public image is in part as a result of their courage in fighting for initial goals that led to the birth of the organizations; they therefore tend to be militant in some cases. The critical problem with some founding members, that affects internal democracy of their organisations, is their inability to cope with the changes. Taking into consideration that the socio-political environment has been changing overtime, the organizations have also changed their mandate; either because the goal was accomplished or simply because of shifting focus of pressing problems. Some founding members having failed to discern these changes do not manage the transition hence view new personnel with new ideas and approaches as threats. In such cases, the democratic decision making systems are regarded as undermining the original vision of the founders. Most organizations have not addressed the future leadership development and only a few have capable young professionals who can take over. All in all, the presence of founders (who also subscribe to elitist tendencies) seriously undermines professional development and ultimately internal democracy of women interest organisations; this confirms Scholte's (in Shah 2006:1) observation that such behaviours negatively affect the enhancement of democratic values in NGOs.

Conclusion: Seeking Explanatory Values to Internal Democracy in Malawi's Women's interest groups

It is perhaps difficult to determine conclusively, based on the nature of this study, whether women's interest groups are more prone to internal undemocratic practices than male led organisations. However, based on the sampled organisation for this study, it is quite apparent that from the sample that most women's interest groups in Malawi do not manifest a strong adherence to internal democratic practices. The most common hindrance towards enhancement of internal democratic practices is the supremacy of the Executive Directors. Most Executive Directors wedge more powers as compared to the board itself. The accountability systems in the organizations impinge on the roles of the management versus the board. In cases where the board is an independent body capable of making impartial decisions there are higher chances of democratic systems in decision making. On the contrary in cases where the board members are close friends of the Executive Directors the level of participation by members in decision making would be dismally low. The way how Executive Directors behave in an organization is dependent on the marked levels of accountability and prevalent mechanisms for checks and balances. It is necessary to make this position explicit because the organogram of all organizations indicate that the board is accountable to the general assembly whereas the Executive Director is accountable to the board. But this distinction can only be effective where the board has the power to hire and fire the Executive Director. The results from the study found that all Executive Directors are guaranteed their position regardless of their performance because boards are only above theoretically. This trend effectively leaves both board and ordinary members with a sense of helplessness in the presence of the Director. This is worse in cases where the Executive Directors are also founders of the organization commonly referred to as the *founder's syndrome*, as already discussed above. The findings show, based on sampled organizations, that most women's interest groups in Malawi are inclined towards democratic structures but have operationally limited democratic practice. The study did not make an attempt at thoroughly discussing the link between the internal democracy and democratic consolidation as this was already assumed to exist. This entails that the failure of some women interest

organisations to fully develop internal democratic principles may ultimately affect the consolidation of democracy in the country.

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