

Jul-2013

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Mbilizi, Margaret Asalele (2013). When a Woman Becomes President: Implications for Gender Policy and Planning in Malawi. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(3), 148-162.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss3/11>

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## **When a Woman Becomes President: Implications for Gender Policy and Planning in Malawi**

By Margaret Asalele Mbilizi<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Recently gender discourse in Malawi changed dramatically when Joyce Banda ascended to the office of president following the sudden death of the incumbent, Bingu Wa Mutharika. A relentless women's rights advocate, Joyce Banda became the first woman president in Southern Africa and the continent's second woman leader, after Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. President Banda has told the nation that gender equality and women empowerment shall remain the central policy priority of her government. She affirms her government's commitment to increasing representation of women in decision making positions and is promising to scale up women's economic empowerment activities.

Against this backdrop this article examines the existing National Gender Machinery in Malawi within the context of having a gender activist as president. Will her passion for gender equality make a difference for gender policy and planning in Malawi? The article reports on a study that critically examines the existing National Gender Machinery and proposes mechanisms to improve its harmonization, coordination, and impact. The study finds that the reluctance by government decision makers to invest adequate resources or create relevant frameworks, strategies, mechanisms and accountability systems for implementing gender-related policies and programs is impeding the achievement of gender equality in this male dominated society. Finally the article provides an analysis of how a woman president might accelerate the process of gender mainstreaming and women empowerment in Malawi.

*Key Words:* Gender and Development, Women in Politics, Qualitative Research

### **Introduction**

Malawi has over the years gained a reputation as a country that is resistant to change when it comes to gender equality and women empowerment. Many women and men still embrace cultural values and norms that are oppressive to women and other marginalized groups including sexual minorities, people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDs, and orphans. A small landlocked country in Southern Africa, Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world with 60% of its 13 million citizens living below the poverty line. Women represent 70% of the rural poor engaged in small holder farming and household food production with limited farming inputs and resources. They have less control over land, reproductive rights, and

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household decision making. Historically, leadership positions in politics, government, and the private sector are dominated by men, and women who aspire to such positions are undermined and ostracized.

But on April 7, gender discourse in this nation changed dramatically when Joyce Banda ascended to the office of President of the Republic of Malawi following the sudden death of the incumbent, Bingu Wa Mutharika. A relentless women's rights advocate, Joyce Banda became the first woman president in Southern Africa and the continent's second woman leader in modern times, after Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. A prominent personality in business, civil society, and politics, and because of her fearless fight for gender equality in a male-dominated society, Joyce Banda remains the embodiment of a strong woman and role model to many women in Malawi and Africa (Chester, 2012).

Having a woman's rights advocate as president has implications for the national gender agenda in Malawi. For example, in her State of the Nation Address delivered at a recent opening of Parliament, President Banda affirmed her government's commitment to increasing representation of women in decision making positions in all sectors of society. Further, her government is committed to uplifting the economic welfare of women by engaging them in income generating activities. Banda is promising to scale up women's economic empowerment activities by transitioning women's business groups into cooperatives that are commercially viable, and link the groups to industries, viable markets, and financial services (Nyasa times, 2012). Just one month after taking over the presidency, Banda launched a presidential initiative on maternal health care, and 3 months later, on poverty and hunger reduction focusing on women empowerment (Nyasa Times, 2012). It is against this backdrop that this article examines the existing National Gender Machinery in Malawi within the context of having a gender activist as president. Will her passion for gender equality make a difference for gender policy and planning in Malawi?

In a recent report, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) asserted that Malawi is on track to reach five of the eight Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010). However, the UNDP report also highlights some major concerns with regard to key indicators of gender equality. According to the report, out of all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the three that are likely to be missed by Malawi are gender related (MDG 2 – Universal Primary Education; MGD 3 – Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, and MDG 5- Maternal Health (UNDP, 2010). Similarly, the recent Gender Scale Index (GSI) for Malawi indicates that women are doing poorly in economic and political power with significant disparities between men and women in higher education, paid employment, as well as in leadership positions in all sectors of society (Ministry of Gender, Child & Community Development, 2010).

In line with its mission of promoting gender equality, the UNDP commissioned a "White Paper for Strengthening the National Gender Machinery" in 2010. I was involved in conducting research and writing some components of the White Paper in collaboration with an international consultant. The overall purpose of the study was to critically examine the existing gender machinery and propose mechanisms to improve its harmonization, coordination, and impact. Further, the White Paper hoped to alert policy makers on key issues affecting the functions of the existing National Gender Machinery and stimulate discussion that might lead to high-level decisions, commitments, and actions to strengthen it. This article reports on some aspects of the research conducted for the White Paper which has since been submitted to the UNDP and Government of Malawi. Further, the article discusses implications for having a woman activist at the realm of a male dominated National Gender Machinery.

## Literature Review

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action called on nations across the globe to establish “National Gender Machineries” to coordinate policies and programs that will accelerate the accomplishment of gender equality and women’s empowerment (United Nations, 1979; 1995). The main task of a National Gender Machinery is to support the adoption of gender mainstreaming and gender equality perspectives in all government policies and programs.

This idea of placing women squarely at the heart of national development emerged into the international policy arena in the 1970s as part of the echoing and growing demands for gender equality by the women’s movement in Europe and North America (Staudt, 1989). In Sub-Saharan Africa, Women in Development (WID) initiatives gained national recognition after the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1976. African political elites symbolically showed their support for the advancement of women through the establishment of women’s ministries, organizations, and the incorporation of Women in Development (WID) agendas in development planning. By 1987, WID had been endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of States as part of each nation’s development policy.

Malawi’s initial effort at a National Gender Machinery was with the creation of the National Commission on Women in Development (NCWID) in 1987. Efforts of the NCWID resulted in law reviews and the development of a National Platform of Action for implementing the Beijing Platform of Action. In the 1990s Malawi established a Ministry for Women, Children and Community Services (MoWCCS).

A major criticism of WID as originally conceptualized is that it led to the continued marginalization of women (Parpart, 1993). Many feminist scholars argued that the results of WID during the first decade were minimal because its agendas reinforced gender roles and perpetuated the subordinate status of women. Evidence from many developing countries shows that the effects of the early WID approach resulted in longer and harder working days for women, who were forced to increase their labor both within the market and in the household (Modgham, 1992). The inability of WID to impact the status of women led to a search for newer strategies for incorporating gender issues in development planning.

By the end of the 1980s, the Gender and Development (GAD) model emerged as a promising policy instrument. Carolyn Moser’s 1989 book on “Gender and Planning in the Third World” provided a foundation to the GAD approach (Jaquette & Staudt, 2006). GAD is a development policy approach that considers fundamental issues pertaining to the in-built structural bias against women participating in power allocation or exerting influence on the critical questions of resource distribution. GAD therefore represents a framework for facilitating the awareness and utilization of knowledge on men and women as separate social categories with similar or separate needs (Jaquette & Staudt, 2006). GAD strategists advocate that development programs should address those needs arising from women’s subordination in society. According to Caroline Moser (1993), the goal of GAD is women’s emancipation and their release from subordination.

In the late 1990’s gender mainstreaming emerged as the primary tool for advancing gender equality. The United Nations Economic and Social Council described gender mainstreaming as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programs, in any area and at all levels (UNIFEM, 2000).

It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as men as an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres, so that men and women can benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality (Prugl & Lustgarten 2006).

In the past decade, Malawi has used both the GAD and gender mainstreaming approaches. For example in 2004, the Ministry for Women, Children and Community Services (MoWCCS) was renamed to Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development (MoGCCD) to embrace the GAD approach. Major programs currently being implemented include; the National Gender Program; National Gender Policy; National Response to Combat Gender-based Violence; and a 50/50 campaign to increase representation of women in Parliament and Local Government. Furthermore, several laws in the areas of inheritance, marriage, divorce, family relations, and gender-based violence have been reviewed (Government of Malawi, 1997; 2000; 2004).

In 1996 the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) replaced the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (MPRS) as the overarching development strategy. In the first MGDS document, gender was recognized as an integral part of the national development agenda (Government of Malawi, 1996). The second MGDS draft document also included gender considerations but this time only as a cross-cutting issue and not a pillar of development in itself (Government of Malawi, 2011).

Despite such commitments, there are indications that the National Gender Machinery is facing structural and ideological problems. Among other contributing factors, the reluctance by government decision makers to invest adequate resources or create relevant frameworks, strategies, mechanisms and accountability systems for implementing gender-related policies and programs is most pronounced (Moser, Liwewe & Ngwira, 2004; Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 2008; 2009). Several studies and assessments of the National Gender Machinery in Malawi have reported problems of fragmentation, inadequate staff, lack of funds, lack of influence, and weak institutional structures (Sawerengera Consulting, 2011; Liwewe, Ngwira, & Sibale, 2006; and Ponga and Ncube, 2009).

Generally there is lack of political will to fund gender-related programs. For example, the amount of funds available for Gender, Youth, and Sports Development nationally were only \$5,705,080 in 2009/10 which constituted 1.9% of the annual aid budget. The MoGCCD received only 1% of its total budget from government in 2009/2010- the rest came from development partners and bilateral organizations (Ministry of Finance, 2010). The research reported in this article attempted to fill the paucity of knowledge on “how” the National Gender Machinery could be strengthened.

## **Research Methods**

Data collection methods for this study included; a comprehensive document analysis; consultations with officials from the MoGCCD and key sector ministries, international development partners, Community Service Organizations (CSOs), and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs); and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. A comprehensive semi-structured questionnaire was administered to a total of 50 government, international development, and NGO and CSO organizations to gain an understanding of the capacities, performance, coordination, and challenges of the National Gender Machinery. Then one-on-one

qualitative interviews with key policy makers in government, NGOs, CSOs, and the international donor community were conducted by the lead consultant to examine challenges in formulating and implementing gender policies and programs.

The initial analysis of data exposed a number of information gaps pertaining to the current status of the National Gender Machinery. A decision was made to conduct qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in the existing National Gender Machinery to validate the data and collect missing information. I personally conducted all the follow-up qualitative interviews and most of the data reported in this article emanates from this exercise. I developed an interview protocol under the supervision of the lead consultant and the UNDP. A purposive sample of 30 key stakeholders was selected from government, international and local NGOs and CSO, development partners, and donor agencies. I made appointments with the sampled participants through telephone and email communications. I visited the participants in Lilongwe and Blantyre and conducted the one hour long qualitative interviews in their offices. The questions were framed in such a way that respondents would be free to, not only provide information on what they know about the National Gender Machinery, but to critique it and make suggestions for its improvement. I asked questions and listened carefully to the responses, sometimes engaging the respondents in a conversation that would invoke debate and critique. I took detailed notes, transcribed the interviews, and built the findings into the final report of the White Paper which was first presented at a national stakeholder validation workshop.

## **Results of the Study**

There were many issues of concern identified in the White Paper for Strengthening the National Gender Machinery in Malawi. However this article focuses on three major findings emanating from the qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and these are: lack of leadership and clarity on mandates, roles, and responsibilities; fragmented and weak coordination mechanisms; and lack of capacity for gender programming.

### **Lack of Leadership and Clarity on Mandates, Roles, and Responsibilities**

This study found that Malawi's National Gender Machinery lacked a committed and passionate leadership to champion the gender agenda. Gender did not have a voice in the political and policy arenas. The Parliamentary Women's Caucus was not recognized officially as a Parliamentary Committee until 2010- hence it had no budgetary allocation and was operating on a voluntary basis. As a result, no one was pushing for gender in the national budget or advocating for affirmative action policies.

The Ministry of Gender, Child and Community Development's (MoGCCD) vision and mission statements were so general and not specifically targeted towards influencing a shift in power relations or women empowerment. The ministry was mainly engaged in the implementation of donor funded gender projects and not policy creation and dialogue. Most stakeholders interviewed felt that the ministry was supposed to champion the gender agenda but it did not. One participant observed, "The ministry is not championing the gender agenda. Other organizations especially NGOs are doing gender more than the ministry. Most of the problems in this ministry emanate from the top - nobody to strategically map out the issues." What was clear from the findings is that the MoGCCD lacked visionary leadership to direct the national gender agenda.

Some comments alluded to the fact that the ministry was not involving other stakeholders in gender planning. The ministry was blamed for not advising other sectors how to do gender. One participant commented, "The ministry should come up with mechanisms to enforce gender policy, presenting issues in such a way that is not antagonistic. It should team up with advocates that can talk about gender at different levels. Gender issues should not remain issues of the ministry alone. The mentality of the ministry is that they own the gender agenda and therefore no one else should talk about gender. The ministry is in actual fact monopolizing the gender agenda." This finding shows that the MoGCCD does not understand its role as the coordinator of the gender mandate rather than the implementer of gender projects.

It was also felt that while the ministry had the lead role in the gender mandate, its capacity was limited. One participant said, "We want to put gender where the power is. There is need to widen the scope of who can influence the gender agenda. Put gender where it matters. Every sector has to look at gender. Those managing gender have to be highly placed in the organization. Politics are rocking gender programming circles- those with the "know how" should be given the front line. Some men are still acting as gate keepers to the establishment". This finding underscores the general observation that gender messaging is being shaped by people who are often chauvinistic and male biased. This finding is similar to observations made by Moser, Liwewe, & Ngwira (2004) in an article based on a consultancy report for the Department for International Development (DfID) Malawi, who wrote, "At the policy level there is resistance both within DfIDM and in the wider environment towards a specific gender strategy and consequently gender inequality issues are mainstreamed within DfIDM's country strategy. External influences relating to donor harmonization over the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (MPSRP) means that DfIDM's strategy overall has shifted from a human rights-based to a poverty reduction strategy. The Government of Malawi accordingly has shifted from an equality issue in 1998 to one associated with vulnerable groups. The MPRSP itself is influenced by broader economic, social and cultural attitudes to gender relations in the Malawian environment. Resistance to the issue of gender equality is illustrated by the National Gender Policy's emphasis on equal participation rather than inequality. The main obstacle to change is less a lack of knowledge than a lack of commitment or 'political will' to address the issue" (pp. vi). There is not doubt that the gender agenda in Malawi is being influenced by male bias and other traditional views about the role of men and women in society.

It was mentioned by participants that the MoGCCD is not well respected because it did not have both financial and human capacity to get things done. One participant lamented, "Something is missing- there is low visibility of the gender ministry. It is not sharing with others what it is doing. I have never seen a document on how the ministry will champion gender mainstreaming. They are not proactive. The mandate is too big for the ministry. There is low capacity. At the district level capacity is not there, staffing and systems not there." With low levels of funding, the ministry is not able to effectively lead the process of mainstreaming gender in government structures. I sensed a condescending attitude towards that ministry among government civil servants, NGOs and donors. No one seemed to believe that the ministry had the capacity to deliver on its mandate.

The Ministry of Finance, which is supposed to strongly support the MoGCCD, was non-committal to the whole idea of gender mainstreaming. The ministry did not have gender budgeting guidelines. It advised sectors to include gender in its budgets, but did not have mechanisms to enforce compliance. I asked the officers in the ministry to explain why the ministry did not adopt gender budgeting guidelines that were prepared by the MoGCCD and got

this response, “There is lack of clarity on what constitutes gender. When we are funding education or agriculture or rural development, we know what the outcomes will be. But with gender, we don’t know what we are funding. The problem is with the ministry (of gender) itself. They have not clarified their goals and so why should we give them money when we don’t understand how they will use it? When disbursing donor funds, cross cutting issues, including gender, are considered. But we do not have a gender policy or guideline, we leave that to sectoral ministries to include gender concerns in their budgets.” It was clear during my interviews with Ministry of Finance officials that while they understand fully the importance of engendering the budget, they were unwilling to embrace the concept because of cultural, political, and structural constraints. I could sense that gender is not supported by key figures in government and society, and that the ministry did not have much influence on what goes into the budget.

Nevertheless there were some ministries that are supporting the National Gender Machinery effectively. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) had gender component in a department which had a director. The ministry has a Gender Focal Point in the Department of Secondary Education and all other departments has a Gender Officer (10 total). In each of the divisions and at the district level, there was a Gender Officer. In its budget, there was a provision for 50-50 selection in form 1, building of girls’ hostels, construction of toilets (girls drop out of school because of lack of sanitary facilities in schools), school feeding programs, and incentives for girls going into science. In essence the MoEST was getting a lot of support for gender programs from UNICEF, DfID, World Bank, the African Development Fund, and international NGOs and CSOs. (UNDP, 2010; MoGCCD, 2010). It is not surprising that the ministry was leading in gender mainstreaming because girl’s education is a key aspect of most development programs.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MoAFS) has done well in mainstreaming gender in its structures and programs. In the Agriculture Sector Wide Approach to Programming (ASWAP), gender was strongly emphasized as a cross-cutting issue and budgeted for. The ministry put in place Gender Focal Points at its headquarters and division offices and conducted gender trainings at various levels. In employment, women were deliberately targeted and recommended for promotions to decision making positions- with a target of 30% representation. Gender analysis was encouraged during program work plans. The ministry had a Gender and HIV/AIDS Policy and Program Strategy for 2010-2015 and an action and results oriented monitoring & evaluation framework.

There seems to be a strong link between where gender mainstreaming is occurring (MoEST and MoAFS) and the poverty reduction nature of the ministry. Government is more willing to invest in gender initiatives that have direct implications for the MGDS. It is as if women and girls are being used to mobilize resources from donors, but one does not get the sense that government is really interested in transforming gender relations or empowering women.

### **Fragmented and Weak Coordination Mechanisms**

In addition to government ministries, this study established that NGOs and CSOs were substantially supporting the National Gender Machinery with strong mandates on gender. Almost all international NGOs including Trocaire, Oxfam, Care Malawi, Concern Universal, Water Aid, and Plan Malawi were gender mainstreaming and had gender officers in their organization. Most of them had a gender policy or were in the process of developing one. What was evident though

is that each NGO and CSO identified its own niche when addressing gender issues, based on its mission and funding prospects. Some of them were guided by the National Gender Program, but they did not have direct contact with the MoGCCD.

Considering that nowadays NGOs are able to access funding directly from donors, it seems imperative that there has to be a coordinated strategy for gender programming. And yet a coordination mechanism between the MoGCCD, key government ministries, NGOs and other stakeholders was non-existent. The MoGCCD did not produce an annual report on the status of gender equality with indicators and outputs for other ministries and NGOs to acquire information for planning and programming. There was not enough consultation between government ministries on matters relating to gender. Even though some ministries had Gender Focal Points, coordination of the gender agenda was not fully institutionalized.

The MoGCCD created a networking organization known as the Development Assistance Gender Group (DAGG). Members of DAGG included in the sample were Trocaire, UNICEF, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Concern Universal, Oxfam, and GIZ. Most of the members reported that while DAGG was effective in sharing information and knowledge on gender policy and programming, they did not get much from it. It lacked high level commitment to DAGG meetings by the Principal Secretary and Minister of Gender. Besides, there was very poor attendance at meetings. Other reported weaknesses of DAGG included; lack of follow-up on agreements reached during meetings; lack of capacity to influence decisions of member organizations; lack of concrete support from donors; and, terms of reference that are not aligned to the objectives of the National Gender Policy. Thus, DAGG is yet to strategically position itself as a coordinating structure for all development partners.

The NGO Gender Coordinating Network (NGO-GCN) is by far the best known structure that was collaborating with the MoGCCD on gender policies and programs. But the network was largely headed by one person representing many organizations and offering secretarial services. Although the network was registered under the Trustees Incorporation Act of Parliament, it was not established by an Act of Parliament, thus had little legitimacy. In addition, its membership was made-up of loose associations of NGOs who were not coordinated and received very little support from the NGO-GCN itself.

Because of lack of coordination, most NGO and CSO programs were being implemented in regions and districts of each organization's choice. A number of organizations were doing the same thing. There was little effort going into gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, gender budgeting, or gender research. There were no guidelines for NGO or CSO operations and programming at the MoGCCD. The NGO Act of 2000 designated "CONGOMA" as a coordinating body that "represents and promotes collective interests and concerns of NGOs in Malawi" (Government of Malawi, 2001, section 24 (2)). Whilst it has been very effective in maintaining a data base of NGOs in Malawi, CONGOMA has not been able to play its coordinating role, nor has it been able to build the capacity of its members. NGOs stated that they registered with CONGOMA only to fulfill government's mandated requirements to allow them to operate legally.

There were a few links between the MoGCCD and the private sector. In collaboration with relevant line ministries, the ministry dealt with private sector issues such as terms and conditions of employment, limited access to credit and markets by women, and unequal unemployment opportunities. However, a private sector Gender Coordination Network through which women's access to and benefits from the private sector could be prioritized did not exist.

### **Lack of Capacity for Gender Mainstreaming and Programming**

The MoGCCD lacked strategic priorities and capacity to coordinate gender programs. For example the National Gender Program was not fully implemented because the ministry did not create indicators with clear sources of funding for the various activities. The National Gender Policy was not current because the MoGCCD failed to have the document passed by cabinet when it expired in 2009.

Due to lack of funding, the Ministry of Gender was grossly understaffed and basic Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) equipment and facilities were in short supply. There were only 10 staff members in the Department of Gender Affairs. Out of these, 5 had Masters Degrees and only one of the degrees was related to gender. The ministry has a Principal Secretary and Directors who did not have professional training in gender- they were civil servants assigned to the ministry from a common pool.

Gender Focal Points (GFP) was a weak coordinating system. These were staff members within the ministries that had little or no contact with the Department of Gender except, in some cases, participation at monthly briefing meetings or trainings. I was told that the MoGCCD did not have adequate resources to even fund the monthly meetings. The job descriptions of the GFPs hardly included responsibilities for gender related issues. The GFPs were selected or nominated by their Principal Secretaries without consultation or any input from the Department of Gender. Most of them were low level officers who moved around in the civil service.

Higher education institutions in Malawi were not fully committed to capacity building for gender planning and programming. Existing efforts were either individual or sponsor driven. None of the colleges and universities offered undergraduate degrees in gender. The Gender Studies Unit which was established in 1996 at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi became extinct in 2006 due to lack of funding and support from management. There were very few local consultants on gender, such that most gender trainings in the country were facilitated by international consultants. In the 2004-2009 National Gender Program report, it was proposed that a resource centre be established to make available gender training materials and that higher education institutions should be strengthened to offer a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in gender, focusing on mainstreaming and programming. No follow through action had occurred. Stakeholders in this study overwhelmingly supported the idea of establishing a national center for gender studies.

More importantly, officers in the MoGCCD did not seem to have a clear understanding of what doing gender entails. They followed the philosophies and ideologies of their international development counterparts when developing gender policies and programs without situating the issues to the local environment. For example, gender theorists in the Western world are currently advocating for gender as a cross-cutting issue and development partners have adopted the concept. While this strategy might be effective in developed countries, considering gender as a cross cutting issue in Malawi is taking the focus away from the deep gender inequalities that still exist due to socio-cultural constraints. Malawi is a society that still undermines women regardless of their level of education or exceptional talents. Most participants in this study felt that gender in Malawi needs to remain a central pillar in development planning. One participant observed, "Gender has not been included as a key thematic area or priority area in the 2010 draft MGDS document. Instead, it is considered a cross cutting issue with only a few gender specific indicators and outputs in the document." Most participants believe that the MGDS need to continue having gender as one of the priorities with strategies, targets, indicators, and outcomes.

By considering it as a cross cutting issue without clear guidelines on how to mainstream it at the sectoral level, there is a fear that the gender agenda might be neglected or diluted.

In summary, capacity building is a key aspect in strengthening the current National Gender Machinery. Gender has to be well defined and understood by various stakeholders before it can gain acceptance in mainstream development planning.

## **Recommendations**

Many recommendations for strengthening the National Gender Machinery were made in the White Paper. In this article, I present those related to the issues raised by the participants who participated in the qualitative interviews reported above namely; lack of leadership and clarity on mandates, roles, and responsibilities; fragmented and weak coordination mechanisms; and lack of capacity for gender programming.

First, the Ministry of Gender, Child and Community Development (MoGCCD) should have a strong Minister and Principal Secretary who will champion the gender agenda by involving themselves in advocacy, lobbying, fundraising, educating, and sensitising all stakeholders on the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment in the development process. Second, there is a desperate need for capacity building in gender programming within the civil service and among all stakeholders in the gender agenda. All professional officers in the MoGCCD and all Gender Focal Points within government should undergo gender training. The establishment of a center for gender studies should become a national priority. Third, government should re-establish the National Council for Gender and Women through an Act of Parliament, which will assist the MoGCCD in campaigning, lobbying, advocating for gender mainstreaming and mobilizing resources for the gender agenda. Fourth, in order to improve the harmonization and coordination of the National Gender Machinery, the following restructuring measures should be considered:

*Option 1:* The Ministry of Gender, Child, and Community Development (MoGCCD) should have two Principal Secretaries (Principal Secretary 1 responsible for Department of Gender and Principal Secretary 2 responsible for Child and Community Development).

*Option 2:* The MoGCCD should be reformed by moving the Department of Child Development to the Ministry of Youth and Sports, so that the current MoGCCD becomes the Ministry of Gender and Community Development.

*Option 3:* The "Department of Gender" should be moved from the MoGCCD to the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC).

The rationale for restructuring the MoGCCD is to ensure that adequate attention is given to issues of gender. At the moment, the Department of Gender is squashed within a ministry that is also handling children and community development issues. It is not surprising that the Minister and Principal Secretary for the MoGCCD are engaged mostly in activities relating to children affairs. UNICEF is the biggest funding agency for the MoGCCD because of their mission of improving school environments for the education of girls. The ministry spends more time implementing UNICEF projects than on gender planning, monitoring and evaluation.

## Discussion

One of the observations made at the beginning of this article was that the Malawi Government's civil service is male dominated and most officers are not willing to take the gender agenda seriously. Now that the Head of State and Government is a woman, the expectation is that the face of the civil service will change, with more women being appointed to senior policy positions. President Banda is likely to adopt a 50-50 approach to filling leadership positions within the civil service and parastatal organizations -- an idea which she promoted throughout her life as a gender activist. Additionally, Malawi is likely to see more women willing to run for Parliament and in turn, communities being more open to voting for women candidates. President Banda has already made public statements placing gender high on her government's priorities.

The new president will be the champion for gender from a very strategic vantage point. She will influence the development planning process in such a way that gender is reinstated as a key pillar of development and not simply a cross cutting issue. What the president needs is a minister of gender who is equally competent and passionate about gender issues. Just being a woman Parliamentarian is not enough- she has to be a believer in gender equality and must have knowledge and history of doing gender. Similarly, the Principal Secretary for Gender should be someone who is a gender specialist and is willing to be an advocate for women. This person has to speak and write about gender and constantly inform the government and nation through well written policy documents, periodic reports on the status of women, and disaggregated data that show improvements in women empowerment. The Principal Secretary has to be someone who has the political savvy to navigate and advance a highly charged social agenda such as gender. That is why the recommendation that the MoGCCD should have two Principal Secretaries, or that the Department of Gender should be moved to the Office of the President, makes sense. The president must seriously consider a restructuring option that provides a safe space for gender to be prominent.

In addition to a gender aware Minister and Principal Secretary, all the Directors at the MoGCCD should be technical gender experts who understand all aspects of gender planning and programming. The president has to make sure that people deployed to the MoGCCD from the civil service have the requisite qualifications and interest in accomplishing gender equality. She needs to consider the idea of establishing a national institution for gender training seriously. Perhaps the newly constructed public university in Southern Malawi could host a centre for gender studies which offers undergraduate, masters, and doctorate programs in gender related fields. Also, donors and international development agencies could be encouraged to include the training of gender technical experts in their project and funding proposals.

An area of importance in the gender discourse is the whole issue of funding. How will President Banda ensure that the National Gender Machinery is well funded? How will she convince a male-dominated cabinet and parliament to allocate adequate funds for gender planning? How can she involve NGOs and the private sector in funding gender effectively? The president might have to use her executive powers to allocate more funds to the MoGCCD in the national budget. She may need to use her well established relationship with donors and the international community to increase funding for gender in such a way that the focus is not only on poverty reduction but also on gender equality and women empowerment.

Again, the 50-50 campaign is key to mobilizing resources for gender. President Banda needs to appoint more women in key positions in her government including the cabinet. As feminists will say, no one understands better what it means to be a woman than a woman herself.

The more the president surrounds herself with professional women and politicians, the likely possibility that her government will be successful at pushing the gender equality agenda forward. Already research has shown that women Parliamentarians are more sympathetic toward issues concerning women and children and take leadership in proposing and supporting gender-related bills. The incumbent president herself made significant impact at changing the laws of Malawi in favour of women and children when she was Minister of Gender and Community Development in the previous government. Other laws that she needs to push for include a gendered tax bill, a gendered national budget, affirmative action in employment and Parliament, and social protection for divorced, single, and women headed households. Without a balanced gender representation, such bills will not be well supported in parliament.

The new president has the challenge of bringing together a coalition of women from all sectors of society to form a National Council for Gender and Women (Presidential Commission for Women). Historically the original National Commission of Women successfully supported the National Gender Machinery in previous governments but it was dissolved because of funding problems and lack of mandate. This council could be a catalyst to a strong women's movement in Malawi. Its composition should bring together women from all sectors of society to fight for a common cause. The President herself could be the patron of this Council or Commission so that the members feel that they have her full support.

A strong women's movement is needed to ensure a landslide victory in the coming Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2014. Women need to coalesce themselves around the president to make sure that she wins the elections, otherwise the gender agenda will be derailed. With women representing over 51% of the population, a political strategy that targets women to vote for a fellow woman is a winning strategy. The 2014 Presidential and Parliamentary elections will be a referendum on all the women of Malawi. Some of the president's critics have expressed a concern that her activism focuses only on rural and poor women and but she does not tackle the power struggle between men and women in general. There is need for her to break the glass ceiling for professional women and bring more of them on board. The men surrounding the president will not want that to happen. She needs to make the initiative to reach out to those educated women who functioned on the peripheral of mainstream society because the men in leadership could not let them in. It is now time for women to be considered equally for leadership positions because a fellow woman is president.

I am not advocating a male bashing strategy here. In fact the president herself has publicly acknowledged that a few progressive men supported her during the transition following the sudden death of the former president. But this does not mean that men as a group are willing to share power with women. They just do not want to lose their grip on power and they will do anything to please the new president. What I am saying is women are the greatest resource for the president in terms of numbers and affinity to the gender equality agenda. As a group, women will make sure that the president is not bullied out of office by the same men who are surrounding her. She needs to change the gender dynamics and surround herself with more women who will support and protect her presidency. A strategy that allows the dominant male group to continue ruling behind her is defeatist. Democracy is about equality in numbers, therefore under a woman president, it should be expected that a 50-50 strategy in leadership positions should be implemented.

## **Conclusion**

Malawi is still a patriarchal society and its structures are not fully gender mainstreamed. Many women are still facing discrimination, oppression, marginalization, and abuse in both private and public life. Therefore Malawian women should not stop fighting for gender equality just because a woman is president. If anything, she is the biggest asset for advancing women's causes. When a woman becomes president, the tables must turn and gender equality should become a realistic dream. The new vision and direction set by the first woman president provides hope for the future of gender relations in Malawi.

It is almost possible to envision a Malawi where gender equality is an attainable goal. It is realistic to envision that Malawi is now likely to achieve the Millennium Development Goals that were lagging behind. What needs to happen now is that the new president should put in place a coordinated and harmonized strategy for accomplishing gender equality spearheaded by women themselves. The recommendations provided in the White Paper for Strengthening the National Gender Machinery in Malawi are timely. They could go a long way in consolidating the gains made by the unprecedented elevation of a gender activist to the highest office the land.

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