

Annex I: Policy Brief on Young Women's Political Participation

To: Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development

From: The Governance & Development Institute

1. Executive Summary

Rural women experience challenges in their day to day lives that are unique to their environment and where they are similar to those of urban women they are experienced with higher degrees of hardship and deprivation. Reports including government reports and the Malawi Human Development Social Indicators Report show that the general quality of life in rural areas is poor and that poverty is worse among women and children. Sections 20 and 24 of the Republican Constitution of Malawi are to the effect that rural women should not be discriminated against.

The purpose of this brief is to enlighten the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development (the Ministry) of the social, economic cultural and political barriers rural young women face and how these challenges limit the scope of their political participation at the local level. The key findings in this area of research dictate the need for the Ministry to push for programs that will tackle the barriers that limit young rural women's political participation and ensure that there is an increase in the number of young rural women who actively participate in politics at the local government level.

2. Statement of the Issue

What role can the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community development play in increasing and promoting the political participation of young rural women at the local level?

3. Background

Little is known about the nature and extent of young women's political participation in Southern Africa and Malawi in particular. Malawi is predominantly rural with more than 80% of its population confined to the rural areas. Women make up 52% of the population of Malawi and of this 86.3% are rural based. Despite a number of poverty reduction strategies life in the rural areas remains poor. Poverty and women's empowerment including political empowerment are interlinked. At the next general election Malawi will be attaining twenty years of multi-party democracy but would only be holding its second local government elections. Due to the competitiveness of the Parliamentary elections rural women are relegated to participating at the local level but without conducive

environments for this including the relevant development rural women cannot be guaranteed equal participation.

There is very little research and focus on young rural women's political participation at the local level. GDI conducted an in-depth research into this area with the aim of analyzing how social, economic, cultural and political situation of rural women in Malawi impacts on the political participation of young women at the local level. The study further interrogated how the government is realizing the provisions of Article 14 of CEDAW to achieve beneficial development for rural women, how political parties are promoting the rural participation of young women and also how young women Members of Parliament are encouraging young rural women to aspire at the local level.

The research was conducted in the districts of Mangochi, Zomba, Chiradzulu, Thyolo, Nkhatakota, Kasungu and Nkhata Bay and targeted major political parties and women MPs through the Women's Caucus in Parliament. It also included some district commissioners.

The key findings of the research are as follows;

- Malawi is off track in meeting Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 as many rural women remain disempowered, rural young women have no access to meaningful economic empowerment, few of them own property and due to this disadvantaged positions they are targets for gender based violence
- Girls/women continue to be stereotyped and are denied equal access to education, they are victim to early and forced marriages and this hinders their aspirations including political aspirations
- Political parties do not have deliberate policies, programmes or strategies that directly focus on young rural women and political party presence at local level is low and parties are more elitist in representation low involvement of grassroots and ordinary people
- Malawi is making progress in discontinuing bad cultural practices that affect women's development but more needs to be done as other traditional practices still exist that hinder young women from participating in politics
- Article 14 of CEDAW is not instrumental in informing government policy on rural development that benefits women and motivation to join politics is low due to lack of development like road networks, communication systems, markets, schools and access to government structures etc. This is further impacted by rural women's inability to articulate their right to development.

- women MPs are not doing much to promote young women aspirants at the local level and this has been attributed to the fear that a councilor is an MP in waiting
- the leadership roles that some women are playing in village development committees could be an opportunity to encourage women to stand for office at the local level
- the long absence of local government elections has denied young rural women the opportunity to participate in politics as participation at the national level can be daunting and too competitive for rural women

4. Governance & Development Institute Interest

The GDI with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) conducted the study mentioned herein. One of the objectives of the organization is the empowerment of women and the attainment of MDG 3 by 2015. GDI works to realize better outcomes for women and girls and links poverty reduction to women's empowerment. As stated above rural women experience inequalities with higher levels of hardship and GDI considered it important to explore and establish research based evidence of how the government of Malawi and political parties are addressing the unique situation of rural women and how the challenges young rural women face are hindering their participation in politics. GDI's research targeted young rural women as a constituency that has never been targeted before in Malawi for it is among these young women that a culture of democracy can be grown in a way that is sustainable.

5. Pre-existing Policies

There are no pre-existing policies directly targeting young rural women aimed at promoting their political participation. The findings of this research are therefore intended to provide the basis for policy development.

6. Policy Options

A few strategies can be employed to promote the political participation and representation at the local level of young rural women. These strategies include;

- 6.1 legislation to enhance young women's political participation at the local level,
- 6.2 a quota system
- 6.3 empowerment programs

7. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Policy Options

7.1 Option 1: Legislation

There is currently no strong or specific legislation that covers or encourages women's political participation. The closest legislation that Malawi currently has that empowers women is the recently enacted Gender Equality Act.

There is a need for The Ministry to lobby for domestication of Article 14 of CEDAW. This article which addresses the particular problems faced by rural women will ensure that young rural women are protected by the law and their right to political participation and activism is guaranteed by domestic laws. Article 14 of CEDAW also touches on all aspects of rural women's lives as such the root causes which impede women's participation in politics will be addressed. The challenge of domesticating article 14 of CEDAW is that enforcement and implementation and enforcement of laws that contain social economic rights are progressive in nature as such very slow. Therefore, the impact on increased numbers of young women participating in politics will be very gradual.

7.2 Option 2: Quota System

Legislation can also introduce gender quotas, meaning introducing a mandatory percentage of young women candidates at the local government level. This could be within a political parties Act that could make it a condition for registration for political parties to include quotas for women at all levels of political participation within their parties constitutions. This is a faster and immediate mode of closing the gender gaps and automatically increasing the number of young women into the political system. The legislation applies to everyone and once it is passed it must be complied with. In addition to its immediate impact, new laws increasing young women's political participation at the local can also be incorporated in the existing national gender policy for 2012-2017. The national gender policy recognizes that women and young girls should participate in politics and decision making positions; there is a need however to focus and also highlight young rural women's participation at the local level.

However, as it has been seen countless times implementation of laws can be a challenge. In addition gender quotas do not necessarily lead to effective mainstreaming of gender concerns in politics. The root causes and constraints that limit young women's political participation in the first place still remain unaddressed. Therefore it ends up with increased political participation according to the laws but in practice the gaps still remain.

7.3 Option 3: Empowerment Programs:

The Ministry may also push for Programs which will address the social, cultural and economic barriers that limit young women's participation and ensure that young women in the rural areas fully benefit from such programs. Through these programs young women should have access to financial assistance to help them with their political careers. In addition, the young rural women will be able to network with other aspirants and women Members of Parliament. This will provide the young women who are debutants in the political sphere, as such have no prior political affiliations to benefit from the women MPs and share experiences with the other women members. The benefit of such programs is that they can also reach out and sensitize the men in the rural areas in order to penetrate the strong patriarchal systems and start changing the mindset and attitudes of both men and women in the rural areas.

The challenge with such programs is the necessary finances to fully and successfully roll out such a program. This program touches on several dimensions and in order for the young women to grow and develop it has to be a program that runs for a long period of time. In addition the majority of the Malawian population is in the rural areas, therefore the challenge will be in regards to the outreach of the program. All rural young women across the country have to benefit but that will require extensive outreach.

8. Policy Recommendations

It is recommended that programs which will economically empower young women in the rural areas, break down all barriers impeding women's participation and sensitize the rural area population is the best option to address this issue. This option will create an enabling environment for young women's political empowerment and ensure that where there is female representation, the representation is effective and makes an impact in politics rather than being representation on paper.