

# Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

**Target: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary school education and at all levels, preferably by 2005**

## 1. The status of gender equality and empowerment of women

Women in Malawi continue to form a major force in the country's socio-economic activities. Although women constitute about 52 percent of the population, serious gender disparities still exist in terms of access to and control of productive resources and opportunities for participation in the development process. Gender Development Index for Malawi of 0.374 indicates that large disparities between men and women still exist.

The Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) acknowledges that gender disparities in Malawi are one of the major causes of poverty. The 1998 Integrated Household Survey showed that 52 percent of the 65.3 percent of Malawians living in poverty were females and that 25 percent of the households were female-headed.

Education is a key to women empowerment; but wide gender disparities remain in the sector. The 1998 Census indicated a literacy rate of 51 percent for women as compared to 64 percent for men. Enrolment for both girls and boys at primary school level increased almost to parity through the introduction of free primary education in 1994, and other interventions such as the Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) Project. However, high drop-out rates among girls in senior classes, imply that more boys than girls receive education.

Fewer women participate in decision-making as compared to men. The 1995 Civil Service Census indicated that out of the 112,975 employees, only 25.4 percent, in the civil service, were females. The majority of the women were support staff. Out of the 698 officers in decision-making positions, only 12.32 percent were females (Department of Human Resource Management and Development, 2003). In the political domain, only 17 (8.7 percent) out of the 194 members elected to the legislature, in 1999, were females. However, this is an improvement since only 9 females (5.6 percent) were elected in 1994.

Gender-based violence is another issue in Malawi which, until recently, has received little attention and yet, it is one of the factors promoting the spread of HIV/AIDS. Efforts to reduce gender-based violence have, so far, mainly focused on raising awareness. Effective reporting mechanisms and a supportive legal framework which are essential for addressing gender-based violence, have not been put in place.

## 2. Challenges

The key challenge is to transform the fundamental socio-cultural factors that create and perpetuate gender inequalities in the Malawi society. This requires some cultural specific research and interventions considering that Malawi is a multi-cultural country. Knowledge and skills in gender research, analysis, planning, monitoring and evaluation are, therefore, critical for reducing gender disparities.

In addressing the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS, which increase women's susceptibility to infection, on one hand, and increase their vulnerability to the impact of the disease, on the other, it is important to ensure equal participation of women and men in development activities.

Limited human capacity, at all levels, has undermined progress towards achieving the gender equality and objectives of women's empowerment. The Gender Department in the Ministry of Gender and Community Services is understaffed and experiences high turn-over of middle level staff with expertise in gender. The department does not have its own staff at district level. A study commissioned in 2002 by the Ministry of Gender and Community Services showed that capacity to mainstream gender in the development process at district level, was inadequate, as evidenced by a number of district development plans, in which gender issues were not included.

Increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, in a sustainable manner, is a challenge that will require long term measures of raising enrolment and retention rates for girls in schools at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This is dependent on creating more space and girl-friendly environment in schools and colleges, finding innovative means of tackling the socio-cultural factors that limit girls' participation in education and introducing more programmes to support girls' education.

### 3. Policy Framework and Strategies

The Government of Malawi and its development partners acknowledge the importance of addressing gender disparities in all sectors for sustainable socio-economic development. The Ministry of Gender and Community Services was, therefore, established in the early 1990s as the national machinery to facilitate the formulation, implementation, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and activities related to gender, in all sectors and at all levels.


The Malawi Government launched the Malawi National Platform for Action (MNPFA) in 1997, following the adoption of the Global Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The MNPFA, which focuses on poverty alleviation and empowerment, the girl child, violence against women and peace, was the basis for the formulation of a number of projects in education, health, human rights and the environment.

The Malawi National Gender Policy (MNGP) was launched in 2000 to provide guidance in the attainment of gender equality and empowerment of women. It focuses mainly on education and training; reproductive health; food and nutrition; security; natural resources and environmental management; governance and human rights; poverty eradication and economic empowerment.

The Government of Malawi, through the MPRS, laid down some objectives aimed at reducing the existing gender disparities and empowerment of women. These included engendering sectoral budgets, eradicating gender-based violence, enhancing women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes and increasing access to quality reproductive health services.

In the education sector, the Policy Investment Framework (PIF), was formulated in 2001 as a response to the Government of Malawi Poverty Alleviation Programmes and to facilitate the implementation of the objectives of education for all. In addition to improving access to education for all Malawians, the PIF also aims at reducing existing gender disparities by increasing participation of girls and women in education.

A paper, outlining gender-related laws of Malawi, aimed at facilitating gender responsive laws and legal systems in Malawi, was written in 2003. This initiative is a positive stepping stone for the creation of a legal framework that should facilitate the elimination of injustices, emanating from unequal gender relations as well as promote women's rights.



Finally, a Strategic Country Gender Assessment (SCGA) on Malawi, has recently been completed. It provides a cost benefit analysis, which justifies increased investment in education for sustainable poverty eradication. It also gives a practical demonstration of benefits by including gender issues in all development sectors which should give development partners information on strategies for assistance.

#### 4. Assessment of Progress

Progress towards reducing gender disparities and empowering women has been slow. However, in view of the prevailing policy environment and strategies, as well as the support from development partners, some significant progress could be made towards realizing the goal, if all proposals are operationalised.