



Hand in Hand

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. With a population of over 16million people, more than half are living below the poverty line of \$1.25 per day. 51% of the population face an additional challenge – being a woman. Gender disparities exist all over the world, however, in a country that primarily follows customary law where men own and have access to the majority of resources needed to achieve the basic needs of everyday life, women are at a large disadvantage.



Figure 1 - WOFAD members at a donation ceremony in a rural community outside of Blantyre

Most rural communities in Malawi follow traditional practices, including early marriages, early pregnancies and the common belief that women should be staying home and taking care of the family while men should work to earn a living and thus control the households' income. Girls are less likely to go to school, often dropping out when they reach puberty. As a result, women are less likely to find work when they grow up and even if they are engaged in the occasional piece work, wages between men and women are far from equal. Harmful traditional practices which are still commonly practiced in rural villages, in addition to gender-based violence and lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health have resulted in a high prevalence of HIV and AIDS. While new infections are decreasing, many women are still suffering from the challenges

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associated with being HIV positive. Stigma and discrimination, a lack of ARVs and viral load testing machines in hospitals, and poverty have made life difficult for women living with HIV/AIDS. Despite the fact that there is adequate treatment available on today's market, people living with HIV continue dying from preventable and treatable diseases such as the flu or pneumonia. The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) weakens the immune system of a person and thus puts them at a higher risk of contracting common illnesses. Simple challenges such as lack of transport to a nearby clinic, not enough funds to pay for basic medication, discrimination from health care providers towards people living with HIV or poor diet all contribute to this phenomenon. However, what seems simple to us, is often very challenging for a woman, living in a rural community in one of the poorest countries' in the world. A woman, who is HIV positive, whose husband has died and who now depends on other family members to support her and her children. A woman whose husband beats her and does not allow her to work, but also does not give her adequate financial support to invest in her children's education and health. Or a woman who together with her husband fights every day against the discrimination they face due to their HIV status. Such a woman is not a fictional character in a novel about a far-away country somewhere in Africa, such a woman is a WOFAD woman.



Figure 2 - The WOFAD women in front of the office in Chirimba, Blantyre

WOFAD is a small grassroots-based organization located in Chirimba community in Blantyre, Malawi. The organization was formed by a handful of women who saw the need for change when HIV/AIDS rates were at its highest and women all over the country were being blamed for men falling ill suddenly and dying “mysteriously”. In 2005, WOFAD was registered as a non-profit, non-governmental (NGO) organization with the aims of eliminating discrimination based on gender and HIV status and empowering women through knowledge sharing. Since 2005, a group of 20-25 women has been meeting regularly at the WOFAD office and continued to meet every Tuesday for 9 years to lend each other support and discuss challenges they face. Some of the women within the group are HIV positive, while others are negative. Despite these differences, they represent one thing – they are all women. Community belonging, friendships, family and belief are very important in Malawi. Every week these women have the chance to sing together, dance, which if you know anything about Malawi is almost equivalent to breathing air, and pray together. While WOFAD does not have very many resources, they try to support these women as much as possible through information sharing, occasionally supplying food and snacks and involve them in activities such as HTC week, advocacy meetings, and trainings. The challenges the WOFAD women face however, continue. Lack of financial resources to travel to hospitals, purchase nutritious foods, ensure their children can go to school, and social limitations due to traditional beliefs and practices are problems these women face on a daily basis.

The Project:



Figure 3 - Two WOFAD women preparing rice - one of the business ventures

Hand in Hand is a project specifically developed for the WOFAD women. With a new direction of economic empowerment, WOFAD has decided to support the WOFAD women in a project that allows them to open their own business ventures. The project will be run independently by the 25 women who have organized themselves into groups of 5, however, through WOFAD the women will receive technical as well as financial

support to start up their businesses. The women have undergone a training in business and basic financial management and started developing their business plans and budgets. They are being supported in the process of finding markets, understanding roles and responsibilities of each member and marketing themselves as women entrepreneurs. Each group will be engaged in a different activity. The women have collectively decided on their respective income-



Figure 4 - One of the women dancing after receiving a bible donation in the local language Chichewa

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generating activities while considering competition, availability, demand, and costs. The five business ventures are:

1. AGBEES Women's Group: Raising and selling chickens
2. RORUPAU Women's Group: Buying and selling potatoes, groundnuts, beans and rice
3. LALAM Women's Group: Buying and selling dried fish
4. EMERDA Women's Group: Buying and selling maize
5. Green Apple Women's Group: Buying and selling onions, potatoes and garlic



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Women's Names:

Baliyamu, Ruth; Banda, Maria; Chimbanga, Grace; Ching'amba, Rose; Chivaula, Grace; Chizaka, Edina; Fulaye, Belita; Gemani, Damarice; Kambalame, Emelida; Kapfiri, Annie; Kwayitana, Mahatu, Patricia; Mahwale, Lucia; Mahwale, Unice; Mankhokwe, Rose; Master, Esinart; Mpando, Ruth; Mpanda, Annie; Pole, Emma; Samudeni, Agness; Yasmine, Milliam; Zinyongo, Lydia.

We thank everyone in advance for their interest and support! We believe in this project because it is made and run by the beneficiaries. The women feel motivated and committed as they have been part of the planning process since day one; empowerment is about just that. Taking a bottom-up approach and involving the women in decision-making will ensure successful and sustainable business ventures.

The women are grateful for any donation and know that the money will directly benefit them, their future endeavours as well as their children's future.

Thank you very much!!!

Zikomo Kwambiri!!!



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