

Popularising the Africa Women's Protocol

The experience of Malawi



Introduction

Oxfam's mission is to work with others to overcome poverty and suffering. Our interpretation of poverty goes beyond lack of finances to encompass lack of capabilities, powerlessness, and inequality. Our fight to overcome poverty and suffering focuses on the right to a sustainable livelihood, water, education, health, protection and security, a voice in public life, and freedom from discrimination. The promotion of gender equality and women's rights is therefore at the heart of our efforts.

When the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women entered into force, it became a potentially effective tool for advancing the rights of African women. Unfortunately, unless people from all walks of life, including grassroots women, judges, police officers, government officials, and men and women's rights advocates know about such instruments, their effectiveness will be grossly undermined.

Every effort must be made to promote the popularisation, domestication, and implementation of the Protocol by encouraging effective partnerships between civil-society organisations (CSOs) and government institutions.

Malawi

Malawi was among the first countries to ratify the Protocol. The Ministry of Women and Child Development recognised that unless the Africa Women's Protocol was widely disseminated in the country, it would not be an effective tool for changing the lives of women. A deliberate effort needed to be made to educate Malawians and provide them with the information to claim their rights and seek redress when they were violated. The Ministry also recognised the value of the Africa Women's Protocol as a tool for integrating women's rights into national policies.

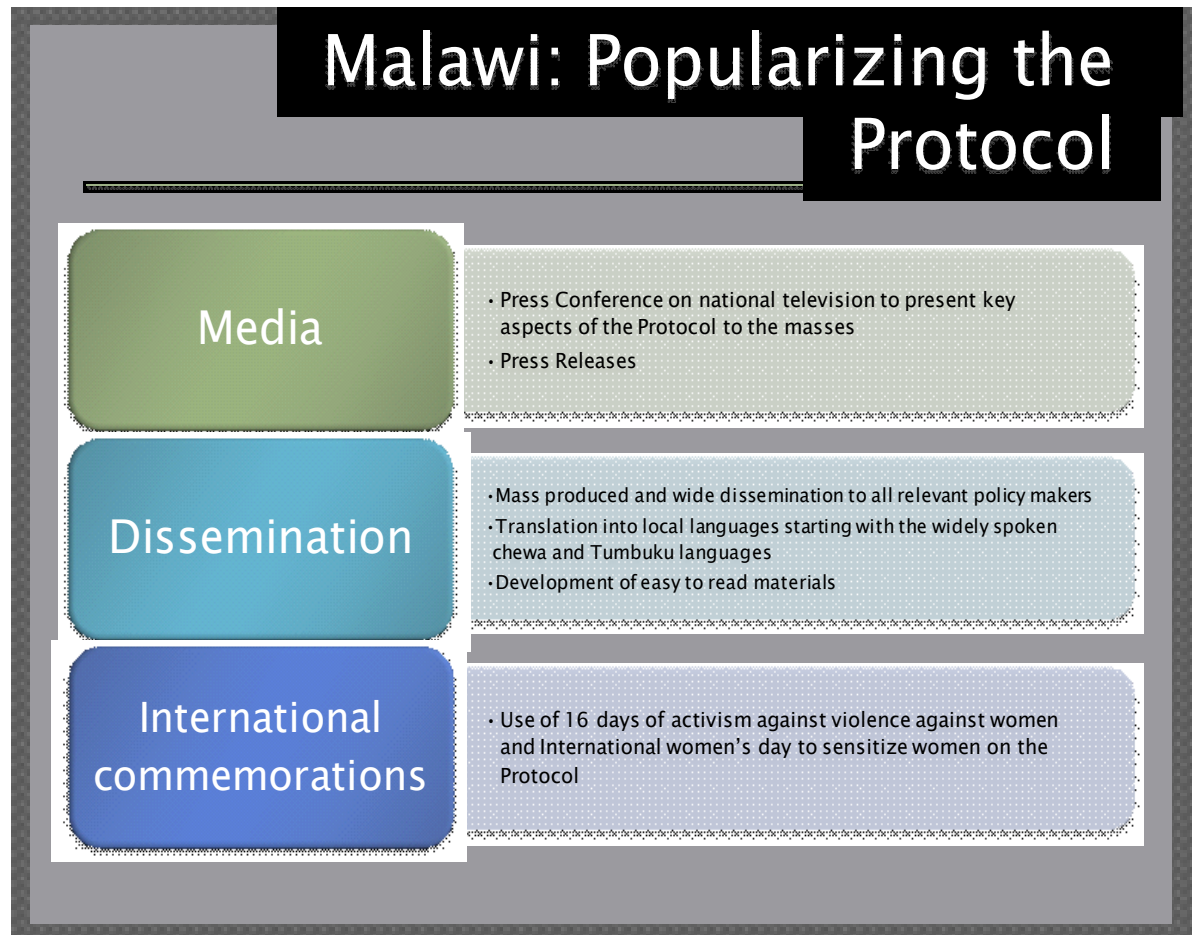
With the support of Oxfam, the Ministry designed and implemented a project to disseminate the Protocol to all Malawians, especially those in the rural areas. The overall objective of the project was to enhance the protection of women's rights and promote their participation in all spheres of development. The Ministry took a long-term view of the project.

The initial phase supported by Oxfam focused on popularisation. Subsequent phases were to focus on prioritising provisions of the Protocol in the context of Malawi, including targeting law reform and policy or practice change. In the long run the project aims at integrating the provisions of the Africa Women's protocol in all policy implementation efforts of government, non-government organisations (NGOs), and other stakeholders.

The specific objectives of the first phase were to:

- build the capacity of key stakeholders to understand and disseminate the Protocol; and
- seek support from policy makers for the provisions of the Protocol.¹

The project was co-ordinated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development with support from partners such as the Malawi Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, and NGO Gender Coordination Network.



This section outlines a number of key strategies to popularise, domesticate, and implement the Africa Women's Protocol.

- The Ministry of Women and Child Development used the Protocol to promote speedy legislation of the Prevention of Domestic Violence (DV) Act.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Development in Malawi printed 5000 copies of the Protocol and distributed them to stakeholders including the Ministry of Justice, faith-based leaders, community leaders, NGOs, and various parliamentary committees. The Ministry also held a number of meetings to disseminate the Africa Women's Protocol.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Development used (and continues to use) press releases and radio phone-ins to promote the Protocol, and raised awareness of the Protocol by targeting community leaders such as teachers, chiefs, and marriage counsellors.
- The Malawi government has enhanced various structures necessary for the implementation of issues related to gender-based violence (GBV).

Community development assistants and social workers have been recruited and community action groups on GBV set up, comprising respected and influential people in the communities such as marriage counsellors.

- The government has built partnerships with CSOs. During the review of the gender policy and the development of the legislation on human trafficking, the Ministry of Women and Child development worked with a number of CSOs.
- Community action groups in Malawi that support victims of GBV.
- The 16 days of Activism against Violence against Women (VAW) were used as a strategy to remind the president and his government of the various promises that were made to women.
- The Women and Child Development Ministry has conducted gender training for judges and opened rehabilitation centres, and plans to set aside budgetary resources to open more rehabilitation centres.
- The Ministry is using economic empowerment groups as an entry point to advocate for women's rights. The approach goes beyond micro trading and credit to macro-level economic strategies.

The Ministry successfully concluded the first phase of the project and is continuing work with its partners to take forward work on the Africa Women's Protocol.

Conclusion

The popularisation programme is an excellent example of how fruitful collaboration between governments and CSOs can be. Unlike most campaigns where the focus is on pressuring governments to take certain actions, an alliance of government and CSOs came together to work towards the same human-rights goal of promoting accountability on women's rights. It is commendable that Malawi has gone beyond popularisation to domestication, and making the Protocol relevant to the lives of ordinary women.

Recommendations

Where appropriate, other countries should emulate the effective collaboration between government, CSOs and Oxfam that underpinned the success of the popularisation project in Malawi.

This partnership should be nurtured and carried through the whole continuum of activities on the Protocol: that is from ratification and popularisation through domestication to monitoring.

Notes

¹ Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services: A Proposal for the Dissemination of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women, Submitted to Oxfam, November 2005

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