



Keynote Address

Director, Centre for Social Concern (CfSC)

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Decent Work for Women: An Interaction Session with Journalists and Media Houses

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen – Representing different Media Houses, Honourable Journalists, Honourable Representatives of Malawi Congress of Trade Union, Honoured and Honourable Minister of Labour, in the person of Mr. Nyanguro, Representatives of the Missionaries of Africa, Our Honourable Staff Members of CfSC, Very distinguished Ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of the Centre for Social Concern (CfSC), I would like to warmly welcome you all to this important mini-conference on *Decent Work for Women*. Women, with and in regard to our mothers first, are the engines of what or even who we are as men or their children. They are the heart of a family in their hard working spirit; yet they are often the least recognised, taken for granted, exploited, abused and often dehumanised. They are, very often second hand, unrecognised-citizens in their hard working situation. The Centre for Social Concern in strong collaboration with *Hivos* make combined effort to address these injustices through *Decent Work for Women* Project.

Centre for Social Concern was founded in 2002 as faith-based organization that promotes research and action on social issues, linking Christian Faith and Social Justice. The CfSC aims at transforming the unjust structures in Malawian society through research and advocacy to ensure sustainable change in policies for the betterment of all in line with their human dignity and the Integrity of Creation. The Centre aims at humanising the dehumanised. Women being at the Centre of it all, we recognise that, “Behind any great man is a great woman!”¹

In the spirit of exposing the plight of the poor, the dehumanized, and with the realization that the average person is struggling to afford even the most basic of monthly commodities, CfSC, through its Social Conditions Research Program conducts the “Basic Needs Basket” (BnB) survey since its foundation. The Program aims at gathering facts through research and use those facts to lobby and advocate for change in policies and/or practices that inhibit attainment of sustainable livelihood. The hallmark of the project is to contribute towards a more humane and socially just Malawi.

Activities of the Centre for Social Concern dwell on four pillars, namely Economic Governance (which actually has organized this very programme today – Women@Work), Active Citizenship, Social Conditions Research and Interreligious Dialogue, promoting the essence and value of human co-existence.

With funding from *Hivos*, Centre for Social Concern is implementing a project titled, *Activating Gender Lenses in Advocating Decent Work for Farmer Workers in the Horticulture Value Chains*.

The *Decent Work for Women* programme builds on *Hivos*’ “Women@Work” programme (2011- 2015) targeting the conditions of women working in 8 countries in Africa. Research commissioned by *Hivos* in 2018 reveals that women in the horticultural industry in Malawi live in a male-dominated culture

¹ Every great man is great woman, <https://writingexplained.org/idiom-dictionary/behind-every-great-man-is-a-great-woman> (accessed on May 28, 2020).

and are not accustomed to claiming their rights and lack knowledge about their labour rights. There is need to uplift and empower women workers in horticulture industry since it is one of the global value chains driven by women.

The study found that on the policy front, Malawi has important legislation and policy instruments that are able to ensure that women workers in the chilli sector enjoy their right to decent work, if well implemented. These include the Malawi Constitution; the Labour Relations Act (1996); the Employment Act (2000); the Workers' Compensation Act; and the Occupational Safety, Health and Welfare Act, among others. Further, between 2011 and 2016, Malawi was implementing the ILO-supported Malawi Decent Work Country Programme, that was promoting decent work among employees in Malawi, including those in the agricultural sector.

The baseline study has found that women are actively involved in all the production activities along the horticulture value chain. However, they are almost exclusively involved in the sorting and grading. They are also little engaged in enforcing the existing policies which concern them.

We do realise that when doing these agricultural activities some women workers – if not many - are not provided with protective gear, thereby risking their health. Promoting better work conditions for women, therefore, remains to be our priority. Thus, the Centre for Social Concern aims at enhancing the level of understanding decent work as we are doing today. Consequently, you as Media professionals, having the ability and means to easily reach those women whom we are aiming at, through our combined effort, you will be able to expound those existing policies on decent work in a simple language that they will be able understand them easily.

The study has also found that as a whole, our sampled women farmers in horticulture industry are receiving wages that are lower than the government-set minimum wages. This depicts clearly in the private sector.

Centre for Social Concern is, therefore, making the following recommendations to government in order to promote *Decent Work for Women*:

a. The Government must Increase Minimum Wage:

The monthly research on cost of living carried out by the Centre for Social Concern reveals that the family of six people requires an average income of MK194,000 for basic needs in a month. Report commissioned by *Hivos* in 2020, reveals that workers in horticulture, majority of them being women, are receiving money that is below the living wage of the rural society. This implies that the wages they earn are not able to push them out of poverty and that the cost of living in their society is higher than the money they are receiving.

Therefore, there is a need for the government to consider increasing their wages. In fact, the money they receive is even lower than the money they need to purchase basic balanced diet. Studies carried by Centre for Social Concern reveals that the monthly requirement to buy quality food that provides adequate nutrition is at MK100,000 which is far from the MK35,000. Centre for Social Concerns recommends minimum wage closer to food poverty line as stated above.

b. Enforce adherence to Minimum Wage by all Employers:

Studies commissioned by *Hivos* in Malawi in 2018 reveals that women in horticulture farms are getting less than the government set minimum. CfSC has noted with deep concern that the government does not enforce the legal minimum wage, especially in private sector, which is already very low in all

standards. The government must ensure that vulnerable workers that include women must be given legal and fair wages as set by the government itself.

c. Increase in Free Tax Band:

Lack of recognition of inequality as a problem on its own right in any of Malawi's development strategies worsens the inequality. Economic inequality (measured by consumption) in Malawi worsened in 2011. The share of consumption attributable to the top 10 percent was at 53 percent in 2011, and that for the bottom 40 percent was at 13 percent. The Gini coefficient of per capita consumption increased from 0.390 in 2004 to 0.452 in 2015 showing that consumption inequality worsened over this period.

Centre for Social Concern has for a long time advocated for progressive tax systems that will not only increase the revenue basket but fairly distribute the same to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. Centre for Social Concern proposes an increase to free tax band to MK100,000, which is closer to food poverty line (the amount of money required to buy basic food in a month). Centre for Social Concern is convinced that an increase in free tax band will lead to an increase in disposable income. The increase in disposable income will lead to an increase in demand for commodities. In addition, the increased demand for commodities will create more labour that will also lead to more people paying taxes.

d. Enforce Signing of Written Contracts

As specified in the Employment Act (2000), before an individual is employed, the employer is supposed to formulate a contract that should contain all the agreements describing the terms and conditions of employment. The employee is supposed to sign the contract upon agreeing with the terms and conditions. It has been noted with concern that majority of casual labours, not excluding women, are employed without written contract in order to avoid other benefits that are entitled by a permanent worker.

e. Sensitize Workers on Workers' Rights, Discrimination and Sexual Violence:

Every worker is entitled to certain rights at their work place, including freedom of association, non-discrimination and lack of forced labour in abusive conditions. It is very essential that these rights are known not only to the employers but also to the workers themselves. Workers who know and understand their rights at work place are fully able to have and enjoy decent work.

If that is not the case, then they need to be empowered in order to demand conditions conducive to decent work.

Studies which were commissioned by *Hivos* revealed that 74% women workers are not aware of their rights at their work place. Most of them believed that the employer has power over them; thus, they are supposed to do whatever they are required to do even if they are not comfortable with it or totally deprived of their rights. Fear of losing their jobs exacerbated the situation.

Centre for Social Concern believes that it is the responsibility of everyone, including media professionals, to talk on behalf of the voiceless. They are to assist them to uplift their living standard.

I, therefore, call upon you to join Centre for Social Concern in promoting decent work for women.

I wish you all fruitful deliberations as you enjoy sharing knowledge and experiences in the field of decent work for women.

**Thank you all, thank you one.
Takulandirani**