

Cop. Farmer. Nutritionist. Rockbreaker

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International attention turned to [Malawi](#) in April 2012 when President [Joyce Banda](#) came to power. Only the second woman head of state in Africa, she was named last year by *Forbes* as the most powerful woman on the continent.

Banda took charge after the death of her predecessor, Bingu wa Mutharika, at what was economically a very difficult time. After the IMF encouraged her to devalue the kwacha, in 2012, the country experienced widespread food and fuel shortages. Recent events have made her term no easier. The attempted assassination of the government budget director, last September, led to a corruption scandal, dubbed cashgate, that saw Banda sack her entire cabinet, and the EU, UK and Norway withdraw funding.

Her leadership could come to an end in May with the presidential election, a highly contested poll that will coincide with Malawi's 20th anniversary as a multiparty democracy.

Although her success in most areas hasn't been fully evaluated, she has been commended internationally for her efforts to improve women's rights. Working for gender equality is also a priority of Irish Aid, the Government's overseas development programme, and Malawi is one of its priority countries.

There is a lot of room for improvement. Malawi is 124th in the world for gender inequality, according to the UN. Women make up 22.3 per cent of seats in the Malawian parliament, and only 10.4 per cent of women have a secondary education, half the rate for men.

January Mvula, director of the Sustainable Rural Community Development Organisation, says Malawian women are physically strong. "African women carry a baby on their head, one load on their back, and others in each of their arms." But when your measurement extends beyond the physical, the empowerment of women in Malawi is still in the early stages. "We are from a background where women are often disregarded."

Issues such as gender-based violence are widespread. Early marriages and pregnancies prevent women completing their education. One in seven Malawian women is infected with HIV or Aids.

Beyond these problems, Mvula says that Malawian culture doesn't encourage women to speak out, and this stalls progress. "We live in a culture of silence, and we need to get women talking so they can really understand each other. The first thing is we need to empower them to speak the good things about themselves. If they can speak the good things, then maybe later they can speak the bad things too."

The challenges Malawian women face are both different from and similar to those of Irish women. Through their experiences of career choices, education and poverty, four Malawians detail the experiences of women in Malawi today, and the impact, if any, that having a female president has had on their lives.

Theresa Banda Africa and Malawi p

rogramme manager for Valid Nutrition

Theresa Banda was the first girl from her village to go to university. "My father was a teacher. My father was really a pull factor for me. He started giving me incentives. Small things like, 'I'll buy you a new dress,' 'I'll give you a full chicken to yourself.' And then I'd say, 'Look, of the girls I'm number one.' And he'd say, 'No, who told you girls and boys are different? In the whole class you're number five.'"

Born in a rural village in northern Malawi, Banda attended Bunda College of Agriculture, where she graduated with a minor in nutrition. "I would look around at the kids that are not growing well. I felt that there was a need for somebody to do something about that. I asked at that time, and there were no nutritionists in Malawi."

Halfway through her studies, Banda decided to get married. "My husband was my friend way back from secondary school, so we grew up together." Her father wanted her to postpone marriage until she had finished her education and begun work, but she proceeded with it against his wishes.

Banda left her husband and children in Malawi between 1988 and 1990, to take up a scholarship to Howard University in Washington DC to do her master's degree. Although she was offered the chance to stay and do a PhD, she turned it down. "I wanted to go home. Of course Washington had all these social amenities that we didn't have, but overall I didn't like it. I think home is best."

Instead Banda took a position with the ministry of health, and went on to work for the World Bank. She now lives in [Lilongwe](#).

Overall, things are improving for women in Malawi. There is an understanding that there are more “men drunkards” than women, Theresa says, and that if women are given the resources they can take much better care of their family than men can. “If we had more women in power controlling the resources, at least maybe we would have moved an inch instead of the quarter of an inch that we are moving.”

Banda says the president has been an encouraging influence. “Before becoming president she was the president of the national association for businesswomen. Now she still talks about how women have something to do.”

Banda has three children of her own, and brings up four orphans, of whom the youngest is 15. Perhaps in consideration of her father, who complains about being reliant on females to cook for him because of his lack of skills, all the boys she has brought up have been taught their way around the kitchen. One of her daughters studies psychology. The other is a doctor.

When Banda travels back to her village for family events she notices things are changing. “Now a lot more girls attend university. Everybody used to say, ‘You see: Theresa went; you could do it too.’ ”

Dorcus Jussab

Farmer and housewife

Dorcus Jussab lives in Chididi, a tiny mountainside village in the district of Nsanje, at the southern tip of Malawi, within walking distance of Mozambique. It is one of the poorest places in one of the poorest countries.

Jussab splits her day between farming maize and doing household chores. One of those is minding the chickens that roam outside her small house. “All the housework is done by me; it’s only when I fall sick that my husband does the cooking, but if I am okay then it’s my job.”

Recently, she has been working on small businesses with other local women, and for the first time she is making a financial contribution towards supporting her family. Her husband is a chaplain, and though he is salaried, his income is not enough.

The village in which she grew up was beside a secondary school. Her future husband attended it, and proposed to her when she was still in primary education, but Jussab was a keen student. “I said, ‘I am at school. If you want me you can wait for me until I’ve finished.’ And he said, ‘Okay, no problem: I will wait for you.’ ”

She was selected to attend secondary school, but her parents couldn’t support her financially. “Even when there was money, priority was given to my brothers.” She married two years later.

Jussab has two sons and a daughter. Two go to school and the youngest is in kindergarten. “I would regard boys and girls as the same. We will send them all to school, and I dream of having them all go to college. That’s what I wanted to do, but I failed because I didn’t go to school, so I want my dreams to go to my children.”

A tour of the local village school shows the improbability of these dreams being achievable for her daughter. In the past 10 years just one girl has graduated from secondary school. “School is the most important instrument that a woman should have, because when they get education then they stand at an equal opportunity with men, so they are also decision-makers. They also control resources, and they can contribute positively towards their livelihoods.”

Illiteracy removes most women even farther from ideas of gender equality and empowerment, but for Jussab, Banda’s presidency provides visible evidence of female ability. “Dr Joyce Banda, she stands out as the biggest role model in Malawi, because, while we have other women that are learned, we don’t hear about them, we don’t see them. But this woman, we hear about her, we see her. Now those with daughters are sending them to school, and one day again there’ll be somebody like Dr Joyce Banda.”

Fanny Chimbaya

Policewoman and prosecutor

Fanny Chimbaya is unusual in Malawi, because she is more highly educated than her husband. “My husband didn’t go to university. His family didn’t have the fees to pay for him, because there were many children and it’s a lot of money.”

Chimbaya is a policewoman, and her small house in a suburb of Lilongwe is full of noise and laughter. She, her husband and five girls sleep in the two bedrooms, and 35 chickens run around outside. On the wall of her kitchen is an alphabet chart. In her spare time Fanny teaches more than 30 women and children to read and write.

She has worked for the police since 2002. Now she works as a prosecutor, handling child cases. “We have a lot of child cases in Malawi because of their vulnerability. “A lot of the children are vulnerable because they are orphans from the HIV pandemic, they are looking for something to eat and they end up being arrested because they don’t have food. And the young girls end up

being abused. They go to court and they are ordered to pay 2,000 kwacha [€3.40]. A lot of them do not want to pay and are put in jail.”

In Malawi, from the age of 15 you can be put in adult prison. “When I see them going to school I like my job. Making differences, making changes.”

She points to facilities that are still lacking, however, such as somewhere to report sexual crime. “In my office we have a women’s network, and we are fighting [for] the same opportunities. When they are promoting men they must also promote women.”

Fanny’s mother sold flour in the market to earn the money to send her to school. While she was growing up her neighbour worked as a police officer, and this influenced her choice of career. “I was impressed by her head-dress. And she became a role model for me.”

A picture of the president hangs in every police station in Malawi. Although Chimbaya believes the president has a lot to do towards tackling corruption before her time in office could be considered a success, this impact is felt. “With her being a woman we find that she is setting an example to our children.”

Madris Gryflo

Rockbreaker

Madris Gryflo sits in the same spot for 12 hours every day, breaking stones into chippings that she sells to buy food for her grandchildren. She arrives at daybreak – before 6am – each morning, and, her muscles aching, walks the short distance home again after the sun goes down. She describes herself as self-employed, one of a group of enterprising individuals who sit separately at the foot of a sheer rock face.

This is Ngweyna Quarry, in Area 23, Lilongwe. The hot sun beats down. An entire family are spread three metres from Gryflo. Children with dirty faces play in the dust.

There is a determination about her work. Keeping going requires focus. “It is very, very difficult.” When a potential customer passes by on the nearby road her neighbours become her competitors, as they compete to sell their wares. She is solely responsible for the negotiation that accompanies the sale of the chippings. That means her income from each pile varies from 2,000 to 5,000 kwacha (€3.40-€8.50).

Gryflo is the sole provider for her grandchildren. Her daughter died, leaving three offspring, aged 14, 12 and 10. All of them go to school, though paying to send them there is a struggle. Her husband died in 1989, leaving her on her own.

Though her parents never told Gryflo her actual birth date, she knows she was born in 1942. She married when she was 17, and she sees early marriage as a major barrier to women’s progress. Many girls drop out of school to get married, and the lack of education means they are vulnerable, and unable to provide for themselves if something happens to their husbands. She left school halfway through primary school because her family couldn’t afford to send her any longer.

She sees no way out of poverty. “I work just to survive. I am seeking food all the time.” But she is thankful that at least she has the strength to break rocks. Other women who lack strength, she says, are completely at the mercy of others.

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