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Members of Young Urban Women's movement in Mchinji, Malawi working together to advance women's economic justice and feminist macro-economic alternatives.

Transitioning to a Feminist Wellbeing Economy in Malawi and beyond

The dominant economic model and the primacy it places on economic growth achieved through privatisation, deregulation, contractionary fiscal policies and liberalisation of the economy has proven detrimental to women's rights, especially those facing intersectional marginalisation. It is driving the destruction of the planet whilst fuelling inequality rooted in slavery and colonialism, which shifts resources from the global South to the global North through systems and institutions that are undemocratic, unrepresentative and unaccountable. The polycrisis of Covid-19, climate change, debt, conflict and rising food and fuel prices is being used to justify intensified rounds of austerity around the world, reinforcing a racist, sexist division of labour that devalues care work, whether paid or unpaid, whilst the wealth of billionaires and multinational corporations (MNCs) continues to grow. Now more than ever, there is an urgent need to reorientate our economic model towards feminist approaches that prioritise care, wellbeing, gender equality and human rights, as long called for by feminist movements and their allies in wider civil society.

The Malawi context and how the current economic model is not working

Malawi gained its independence after 75 years of colonisation by the British in 1964. Despite being rich in agricultural lands, natural resources and a vibrant youth population, 70% of Malawi – or 13 million people – live on less than USD $2.15 a day.[1] Patriarchal norms are entrenched, meaning women experience this poverty more acutely. Between 2010/11 and 2016/17, income poverty amongst female-headed households increased from 57.2% to 58.7%. For men, it remained around 49.1%.[2] About 94% of employed women (compared with 85% of men) work in the informal economy.[3] Women are paid less,[4] occupy just 22.9% of parliamentary seats, and perform more than six times longer on unpaid care work than men.[5]

Gendered austerity: Numerous rounds of economic reforms since the 1980s linked to loans or policy advice from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have led to sustained underinvestment and cuts to vital public services, such as health and education. Such austerity measures have an impact on women as principal providers of unpaid care, as the majority of public sector workers, and primary users of public services. The assumption is that women will fill the gaps with their labour, leading to time poverty that prevents women from accessing decent work and education, and engaging in political decision-making.

Debt distress: The pandemic and spiralling inflation have pushed Malawi into a debt crisis.[6] Malawi's debt hit 66.7% of GDP in 2022 and is predicted to rise in 2023,[7] further constraining its ability to finance desperately needed public services, which are so crucial for women's rights and the ability to respond to the climate crisis. Malawi's external debt repayments shot up in 2021 from about 5% of government revenue to 31%. The IMF predicts that this debt is likely to stay over 30% of government revenue until at least the early 2030s.[8] As loans are mostly provided in US dollars, Malawi's debt has been intensified by recent interest rate rises in the US to curb inflation, along with the depreciation of its own currency.

Climate crisis and food insecurity: Over-reliance on export-orientated agriculture has led to chronic food insecurity, which affects women as those mainly responsible for meeting the nutritional needs of their families. Conflict in Ukraine and high inflation have caused food and fuel prices to rise, pushing many to the brink of hunger.[9] Climate crises, driven by the demands of the current economic model, are having devastating consequences for women, who comprise 60-80% of the agricultural labour-force.[10] Women's unpaid care workloads also increase when access to food, potable water and infrastructure is disrupted. Malawi is spending about USD $12.5 million, or 1% of GDP, on addressing climate change annually.[11]

Tax injustices: Malawi loses over USD $60 million every year to MNCs and wealthy elites diverting their profits and wealth to tax havens, equivalent to more than 30% of the country's health budget.[12] Malawi is also party to several tax treaties with countries in the global North, which place limits on how it taxes foreign companies. Some of these treaties date back to the colonial era – including its treaty with the UK – and prioritise the interests of the former colonising powers and MNCs.[13]

Rights violations in global value chains: Thousands of women work in plantations cultivating crops for MNCs. For instance, the tea sector employs more than 50,000 people in the peak season, providing a livelihood to 16,500 smallholder tea farmers, at least 65% of whom are women.[14] However, the sector has been filled with allegations of low pay, poor working conditions and systemic gender-based violence, including sexual assault. In 2020, 31 women plantation workers sued a UK-based parent company in the UK for failing to protect them from such abuse at the hands of male colleagues.[15]

Shifting to a feminist wellbeing economy (FWE)

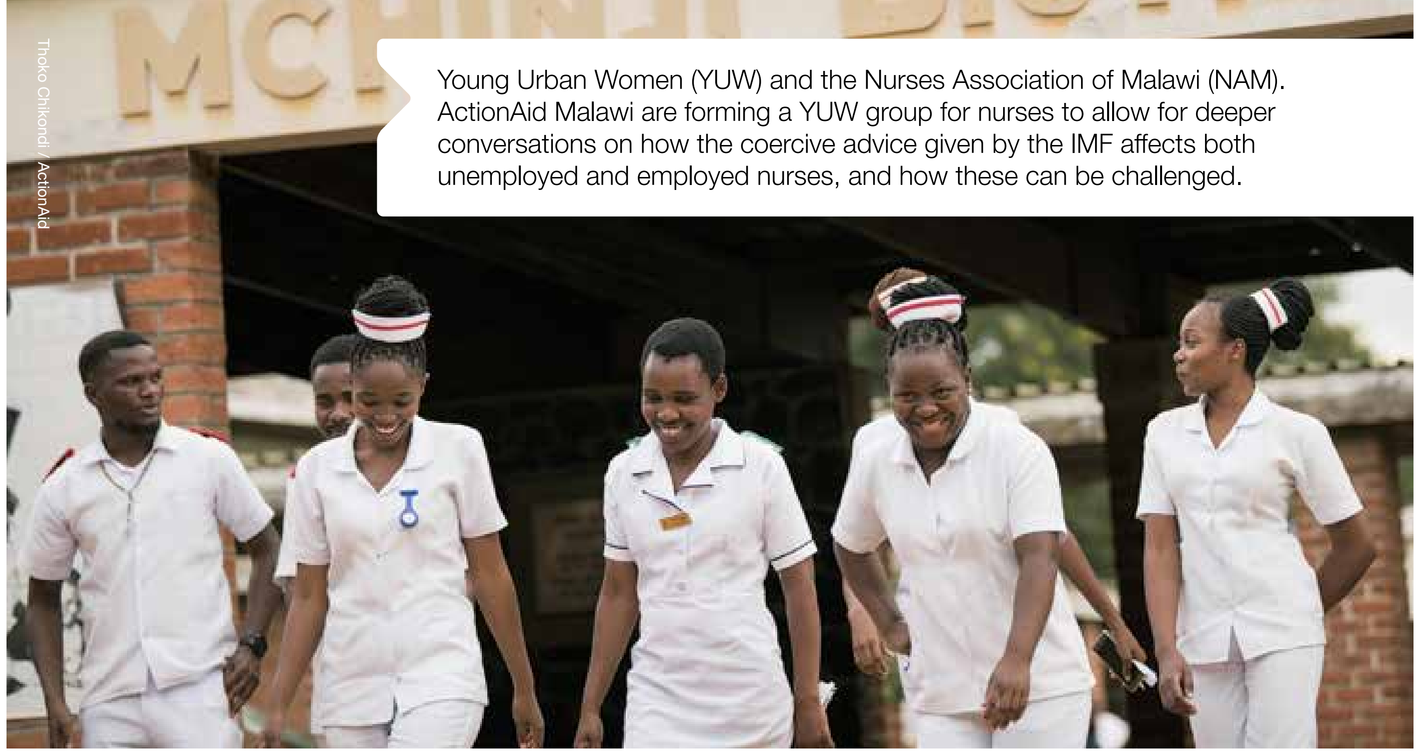
Feminist wellbeing economy (FWE) offers a decolonial, rights-focused paradigm that centres the wellbeing of people and the environment to redress intersecting systems of oppression based on gender, race, class, location, sexual orientation and gender identity. An FWE approach aims to repurpose macroeconomic policy towards the realisation of human rights and climate justice and adopts metrics to measure wellbeing beyond GDP that recognise and value unpaid care work. It prioritises cooperation, solidarity, trust and the collective over individualism, competition, co-option and privatisation. Young women and LGBTQIA+ people in Malawi are calling on their government to urgently adopt a feminist wellbeing approach to the economy. For them, a FWE means the following:[16]

- **An economic model that puts people before profit and ensures equity, dignity and food security**, leading to improved standards for all Malawians, allowing them to live longer, healthier, happier lives.
- **An economy that focuses on women's wellbeing** and redresses the multiple forms of discrimination they face based on gender and other intersecting forms of injustice, empowering women to participate fully in all economic spheres.
- **Women's unpaid work is recognised and valued.** Stereotypical community and reproductive roles are challenged along with heteronormative notions of the family and gender roles.
- **Readily available, high-quality rights-based provision of public goods and services**, including health, education, early childhood development, potable water and decent housing, along with all necessary forms of **social protection**.
- **An end to exploitation of labour,** especially of women and marginalised groups: equal living wages; formalisation of the informal sector; safe working conditions.
- **State protections** for farmers local businesses from competition with MNCs. More training and hiring of people from LGBTQIA+ communities, and greater access to markets for women.
- **The freedom of women and LGBTQIA+ people from all forms of violence and harassment**. Youth, including young women, have **access to sexual and reproductive health and rights**.
- **Economic activities** are geared towards how they benefit **nature and the environment**.
- **Domestic resources are mobilised,** and alternative sources are explored to ensure the government can adequately resource public services without having to take on loans.
- **Widespread civic education so people know their rights** and can hold the government accountable. **More women in positions of power** and equal participation of women, youth and marginalised groups in decision-making.
- **Improved government accountability and transparency**, whereby citizens know the terms and conditions being agreed on in loans. Political immunities are removed, and corruption is ended.

Momentum around this agenda is gaining pace. In recognition of the harms caused by a myopic focus on GDP and free-market supremacy over gender equality, human rights and planetary boundaries, growing numbers of governments and multilateral institutions, along with civil society (notably under the umbrella of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance – WEALL), have been developing alternative frameworks and metrics to assess, resource and advance societal wellbeing. These include Scotland's commitment to delivering a wellbeing economy, Canada's Quality of Life framework, the Buen Vivir frameworks of Bolivia and Ecuador, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, as well UN and ILO-lead initiatives around the Social and Solidarity Economy, including in numerous African countries.

Potential pathways and opportunities for realising FWE in Malawi and beyond

In Malawi, policy initiatives that could serve as a basis for beginning the transition to a FWE include: establishing mechanisms to improve transparency and accountability to citizens with respect to economic decision-making; Investing in gender-responsive public services, such as health, education and early childcare; implementing its Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP II) and ratifying ILO Convention 190 on gender-based violence; universalising social protection through the expansion of the National Social Support Programme; supporting farmers to adopt climate resilient agroecological farming techniques; systematic implementation of gender-responsive budgeting; developing a progressive, gender-responsive domestic resource mobilisation strategy; and reviewing tax holidays and double taxation treaties to ensure that MNCs are paying their fair share.


Thoko Chikondi / ActionAid

Young Urban Women (YUW) and the Nurses Association of Malawi (NAM). ActionAid Malawi are forming a YUW group for nurses to allow for deeper conversations on how the coercive advice given by the IMF affects both unemployed and employed nurses, and how these can be challenged.

However, the extent to which Malawi and other countries in the global South can pursue more feminist economic approaches that allow them to meet their human rights and gender equality commitments, guard against climate change, and ensure accountability to their citizens remains critically constrained by the economic situation facing the country. This in itself is a direct reflection of the power wielded by countries in the global North and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and the existing web of global tax and investment policies and frameworks to which Malawi is subjected. As such, far-reaching systemic changes are needed to the global economic architecture, decision-making institutions and processes, and demanding concerted action on the part of global North countries and IFIs, such as the IMF and World Bank.

Recommendations to global North governments and IFIs include:

- **Support and promote investments in universal, high-quality gender-responsive public services and social protection, particularly in the care economy**. Refrain from impinging on the ability of states to uphold their human rights and gender equality obligations through loan conditions or policy advice to cut public spending in key sectors such as health and education, including cuts and freezes to the public sector wage bill.
- **Urgently and proactively engage in measures to restructure and cancel the debt** of countries facing debt distress and crisis, including by supporting sovereign debt workout mechanisms. Enact binding requirements for private lenders to participate in debt workout processes.
- **Promote progressive forms of taxation** and the capacity of national tax authorities to collect them, such as wealth taxes, corporation and capital gains taxes, rather than expanding regressive taxes such as VAT. **Take steps towards the eradication of tax avoidance, evasion and illicit financial flows;** institute wealth taxes on the super-rich and MNCs, particularly fossil fuel and energy companies. Proactively support the creation of a UN global tax body.
- **Advance gender-just trade strategies and approaches** that: protect workers' rights and land rights; safeguard local traders and producers; respect the policy space of countries to invest in public services and support fledgling domestic industries; and exclude ISDS and measures that place investor rights over human rights and efforts to tackle the climate crisis.
- **Fulfil global climate commitments-** Countries that are historically responsible for climate change must fully implement their global climate commitments, pay for climate losses and damages, and provide support for countries to reduce climate risks and adapt to climate change. This support should be exclusively grant-based and must not exacerbate the existing debt crisis.
- **Implement binding regulations to hold companies to account** for failing to prevent human rights violations and environmental harms linked to their value chains

and activities, including mandatory human rights due diligence requirements. Support the creation of a UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights.

- **Commit to improving accountability, transparency and representation, along with widespread reform within the IMF, World Bank and other IFIs** by calling for a firm adherence to human rights principles and standards as the baseline standard for all policies and approaches: a commitment to undertaking systematic gendered human rights assessments in order to understand policy impacts and how they need to be adjusted to advance, rather than harm, women's rights; systematic engagement with civil society including women's rights organisations; and open, transparent processes for electing leaders and other measures that ensure equitable voice and decision-making power for countries in the global South.

- **Support the development and use of alternative metrics to GDP** by drawing on the analysis of feminist scholars to assess societal progress and to inform the equitable redistribution of resources, both domestically and globally, in ways that re-centre care, wellbeing, human rights, women's rights and environmental sustainability. from an intersectional perspective.

- **Align ODA budgets accordingly**, with greater financing for gender equality, including direct, long-term, flexible funding to women and girl's rights organisations and feminist movements.

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16 In 2022, ActionAid convened two workshops in Malawi with members of the Feminist Macroeconomic Alliance Malawi, trade unions, women farmers, and representatives from groups representing sex workers' rights and LQBTQIA+ rights groups.

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