

THE IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGION AND CULTURE ON GENDER EQUALITY: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE 2014 ELECTIONS IN MALAWI

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Abstract

The Fifth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal highlights the importance of promoting gender equality and empowering women as the avenue of reducing global poverty and human deprivation. This article discusses ways in which patriarchal discourses embedded in religion and culture in many African societies may be manipulated by politicians to exacerbate gender disparities in power relations. The analysis is drawn from the 2014 Malawi elections in which a major opposition party used a campaign slogan peppered with sexist religious and cultural connotations to ridicule and vote out of office southern Africa's first ever female President – Joyce Banda of Malawi and her People Party (PP). In May 2014, Malawi held national elections and the main contestants were the then incumbent President Joyce Banda representing the PP, Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and Atupele Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Mutharika and the DPP won the elections to wrestle away the presidency from Joyce Banda and her People's Party. The eventual winning party (the DPP) created a campaign slogan – Sesa Joyce Sesa¹ – to attack the femininity of then President Joyce Banda. Eventually, picked up by the social media, the slogan appeared to resonate with the religious and cultural identity of the electorate. It is against this backdrop that this article analyses the DPP campaign mantra and illuminates the implications of deeply entrenched religious societies on women empowerment, specifically in political leadership roles. The article suggests that for Africa to make strides with regard to the fifth Sustainable Development Goal, stakeholders ought to engage and rethink over retrogressive and manipulative beliefs that constrain women's roles in the political arena.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, religion, gender, culture, women empowerment

¹ In Malawi's dominant Chichewa language it means "Sweep Joyce [Banda] away"

INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, world leaders gathered at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York to adopt an agenda aimed at transforming the world by 2030 through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015:1). These were built on what had earlier been known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000 when the UN General Assembly set up eight targets which were meant to be achieved by 2015 but were not fully achieved by the deadline (Sexsmith & McMichael, 2015:581). The MDGs stemmed from agreements made at major UN conferences in the 1990s and were framed as a compact between the global North and the global South and this was reaffirmed at an international conference on financing development held in Monterrey, Mexico in 2002 (Haines & Cassels, 2004:394). According to the UN Development Group (UNDG, 2012:13), consultations involving UN technical experts, governments, civil society groups, among other multiple stakeholders, commenced in 2012 to stimulate an inclusive debate that has been coined as a '*Post-2015 Development Agenda: What Future do you want?*' The consultations led to the reformulation of the MDGs to new global 17 SDGs (UN, 2015:1).

Paramount to this article is the fifth of the 17 SDGs which notes that to transform the world by 2030, UN member states should make efforts to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (UN, 2015:18)). In engaging with this issue, the United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) underlines that advancing the rights of women and children advances humanity (UNICEF, 2015). Garcia-Moreno, et al (2005:1282) contend that the fifth Sustainable Development Goal is of great importance because recognising equal rights and opportunities for women and men is critical for social and economic progress.

Measuring women empowerment encompasses multifaceted areas. For Moghadam and Senftova (2005:389), critical areas of concern include women's poverty, educational attainment, reproductive health and rights, employment and economic resources, political participation, violence against women, armed conflict, women and the media. Similarly, Sachs (2005:20) points out that promoting women's "access to economic and political opportunities" is among major strategies aimed at mitigating global poverty. Sachs further notes that SDGs provide a powerful opportunity to help give voice to the hopes and aspirations of the world's poorest and "voiceless" people. Simwaka, et al (2005:708) are of the view that in Africa, there is an urgent need to take a holistic approach to achieving gender equality and women empowerment including "increasing women's participation in political bodies".

Besides being a member of the UN Sustainable Development Goals project, Malawi is a signatory to the 2008 Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development that calls for gender parity in all areas of decision making by 2015 (Mdlongwa, 2009:6). The country is also part of the Economic Commission for Africa's Gender Development Index, launched in 2009 to measure gender disparities and women

empowerment (Machinjili, 2012:v). In this regard, presidential, parliamentary and local government elections provide a window of opportunity to evaluate the progress Malawi has made towards gender equality and women empowerment.

On May 20, 2014, Malawi went to the polls to elect the country's fifth president after twenty years of democracy in which for the first time, one major contestant was a woman – President Joyce Banda. Principal candidates in the elections were: President Banda representing the People's Party (PP), Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Atupele Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The elections were won by Mutharika of the DPP with 36 per cent of the votes, Chakwera of the MCP amassed 27 per cent votes while the then incumbent President Banda of the PP came a distant third with 20 per cent of the votes; the remaining votes were split between the UDF and other smaller parties (National Democratic Institute, 2014).

Serving the shortest presidency in Malawi's history, President Joyce Banda ascended to power in April, 2012 by the virtue of being Malawi's Vice-President, according to Malawi's constitution, following the sudden death of President Bingu wa Mutharika. This development made her Africa's second ever female President after Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who was elected into office in 2005. The political campaigns ahead of the 2014 elections provided multiple platforms for candidates to showcase to the electorate their abilities to foster Malawi's democratic governance since abandoning a 30 year-one party repressive rule for plural politics in 1994. But it was an organised sexist religious analogy created by the eventual winners – the DPP under the leadership of Mutharika – that went viral in social media to resonate with the cultural identity of the majority of the Malawians and their religion and to a great extent, contributed to the defeat of the caretaker President Banda and the PP.

It is against this backdrop that this article analyses Malawi's 2014 elections through the lens of the DPP's *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign mantra, to assess the implications of religion and deeply embedded cultural beliefs on the third Millennium Development Goal. The article observes that issues of religion and cultural beliefs, particularly among the semi-literate and even more so illiterate communities of African societies like Malawi, are of great challenge with respect to the enhancement of gender equality and women empowerment encased in the third MDG. It further suggests that it is incumbent upon stakeholders, including governments, the civil society, religious leaders and the media to make concerted efforts aimed at addressing gender issues literacy within the context of religion and longstanding cultural beliefs.

This article is in five sections. The first section is a brief contextual look at the DPP's *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan. The second section is a historical overview of the link between religion, culture and Malawi politics. The third segment is a review of literature on religion, gender and

identity. The fourth section is an analysis on the political campaign slogan under discussion in this article and the fifth section concludes the discussion with policy recommendations.

SESA JOYCE SESA: THE CAMPAIGN SLOGAN OF THE DPP IN THE MALAWI 2014 ELECTIONS

Sesa Joyce Sesa (Sweep away Joyce), first came into the public domain in November, 2013 when the then DPP Presidential aspirant, Mutharika addressed a political gathering in Thyolo district, southern Malawi. In a prelude to Mutharika's speech, George Saonda, a key member of the DPP, delivered a speech that contained rhetorical questions to the audience which were peppered with misogynistic religious and cultural images about the then President Banda's credibility to lead a country because she was a woman. In response, the audience, which included hundreds of women, joined the orator – Saonda – by heckling Banda's name.

Following the political rally, Saonda uploaded a video recording of the gathering on You Tube with a background of jazz-rhythmic sounds and the thematic slogan instantly went viral in the social media, instantly generating 3,781 views (Saonda, 2013). *Sesa Joyce Sesa* had a nationwide impact preceding the elections, nearly turning into a household song across the country. The campaign mantra was then picked up by two of Malawi's significant online news media – *Nyasatimes* and *Malawivoice* – which further provided multiple platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to share the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* video (*Nyasatimes*, 2013; *Malawivoice*, 2014). The following is an excerpt from the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* You Tube video clip².

Saonda: *Kodi kumpingo wa a katolika, wansembe akachoka, munaona asisteri akudyetsa mgonero?* (In the Roman Catholic Church, in the absence of a priest, does the nun bless the Holy Communion for congregants?)

Audience: *Ayiii!* (Noooh!)

Saonda chorus: *Sesa Joyce Sesa* (Sweep Joyce away!)

Audience chorus: *Sesaaaah!* "Sweep her away!!!"

Saonda: *Nanga ku Chisilamu, ku mzikiti Shehe akachoka, munaona mzimayi akupita kutsogolo?* (For Moslems, when the Sheikh/Imam is away at the Mosque, do you ever see women conduct the prayers?).

Audience: *Ayiii!* (Noooh!).

Saonda chorus: *Sesa Joyce Sesa!* (Sweep Joyce away!).

Audience chorus: *Sesaaaah!* (Sweep her away!).

²The video clip is attached to this article but is also available online as cited above.

Saonda then caps the rhetoric with a local proverb to argue that: *Fisi akalowa mnyumba, mwini ake akamwalira, sindiye kuti mkaziyo ndi wache* (A man hired to sleep with a widow in order to cleanse off evil spirits following the death of her husband is not necessarily expected to take over the household).

As noted above, the slogan contained rhetorical jibes drawn from the Bible and the Qur'an; in other words, Christianity and Islam, which were suggestive to the notion that women are not expected to lead but to be subservient to men. This thus leads to the discussion on the relationship between religion, politics and gender in Malawi.

RELIGION, POLITICS AND GENDER IN MALAWI: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Malawi has a population of about 16 million people (Government of Malawi, 2012a). Of this population, 76 per cent are Christians, 11 per cent are Muslims and the rest belong to other indigenous faiths (Government of Malawi, 2008a). Of all religions in the country, Christianity has had the most enduring impact on people's socio-religious life world (Matemba, 2011:329).

Multiple scholarship reveals that the influence of religion in Malawian politics dates back to the colonial times when the country was called Nyasaland under the British Protectorate (cf. MacDonald, 1970:106; McCracken, 2000:59; Power, 2010:8). For instance, McCracken (2000:5) points out that in the late 19th century, the mission of the Church of Scotland to spread Christianity in Malawi and the rest of the east and central African region, was closely interrelated with that of the majority of the British settlers' desire to own and control the region's economy.

Ironically, some locals that had been acculturated into Christianity, led by Reverend John Chilembwe of the Providence Industrial Mission (P.I.M) launched an abortive uprising against the British colonial rule in Malawi in 1915 (McCracken 2012:127; Mtewa, 1977:227). While a few white settlers died in the revolt, Chilembwe and the majority of his followers were killed by the colonial government (Phiri, 2004:271). As the locals continued to press for independence between the 1920s and the early 1960s, both the white settlers and the natives used religion as a platform to air the manifold grievances of the society because it was one aspect of community life in which other socio-economic influences could not be ignored (Pachai, 1973:212). Pachai further underscores that "issues of religion and politics became interwoven". The church as it were, in many aspects was an avenue for natives to promote political teachings and social movements, according to Pachai. As McCracken (1998:234) observes, Levi Mumba – the first President of the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) – a grouping of locals in the nationalist struggle in the 1940s, was trained by the Church of

Scotland missionaries and he “linked his political beliefs to the Christian values” he had learnt earlier. This is in line with an argument advanced by Linden and Linden (1971:629) that Christianity, far from being opiate, provided radical apocalyptic themes through which Africans articulated opposition to colonial rule. Natives, Linden and Linden further argue, used Biblical texts to legitimise their struggle for independence.

As Nyasaland geared towards independence between 1960 and 1964, there were three political parties led by natives – the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) under Kamuzu Banda, the Christian Liberation Party led by Thamar Banda, and the Christian Democratic Party led by Chester Katsonga (Pachai, 1973:243). But according to Pachai the MCP, which commanded the largest following, early on “harassed the Christian based political parties” accusing them of spreading “imperialistic propaganda”. It was for this reason that by 1964, the MCP under Kamuzu Banda had pulverised all the other opponents and “it was this party alone that had to decide the destiny of the country” (Pachai, 1973:243).

Worth a special mention is the fact that in the prelude to independence, specifically in 1961, Kamuzu Banda formed a transitional legislative council “but no women candidates were chosen” (McCracken, 2012:383). This, according to McCracken, demonstrated the nature of the MCPs leadership for it advocated for a “strong-man government” through the writings of one of its founders and key member of the legislative council – Dunduzu Chisiza (McCracken, 2012:409). In an excerpt from a 1961 publication – *‘What lies ahead’* – Chisiza underscores that new African governments must help African women to adjust themselves to their expected roles because “modern African young men want their wives to know how to rear children . . . prepare traditional and western dishes . . . master the art of washing and ironing clothes” (Chisiza, 1961:21). For McCracken, Chisiza’s views towards women were self-contradictory in that he spelled out in the same publication that under the MCP government, respect for the dignity of the human individual and the sanctity of his personality shall be recognised “and basic human rights shall be guaranteed” (McCracken, 2012:409). As mentioned earlier the role of women in politics during the 30 years of Kamuzu Banda’s dictatorship was that of dancing praise songs at political rallies. Of cumulatively 72 male cabinet ministers appointed by Kamuzu Banda between 1966 and 1992, only three were women (Semu, 2002: 85; Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership, 2014).

The intertwining of religion and politics in Malawi, however, came to the fore in 1992, when the Roman Catholic Church played a crucial role in galvanising the masses against the dictatorship of President Kamuzu Banda and the MCP (Ross, 2004:91). Although that turbulent year was characterised by industrial action; serious urban riots; student demonstrations; the emergence of new domestic political groupings; and the MCP government’s agreement to hold a national referendum on the future of the one party system in the country, in retrospect perhaps what was most remarkable about these developments was that they were sparked off by the Roman Catholic church, and that their

momentum was sustained at crucial stages by other Christian denominations in Malawi (Newell, 1995:243).

Through a pastoral letter entitled '*Living our Faith*' on 8th March, 1992 a grouping of Roman Catholic bishops, the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, openly criticised Kamuzu Banda and his autocratic rule (Cullen, 1994:37; Ihonvbere, 1997:226). Although ostensibly addressed to the Catholic faithful, the pastoral letter clearly targeted a wider audience and was written in a language designed to provoke public action and political change (Dulani, 2009:143). The letter, published in Malawi's predominant *Chichewa* and *Tumbuka* languages, was read out and distributed in all Catholic churches nationwide, according to Dulani. Through references to Biblical texts – Ephesians 4:7-16 and Peter 4:10 -11 – and local proverbs, '*Living our Faith*' identified some of the key weaknesses and failings of the one party regime (Dulani, 2009:144; Ross, 1996:39). One of the concerns that the Catholic Church pointed out was with regard to freedom of expression and association and it noted that:

Human persons are honoured - and this honour is due to them - whenever they are allowed to search freely for the truth, to voice their opinions and be heard, to engage in creative service of the community in all liberty within the associations of their own choice. Nobody should ever have to suffer reprisals for honestly expressing and living up to their convictions: intellectual, religious or political. We can only regret that this is not always the case in our country. We can be grateful that freedom of worship is respected; the same freedom does not exist when it comes to translating faith into daily life (Afcast, 1992).

The language of the pastoral letter was rooted in a longstanding Catholic tradition of citing both canonical precedent and examples from the teachings of Christ and his disciples to justify Church involvement in temporal affairs (Mitchell, 2002:7). Mitchell contends that true to this tradition, 20th-century liberation theology legitimizes itself through the New Testament, with Christ the revolutionary as a central pillar of support. The power of the Catholic Church as a key player in the political arena was buoyed by the growth in its membership over time to 3 million out of the country's population of 13 million (Dulani, 2009:154), making it the country's single largest Christian denomination.

As Dulani (2009:151) puts it, the events of 1992 placed religion as one of the few platforms from which criticism of the one-party regime could be made without being silenced. Newell (1995:251) argues that with the pastoral letter, the bishops "struck a chord in the nation's psyche" which was evidenced with clapping and ululation when it was read out to the majority of the Catholic faithful across the country. The significance of the letter was so enormous that it was followed up by protests for political change from University of Malawi students and leading Protestant churches such as the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (C.C.A.P) who weighed in with support for the Catholic clergy (Dulani, 2009:145). In Malawi, the C.C.A.P church is the second largest Christian denomination after the Catholics (Newell, 1995:256).

To further pile up the pressure on President Kamuzu Banda and his dictatorial regime, the Catholic and Presbyterian clergy were joined in by those of the Anglican Church and Muslim community, and collectively formed Malawi's first political pressure group since independence called the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) in October 1992 (Newell, 1997:258). This pressure group, which still exists today with the full support and representation of all major denominations, was formed as a vehicle through which meaningful dialogue could be conducted with the government in the interests of the nation, Newell further notes:

Following the formation of PAC, underground political parties emerged and President Kamuzu succumbed to intense pressure that led to a referendum on democracy in June 1993 and the first democratic elections in May 1994, which was won by President Bakili Muluzi of the UDF party (Dulani, 2007:146).

As Newell (1997:260) points out, while President Kamuzu Banda attempted to establish a social uniformity in Malawi's multi-ethnic landscape with his regular speeches on nation-building, religion which is deeply entrenched in the country's national identity, led to his downfall and that of the 30 year-repressive regime.

The reverence to religion and religious leaders continues to be evident among Malawian politicians twenty years into democracy. Matemba (2011:331) observes that during national elections, politicians who ignore the Church by not making appearances at services or by not giving churches gifts of money, say for church refurbishment, certainly risk losing the votes of the Christian voting bloc. For instance, in 2008, a year before Malawi went to the polls, the then Minister of Agriculture, Frank Mwenefumbo, donated subsidised fertiliser vouchers which were meant for poor rural households but the politician instead offered them to leaders of the largest Protestant church – the C.C.A.P – as a “political ploy to garner votes from congregants” (*Weekend Nation*, Comment, 2008:2). Similarly, a month ahead of the May 2014 elections, both President Joyce Banda and the leader of one of the major contesting political parties – Lazarus Chakwera of the MCP – participated in the long Good Friday walk called “the Way of the Cross” in the streets of the capital city – Lilongwe – organised by a Roman Catholic Church in reminiscence of the path that Jesus Christ took on his way to Calvary as described in the Bible (Malawi News Agency, 2014). Interestingly, both Banda and Chakwera are not Catholics but members of the Protestant and Presbyterian and Assemblies of God churches respectively.

Christianity is so intertwined with the social-cultural norms that hardly any public function starts without an opening prayer (Matemba,2011:331), and this is all rooted in the history of Christianity dating back to the 19th century which has been immense in shaping the country's national identity.

The preceding discussion illustrates that historically religion, more specifically Christianity, plays an important role in the socio-political arena of the Malawian public. As Matemba (2011:331) argues, religion is the main matrix of Malawi's national identity.

RELIGION, GENDER AND IDENTITY

The impact of religion on Malawi's cultural identity is of profound importance with respect to issues of gender. Ursula King (1995:1) argues that gender issues are significant in contemporary society and culture because throughout human history, there has existed an asymmetry in the relations of power, representation, knowledge and scholarship between men and women. For King, many current issues and debates about women, their experience, and self-understanding, status and role are still influenced by or indirectly related to religious teachings and world views about women and their experiences. In view of the historical-cultural embodiments and institutional structures in religion, it requires an investigation of gender-specific issues in very particular ways (King, 1995:3).

Religion has not only been a matrix of cultures but it structures reality – “all reality including that of gender” (King, 1995:4). This is in line with Joy's argument (1995:122) who contends that God-talk itself has remained a captive of the human predilection to conceive of the absolute in masculine imagery and terminology. O'Connor (1995:55) holds the view that much of what is known about religion is based on what has been written, told and taught by western educated males in the western religious and philosophical traditions. O'Connor postulates that:

Much of what we see, we see because we have been trained, educated and socialised to see in certain ways. This means there are also things we do not see, questions and insights to which we are blind, paths not taken, whole areas that are concealed to us as others are revealed (1995:47).

According to Johnson (2005:759) “our relation to societies and how to participate in them can have magical effects on how we see things”. Cultures, such as those that are religious, consist of words and ideas that are used to define and interpret humankind experiences, Johnson further notes. Such cultures are patriarchal in that “they promote male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centred” and are also obsessed with the control of women (Johnson, 2005:5). Johnson notes that when a woman finds her way to the top of the hierarchy in a patriarchal society “people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule and wonder how she would measure up against a man in the same position”. In the case of Malawi, such social hierarchical structures have become internalised since the advent of Christianity in the 19th century and continue to be reflected in everyday life.

Societal cultural attributes like religion have a huge bearing in the construction of identity which Castells (1997:6) defines as the people's source of meaning and experience. Castells argues that meanings are constructed through the identification of symbols for the purpose of a particular action. Nevertheless, identities can originate from dominant institutions and

“they become dominant when and if social actors internalise them, and construct meaning around this internalisation” (Castells, 1997:7). In this respect, the dominant institutions that have contributed to the construction of Malawi’s identity are the Church and to a certain extent, Islam. In the case of Malawi’s 2014 elections, a woman presidential aspirant – specifically Joyce Banda – was associated with attempting to break away from a well-woven religious family structure, where patriarchy is a societal norm.

Religion provides a distinct setting for identity exploration and commitment through offering ideological, social, and spiritual contexts (King, 2003:197). King further contends that religion in an ideological context, intentionally offers beliefs, moral codes, and values from which one can build a personal belief system from an early age. Consequently, the beliefs, worldview, and values of religious traditions, King argues, provide an ideological context in which a person can generate a sense of meaning, order, and place in the world that is crucial to identity formation. Integrating one’s personal ideology to religious beliefs is integral in identity formation (King, 2003:203).

Looking through the political campaigns ahead of Malawi’s 2014 elections, there was clear evidence of gendered ideology, more particularly by the DPP against the femininity of former President [Joyce] Banda. For example, in most political gatherings organised by the DPP, especially in the rural areas, the party cadres relentlessly evoked the rhetorical question of whether women could lead in churches or mosques.

For Schlesinger (1991:146), the notion of collective cultural identity is problematic in society because it serves as “a screen to reality”. By collective identity Schlesinger (1991:153) refers to a national identity in retrospect, such as Christianity in the case of Malawi. Cultural identity easily slips into a nationalist affirmation of the superiority of one group over others (Mattelart *et al.*, in Schlesinger, 1991:146). Understanding the impact of global religious beliefs is imperative in the context of gender relations in that global processes simplistically impose gender values (Ghail & Haywood, 2007:220). Although the church can play a role in social change, it invests its energies in preserving the status quo (Richardson, 1981:99). For Richardson, because the status quo favours the interests of the more powerful, religion helps perpetuate social inequality.

The justification of perpetuating unequal power relations between men and women in patriarchal society with predominant Christian beliefs is rooted in multiple Biblical texts from the Old Testament to the New Testament (Richardson, 1981:103). From the onset, the Old Testament accounts of Creation in Genesis, where the story is that God created man first then woman (The Holy Bible, Genesis 2:7; 18; Richardson, 1981:103). In Exodus, the commandment is given not to “covet your neighbour’s house” and in this case, a wife is listed among the possessions along with servants, oxen and other domestic animals (The Holy Bible, Exodus 20:17; Richardson, 1981:103). Myriad Biblical texts including Leviticus 12:1-5,

Deuteronomy 22:18-21 and Job 14:1-4 reflect and perpetuate a patriarchal order (The Holy Bible; Richardson, 1981:103). The New Testament is often used to justify male superiority over the female in multiple texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:3 but it is in Ephesians where the Holy Bible points out that:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (The Holy Bible, Ephesians 5:22-24).

Nevertheless, some Biblical texts clearly spell out the promotion of gender justice. For example, the Holy Bible (Galatians 3:28) notes that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. In Judges 4:4, the Holy Bible states that Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess, judge and leader of Israel at the time which implies that a woman had a crucial position of governance.

That notwithstanding, interpretations of Biblical texts, which often vary, have consequences in the social organisational structure of religious institutions and this is ultimately reflected in the performances of the males and females within them. It has been noted over the years; for instance, that the issue of leadership roles in predominantly Christian faiths such as the ordination of priests in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches is a heavily contested issue (cf. Ecklund, 2006:82; Fabio and Reicher, 2000:95; Chaves, 1996:840). The father figure, a prominent feature of Christianity, is a predominant ingredient in the image of the clergy (Bock, 1967:531). In the Catholic faith for instance, the priest is commonly referred to as “Father” by the church’s followers which is significant in structuring the hierarchical and gendered power relations and such religious ideologies filter through the society’s everyday life.

It is worth noting that the patriarchal stance embedded in Christianity is similarly reflected in Islam. Islam in Arabic means state of submission and a Muslim is one who has submitted to Allah (Castells, 1997:14). As Castells further postulates, state institutions in the Islamic sense, must be organised around uncontested religious principles formulated in the Qur’an – the Islamic holy book. Just like Christianity, Islam demands that women must “submit to their guardian men as they are encouraged to fulfil themselves primarily in the framework of the family” (Castells, 1997:15). A text from the Qur’an (Surah 4:34) notes:

Men are in charge of women by right of what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend for maintenance from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in the husband's absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives], from whom you fear arrogance, first advise them, and then if they persist,

forsake them in bed; and finally, strike them. But if they obey you once more, seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever exalted and grand.

However, in the Qur'an (Surah 3:195) it is pointed out that the Lord will reward the good deeds of both males and females because they are "of one another". But as in Christianity, the Qur'an, texts are also subject to varied interpretations and in the Malawian 2014 elections case, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) manipulated such variances to benefit their gendered discourse.

The foregoing debate reinforces the argument advanced by Ecklund (2006:81) that many religions have patriarchal rules and institutional policies that formally limit leadership for women. While religious cultures oftentimes stand for what Firth (1981:588) describes as a "moral and spiritual values", critical questions in light of gender equality and empowerment of women as enshrined in the third Millennium Development Goal are exposed. This forms the basis of the analytical look which is tackled next.

SESA JOYCE SESA: ANALYSIS

Given the role played by religion in shaping Malawi's cultural identity, it comes as little surprise that the religious-gender implications were a factor in the 2014 Malawi elections. Malawi, as noted by Moto (2004:346) is a patriarchal society and this is reinforced from an early age. The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan created by the DPP, resonated with this historical make-up of Malawi's identity – religion – and more particularly with the rural and less literate electorate.

Close to 85 per cent of Malawi's population reside in rural areas (Government of Malawi, 2008b). This landscape is even worsened by the fact that most young females of the rural dwellers, drop out of school and engage in early marriages (Government of Malawi, 2012b:16), which shapes up as a culture that is heavily depended on males (husbands). Against this backdrop, the terrain was vulnerable to manipulation by the DPP with their religious sexist campaign slogan.

The title of the slogan in itself: *Sesa Joyce Sesa* (Sweep Joyce away) was demeaning as it likened Joyce Banda to "garbage" or "trash" that had to be swept away. This analogy had both cultural and religious connotations. In a cultural context, it is common for rural societies to cast off women deemed to have engaged in immoral malpractices not in tandem with the traditional beliefs. For example, refusing to cook for her husband, even when pregnant, is a taboo. Such women are taken to traditional courts and may be cast off the society; in other words, they benefit to be "Swept away", and for the DPP, President Joyce Banda deserved such treatment.

The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* (Sweep away Joyce {Banda}) slogan also bore a religious connotation of Biblical heritage. In Jewish law, which is noted in the Holy Bible, Deuteronomy 22:18-21, virginity was of profound importance for women to be defined as “clean” and therefore qualifying for marriage (The Holy Bible, Deuteronomy 22:18-21; Richardson, 1977:102), and “those persons considered clean, were granted the right to participate in religious ceremonies”. In the context of *Sesa Joyce Sesa*, the DPP’s campaign mantra typically referred to then President Joyce Banda as “unclean”, “filthy”, like the women described in the Holy Bible Job 14:4 where Job asks: “Who can bring what is pure from the unpure?” (The Holy Bible, Job 14:4; Richardson, 1977:102).

The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan was well constructed to reverberate with the religious identity of Malawians and mock President Joyce Banda in regards to her capabilities to continue governing the country. This view is informed by Castells (1997:23) who underscores that cultures embedded with deep religious heritage encourage the oppression of women because submission to men guarantees salvation. Castells further notes: “With salvation guaranteed, as long as a Christian strictly observes the Bible, and with a stable patriarchal family as a solid footing for life, business will be good” (1997:23). Although there are some Biblical texts which promote the equality of men and women; for example, in Genesis and Ecclesiastes (The Holy Bible, Genesis 1:27; Ecclesiastes 9:9), the DPP capitalised on those that seem to devalue women.

The DPP campaign was aimed at manipulating the electorate, mostly the rural religious communities by calling upon them to reflect on the traditional organisational structures within their sense of identity – religion. First, the narrator, Saonda, who delivered keynote speeches during the campaign rallies organised by Peter Mutharika, the then DPP Presidential candidate (incumbent Malawi President), teased the audiences by exemplifying with hierarchical structures within the Roman Catholic Church, which as noted earlier, is the most dominant Christian denomination in Malawi. Then, he would turn to similar analogies in Islam before encasing his rhetoric with a sexist local proverb.

The local proverb blended in by the DPP into their sexist campaign slogan is rooted in traditional cultural belief called *Fisi* (hyena). In this rhetoric, the main campaign slogan orator, Saonda, would tell the audiences in vernacular that: *ngakhale fisi akalowa mnyumba sindiye kuti mkaziyo ndi wache* (A man hired to sleep with a widow is not expected to be the next head of the family). In an old Malawian tradition, when a husband died in some rural settings, to wind up the mourning period, the village community would organise a ritual ceremony in which a man, in most cases a brother to the deceased, would sleep with the widow which was believed to cast away evil spirits from the family. Such a person was called metaphorically as *Fisi* (hyena) likening the act to the actual elusive behavioural hunting nature of a hyena during the night.

This was striking because just like the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church blended traditional proverbs and Biblical texts in their 1992 Pastoral letter to criticise the one-party repressive regime of Hastings Kamuzu Banda, it was similarly noted that the DPP fused a traditional patriarchal proverb into religious beliefs that underline the role of women in society as being subservient to men. The *Fisi* (hyena) proverb symbolised that former President [Joyce] Banda was then just a caretaker President following the death of Bingu wa Mutharika in 2012 but it did not necessarily mean that she [Joyce Banda] had to be given a full mandate to govern.

It was further observed that the fusion of gendered religious analogies and the cultural beliefs was easily identified by the electorate, particularly in the rural less literate communities. The electorate were vulnerable to the sexist manipulation regarding male/female religious roles because it was entrenched in their minds from history. This is in line with the argument that religious experiences of African women must be seen as embedded in particular historical, social and cultural contexts (Hackett, 1995:258).

Given that the fifth Sustainable Development Goal recognises equal rights and opportunities for women, then the context of the DPP campaign slogan contained rhetoric that was at variance with the SDGs. In fact, the DPP, which defines itself as a “progressive” party, ironically diffused a mantra that was rather “retrogressive” with regard to gender equality, women empowerment and political participation. As Moghadam and Senftova (2005:391) posit, women empowerment is conceptualised in terms of the achievement of basic capabilities; of legal rights; and of participation in key social, economic and “political domains”. But in the case of Malawi, the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign motto was coined to perpetuate social inequalities with respect to gender. As noted in the section on Malawi’s historical overview of religion, politics and gender in Malawi, women were among the marginalised, more particularly with respect to key political leadership positions.

During the 2014 Malawi elections campaigns, the DPP, like the rest of the contesting parties, presented a manifesto to the electorate in a public ceremony, covered in multiple media broadcasts. What was interesting to note was that Chapter 22 of the manifesto underlined issues pointed out in the fifth Sustainable Development Goal in that “the DPP condemn the marginalisation and discrimination of women in the development process” (DPP Manifesto 2014:47). The paradox of this promise entailed in the manifesto was that as the supporters of the party mobilised themselves at the launch of the manifesto, they chanted “*Sesa Joyce Sesa!*” This then means that to the DPP, now the governing party in Malawi, the agenda of advancing the fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal is just on paper but not in practice. More ironical was the fact that the majority of those rallying behind the sexist slogan were women. Historically in Malawi politics, women take up the cheerleading roles for the usually male politicians at the top of the hierarchy. In line with an argument advanced by Geisler

(1995:546), women's role in politics in most of Africa is often limited to a particular female space, such as party's women wing, where its members are given little or no scope to influence policy formulation, not even policies directly relevant to them. This then calls into question as to whether much progress has been made regarding the fifth Sustainable Development Goal in Malawi, especially on the issue of political inclusiveness.

Attributes drawn from religious and cultural beliefs concerning gender roles are social constructs. Religious as well as traditional beliefs in most cultures globally have often been issued to categorise roles which men and women may be perceived capable of undertaking in society. The social importance given to these constructs to describe women's role in society contribute to inequalities in gender and marginalisation of women in political leadership roles as it was in the case of Malawi's 2014 elections.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In a quest to wrestle political power away from caretaker President Joyce Banda, the DPP created a campaign slogan that was manipulative of the religious identity of the Malawi citizenry. Although most forms of religion call for love, peace and tolerance, Christianity and Islam are embedded with texts that are patriarchal and sexist and this stifles the very essence of promoting gender equality and women empowerment.

Multiple stakeholders, including the civil society and the news media, expected to safeguard democracy, ignored this role and overlooked the demeaning nature of the DPP campaign mantra – *Sesa Joyce Sesa*. This then meant that they contributed to the reverberation of the gendered discourse of the slogan into the public sphere. This poses a serious problem in light of the fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal. In fact, such patriarchal discourses knock down the positive strides on the Malawi Gender and Development Index (MGDI) launched in 2009 by the Malawi government to measure gender equality and women empowerment in the country as part of the Economic Commission for Africa's Gender Development Index (Machinjili, 2012:v).

Manipulating religious teachings and traditional cultural beliefs to advance patriarchal agendas in power relations has profound influence on societal attitudes towards women and their potential to take-up critical decision making positions, especially in developing democracies such as Malawi. It is thus of utmost importance that multiple stakeholders, such as political leaders, the media and the civil society should consider policies that would civically engage the electorate on the awareness of deeply entrenched religious and cultural beliefs that undermine the advancement of women in crucial decision-making positions. It is critical to address such sensational discourses in the public sphere that are rooted in patriarchy. Effectively, this could be progressive with regards to the fifth Sustainable Development Goal and the "beyond 2015" agenda aimed at eliminating global poverty and human deprivation,

especially in the poorest of countries across the globe. As Amadiume (1997:181) rightly argues, the struggle to deconstruct and decolonise the effects of masculine imperialism and patriarchy that came along with colonisation must continue.

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