

Women Overcoming Unpaid Care Work to Lead Resilience: A Series of Inspiring Case Studies

Evelesi Zulu works to clear farmland to grow food for her family.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID MALAWI



Malawi

Working alongside men to break down the barrier of unpaid care work and build resilience: Evelesi Zulu

The small village of Kumphika in Neno, Malawi, suffers equally from a lack of public services as from devastating impacts of climate change and disasters. As it is situated in an isolated area with no tarmac roads, electricity, or public transport, essential goods are expensive, vital services such as hospitals and courts are far away, and most government officers refuse to work in the area. In addition, while harvests have always been unpredictable, since the 1990s the impact of climate change has increased the intensity and occurrence of erratic rainfall, droughts and flooding, resulting in a chronic hunger situation which affects 60% of families in the village.

The toll of these conditions is particularly felt by women. Women in the village of Kumphika travel a long distance to get water, an average of two hours per day. The nearest maize mill is also two kilometres away – but women have to visit it at least twice a month. In addition, women in Malawi produce 70% of food, but typically control neither the means of production nor the harvest itself, which is instead usually owned by men.

Evelesi's story

Evelesi Zulu lives in Kumphika. She is the person responsible for cooking, fetching firewood, washing clothes, and bringing up her children – from cleaning school uniforms to monitoring their academic success. All of this unpaid care work leaves little time for Evelesi to engage in activities which might support her community, and help them to become more resilient in the face of worsening climatic conditions.

However, Evelesi is a natural leader, and she was appointed by her community to be a member of the Village Development Committee, the Area Development Committee, and the School Management Committee. Mostly managed by men, Evelesi's involvement in these activities required her to engage in many time-consuming activities, hampered by the already high burden of unpaid care. After ActionAid mobilised a network of women farmers' groups across Malawi in 2008 to advocate for policy formulation and resource allocation to address the hazards that women face because of climate change, Evelesi was also chosen as the leader of the women's group in her area, 'Chinkhali Women's Group'.



The Chinkhali Women's Group, led by Evelesi, plants thousands of tree seedlings to protect water points near their community.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID MALAWI

Changing community attitudes

In 2014, ActionAid engaged women, men, and traditional leaders in the area to identify and analyse community vulnerability to climate change through a "Reflection Action" approach. Using pictures, problem trees, and gender-analytical tools, the community analysed and recognised the increasing burden on women and girls due to climate change.

The Reflection Action circles found that the drying up of water points meant that women had to walk longer distances to access water, worsening their care burden. The increased hunger situation has also resulted in increased violence against women within households.

By mapping out these hazards and analysing the causes, effects, and impacts of them on women, an action plan was made by the women for the area, consisting of various initiatives aimed to reduce the burden that climate change was putting on the shoulders of women.

The Chinkhali Women's Group, led by Evelesi, worked to advocate for reduction of unpaid care. They joined with a group of men who agreed to be ambassadors, championing the freedoms of women, including challenging unpaid care burdens. The men used drama to interact with fellow men, boys, traditional leaders, law makers and government officials. The men also encouraged others to attend Reflection Action circles so they could better understand the challenge of climate change and unpaid care work on women and girls. Traditional leaders were also engaged, ensuring that the cultural and traditional belief enshrining women's roles change.

A positive change for resilience

Engaging diverse community members to tackle the perception and unequal burden of unpaid care has had real impacts on the resilience of the community. Men have taken some of the burden of unpaid care from women, and worked with their wives to find ways to ease the burden. As a result, Evelesi's group, the Chinkhali Women's Group, has had more time and energy to build resilience within their community.

They have planted 12,000 tree seedlings in 2017 to ensure that there is coverage along the banks of the Mpimbi and Mangadzi rivers so that water points do not continue to dry.

"My husband was one of the first volunteers who were trained to be role models in the community, and our house has become a shining example of the liberation of women in the community," says Evelesi. "Using the money we got after selling maize, he bought a motorcycle which he uses to fetch water, and to drive me to community meetings. My life has been changed completely because I no longer walk those long distances. I have more time to work with my fellow women to raise more seedlings."

The reduction in unpaid care burden has also allowed more local women to spend time generating income for their households, including through Village Savings and Loans schemes.

Challenges and the way forward

The isolation of Kumphika village and the wider area, and the persistence of male-dominated cultural practices, make it difficult to quickly change attitudes and actions. The prevailing cultural beliefs condition women not to complain about their situation. Some religious teachings also promote submission of women and girls to men. As such it will take time to fully achieve a society where the unequal burden of unpaid care work is obsolete.

The approach by ActionAid and the Chinkhali Women's Group of engaging various gatekeepers to cultural beliefs and traditions is however making a good first step in changing some of these norms. The 'Reflection Action' approach helps individuals to challenge themselves, reflecting on the context within their home and accepting that the situation is unequal and must be changed. Working through role models and ambassadors, particularly when they are decision-makers, also provides the opportunity for the community to see what it means for the household when women have more time to spend after being partly relieved from unpaid care work.



Evelesi and her husband have bought a motorbike to ease her burden of collecting water and make it easier to attend community resilience meetings.
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