

Case Study 5

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



Malawi

Women's economic empowerment changing unpaid care norms and boosting resilience: Florence Nkhonjera

The impact of climate change can be clearly seen in Rumphi, Malawi, where now-unpredictable weather patterns have caused reduced harvests from rain-fed agriculture resulting in food shortages. 50-year-old Florence Nkhonjera from Kaiwale village describes how, due to social norms around women's roles and the distribution of unpaid care, this has a particularly severe impact on women:

"My family has had chronic food shortage and consequent hunger for six months of the year, mostly from the month of October to the month of March, the leanest months of the year for many families. As a decision maker on what to cook and eat for the family, I did not have control over some productive resources like cash and livestock that were entirely under the control of my husband."

Negative norms restricting women from helping their families build resilience

In Rumphi district, food shortages and hunger at a family level have greatly impacted women in many families because they are the main caregivers to children, and are responsible for finding food. Usually during this time, their husbands are away from home working or undertaking other activities.

The role of many married women in Malawi is such that they do not have decision-making power over certain aspects of family life, such as control over productive resources like livestock or money. Even if the family owns a goat and is in dire need of food, a woman could not sell the goat to buy maize unless their husband permits it. These are some of the culturally prescribed norms that have disadvantaged women in the district.

As a result, some women try to engage in small income-generating activities to provide food for their children. But this has negative ramifications on how much women are able to harvest, because their time is divided between these activities, unpaid care work, and time in the fields cultivating crops.



Finding a way through unpaid care burdens to promote women's empowerment

Through the Coalition of Women Farmers (COWFA), with support from ActionAid's *Ready for Anything* project, women like Florence were supported to empower themselves to improve their and the broader community's resilience. ActionAid started by holding sensitisation and inception meetings in the community, engaging community leaders and men who learn about the planned activities. By making the whole community aware of the project, and because the activity groups constituted only women, the men felt comfortable with their wives participating.

In order to fit the activities around women's unpaid care burdens, the meetings were held in the afternoon at a time best suited to the women, and only took place weekly for about two hours, so that only a limited additional time burden was added for women.

Collaboration through village savings and loans

Through the project, 412 women were trained in climatic hazards causing vulnerability. The women formed 'Reflection Action Circles' to take the next steps to build their resilience.

"As women that participate in reflection action circles, we agreed to undertake climatic risk reduction strategies while also diversifying food security and livelihood strategies in order to beat food shortages that come with lower crop yields. One of the livelihood strategies that we agreed upon was the introduction of Village Savings and Loans (VSL), with the aim of complementing food sufficiency at household level, as well as a source of empowering us, women," said Florence. The women collaborate by meeting regularly and saving

together from their own incomes. Their accumulated savings then form a loan fund from which the women borrow, at an agreed interest rate, to meet their needs and small-scale business aspirations. At an agreed time when money is most scarce (usually during the lean season), the accumulated profit is distributed in proportion to the amount that each woman saved. ActionAid and Rumphi COWFA trained 27 VSL agents as trainers in VSL and business management.

Women's economic empowerment and leadership

Because of the Village Savings and Loans scheme there is increased food security in the community, with families better able to deal with unpredictable weather patterns resulting in a reduction in chronic food shortages. Women have a greater ability to engage in small-scale businesses and manage their own money for their family. Money raised through the scheme and from small-scale businesses run by women is used to buy farm inputs which allows them to practice irrigation farming, such as organic fertilisers. This has helped families to move towards agro-ecological farming and reduce their reliance on rain fed agriculture.

"When I look back and see who I was in the past, and what I am right now because of the Ready for Anything project, a smile naturally registers on my face," says Florence. "The Village Savings and Loans scheme has contributed to my family's reduced food gap from six to only two months in a year. Another good impact is that I am now economically empowered because of the money that I earn from the scheme, as well as the sale of farm harvests and from my vegetable business. These are the productive resources that I could not have owned or controlled in the past."

The Village Savings and Loans groups have also played the role of community networks, facilitating activities such as supporting the neediest members of society when disasters occur. The groups have employed a holistic approach to building their resilience to climate change and its impact. Some of the strategies include asset building through a goat pass-on scheme, land and water management, pit planting and catchment area conservation. They also mobilise against discriminatory laws, such as unequal land rights for women, especially widows. With the support of COWFA, the women ran a successful land rights campaign appealing to the traditional local authorities of elders to change the embedded practices around inheritance of land.

With the help of the Village Savings and Loans schemes, as well as some women starting their own small scale businesses, others have gained and developed their own leadership skills and thereby grown in confidence. The fact that there are now more women than men in leadership positions in Disaster Risk Management committee structures in the area is illustrative of the change in status of women in the community.