



Should women be allowed to wear mini-skirts and trousers in Malawi?

Synopsis

This concept note concerns a seminar that the Gender and Media Diversity Centre (GMDC) of Gender Links (GL) in partnership with Malawi Institute of Journalism (MIJ) would like to host aimed at discussing gender matters regarding freedom of dressing and culture in Malawi. This follows recent incidences in which women were sexually harassed, groped and stripped off by people believed to be street vendors for wearing miniskirts, trousers and short dresses. For GL, a southern African organisation advocating for gender equality in all aspects of public and private life, its pertinent concern is around safety of women in public spaces and also their freedom to choose what they can wear.



Background

From the time Malawi got her independence in 1964 up until 1994, women were not allowed to wear miniskirts, trousers and short dresses. In 1973, government put in place the Decency in Dress Act, which banned women from wearing miniskirts and trousers. The decree also applied to all foreign women visiting the country.

In 1993 when Malawi moved to a multi-party system of governance, government repealed the Decency in Dress Act. Since then, women in Malawi have enjoyed the freedom of dress until January 2012 when a group of men decided to strip off women wearing miniskirts and trousers. First incidences were reported in Chisapo Township in Lilongwe before Blantyre and Mzuzu cities followed suit. By 19th January 2012, 11 women had been harassed and stripped off by alleged street vendors. They claimed they were directed by President Bingu wa Mutharika and some politicians to undress women in an attempt to enforce "Malawian culture". The President however distanced himself from unruly behavior and ordered the police to arrest the culprits. About 44 suspects were arrested.

According to media reports, "culture" formed the basis of the unruly acts. The wrongdoers said they were enforcing Malawian culture. But, what is culture and what is Malawian culture? Edward B. Tylor, a renowned English anthropologist defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (herein also referring to women) as a member of society." This means that culture is not universal among individual beings or societies. And due to globalization, most societies across the globe are multicultural and Malawi is no

exception. Further, Malawi is a pluralistic society meaning that it comprises of people from different beliefs, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. According to Section 26 of the constitution, Malawi is a pluralistic society that acknowledges and allows for the cultural diversity of its citizens.

It is therefore problematic to hear that some men went out of their way and started undressing women because it is against their culture to wear mini skirts and trousers. This incident shows that though Malawi is a democratic, multicultural and pluralistic society, some "conservatives" feel that women should not be allowed to wear some clothing because it is "un-Malawian."

Just like any other Malawi citizen who is guaranteed by the laws of the land to freedom of dressing, denying women a right to wear what they want in the name of "culture" infringes upon their rights. The safety of women in public spaces also becomes a matter of concern. Should women therefore not be allowed to wear miniskirts, trousers and any other dressing that might be regarded as un-Malawian? How safe are they to walk around if they choose to wear such clothes? If they wear it, who is going to guarantee their safety? What can women themselves do to protect themselves from such abuses?

This seminar will thus offer a platform to debate conservative ideas that are still used to undermine women's rights and how these can be changed.

Objectives

- Creating space for participatory discussion and debate on gender, human rights, freedom of dressing and culture.
- Share ideas that would ensure safety of women wearing outfits perceived as "un-Malawian" by certain sectors of society.

Output

- A seminar on gender, human rights, freedom of dressing and culture
- Media coverage of the debate
- A live radio program of the debate on MIJ FM
- A report on gender and freedom of dressing

Outcomes

- Vibrant discussion on gender and freedom of dressing
- Sharing knowledge that can enhance the fight for equality in the region

Date	Venue
13 th March 2012	Malawi Post Corporation Centre