Virginity on sale over the counter

Herbal soap will restore virginity, according to advertisers

By Caroline Somanje, Malawi

It used to be that African women were deluged with advertisements for skin lightening creams, products that made their traditional short and curly hair longer and smoother and others that promised instant beauty and a return to the era of “Sweet Sixteen”. Now, in these days of HIV/AIDS, they must also fork out money in the attempt to achieve the biologically impossible task of remaining permanent virgins. While governments, non-governmental organisations and churches are investing heavily in championing abstinence as the one certain way to contain HIV/AIDS, Malawi has just been slapped with a new challenge — an influx of “sexually satisfying” products being advertised daily in local newspapers.

Key among these products is the “virginity soap” guaranteed to bring back virginity come hell or high water. The adverts practically challenge women to indulge in sex, lose their “virginity” and be assured of buying it right back — as long as they are willing to dig deep into their pockets to achieve this miracle. One of the better known adverts reads: “Argussy herbal soap, enriched with herbal extracts for cleansing the most sensitive area of a woman without leaving residue. Protects against irritations, bacteria, yeast and fungi that cause inflammation, itching, burning sensation and unpleasant odour. Tightens the vaginal muscle, giving a satisfying sexual experience.”

Medical experts in Malawi have raised concerns about this soap and its claims to restore virginity, which some consider outlandish. Wyn Chalira, head of the medicine inspection department at the Malawi Pharmacy, Medicines and Poisons Board, describes the advertisement as exaggerated and a disingenuous marketing strategy. Says Chalira: Although there is no cause for alarm in its use, the claims that the soap can tighten vaginal muscles is misleading. There is no scientific basis for such claims. It is the same as ordinary soap and contains some of the usual ingredients such as glycerine and mineral water.”

The “virginity soap”, according to the label, is made in France and distributed locally by the Kenya...
Virginy on sale over the counter

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Nigeria

Churches in crisis as widows step into pulpits

By Tina Odugbemi

NEKCHI Anayo-Butapata is in a pensive mood. These are trying times for Nigeria’s Pentecostal Christian community, which is growing increasingly uneasy with the number of widows taking over the running of their husband’s churches.

When death rapped on the door of her husband Hartford, who was president and general overseer of the Lagos-based Victory Christian Centre, many members of the congregation quit in protest. Even the man she thought she could depend on to run the church resigned despite her plea. The family, the church, the nation and everyone who is interested in leadership and religion joined in the debate over whether or not it was the right step — both biblically and culturally.

Nearly seven years later, the debate refuses to die. Not that it has stopped women from rising to the challenge: at least five other women have followed in Anayo-Butapata’s footsteps. But Nigerians are asking the key question: Should the church be seen as a family business?

Africawoman went in search of the woman who started it all. The preacher, who took over leadership four months after the death of her husband on February 9, 1995, has a strong sense of mission. She was also injured in the attack at their home, during which her husband, a vocal fanatic of the San Ahaha regime, was shot at close range in the head and chest. She believes her life was spared so she could carry on her husband’s work. Besides, she refuses to let his killers abort his dream.

She says: “My husband invested years of preparation in me from the first day of the ministry. The training was rigorous and I was involved in everything. If my husband travelled outside the city or country, even for weeks, I was in charge. It would have been unreasonable for anyone to take the ministry off me because I am a woman. None of the ministers with me when my husband died came before me. They met me there. I raised them, taught them in our Bible School. I was ordained before them and never reported to any of them. If I was vice-president, then it stands to reason that I should have taken over.

The good number of Nigerians who found her convincing. Victory Christian Centre has grown from eight branches to 16 since she took over. And Anayo-Butapata has been joined in the business of winning souls by fellow widows Margaret Idahosa, Victoria Morenike Balogun, Abosede David-Yesu, Dele Ijagbulu and Sarah Omaku. Ijagbulu, David-Yesu and Balogun eased themselves into leadership quietly but Idahosa and Omaku had elaborated ordination ceremonies.

The most recent was that of 41-year-old Omaku, whose husband died in the United States earlier this year after a long battle with cancer. On May 1A, less than two weeks after he passed on, his widow was ordained in a colourful ceremony led by the even more colourful US evangelist Crefo Stuss. Accompanied by ordination, Omaku was a journalist working for the Christian Broadcasting Network.

A senior official of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria Moses Bob, says nothing wrong with a widow inheriting her husband’s church, if the man had “confidence in her ability, maturity and comportment for leadership, coupled with high degree of patience, tolerance and resilience”.

He adds: “If he then dies, it is not a matter of a right that she should take over, but the church membership will have been more than convinced that she fits into the leadership position and it would come naturally. If she was reduced to just taking care of women and children and she was only tagging along while her husband was around, she should not try to take over. It is not something she is inheriting by marriage and it is unacceptable.”

David-Yesu of the Light of Salvation Gospel Church confesses to having confined her activities to managing women’s affairs while her husband was in charge. She says she had, however, been “called by God” to take over the leadership of the church in July 2001 — eight months before her husband died in February 2002. According to David-Yesu, God used the first three months to prepare her for the future. Shortly after, her husband fell ill and eventually died.

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“Every pastor’s wife must assess her stand with God, her managerial skills and experience and her acceptance within the church before attempting to head it,” she says. “A church is like any other organisation, yet it is different. If a woman — or even a man — does not hear the call but dares in it, she may stumble and stumble along the way.”

She invited a male pastor to join her even though her husband had presented her to the church as his successor. Balogun has a different story. Says she founded her church but had to hide behind her husband if the ministry was to gain acceptance. When he died, it was relatively easy for her to take over the administration of the church.

Whatever the virtues of the women preachers, their path to leadership has exposed the lack of management structures in many independent churches. Clearly, there are no organisational charts or succession plans. And the leaders do not make succession arrangements because they “either feel they are too young to die or that they will live forever”. Many churches are managed as sole proprietor businesses, which he describes as “one-man shows” or “me and my family/wife ministry”.

Bob appears to be doing well. She has acquired a permanent site for her church and publishes books and newsletters. Ida-hosa’s Church of God Mission International has been granted a licence to start a private university. But Bob is sceptical. “The churches are doing well, but the women are not. Many of them have lost control and depend on the men around them, who are actually the church managers. They are mere figureheads, who do not hear the call.”

These women mean many things to their followers. They are given titles such as “Mummy” and “Mother in Israel” and their followers look up to them for spiritual guidance and practical needs such as food. Stanley Egbochukwu, director of Business Day Newspapers, is an older in Anayo-Butapata’s Victory Christian Centre. He argues that women heads make a difference in their churches and are more innovative. He says: “They organise more welfare-oriented programmes. They pay particular attention to family and marriage. They care for widows and orphans. They have beautiful children’s departments.”

Idahosa turned 60 on July 27, 2001. In a full-sentence tribute by her church published in the Guardian, Rev. Rufi Eka, a Lagos-based national officer, wrote: “This man we call Ma-maah, you were not afraid to walk the road … You broke the manacles, shackles and bonds holding the woman and the female minister in perpetual bondage and subjugation. You dare to give voice to the aspirations of the woman in all generations.”
Language dilemma as Tanzania opens up to the world

By Jamillah Mwanjisi, Tanzania

University of Dar es Salaam law student Sylvia Bahame in Tanzania’s new beauty queen.

Though some had reservations about her taking the title, there is consensus that she was the best of the 26 contestants — if not necessarily the most beautiful. That accolade rightly belonged to Nargis Mohamed, whom virtually everyone had put their money on.

The trouble with Mohamed was simple: she may have been taller and slimmer, but she could not speak English well and failed to answer the critical question that would separate the commoners from the queen.

“Yes, she was beautiful and had a good figure but she could not speak one proper sentence in English,” says Rose Lungu, a beauty contest fan. “How could she represent Tanzania in the Miss World pageant? Bahame is smart. She is educated. She speaks perfect English.”

Even though Tanzania is the home of Kiswahili, which has just been declared one of the African Union’s official languages, it is English that is increasingly considered the measure of one’s education. Children in Tanzania’s public schools start learning English as a subject in standard three, at the age of 10. Kiswahili is the medium of instruction in public primary schools. The situation is reversed in secondary schools, with Kiswahili becoming the medium of communication in official matters only. By this time, however, most children have difficulty with speaking English fluently.

The need for fluency has been brought home graphically to Tanzanians, however. Be it in the media, marketing, banking or hotel industries, people who can speak English fluently stand a better chance of landing a good job. This has set off a chain reaction, with parents paying through the nose for their children to attend private schools that teach in English. Some send their children to boarding schools in neighbouring Uganda and Kenya and as far away as Zimbabwe, believing that this will give their children an advantage when it comes to job hunting.

“My entire salary is going into paying my son’s school fees,” says Abel Ngapemba. “But I don’t regret it because I know he is getting a good education that will help him in future.” Ngapemba has to take on extra work to supplement his income. Private primary schools here charge between Sh200,000 and Sh600,000 ($330 to $600) per term. This can only widen the gap between the rich and the poor, creating a vicious cycle of poverty for the majority of Tanzanians who live on less than a dollar a day.

A study done by Kuleana, a non-governmental organisation that advocates children’s rights, shows that many of the gains of the 1970s and 1980s — driven by policies and campaigns for better education — have been eroded by growing demands. Children fortunate enough to go to school face low quality education, overcrowded classrooms, poor teaching, lack of books and deteriorating structures.

Researchers and academics argue that Tanzania’s poor education system and the place of English in it have had a bigger impact on society than has been acknowledged. Says John Kiango, acting director of the Institute of Kiswahili Research, which promotes the use of the language: “We don’t have inventors in Tanzania, but that does not mean we don’t have educated people. We do, but we can’t apply the theory to help us create new things. We learn theories in English but we don’t understand them enough. It is impossible to apply and use the knowledge.”

It is estimated that between 50 million and 80 million Africans speak Kiswahili. Most of them live in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some southern African refugees who lived in eastern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s took the language back home to Mozambique, South Africa and Namibia. In Oman, Kiswahili is the second most common language after Arabic, which it draws significantly.

Kiango and his institution see no reason why Kiswahili should be dropped as a medium of instruction in schools. Using the more familiar language will help children learn and understand the subjects better so they can apply that knowledge effectively, he says. “English and French should be taught, but properly, with qualified teachers and teaching aids.”

He points to countries such as Japan and Finland, where tuition is conducted in local languages — and which have benefited tremendously from local inventions that have gone global. Why can’t we be proud of our language, which is spoken by more than 90 percent of the population? Why should we continue embarrassing ourselves like the beauty queen, who crammed herself into the highest possible level?“We don’t have inventors in Tanzania, but that does not mean we don’t have educated people. We do, but we can’t apply the theory to help us create new things. We learn theories in English but we don’t understand them enough. It is impossible to apply and use the knowledge.”

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Minister for Education Joseph Mungai is adamant that English is here to stay as the language of instruction in secondary schools. If that is so, why not apply the policy across the board then, from kindergarten to the highest possible level?
Virginity at a premium, but at what cost?

From Malawi comes the news of the “virginity soap.” If it sounds like a mirage, it is because that is exactly what it is. But that has not stopped the firm that is marketing it. Neither has it gone bust, so we can only assume that someone somewhere is keeping Prime Touch in business.

It bears repeating: women cannot hope to restore their virginity after their first sexual experience. Period. With that off our chests, we can analyse the whole concept of “virginity” and why women should feel compelled to spend at least US$8 on a small bar of soap that offers to “tighten vaginal muscles, giving a satisfying sexual experience”.

The virginity sad is sweeping right across the continent. Fuelled by fears arising from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the return to virgin ways movement is not necessarily a bad thing. Girls are being encouraged to remain chaste until they marry, with rewards and certificates on offer in countries as varied as South Africa, Swaziland, Ghana and Zimbabwe.

Yet there is an element of double standards even here: the focus appears to be on girls, who would traditionally not even be as sexually adventurous as boys. We have a situation where girls are subjected to the indignity of having their private parts probed by strangers in the name of checking their status; there is no equivalent for boys. How will this safeguard the next generation against HIV is open to conjecture.

The pre-occupation with virginity gets even more ominous. In some parts of Africa, there is a belief that having sex with a minor will cure men of Aids; or, at least, ensure that their ever-younger “partners” will not have been infected yet. This has translated into horrendous assaults on infants by men old enough to be their fathers and grandfathers. Now we can only assume that the older women are fighting back. If it is virgins they want, goes the thinking, they will get them. Not too long ago, it was an outbreak of “dry sex”. Women would insert herbal concoctions, some of the ingredients even said to have been corrosive, to ensure maximum pleasure for their men. While it is remotely possible that the so-called claims to tighten vaginal muscles are one big hoax. The soap is nothing more than that - just a common soap which may not even stand up to the “herbal” test.

In that sense, it joins a myriad other products, conveniently targeting women, which claim to restore our skins to the “fair and lovely” standards of our youth. African women invest huge sums of money on skin lighteners on the understanding that the whiter you are the closer you are to the international beauty standards that are reinforced time and again by the beauty contests. The fact that they could be ingesting slow acting poisons that will cause internal damage is of no consequence.

Even men have joined women in worshipping beauty and perfection, never mind the fact that some of the products they are spending huge sums on are little more than basic concoctions at best and pure poison at worst. There is little difference between the woman who spends money on the slimming belt, the facelift or breast enhancement and the woman who buys the “virginity soap.” The worst part of it as that there is little that we can do to stop adults hell bent on a destructive - or at least wasteful and humiliating - course of action.

Children in many of Malawi’s primary schools continue to learn under trees because there are not enough classrooms to cater for pupils enrolled under universal free primary education.

For example, Chikumbuso District, one of Malawi’s most popular tourist destinations, is yet to construct classrooms for pupils enrolled under universal free primary education. Pupils have to make do with a small classroom that was originally built for primary one and two, and is now full of pupils from grades 3 to 7.

A week after, second vice-president Chakufwa Chihana made a valiant effort to outshine his boss. When a group of people visited him to remind him of a promise to get them jobs, he bought them crate of beer.

Bakili Muluzi shocked the nation when he coughed US$2,000 to the Football Association of Malawi to enable fans enter Chichiri Stadium free of charge to watch the first leg of the international match. Two days later, a tree snapped and fell on pupils learning under a tree in the capital, Lilongwe, killing two girls on the spot and injuring seven others. There was a re-sounding silence in the presidential quarters.

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Human rights activists responded with a volley of criticism, accusing African governments of lack of vision and policies to combat the continent’s chronic poverty and hunger and HIV/Aids. Leaders, they argue, focus on appeasing sections of the community in order to gain political mileage.

Seodi White, lawyer and national coordinator of the Women’s Rights Committee, said: “It is high time African leaders learnt what it is to lead responsibly.”

The choice for Africa is stark — either bring to heel leaders who do not stick to their election pledges and instead turn themselves into demigods or face yet more generations of people living in poverty, disease and ignorance.

By Wei N’goma, Malawi

Two decades into public sector reforms in Africa, poverty remains as deeply rooted in rural areas as ever, says the Economic Commission for Africa. Most countries have seen an increase in the population living on less than a dollar a day and cannot afford basic needs. Not that these depressing statistics are enough to shake the political leaders of Africa: On September 27, President Bakkili Muluzi shocked the nation when he coughed up enough money to send all football fans to cheer the national team in a match against Zimbabwe in Blantyre.

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Subsidies undercut African farmers

By Sibongile Ncube

COTTON is king in the remote village of Gokwe. It is the mainstay of this rural community living 400 kilometres southwest of Harare. Cotton pays for education, food and medical care; it also helps build roads, boreholes and other infrastructure.

Back in the days when exports meant something, production expanded to include the majority of local farmers and Gokwe was flush with money. Sithembile Dube continues to do a 25-hour week of high-grade cotton every season, oblivious of the trade talks on heavy cotton subsidies that have steadily eroded the international prices of the crop. The 45-year-old mother of six has been working the land for ever-diminishing prices — thanks to the manoeuvres of the developed world, led by the United States, that have created an unfair playing ground for Africa’s agricultural exports.

The collapse of cotton prices on the world market — they have dropped 54 percent since the mid-1990s — threatens the existence of communities such as Gokwe. “The prices are too low for us to make a decent living and give our children all that they need, such as school fees and uniforms,” says Dube. “We can’t meet all these needs.”

According to labour statistics issued by the World Bank and other institutions, 42 percent of the economically active population involved in agriculture in Africa is female. But the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) suggests that women’s role is underestimated since there is a tendency to register farming households even when they carry out a wide range of productive activities over and above their domestic duties.

Farming subsidies and agricultural protectionism have been the thorniest issues in negotiations leading up to the proposed new round of global talks to remove trade barriers and liberalise the agricultural industry.

Crop subsidies have been blamed for historical lows in various crops prices on the world market as sells outside America depress their prices in order to match the subsidised bids from US farmers.

Subsidies have further depressed agricultural activity in southern Africa, where most farmers export beef, cotton, maize, coffee and wheat to markets in the European Union. But why are farming subsidies such an issue?

Phasing out trade barriers on agricultural exports has left some developing countries vulnerable to dumping even as the West maintains its subsidies and protects its farmers. The subsidies are meant to keep producer prices low and benefit consumers down the line, the US Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says, but it is time to move towards less efficient domestic producers from foreign competition.

“With Africa suffering trade barriers such as food insecurity and reduced capacity to utilise the continent’s agricultural systems, an integrated response from governments in the developing world and the industrialised nations is required if the continent is to forge ahead. Most African economies depend on agriculture, and the Agreement on Agriculture is not in the best interests of local farmers,” FAO says.

Women provide 80 percent of the labour force on those farms. Farming employs some 70 percent of sub-Saharan Africa’s workforce and generates an average 30 percent of the region’s domestic product. Yet rural Africans are among the poorest people in the world. Doing away with farming subsidies for the developing world and Africa in particular would mean leaving the majority of women farmers to manage on their own when their counterparts in the developed world continue to get them a living wage.

In the past three years, the US has provided an additional US$26 billion to its 500,000 farmers; it has also promised to pay an additional US$17 billion in the next 10 years under the new Farm Bill. It is against this backdrop that the anti-subsidy demonstrations took centre stage at the WTO meeting, where a Korean farmer stabbed himself to death to demonstrate the negative impact of subsidies on farmers in the developing world.

Because they are powerless to face this unfair competition, says Eddie Mwenje of the National University of Science and Technology, subsistence farmers like Dube have suffered depressed prices and high costs of production, resulting in loss of income.

US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick has repeatedly told the media that the US is not doing anything illegal but simply taking advantage of the limits set in the WTO agreement.

“If you want us to change, sit down at the table with us,” he told the United Nations publication Africa Recovery.

With production in much of Africa hampered by poor soils, erratic rainfall and acute under-investment in rural infrastructure and inputs, farmers do not stand a chance of excelling on the world market.

If Africa is to keep pace with modern technology, governments must come up with new farming systems that are farmer-led to help improve agricultural outputs.

The cat and mouse games over — but for how long?

By Ruth Omukhango

It is two o’clock and Milka Njeri is sitting on an old sack in one of Nairobi’s back streets. She keeps an eye on the neat pile of vegetables and fruits before her, patiently waiting for customers to arrive.

There is an awful stench from the public toilet across the street and there is some lighting being brought to the alleys by arrangement with the city council, but the hawkers are quick to optimistically say that they will be able to work out a healthy relationship with city authorities, credit remains a major problem because of the uncertain nature of their local authority. The women have formed small units of five to 10 members, popularly known as merry-go-rounds, through which they save money “for a rainy day” on a daily basis.

Jane Nyambura, who once suffered a broken arm in a skirmish with council officials, is just grateful that she has a sort of permanent base from which to work and that the cat and mouse games with the officials are finally over.

According to City Director of Social Services and Housing Benson Gachui, the council ultimately hopes to build big markets close to the city centre where the hawkers will be expected to move. The only problem so far is the familiar chorus from African administrators: this dream will only come to pass when the hawkers can be pulled off the streets and alleys.

Nairobi residents can’t help wondering how long the easy relations between these perennial “enemies” will last.
Caring for sick and dying: who should pick up bill?

By Margaret Kirunda

Home-based care has been touted as the most amazing intervention in the care of people living with Aids. It reportedly has the amazing ability to cut costs while ensuring quality care and support for the sick. What we don’t hear of is its negative impact on the lives of women as the primary home care-givers. Now comes the truth: as the Aids pandemic rages, thousands of women caring for the sick and dying are virtually trapped under the enormous burden of home-based care.

Home-based care is extremely demanding, meaning that women cannot carry out any economic activities while caring for the sick. Consequently, home-based caregivers have been made even poorer through loss of income. Tumbezulu Revesayi, care coordinator at the Midlands Aids Service Organisation, says: “I have seen many women who used to engage in the lucrative cross-border trade become poorer and poorer because they stuck at home caring for a sick relative.”

Taking care of a terminally ill person in a 24-hour job seven days a week and should not be trivialised, she adds. Zimbabwean women are losing between two to five years of their economic and social life to home-based care. What this has meant in real terms is that all the gains made through the economic empowerment initiatives in the UN Women’s Decade are rapidly being eroded.

In rural Zimbabwe, home-based care has led to women farmers, who perform 70 percent of farming saying that they would not revisit that under cultivation. Management standards have dropped significantly and homesteads are losing prized livestock. There is less money for buying inputs.

Because of the high cost of caring for the sick at home, rural households are pushed into slaughtering their livestock, sometimes even including heifers. Women who were self-reliant only five years ago are now living on charity and food donations from non-governmental organisations and neighbours. How can home-based care be cost effective when it is women who are picking up the bills?

Besides making women poorer, home-based care has a great physical and psychological impact on women. They can expect to suffer burn out with no relief. “Taking care of the ill is very stressful for the woman and if she is not well herself, this could lead to the rapid deterioration of her own health,” says Vida George of the Matabeleland Aids Council based in Zimbabwe’s second city, Bulawayo.

When under pressure, she says, women are pointing to the fact that they would not be able to abandon a project he commerce for what they see as an arbitrary reason, as long as the lobbyists are concerned. The SADC chair at the time makes the point that women probably would carry the burden of care without complaint. But we are dealing with a pandemic and as it progresses many people become bed ridden. In the high-density suburb of Mhoba in Gweru, which is about 280 kilometres south of Harare, one out of three households has at least a family member living with HIV/AIDS.

Who decreed that nursing the sick must be the responsibility of women? The national aids policy clearly does not say whose responsibility it is to care for the ailing. The relevant section vaguely refers to what ought to happen to a person living with HIV/AIDS. It is this lack of clarity that has misled many Zimbabweans into believing that it is women’s sole responsibility to carry the burden of care. Says George: “Women tend to feel that taking care of the ill at home is their responsibility because that is what society expects of them. Men tend to take advantage of them and do not play their part. In most instances, the man is usually there as a mere observer.”

This attitude angers Daniel Manful, minister of gender, child and social welfare. He argues that Muluzi would only use affirmative action if he were given the power to do so. “The president can only use affirmative action if he were given such powers, but he has not been given such powers. We can’t leave everything in the hands of the president.”

He says affirmative action should begin at party level, with a call from the president for women to contest parliamentary elections.

The opposition Malawi Congress Party’s legal adviser, Edwin Banda, argues that Muluzi would only be capable to use such powers to appease a few women rather than empower women in general. What is required, he suggests, is a deliberate policy on promoting women, which he considers to be totally lacking right now.

Malawi is far off the regional target. National Gender Director, Isabel Matenje, says the country has achieved only 8.8 percent representation of women in politics. The public service sector has fared no better at 9.62 percent. Malawi has only 16 women MPs out of 193, four ministers out of 31 and four deputy ministers out of 15. There are only four women chairs of parastatal boards out of 44. A progress report sent to the ministry of gender says there are three women heading diplomatic missions out of 17 and five principal secretaries out of 52.

Kethusile-Guru, the technical adviser on gender at the SADC secretariat in Gaborone, Botswana, says women are not fairly represented in decision-making positions in most African countries. “There is some progress, but still a lot to be done,” she says.

So far, only South Africa and Mozambique have attained the target. Mauritius is hard on their heels with 31.6 percent. Rwanda has just joined the elite club of countries that have set their sights on equal representation. In its October election, 39 women were elected to the 80-member parliament, bringing the country up to standards set in Scandinavia.

Zambia

This pill will only hurt women

By Grace Zulu

More than any other group, Zambian women have paid an inordinately high price for the country’s debt burden arising from loans to bilateral and multilateral institutions taken out between 1980 and the 1990s. The debt has meant that the government has cut back drastically in areas such as health, sanitation, water and education. Due to the massive debt repayment, 80 percent of Zambia’s population of 10.5 million, the majority of them women, live in poverty.

One of the most pressing needs for women is water, which at current levels is not available to 20 percent of the population. Women must travel long distances to fetch water, which is not only a time consuming task for women, but also for men. In rural Zambia, women are suffering from what society expects of them. Men are suffering from what they do not feel is their responsibility. The government is unable to allocate any more funding for such projects because it is tied up with its commitments to the international lending community.

Jubilee-Zambia, hosted by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection is campaigning for cancella- tion of the country’s debt, says Zambian women have borne the brunt of the cuts in budget allocations. Charity Musamba, the debt project coordinator at Jubilee-Zambia, says the poverty reduction strategy was allocated 420 billion kwacha ($870 million) in this year’s budget but only 110 billion kwacha ($221 million) released.

According to Jubilee-Zambia, debt servicing deprives women of the chances of a better life because the government can’t implement programmes meant to boost their status. Even where women are the majority and most vulnerable, their needs are unlikely to be taken into consideration. Despite full privatisation of nearly all of Zambia’s parastatals and massive job losses as the government struggles to appease the Inter- national Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Paris Club, the country is unlikely to make much progress without debt relief.

The government has been forced into the streets in an attempt to boost the shortfall in family incomes: some have resorted to commercial sex, according to Musamba.

She adds: “The government has continued to service its debt because it hopes to remain in the good books of the creditors. What they don’t realise is that the debt—creditor relationship always comes with conditions. These policies have had a negative effect on women, and this is why Jubilee-Zambia is campaigning for total debt cancellation.”

No more excuses, Muluzi told

By Pilavani Seni-Banda

With Malawi’s third multi-party elections set for May 2004, women’s lobby groups have already started jockeying for positions — their aim to edge closer to the Southern Africa Development Community target of at least 33 percent women’s representation in leadership and decision-making by 2005.

The women are demanding that the fact that the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development was signed by heads of state and government during a meeting in Blantyre as good enough reason for Malawi to take clear steps to achieve the target. The fact that President Bakhili Muluzi was the SADC chair at the time makes the campaign a personal challenge as far as women are concerned.

Right now, they are pretty angry with him for what they see as an attempt to abandon a project he committed to in good faith and in the name of the people.

The controversy kicked off when he was asked to say how he would ensure that Malawians attained the target before the deadline. Muluzi responded that there was not much he could do because he was limited by the law.

Since 1993, he said, he had been demanding that — as in Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe — the constitution should empower him to nominate 20 Members of Parliament from special interest groups, including women. “You have de- nied me that right, and that is why I am demanding,” he said.

Women and civil society have dismissed this on the grounds that it would amount to returning to the one-party state of the 30 years between 1964 and 1994. They are in turn accusing Muluzi of flim-flam excuses to justify his government’s failure to empower women in line with SADC commitments.

Ngwira Kangoyelo, chairperson of the Women Lawyers’ Association, said: “Women in Malawi have in- volved more than just nomination to parliament; the president also has powers to appoint them to po- sitions such as Cabinet ministers, diplomats and board members in parastatals. “There is no excuse be- cause the president has the discre- tion to appoint women to all other posts but MPs,” Kangoyelo adds.

Tumanye Kachaka of Women and Law in Southern Africa is “sceptical of the criteria the president would be using if he were given such powers. We can’t leave every- thing in the hands of the president.”

She says affirmative action should begin at party level, with a call from the president for women to contest parliamentary elections.

The opposition Malawi Congress Party’s legal adviser, Edwin Banda, argues that Muluzi would only use such powers to appease a few women rather than empower women in general. What is required, he suggests, is a deliberate policy on promoting women, which he considers to be totally lacking right now.

Malawi is far off the regional target. National Gender Director, Isabel Matenje, says the country has achieved only 8.8 percent representation of women in politics. The public service sector has fared no better at 9.62 percent. Malawi has only 16 women MPs out of 193, four ministers out of 31 and four deputy ministers out of 15. There are only four women chairs of parastatal boards out of 44. A progress report sent to the ministry of gender says there are three women heading diplomatic missions out of 17 and five principal secretaries out of 52.

Kethusile-Guru, the technical adviser on gender at the SADC secretariat in Gaborone, Botswana, says women are not fairly represented in decision-making positions in most African countries. “There is some progress, but still a lot to be done,” she says.

So far, only South Africa and Mozambique have attained the target. Mauritius is hard on their heels with 31.6 percent. Rwanda has just joined the elite club of countries that have set their sights on equal representation. In its October election, 39 women were elected to the 80-member parlia- ment, bringing the country up to standards set in Scandinavia.
GHANA

Unwanted, unwelcome and most annoying


There’s everything in a name


ZIMBABWE

women as perpetual children who never achieved the age of majority. The African woman could presumably not handle anything without the man in her life being there to vouch for her and act as her guardian — be it brother, son, husband or father.

In an interesting case, a man signed an affidavit stating that he did not want his wife to use her surname. Did the registry officials care? No, the woman still had to change her surname. Despite all the conventions they have signed to end discrimination against women, many African countries continue to short change women. Despite all the threats and henchmen that have been eaten in the name of women’s equality and all the speeches made at campaign rallies against domestic violence, little or nothing has changed. Why should the campaign against domestic violence not be turned into a political gimmick, after all? Women comprise more than half the voters in many countries and it is only prudent to make the right noises in their direction.

In cases where there are laws, there is no mechanism to ensure that it is followed. According to Wozani Moyo, a lawyer with the ZWLA, the law allows a woman to retain her maiden surname but falls short of protecting women from overzealous registry officials.

“Provisions of Section 11 of the National Registration Amendment regulations of 1979 do not compel women with registered marriages to change their surnames to those of their husbands if they do not wish to do so,” she says. “This administrative requirement is totally unconstitutional because it treats women as second-class citizens and denies them the right to express themselves.”

In most African traditions, the question of surnames does not even arise; married women are either identified by reference to their homes or clans of origin or by their fathers’ or children’s names. In Muslim culture, women have the right to retain their original surnames if they choose to do so. Moreover, many women prefer to keep one surname for professional purposes. Whether they choose to go with two names, names or even a multiple choice scenario, women have the right to decide what they will respond to. No one, not even official bureaucrats in government offices, should be allowed to take away women’s right to an identity of their choice. It’s time for women to join Mutya-
maenzi and say “No”.

Solve the problem.

Says Alo Dapatum: “Sexual ha-

rassment is a serious issue, espe-
cially in closed-in offices and strin-
gent laws should be put in place to
stop it. By our bringing up, people

believe women are there just for

men’s pleasure; we women ourselves also feel shy about reporting ha-
rassment. I don’t buy into the idea

that the dresses some women wear

leads to their being harassed.”

Ken Attafuah, executive secre-
tary of the National Reconciliation Commission, argues that those who believe they have been subjected to sexual harassment have a respon-
sibility to protect themselves and stop it happening to others.

Human rights activists in Africa often face the criticism that they have imported foreign ideas from the West. It is a view that Betty Mould-Iddrisu, chairperson of AWLA, does not agree with. Sexu-
al harassment is a human rights abuse, she says, and there is need for advocacy to drive the point home. But to many others, no amount of awareness, court cases and hefty awards is going to elimi-
nate sexual harassment. What is required is a “change of heart”. How to achieve that should keep all women and men of goodwill busy for quite some time.
Black Queens fight way to the world finals

From Page 1

received enough funding to ensure adequate training. A few days to the world tournament, the man-

agers were compelled to launch an appeal for funds. The response was remarkably low. But even the very fact that they had to do so was an insult in itself. Before then, they had organised a series of road shows and some friendly matches to boost their meagre kitty, but there was little to show for their ef-

forts.

In contrast, the government doled out more than US$26,000 to the Black Queens as their sole vehicle to fi-

nancial success. Women’s soccer is considered a “fringe” game in Africa. It’s important for young women to know that, and to know that they can successfully over-

come the fears that may otherwise hold them back.

Apart from honing their compet-

itive instincts, football also encour-

ages girls to be physically active as a lifelong habit that enhances phys-

ical and mental well being.

These days, Kadzo and her team-

mates find it much easier to organ-

ise their time. ‘I don’t want my mother to get an excuse to deny me the chance to play, so I wake up ear-

ly each day and finish my chores before the other girls,’ says Lauzi Mwalaa.

RAISED EXPECTATIONS: Despite its potential, women’s soccer is still considered a ‘fringe’ game in Africa.

They were on the verge of win-

ning the African Women’s Cup for the first time early this year in Warre, Nigeria, after beating the host and bitterest rival by a lone goal in the preliminaries but eventu-

ally losing to the same side 0-2 in the final match.

That performance — particular-

ly from Sackey and goalkeeper Memunatu Afiiba Sulemana, who is rated third best in the world in raised expectations that the Queens would at least scale the first round at the world event.

“They would have done better had they been given the needed push to play more friendly match-

es before the tournament,” said Nana Gyamfua, who was getting ready to leave for greener pastures in the US. “Most of my colleagues are young mothers with no jobs and no education. For them to put up this performance was com-

mendable.”

The principal loser in the rise and women’s soccer is net-

ball, which has died out completely as women set their sights on the more lucrative game. Not that the authorities seem to care enough to invest more in women’s soccer.

To the delight of the Black Stars, they won the African Cup of Nations four times. But it is a feat that has been equaled by Egypt and Cameroon. Their attempts to book a place in the World Cup have borne no fruit, making it even hard-

er to explain why the football asso-

ciation will not put its money where its mouth is — with the Queens.

November 2003

Africa woman

It’s not just a piece of leather

Football helps boost girls’ confidence and determination to succeed

By Kwamboka Oyaro

ABOUT

200 schoolgirls in an assort-

ment of football gear are running around a pitch in the hot afternoon sun in Kilifi on the Kenyan coast. The warm-up has been slow-paced but this is the real thing and the competition is keen. The pitch erupts in excitement as a goal seems to be in the offing. The girls are part of a project started three years ago by the British Council with the intention of empowering girls in a region where early marriage is the norm and academic excellence is not con-

sidered too important. Grinding poverty and lack of female role models also contributed to their poor performance in national ex-

aminations.

The largely Islamic community here requires that girls maintain a certain decorum in dressing and soccer gear — or “men’s clothes” — are just some of the challenges the teams had to deal with before the project could take off.

“We told concerned parents that their daughters could wear skirts,” says Sarah Ford, of the Moving The Goalposts project. “They had no problem after that.”

The girls have since undergone a transformation of sorts, gaining the confidence to speak up in public and also to articulate their rights.

“When people tell me not to play a man’s game, I ask them why they think a girl’s work is just domestic chores,” says Elpinia Kadzo of Fumbini Primary School. “Girls have a right to do what they like doing. They can also become interna-

tional stars like the Beckhams.”

The teams prepare rigorously for the girls’ annual tournament. Each of the 10 or so participating schools presents two teams — the junior and senior, covering lower primary (up to 10-years-old) and upper pri-

mary (12 and above). This year, the championship was held at the Kil-

fi Institute of Agriculture football pitch.

Winning a match may be excit-

ing, but the girls are just as intent on building their confidence and power. When Katikirienu beats Fumbini through a post-match penalty after finishing 1-1, Fumbi-

ni’s disappointment is momentary and soon they are singing victory songs as hard as everyone else on the pitch. Being number two is not so bad, and next time they may just take the trophy home.

Football’s greatest appeal is that it can give power to children, girls as much as boys, says Brandis Chas-

tain, a US football star who has be-

come a role model for millions of girls. Football boosts girls’ self-esteem, making them understand that they have a chance to be “pow-

erful and strong, and that those are perfectly fine qualities for a woman. They learn to explore themselves through football”.

Chastain says: “It is only within the set-up of a football team that girls can be told that it is okay to be afraid — afraid to fail or afraid to succeed. It’s important for young people to know that, and to know that they can successfully over-

come the fears that may otherwise hold them back.”

Apart from honing their compet-

itive instincts, football also encour-

ages girls to be physically active as a lifelong habit that enhances phys-

ical and mental well being.

The girls are part of a project run by the British Council with the intention of empowering girls in a region where early marriage is the norm and academic excellence is not considered important. This is a story of the determination to succeed. Women’s soccer has come a long way, and the girls no coach or equip-

ment. But they motivated each oth-

er and were able to beat all the teams that challenged them. “If we set out minds to something, we can achieve our goals,” she says.

Black Queens fight way to the world finals

From Page 1

received enough funding to ensure adequate training. A few days to the world tournament, the man-

agers were compelled to launch an appeal for funds. The response was remarkably low. But even the very fact that they had to do so was an insult in itself. Before then, they had organised a series of road shows and some friendly matches to boost their meagre kitty, but there was little to show for their ef-

forts.

In contrast, the government doled out more than US$26,000 to the Black Stars as bonus-

es in their “must-win” African Cup of Nations qualifier against the Cranes of Uganda in Kumasi in June. The Stars could manage only a 1-1 draw. They were promised close to 40 million cedis each should they win the return leg of their encounter with Rwanda in July in Kigali. Alas, the money re-

mained safely in the government’s coffers.

Fuming after Ghana was kicked out of the World Cup, “grandma” Sackey (54) lashed out at officials of the Ghana Football Association, de-

scribing them as ineffective and in-

efficient and lacking what it takes to transform the game. “All they are interested in is interfering in is-

sues which fall outside their do-

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surance success. Women’s soccer is still in its infancy in Ghana, howev-

er, and it is only at international competitions like the World Cup where its mouth is — with the

RAISED EXPECTATIONS: Despite its potential, women’s soccer is still considered a ‘fringe’ game in Africa.

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