

A Deeper Look..... looking into the lives of people and projects that are making a difference in Malawi.....

“There is a lot of goodwill from the country’s leadership and many people to address reproductive health issues including safe motherhood”*Chrispine Sibande Senior Policy Associate of Ipas Malawi talks to Thengo Kavinya on his career.*



List your background and that of IPAS in Malawi?

I am a human rights lawyer with expertise in Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights. I hold a Masters in (LLM) in Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights obtained from University of Free State, South Africa. I also have LLB (Hons) obtained from University of Malawi. I am a practicing lawyer and a Member of Malawi Law Society.

In my eight years career as a lawyer, five years has been in the human rights area. I have attended various courses in human rights in Vietnam, Denmark, Sweden, Kenya, Ghana, Gambia, Senegal, Uganda and South African among others. Sexual and Reproductive rights focus on the right of individuals and couples to enjoy and attain their sexuality and reproductive choices and the need for proper legal environment for people to exercise these rights.

Ipas Malawi is a locally registered organization under Trustees Incorporation Act focusing on reproductive health and rights. Ipas works to increase women’s ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, especially the right to safe abortion. Women should not die, get injured and suffer permanent disability due to unsafe abortion. Ipas is part of Ipas family in the world that works in different parts of the world in North America, South America, Asia and Africa.

In Malawi Ipas has mainly partnered with a network of NGOs, professionals and individuals known as Coalition for Prevention of Unsafe Abortion (COPUA) to do research and advocacy on issues of unsafe abortion in Malawi. Ipas is also partnering with Government Institutions where there is need to review policy and law on reproductive health.

What are your views on the current standards of reproductive health in the country and what should change and improve?

There is clear commitment from Malawi Government to address reproductive health. Government has come up with different policies on Sexual Health and Reproductive Health. These include policies in Sexually Transmitted Infections

(STIs), Condom Use, HIV and AIDS, Maternal Health, Tuberculosis and Reproductive Health which are linked when we talk about of reproductive health. The Ministry of Health has a special department that focuses on reproductive health known as Reproductive Health Unit (RHU). We have also seen a commitment from higher level such as the Presidential Initiative on Safe Motherhood. A number of NGOs are also working in reproductive health and some of them are even providing reproductive health services.

Therefore one can really appreciate the commitment from government to address various aspects of reproductive health. However what lacks is legal framework to support the policy environment. People are yet to demand their reproductive rights. Again government is trying by developing and passing of Gender Equality Bill and developing HIV and AIDS Management Bill. But we need more including laws that address the problem of unsafe abortion.

We also need to involve local and religious leaders in addressing Reproductive Health. We have situations where some religious leaders have spoken against provision of reproductive health services. We still have some religious affiliations who speak against the provision of condoms. Civil education needs to reach out to everybody and all institutions so that people understand why it is important to access reproductive health services.

During the last sitting of parliament the gender equality bill was passed, what’s your take on this as IPAS?

It is a first step in the right direction on some issues of sexual harassment, equality in access to education, equality in employment and to a very limited extent reproductive health. The law is not very robust in reproductive health. But people need to understand where we are coming from. I believe as a country we can build on Gender Equality Act and pass more laws that would benefit women and provision of health services including sexual and reproductive health services. We need to look at international developments and agree as a country as to what else needs to be addressed. One of the things we need to focus is the domestication of various international instruments that we have signed and ratified. It does not make sense that we sign things at international level and implement nothing at local level.

There has been a strong stance against abortion by the church and the Malawian community because it is still regarded as a taboo in that the societies believe that by encouraging abortion it is the same as promoting prostitution, what’s your comment on this?

Many people do not have correct information on issues of abortion. The main concern in Malawi is the issue of Unsafe Abortion. Many Malawians understand the issue. The Malawi Community is not happy that women should die

on something preventable.

Women do not go through abortion because of law or church teachings. They go through abortion because of the various very pressing circumstances. The world or the church has no capacity to stop women who choose to go through abortion. Therefore abortion statistics and numbers will never change and do not change. The situation in Malawi is that many women go through unsafe abortion using cassava sticks, wood, herbals, powdered soap, rat poison, hangars, bicycle spokes and even asking their boyfriends and husbands to step on the stomach.

As a result studies show that 70,000 women go through abortion every year. 31,000 develop complications including loss of uterus, fertility, permanent disability and even death. 17% of maternal mortality rate is caused by unsafe abortion. The Ministry of Health spends approximately MK350 Million (US\$400,000) treating post abortion care.

There is readily available solution to this. Those women who choose to go through abortion should have access to safe medical abortion services. Let us give chance to those who make choices to access safe choices. The most disturbing part of all this is that the rich are able to access safe abortion services inside and outside Malawi. It is the poor that suffer as they are forced to go through life threatening methods of abortion.

Since there a number of issues to address in abortion, we need a law to address various matters and concerns.

Which health care systems are you currently working with in the country in a bid to promote saving mothers lives through safe abortion?

The country now provides post abortion care services in all hospitals whether private or public. What lacks is the provision of direct safe abortion services.

Currently we are working with various stakeholders through COPUA and other institutions so that Malawi reviews its policies and laws on abortion. This will lead to improved environment and help women to access safe abortion services and eventually reduce deaths of women. However any process will need support from all Malawians.

.There has been much talk of safe motherhood since the ascendancy of the current President, as IPAS Malawi representative are we on the right track?

As I said earlier on, there is a lot of goodwill from the country's leadership and many people to address reproductive health issues including safe motherhood. My plea is that all of us Malawians need to support government on this noble cause and make sure we address all legal barriers that are hindering progress. Above we need substantive resources in health to address various challenges.

Apart from promoting safe abortion what other activities that IPAS indulge in?

Ipas does work in providing adequate health skills among youth and provision of various reproductive health products. Ipas trains health personnel in various aspects of health. Ipas trains individuals and NGOs on various aspects of advocacy especially evidence based advocacy.

Can you cite some of the challenges faced in your career and mention some strides IPAS have achieved in Malawi?

Any work in sexual and reproductive health rights is linked to women. The male chauvinism is a big challenge. There are many men who are in support of initiatives that empower women. However there are some who want women to remain submissive and abused. This has remained a challenge. We need a constant dialogue on equality between men and women, boys and girls. Men need to support all efforts and fight barriers that prevent women from enjoying reproductive and sexual health rights.

Any last Words

As a country we are in a right direction in issues of gender and women's rights. What remains is to go further and develop a robust legal environment to support international recognized sexual and reproductive health rights and choices.