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Are Malawian Adults Turning Pink? Exploring Public Opinion on Women's Political Leadership

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1. Introduction

This briefing paper explores the opinions of Malawian adults on women's political leadership ability. Existing literature contends that people hold opinions in the form of "stereotypes" that have potentially negative implications for women candidates, especially when they are running for national office (Huddy and Terkildesen 1993, Braden 1996, Kahn 1996, Feehan 2006, Chilobwe 2011). Stereotypes reflect perceived rather than real traits of an individual (Huddy and Terkildesen 1993). These perceptions, however, shape how the people holding them interact with those being viewed; they may result in misconceptions, misjudgments and ascriptions of character based on wrong information or hasty generalizations (Chilobwe 2011).

Literature shows that voters tend to correlate specific personality traits with each gender, and during elections they may employ these stereotypes when determining who to support for political office (Feehan 2006, Chilobwe 2011). Generally, typical gender stereotypes are thought to work against women who are running for office. However using data from the Afrobarometer Round 5 survey from Malawi, the findings reveal a departure from this pattern. This briefing paper demonstrates that Malawian adults interviewed in this survey do not appear to be deterred from voting for women by gender stereotypes. This may explain why there is a significant increase in the number of women winning elections to become Members of Parliament in Malawi.

The paper starts by presenting the trends with respect to how women have been fairing in democratic elections since 1994. In Malawi, just like in other countries, the number of women expressing interest in participating in politics by contesting in elections has been increasing. Table 1 presents the participation of women candidates in parliamentary elections and those that won the elections. Although women's representation in the Malawian legislature is below even the first SADC threshold of 30%, let alone the 2009 SADC 50/50 Gaborone Declaration standard, the number of women participating in parliamentary elections and making it to parliament through the ballot box has been increasing significantly. Moreover, at 22%, Malawian women's representation in parliament is actually among the top countries in Africa among those using first-past-the post electoral systems. Actually as Kamanga-Njikhoo and Malumelo (2009) note, Malawi is in the top five in the SADC rankings. Thus the fact that women's representation in Parliament for 2009 went up to 22% from 14% in 2004 is a significant achievement considering that Malawi has no affirmative action of any kind for ensuring women's access to

the National Assembly. In fact, there has been very little room for women to progress rapidly in politics in countries with first past the post systems as there is no guarantee that even if you field women they will win (Lowe-Morna 2006).

Table 1: Women’s Participation in Parliamentary Elections and in Parliament

Year	Candidates		Winners	
	Women	Total	Women	Total
	Numbers			
1994	46	587	10	177
1999	62	668	16	193
2004	154	1098	27	193
2009	237	1175	42	193
Percentage shares				
1994	7.8	100	5.6	100
1999	9.3	100	8.3	100
2004	14.0	100	14.0	100
2009	20.2	100	22.0	100

Source: MEC (2009); Khembo (2005)

2. Afrobarometer Surveys

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, and evaluations of the quality of governance and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer’s main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research, and sharing research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008 and Round 5 is currently underway.

Afrobarometer surveys are conducted using a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries and over time. The methodology is based on a national probability sample of 2,400 adult Malawians selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 2% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions, gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Malawian citizen had an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Malawi was conducted by the Centre for Social Research between 4th June and 1st July 2012. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999 (Round 1), 2003 (Round 2), 2005 (Round 3), and 2008 (Round 4).¹

¹ In earlier rounds sample size averaged 1200 respondents, with a sampling margin of error of +/-2.8% at a 95% confidence level.

3. Gender Stereotypes and Women's Political Leadership

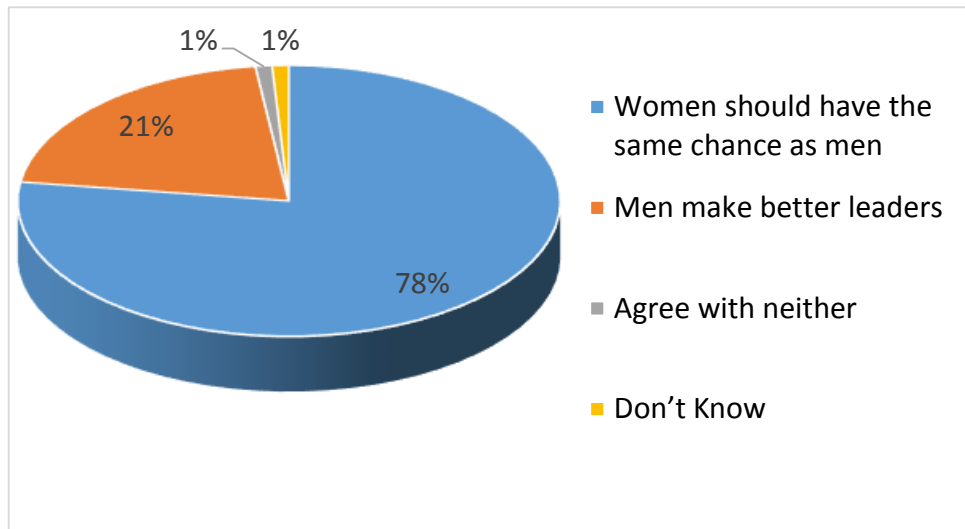
Evidence shows that gender stereotypes exist in the minds of voters, and it can affect electoral outcomes for women negatively, as evidenced in the few women making it to political leadership positions. As Feehan (2006) argues, a stereotypical frame of mind generally causes people to assume that all female candidates possess the same characteristics and that they will all act in a uniform manner. When faced with a hypothetical female candidate, Gordon's (2001) experiment revealed that respondents perceived the woman as more compassionate, honest, and moral than the hypothetical male candidate. Huddy and Terkildsen's (1993) survey went even further to show a connection between the respondents' preference for masculine personality traits and what they considered to be a "good" politician. Dolan (2004) similarly had a group of voters who were asked to evaluate characteristics and found that they frequently associated qualities such as experience, leadership and competence with men. The subjects then went on to rate these characteristics as more important in politics compared to traits commonly linked to women (ibid). If voters tend to correlate specific personality traits with each gender, it increases the likelihood that they will employ these stereotypes when determining who to support in an election.

Kahn (1996) views stereotypes as mechanisms that voters and the media use to simplify the differences between candidates in an election. Furthermore, when the media fails to provide sufficient information about the candidates, citizens will rely instead on these shortcuts to assist in their decision making process (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Dolan 2004). Dolan (2004) suggests that voters use two forms of gender stereotypes: one that relates to a female candidate's personality (gender-trait stereotypes), and one that makes assumptions about how she will make policy decisions once in office (gender-linked stereotypes). These two forms eventually serve the same purpose of providing voters with the criteria for evaluating female candidates. It is imperative to highlight here that voters use these stereotypes as a short way of categorizing female candidates, and as existing literature shows, these stereotypes are largely used to discredit women as potential political leaders. However, we also need to point out that these stereotypes may not always work to the disadvantage of women, but may sometimes help them (see Kahn 1996).

To check if stereotypes are used to judge people and whether they are used negatively or positively, Malawi respondents were requested to state their opinion with regard to what they think about political leadership abilities of men and women and whether both sexes should have the same chance of being elected to political office or not.

A large majority (78%) of respondents are of the view that women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men, nearly four times the number who think that it is only men who make better leaders (Figure 1). This therefore shows that a majority of respondents do not hold negative gender stereotypes.

Figure 1: Popular Preferences for Men vs. Women Leaders in 2012

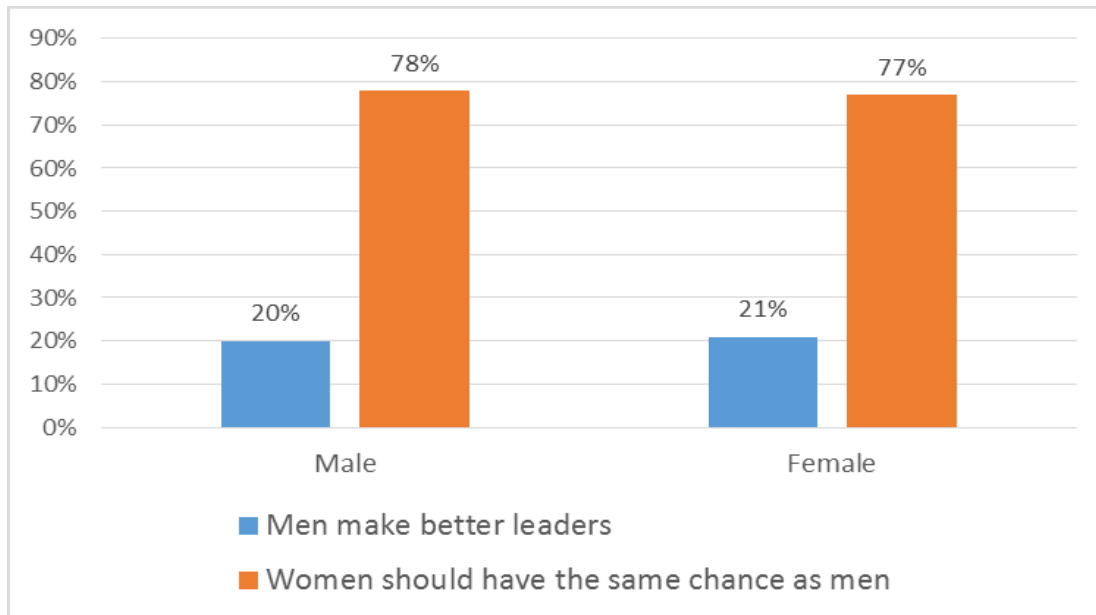


*Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose statement 1 or Statement 2
Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women and should be elected rather than women.
Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.
(figures show those who “agree” and “agree strongly” with each of the statements)*

3.1 Do gender stereotypes change with respondents' sex?

It is generally expected that male respondents will be more prejudiced against women as political leaders than women. However, in Malawi the percentages are statistically the same, with 78% of males supporting opportunities for women candidates, compared to 77% of female respondents (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Gender Stereotypes and Respondents' Sex in 2012



3.2 Does respondent's stereotyping change with location?

One would also expect that people in rural areas will be more conservative and might therefore be biased against women becoming political leaders. In fact, the opposite appears to be true, although the difference is quite small. While 21% of people in rural areas and towns hold the view that men make better political leaders, this figure increases to 23% in urban (cities and towns) locations (Figure 4).

If attitudes towards women's leadership were different for previous surveys, we could have argued that the coming in of the first female president, Mrs. Joyce Banda, around the same time that the 2012 survey was being conducted provided an impetus to change the views that people hold on female candidates. However, we actually find that the trend was similar in Afrobarometer data of 2005 when we compared respondents' opinions by location (Figure 3) and by sex (Figure 4). In fact, people are slightly less accepting of women's leadership in 2012 compared to 2005.

Figure 3: Comparison of Respondents' Opinions by Location in 2012 and 2005

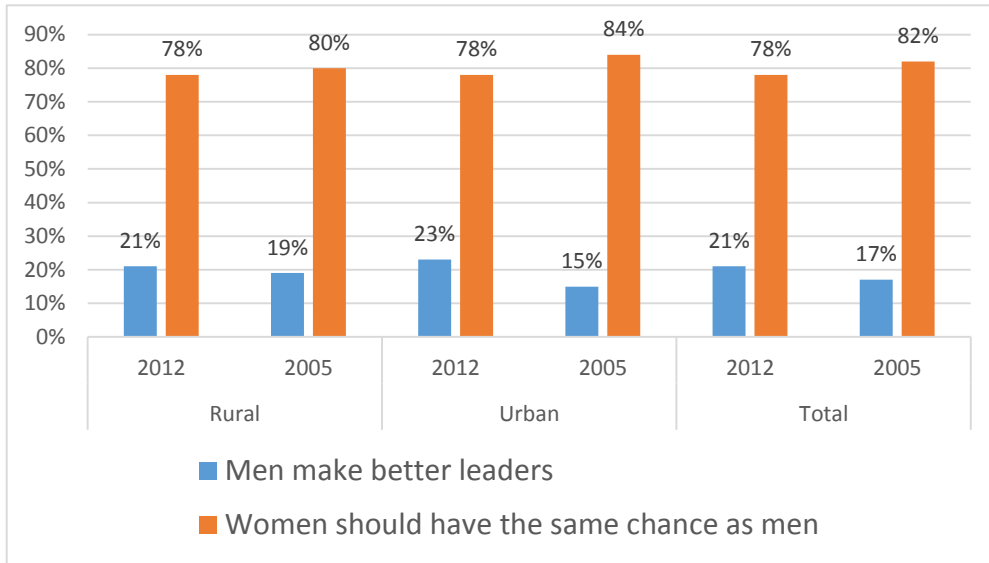
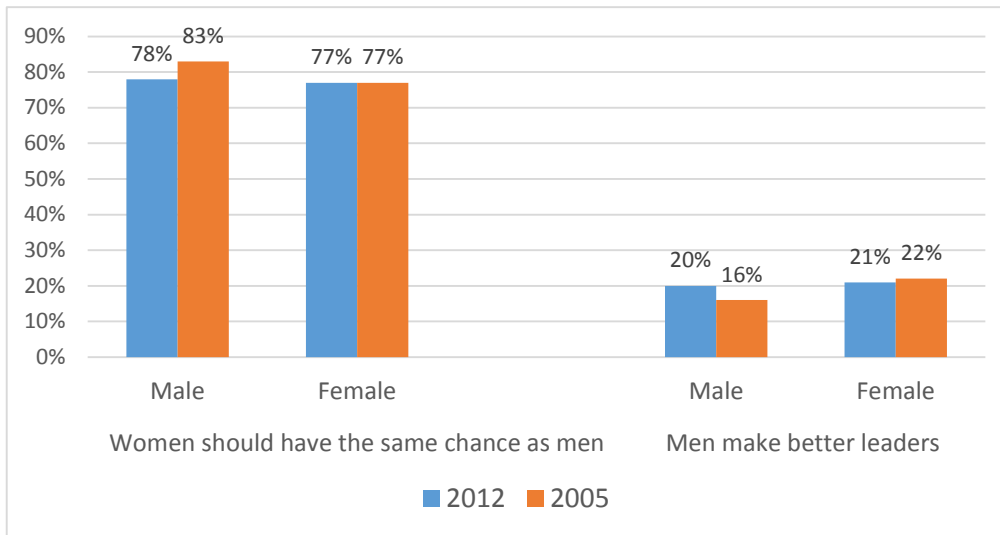


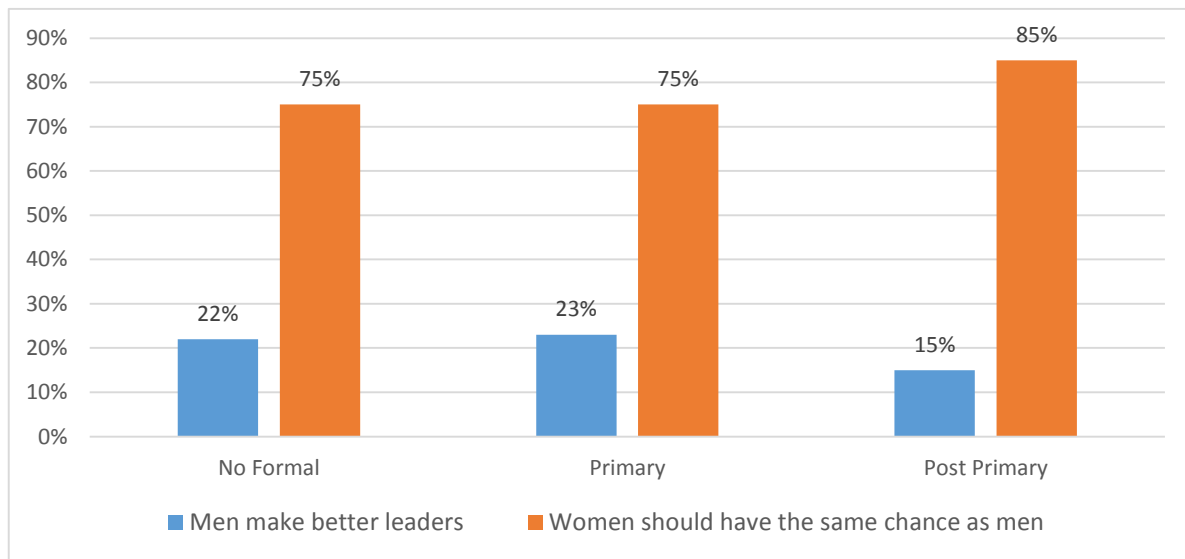
Figure 4: Comparison of Respondents' Opinions by Location in 2012 and 2005



3.3 Does education attainment matter?

Evidence from existing studies show that opinions of people on women as political leaders differ among people with different educational backgrounds (Chilobwe 2011). As Norris, Inglehart, and Welzel (2002) noted, human development in the areas of education brings changed cultural attitudes towards gender. Thus the more educated people are the more positive attitudes they are likely to have towards women’s leadership abilities. Our findings are consistent with this earlier evidence (Figure 5). There are notable differences between more educated respondents and those with lower levels of education; 85% of those with post-primary education are of the opinion that women should have equal opportunity to lead, compared to 75% of respondents in the lower education category.

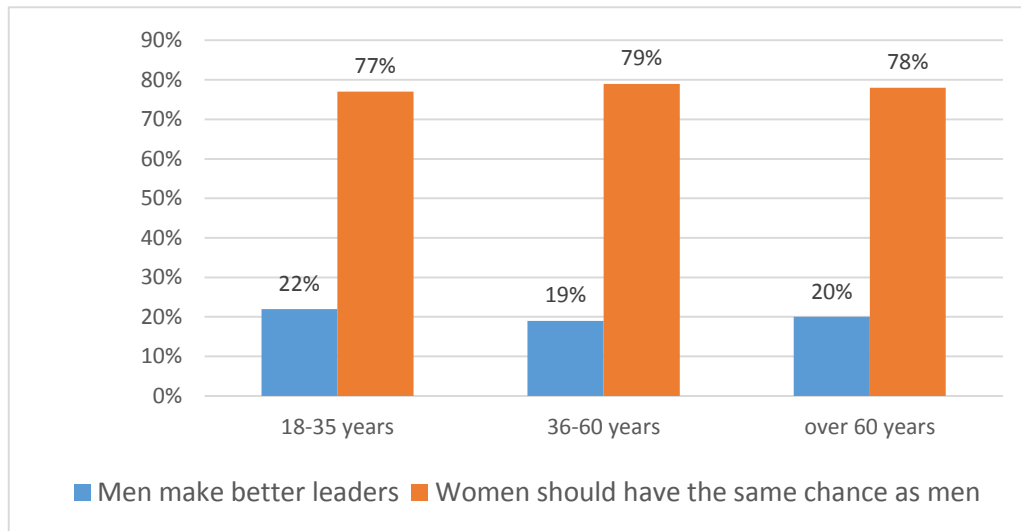
Figure 5: Perceptions of Women’s Leadership Abilities, by Education Level in 2012



3.4 Does age matter?

We expected that older people might be more conservative and traditional in their attitudes, for example, believing more in the concept that “women’s place is in the kitchen,” compared to the younger generation who are exposed to media and other socialization mediums. The findings however reveal that there are no major differences across the age categories (Figure 6).

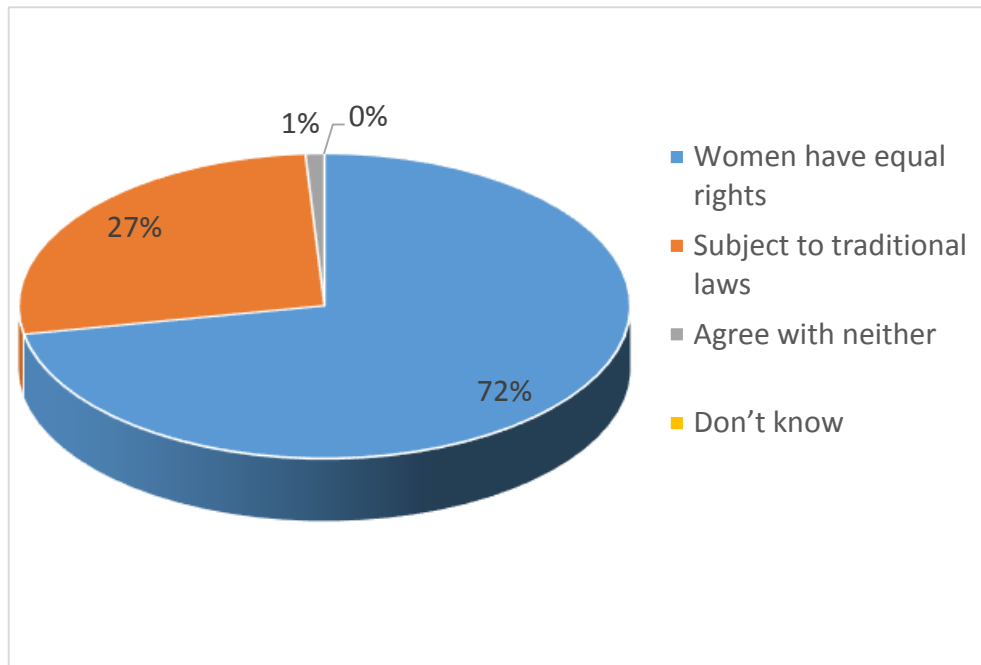
Figure 6: Distribution of Respondents According to Age Group in 2012



4. Demand and Supply for Equal Treatment of Women

To substantiate our arguments further, we looked at expectations in terms of treatment of women and what actually obtains, i.e. demand and supply issues. With reference to the demand side, we assess respondents' opinions about whether women "should have equal rights and receive the same treatment as men do", or if the respondents think that women "have always been subjected to traditional laws and customs and should remain so." A sizeable majority of people (72%) think that women should have equal rights and should receive the same treatment as men (Figure 7). This is very consistent with the finding that majority of the respondents think that women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.

Figure 7: Demand for Equal Treatment of Women in 2012



Which of the following statements is closest to your view. Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

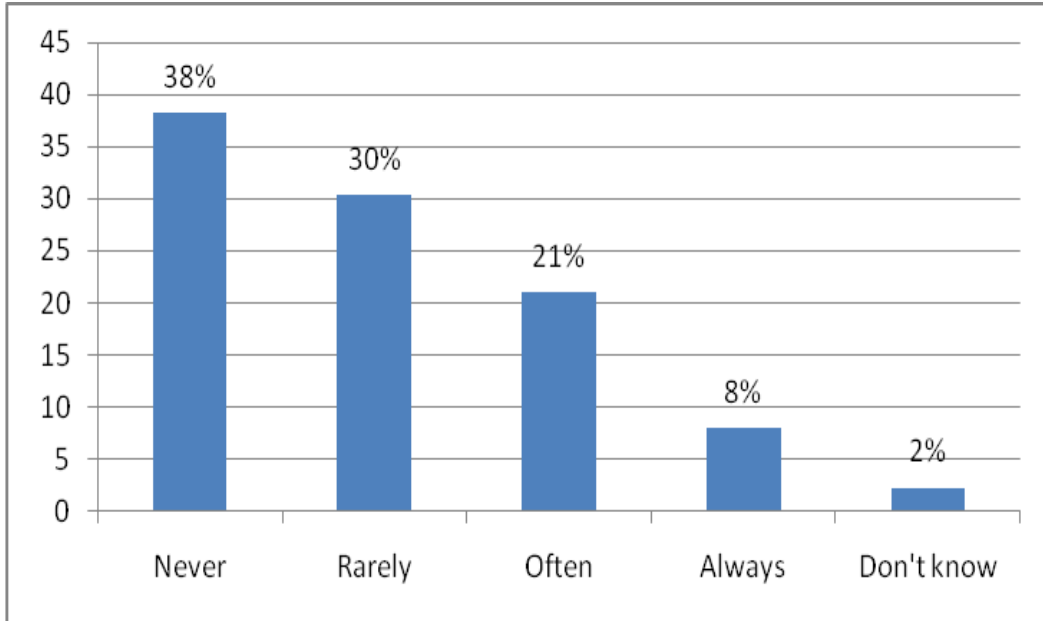
Statement 1: In our country, women should have equal rights and receive the same treatment as men do.

Statement 2: Women have always been subject to traditional laws and customs, and should remain so.

(figures show those who “agree” and “agree strongly” with each of the statements)

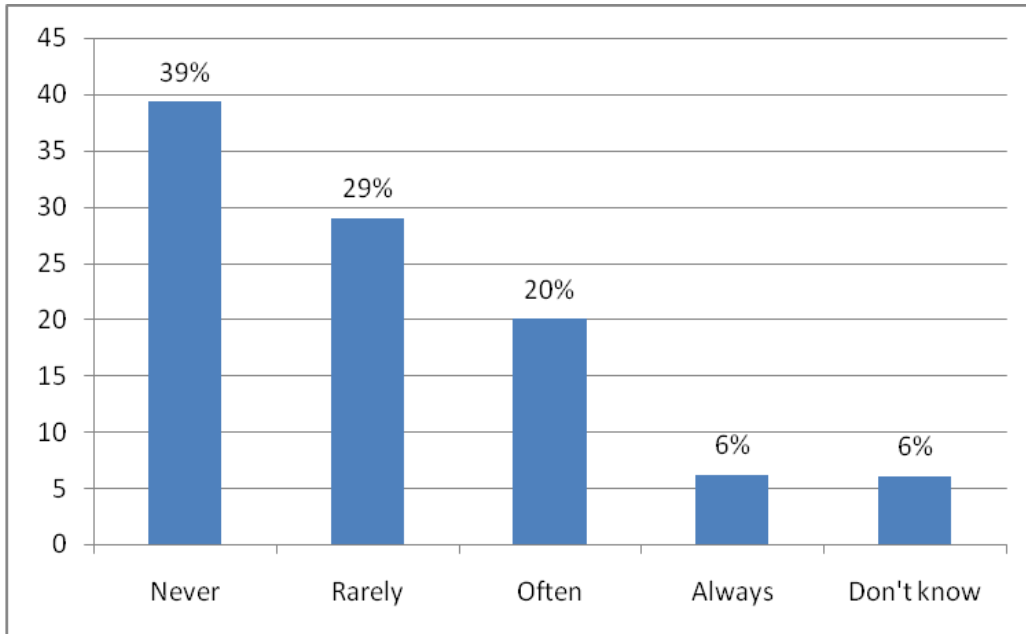
On the supply side we analyzed respondents’ opinions in a number of issues: Are women treated unequally by traditional leaders? By the police? By their employers? A majority of respondents are of the opinion that women do generally receive equal treatment to men (Figures 8-10), although a significant minority disagrees. Thus at least 29% of respondents hold the opinion that traditional leaders treat women unequally, and 26% say the same about police and the courts. And fully one-third (32%) think women face unequal treatment at the hand of employers.

Figure 8: Unequal Treatment by Traditional Leaders



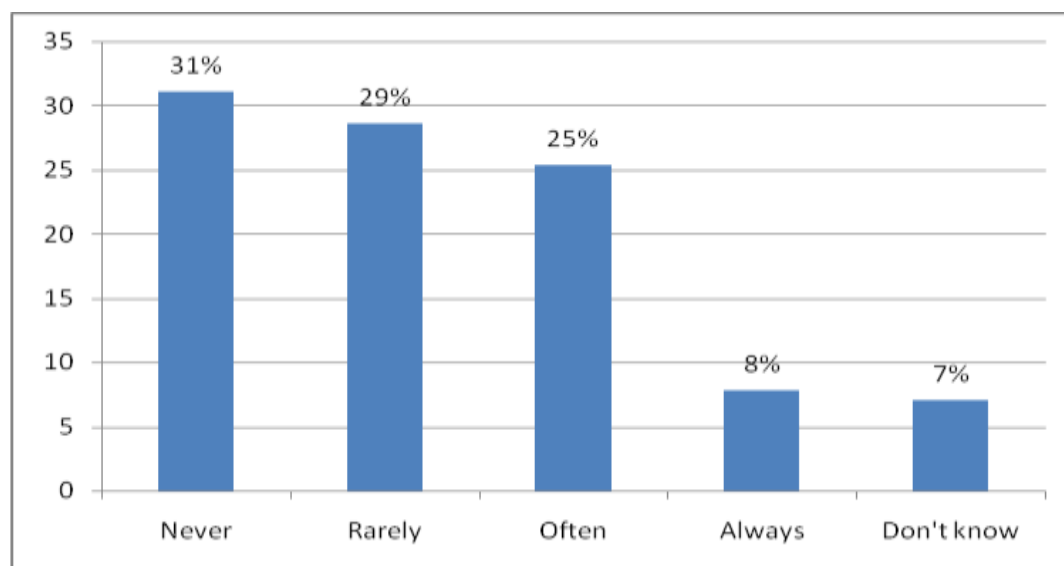
In your opinion, how often, in this country, are women treated unequally by traditional leaders?

Figure 9: Unequal Treatment by Police and Courts



In your opinion, how often, in this country, are women treated unequally by the police and courts?

Figure 10: Unequal Treatment by Employers



In your opinion, how often, in this country, are women treated unequally by employers?

There is thus some consistency between the demand for equal treatment – with more than two-thirds in support and just under one-third opposed – and the supply, where a similar one-third feeling equal treatment is still lacking.

5. Conclusion

The findings presented in this brief reveal important conclusions to be made with regard to Malawian adults' views on women becoming political leaders just like men.

First, negative stereotypes of women do not seem to have influenced the attitudes of Malawian adults regarding women's suitability for political leadership. As the brief has shown, a significant majority of respondents are of the view that women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.

The brief further shows that this observation applies irrespective of one's location or gender. As the findings also show, being from a rural area is not associated with more negative views about women's political leadership credentials. However, we do show that being more educated is related to stronger support for women's right to serve as political leaders.

Since the 2012 findings are quite similar to those from the 2005 survey when both the President and Vice President were men, it does not appear that these findings are driven by the fact that Malawi's first female president had just taken office when the 2012 survey was conducted.

Existing studies may therefore be over-emphasizing the influence of stereotypes in determining attitudes toward political leadership by women. These expectations have not been supported by findings of the Afrobarometer 2012 survey. This briefing paper recommends a follow up qualitative study that will focus on areas where women stood for the 2009 elections and lost, and

aim at finding out from respondents why they did or did not vote for women candidates. The findings from such a follow up study would help in targeting actions towards further improving women's representation towards the 50% target starting with the 2014 elections.

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