

The Role of Mudzi Wathu Community Radio in Socio-Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Mchinji District, Malawi

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (SJIF): 5.231

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 11/Dec/2023

Accepted: 25/Jan/2024

Abstract

This paper presents findings of a study on the role of Mudzi Wathu Community Radio in Socio-economic empowerment of rural women in Mchinji district, central region of Malawi. A sample of 121 women from Radio Listening Clubs were selected randomly to provide quantitative data and 8 people were purposively selected to provide qualitative data for this study. Quantitative data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire using Kobo Collect platform on Android devices. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interview checklist. Descriptive statistical analysis was run using SPSS Software package for the quantitative data and thematic analysis was conducted for the qualitative data. The results tabulated indicate that most women belong to social and financial groups on self-initiative; assume executive roles in groups; run businesses; participate in decision making on both social and financial matters; contribute financial resources to their household needs; have knowledge of women empowerment; acknowledge Mudzi Wathu Community Radio as a source of information, education and self-development especially on matters related to SRH, Human Rights, Entrepreneurship and Gender Equality. The study established opportunities the Community Radio could harness to improve its functionality. These include the full involvement of communities in the development of programmes and engagement of more females to be part of the broadcasting team. The main challenge identified is lack of adequate technical capacity of the team to perform their duties effectively and efficiently. The study recommends among others stakeholder and partner engagement to stir the growth of the station through technical and financial support, full community participation to enhance that content and programmes indeed serve their interest and assessments by the Community Radio to check if the programmes being delivered meet the demands of the listeners.

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Keywords: Empowerment, radio listening club, community radio, community development

1. Introduction

In Malawi, women constitute almost 52% of the population. According to a report by Action Aid Malawi in 2017, two thirds of the Malawi population lives in poverty, with rural women contributing a bigger percentage. Rural women face a multitude of challenges running from high illiteracy rate and lack of access to resources which are propelled by culture and social factors. However the influence of women in development cannot be undermined both at household and community level (Mhagama, 2015) ^[10,11] Over the years rural women have found solace in Community Radios as a source of information and engagement. Community radios have been

believed to be a darling to women through the influence they make in their welfare (Sarbani, 2022) ^[22]. Women empowerment has proved to be a success in rural areas partly due to the contributions made by these community radios.

Mudzi Wathu is one of the prominent Community Radio Stations doing recommendable service in community development in Mchinji district, Malawi. Since its establishment in 2006, the radio has registered strides in the community development sphere through empowering the marginalized i.e. the youth, women and orphans. The radio started as a participatory and interactive tool to spearhead development in the area focusing on the promotion of health,

gender, human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, economic, social and culture. Mchinji SEP (2020) records Mudzi Wathu Community Radio as a great partner in women empowerment in the district. The radio has special programs tailored to meet the demands and interest of women to achieve the women empowerment agenda.

Despite the various contributions the radio has made in the district in the development circles, little has been documented. There is a blackout on literature on the specific roles the station has played. There are studies about other Community Radios in the country focusing on different angles like the promotion of women empowerment, youth participation, health and agriculture. Therefore, it was imperative to establish the extent and document the role of Mudzi Wathu Community Radio in community development specifically looking at rural women socio-economic empowerment.

This study pursued the following questions in trying to shed light on the contribution Community Radio stations are making in socio-economic women empowerment:

1. What are the engagement strategies employed to enhance women participation?
2. What is the role of Mudzi Wathu CR in socio-economic empowerment of rural women?
3. What is the contribution of Mudzi Wathu CR in socio-economic empowerment of rural women across different demographic.

2. Background

Radio is regarded as the most accessible communication media tool for rural people. The marginalized and disadvantaged more specifically the women and the youth find the radio to be more applicable to them. The radio as a communication medium has the potential to reach out to a multitude of people within the shortest period of time (Prasad, 2019) [18]. It had been used by governments, organizations and other players as a tool for development. It has been used to educate, bring awareness, entertain and inform people on developmental issues i.e. agriculture, health, gender, governance and politics among others. It has also been to stir development through its participatory and interactive approaches.

Radio is segmented into 3 as Public, Commercial and Community. The segmentation is based largely on the functionality and broadcasting spectrum. The Public radios is regarded as the pillar and mother of all radios mainly due to its affiliation to the public machinery. Normally it is well established and has a big broadcasting spectrum. Commercial radios are simply private entities serving a special interest and mostly for a profit. This is all in contrast to community radios which are normally small and serving specific locations.

The concept of Community Radio (CR) has gained mileage in the recent past. Community Radios have emerged as important tool, and have changed the media and communication landscape worldwide. Community Radios make up one part of the three-tier system of radio (Johnson, 2020) [4]. Unlike the other forms of radios, Community Radio provides a platform where community members share ideas, discuss issues and exchange views that directly or indirectly affect their lives (Sengupta, 2020). This creates a direct relationship between the Community Radios and the community. They work in coordination and needs each other in order to register enviable changes.

Community Radios are not only medium of information sharing but also agents of change in the communities they serve. Community Radios act as perfect platforms that offer

discussions and debates with potential to trigger development. Furthermore, Sarbani (2022) [22] records that community radio offer a platform that enable women to overcome various forms of societal and cultural barriers that challenge their contribution in community development. The community radio grants the women an opportunity to act as agents of change in the communities and encourage other women and girls as role models. This has a triple effect in development at all levels be it community and national.

3. Methodology

3.1 Description of the Study Area

Mudzi Wathu Community Radio has broadcasting coverage in the whole of Mchinji district and some parts of Lilongwe rural, Kasungu, Dowa and Dedza districts in the Central Region of Malawi. Mchinji district was purposively chosen as the study area due to its signal reception and total area coverage. These 2 advantages might translates to big listenership and following. Additionally, Mudzi Wathu Community Radio is stationed in Mchinji district, this posed an advantage to the researcher in terms of logistical and administrative support acquisition from the radio personnel. These were paramount to the success of the study.

Mchinji district is located in the central region of Malawi, approximately 109Km from the Capital City of Malawi, Lilongwe. It borders Lilongwe to the East, Zambia to the West, Mozambique to the South and Kasungu to the Northern side. (Mchinji SEP, 2020). Mchinji district has a population of 602, 305 of which 305, 519 are women and 296, 786 are men representing 48.3% and 51.7% respectively. It has a youth population of about 294, 540 which is around 48.9% of the whole population (NSO, 2018).

The overall literacy rate hangs at 66.0%, with 71.7% and 28.3% for males and females respectively. However the adult literacy rate is around 73.4% respectively, translating to 80% and 69.4% for males and females respectively (NSO, 2018).

3.2 Sampling

Simple random and purposive sampling designs were used for the study. Both sampling designs were employed to capture data in Mchinji district. Simple random sampling involved selecting women respondents in the Radio Listening Clubs while purposive involved the selection of in-depth interview respondents. The sample size of the study for the women respondents was determined using Cochran (1963) Sample Size Formula calculated from a population (universe) of 960 women.

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where n is sample size; z is standard error with a chosen level of confidence; p is the sample proportion probability of desirable characteristic in a population; q=1-p; and e is the acceptable error of 5%. 90% was taken to be the population proportion level. The sample was calculated at 95% confidence interval. Therefore, the sample size was 121.

The purposive sampling required a sample size of 8 respondents from different sectors.

3.3 Data Collection

The study used two data collection methods. Firstly, a survey was conducted targeting the women respondents. Data were solicited mainly from primary source with the help of a semi structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was programmed

using Kobo Collect application and deployed on android tablets for personal interviews. The semi-structured questionnaire captured data on demographic characteristics of the respondent, knowledge on women empowerment and community radio, social empowerment drivers and economic empowerment drivers.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were conducted using an interview checklist to get thorough understanding on women empowerment in relation to community radio. The respondents were Mudzi Wathu Radio staff, Community Development Assistants (CDA) and Radio Listening Club Chairpersons.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data captured on Kobo Collect platform was processed and analyzed using SPSS software. This descriptive data was presented in frequency and percentage mode through tables and figures. The qualitative data from the in-depth interview was analyzed through Thematic Analysis and explained based on predetermined topics.

Results

3.5 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The Table 1 and Figure 1 show the characteristics of women respondents in the study area. The study found that the highest percentage (35.5%) of the women fall in the 31 to 40 years age bracket, with the least percentage (4.1%) falling in the 15- 25 years age bracket. It further established that the majority (71.9%) of the women were married with the least (4.1%) being single. It was observed that most (53.7%) of the women attended primary school education but none (0%) was recorded to have attended tertiary education. The study also found out majority (64.6%) of the women engage in farming as their occupation and a small percentage (5.4%) are formally employed.

Table 1: Description of respondent Socio- economic data

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Single	5	4.1
	Married	87	71.9
Marital status	Divorced	7	5.8
	Widowed	14	11.6
	Separated	8	6.6
	Never attended school	29	24
Education	Primary	65	53.7
	Secondary	27	22.3
	Tertiary	0	0
	Farming	78	64.6
Main occupation	Casual labor	24	20
	Business	12	10
	Formal employment	7	5.4

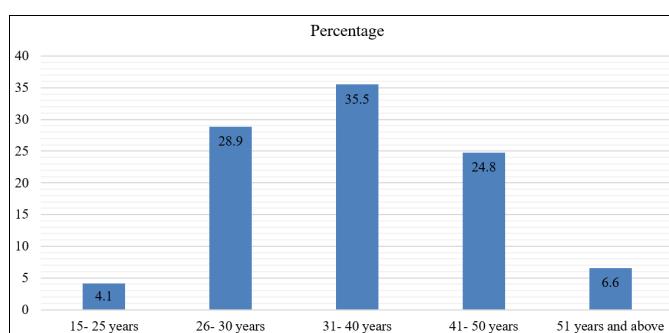


Fig 1: Age distribution of respondents

3.6 Community Radio and Women Empowerment Information

3.6.1 Community Radio

The majority (84.3%) of women in the study area showed they listen to Mudzi Wathu Community Radio daily with a small percentage (3.3%) indicating listening to the radio weekly (Table 2). The study further found that 95.87% of the women get women empowerment information from community gatherings and 76.03% indicated sourcing the information from Mudzi Wathu Community Radio (Table 3). It was also established that majority (93.39%) of the women listen to the radio as source of information, with other reasons being entertainment and self- development (Table 3). On the type of programmes most preferred by the women in the community, the majority of the women (82.64%) indicated gender equality, with the least (70.25%) indicating sexual and reproductive health (Table 3).

Table 2: Radio Listening Times

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	102	84.3
At least 3 times a week	15	12.4
Weekly	4	3.3

Table 3: Community Radio Information Vs Women

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Community gathering	116	95.87
	Community radio	92	76.03
Source of information	Friends	70	57.85
	Church	57	47.11
	Family	35	28.93
	Information	113	93.39
Why CR	Entertainment	105	86.78
	Self-development	83	68.6
	Passing time	19	15.7
	Gender Equality	100	82.64
Type of programmes	Education	92	76.03
	Human Rights	91	75.21
	Entrepreneurship	88	72.73
	SRH	85	70.25

3.6.2 Women Empowerment

It was revealed that the women understand women empowerment and are able to apply their knowledge. All the women respondents (100%) indicated having good knowledge of women understand. Further the study established that all the women respondents (100%) showed to have benefited from Mudzi Wathu CR. They indicated that the radio has positively impacted in their lives in different ways (Table 3).

Table 4: Women perceptions

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
WE Knowledge	Yes	121	100
	No	0	0
CR Impact	Yes	121	100
	No	0	0

3.7 Social Empowerment

The study found out that majority (83.5%) of the women belong to different social gatherings/ groups apart from the RLC. The social groups are diverse in nature but provide a good platform of engagement. 94.2% of the women indicated their participation in community developmental activities of assuming either executive or member roles (Table 4).

Table 5 shows decision making attributes the study established in the women. The majority (67.7) of the women revealed they always to make their voices heard in decision making activities. This encompassed both at house hold and community levels. Further, the study found that a higher percentage (63.6%) of the women indicated to have been self-influenced to join social gathers or the RLC.

Table 5: Participation

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Social grouping	Yes	101	83.5
	No	20	16.5
Participation	Yes	114	94.2
	No	7	5.8

Table 6: Decision making

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Decision making	Always	82	67.7
	Sometimes	21	17.5
	Rarely	13	10.7
	Never	5	4.1
Decision influence	Self	77	63.6
	Husband	5	4.1
	Friends	36	29.8
	Family	3	2.5
	None	7	5.8

3.8 Economic Empowerment

Table 7 shows findings on a number of variables expressed by the women in line to economic empowerment. The majority (93.4%) of the women indicated to have power over assets in their households. The study further found that a majority (90.1%) of the women are engaged in businesses or other income generating activities. These businesses supplement to the household financial needs. It was also established that 76.9% of the women have access to credits or loans form lending institutions of groups. This is to boost their businesses. Majority (87.6%) of the women have power to spend on the proceeds of the businesses. The women do not necessarily require input from their men counterparts to spend. The study further revealed that majority (76.0%) of the women always participate in decision making activities of financial matters.

Table 7: Power and Access

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Power over assets	Yes	113	93.4
	No	8	6.6
Business	Yes	109	90.1
	No	12	9.9
Access to credit	Yes	93	76.9
	No	28	23.1
Power to spend	Yes	106	87.6
	No	15	12.4

Table 8: Decision making in finances

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Decision making	Always	92	76.0
	Sometimes	14	11.6
	Rarely	14	11.6
	Never	1	8.0

4. Discussion

The data shows that most of the women fall under the age bracket of 26 to 50 years. The majority (71.6%) of women indicated being married, 53.7% have attained primary school education and 64.6% are engaged in farming as their main source of income. This information illustrates this is the most productive group. This result is consistent with NSO (2018) which reported that women within this age rage are married and mostly engaged in farming. It also reveals that most leave school having completed their primary school levels. However, this contracts with a report by Action Aid Malawi (2017) which shows that most women are illiterate, unskilled and subjected to poverty. This shows there is a change in this trend as literacy levels are improving.

Most (84.3%) of the women responded that they listen to the radio daily. Sarbani (2022) [22] reports that a radio is a women friendly medium because of its accessibility, portability and easy connection to the listeners. This concurs with Prasad (2019) [18] who indicated that Community Radio provides a good platform to the marginalized thus women inclusive. This explains why in this study most women indicated such. Majority (93.39%) of the women use the radio as source of information agreeing with the study by Timalsina (2019) [25] who shared that Community Radios provides access of information to the marginalized. It creates awareness on challenging issues calling for engagement and crafting of solutions. Mhagama (2015) [10-11] seem to agree with Timalsina (2019) [25] and goes further by explaining that Community Radio acts as a tool to discuss gender equality, human rights, HIV/AIDS and maternal health issues. The outcome of this study is in unison with Mhagama as majority (82.64%) of the women indicated they like listening to gender equality programmes. Human rights, education, SRH and entrepreneurship programmes were equally scored highly by many women.

All the women (100%) interviewed indicated having knowledge of women empowerment and the results revealed that a majority (95.87%) of the women get most of women empowerment information through community gatherings. These findings seem to slight differ with Dutta (2019) who indicated in his study that Community Radio is the low cost tool capable of providing information to the marginalized. The difference might be attributed to the reasoning that community gatherings carries a diverse of meetings. Ideally all developmental meeting by the government, partners and community leaders constitute community gatherings. This explains the findings of this study. The study also revealed that all (100%) of the women expressed to have been impacted by the Community Radio. The impact comes from different angles through the different services the radio provides.

On the knowledge of women empowerment the respondents during the in-depth interviews explained that;

“The giving of power to women to have control over their choices and resources; allowing the women to take charge of their lives without any interferences; giving the women an opportunity to participate in development activities through planning, decision making through to implementation”.

The study further revealed that a majority (83.5%) of women belong to different social groups. A majority (63.7) of the women indicated that they joined the groups on self-initiative, they influenced themselves to join groups. The joining of the

groups could me because of the benefits they envisioned therein. This sense of engaging with friends is an attribute of empowerment coming from acquiring high self-esteem levels. As Khan (2017) [6] narrated in his study that Community Radio changes the social fabric that enables women to engage and discuss issues that matters in their lives. The study also showed that 94.2% of the women indicated taking part in development activities. This is in tandem with a study by Sapna (2019) [21] and Mhagama (2015) [10,11] who agrees on the influence of Community Radio on women participation in development activities. On matters of decision making most (67.7%) of the women expressed that they always participate in such activities on the social front. These findings are also consistent with Mwenda (2021) who highlights that among others belonging to social gathers and participation in decision making groups are great indicators of social empowerment.

Royal Tropical Institute isolates the power to make decisions over their finances either individually or jointly as an attribute of economic empowerment. NSO (2018) also explains a person is considered to have control over their earnings if they participate in decision making over the use of those earnings. The results of this study seem to be biased towards this understanding as many (76.0%) of the women indicated they always participate in decision making over financial matters and a majority (93.4%) have power of assets in their households. The study also revealed that 76.9% have access to credit or loans and a majority (90.1%) are involved in various businesses. This is an element of access to economic opportunities which UNFPA advocates as a good strategy to advance economic empowerment.

In agreement with the survey findings, one respondent of the in-depth interview explained;

“Through the radio programmes, we have learnt how to do businesses: through the phone- in program we teach each other entrepreneurship skills to expand our income sources at the household level: most of the women now run business upon being encouraged by other women”.

The study established some strategies that Community Radios could advance to influence women engagement. One of the strategy agreed by many was the introduction and involvement of more female broadcasters in the team. Fombad (2019) [3] study aligns with this suggestion, his finding was that an inclusion of women inside and outside of the radio provides power for engagement and empowerment. This concurs with Sapna (2019) [21] whose study findings revealed that by having more females in the management and running of Community Radios, female listenership is increased. The female listeners feel more connected to their fellows and tend to engage freely. Other strategies highlighted include having more women centred programmes that have community context, and serve the needs of the women. Further the respondents suggested more community mobilization to foster community participation in the management and running of the radio. Ray (2015) [20] encourages community participation in management and governance of Community Radios.

Conclusion

The women in Mchinji district have different social demographic with a diverse in age, occupation and education status. These women have good access to Mudzi Wathu

Community Radio and use it as a source of information for gender equality, human rights and maternal health among others. The Community Radio has played a significant role in empowering women through the various services and programmes it delivers. Socio-economically the women have advanced and are able to isolate successes registered. Although the Community Radio has made strides, the study noted lack of modern equipment and capacity by the staff as major challenges. This study recommends among others good engagement with partners and stakeholders to attract support to address some of the challenges. It also recommends self-assessments by the radio to provide insights and direction on the new trends of things and community needs. The community also need to be put closer to the Community Radio when developing programme content.

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