

# Newsletter

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**Vol. 1**

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## Telling untold stories from the field;

Action on violence against  
women in Malawi's Dzaleka  
Refugee Camp

### Disclaimer

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**Spotlight  
Initiative**



# ABOUT PUBLICATION

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# COMMENTARY

**C**onflicts across the African continent have raged from Somalia in the horn of Africa to the Great Lakes region of Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, as a result, refugees have left these countries to seek refuge to countries like Malawi.

Malawi is on a migration route and the refugee camp continues to receive transiting migrants from the Horn of Africa, estimated at between 5,000-10,000 persons per annum. There are no accurate statistics, as many do not enter through formal migration and border points. They turn up at the camp for rest and recuperation before they continue to South Africa.

This trend persists despite the fact that the Ministry of Home Affairs has recently tightened its border monitoring and screening. The government has recently engaged in discussion with other countries in the region to address the issue of illegal migration, which tends to raise media attention.

Our visit to the Dzaleka Refugee Camp unravels disturbing stories told by those who experienced conflict with their own eyes.

As if that was not enough, women and adolescent girls who are in the refugee camp face violence perpetrated by men who can only be explained as being sadistic and unkind. In the camp, women and girls report various forms of violence in form of rape, battering, physical and sexual assault and intimate partner violence just to mention a few. One of Malawi's local organizations, Facilitators for Community Transformation (FACT) secured a grant from the United Nations Trust Fund on Violence Against Women to intervene and address violence against women whose cases remain alarming. For years, the camp has lacked projects aimed at tackling violence against women, FACT is one of those NGOs with a mission to reduce violence against women in the camp, the problem is still worrisome, because

the camp continuously receives refugees annually.

For a country like Malawi, hosting refugees is not a strange phenomenon, since the conflict broke out in the Great Lakes region, but primary the concern is the safety of women, girls and children who need full protection from all forms of violence in the refugee camp. That is why we commend FACT for embarking on such an innovative project. It is important for development partners across the globe and those based in Malawi to consider investing development aid to tackle violence against women in Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

It can also be noted that many local Malawian NGOs are not developing interventions aimed at tackling violence against women in refugee camp settings. Our key point is that because all Africans are one family, action is needed now to create peaceful refugee camps, free of violence and organizations like FACT have set the pace and started the ball rolling.

# SPECIAL REPORT

In 2012, Cecile Pango fled North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo and found her way into Malawi's Dzaleka Refugee Camp, her story starts way back in her home when rebels from the M23 swept through the Congolese North-Eastern region as they killed her husband.

She recalls that in the 90's under the rule of Mobutu Seseseko life was normal in the region until it descended into chaos in the following years.

*"I remember on that week day I was out in the field for work and on the night of 13th August in 2012. I just received reports that the M23 rebels had come to my house and killed my husband. I rushed back home and found he was gone. They also took a laptop away, suspecting my husband*

*passing secrets to Congolese Government troops"* she recalls

Cecile holds a Masters Degree in Education and previously worked in the DRC for international organizations such as Oxfam GB and Save the Children.

She adds that the vicious cycle of violence still continued as a few months later, masked rebels from the M23 stormed her home again and seriously injured Cecile and broke her arm as they wanted more information from her.

*"The rebels came again at home and broke my arm; they had beaten me up badly and left me wounded. Upon hearing the news, my employer Save the Children quickly transported me to a Kenyan hospital for treatment and surgery. I was very confused and disturbed"* she explains *"Save the Children advised me*

*again and towards the end of 2012 I left Congo and arrived at this camp"*

Cecile now works with Facilitators for Community Transformation (FACT) as a focal point for a project called Strengthening national legal and policy instruments to end violence against Women and Girls affected by civil and political conflicts funded by the UN Trust Fund for Violence Against Women.

She is also a lead pastor of the Horeb Mountain of God church which has a huge following in the camp. Pango notes that women are facing numerous forms of violence in the camp such as sexual assault, rape, beatings and intimate partner violence that seriously affects the health and psychological well-being of women living in the camp.



*A view of the Dzaleka Refugee Camp and refugees on their daily routine. Photo Credit-Internet sources*

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According to UNHCR's August 2020 factsheet, some 46,726 refugees and asylum-seekers resided in Malawi's Dzaleka refugee camp as of August 2020. All new arrivals in the camp undergo 14-day quarantine at the reception centre before joining others in the camp. Dzaleka refugee camp, initially designed for 10,000 people, is heavily congested with over 46,000 posing a serious health risk if COVID-19 is to escalate.

Apart from preaching the word of God, Cecile heads the Women Forum for Action, a local NGO working towards safeguarding and protecting women's rights and commends FACT for the project has helped women to be empowered to claim and defend their rights.

FACT has also mobilized 580 women into Community Action Groups (CAGs) to respond to violence against women by tracking cases and encouraging women to report cases to the authorities such as Police Service, Plan Malawi and other NGOs working in the camp.

The project aims to achieve a goal of reducing Sexual and Gender Based violence cases targeted at women and girl refugees within the refugee camp through effective implementation of legal and policy guidelines by end of the project.

The focus was on engaging 25 members of the parliamentary Women Caucus in policy and legal reviews aimed at promoting the economic and sexual and reproductive health rights of women



*Cecile Pango poses near her houses in Dzaleka Refugee camp- photo credit-Dingaan Mithi*

refugees in Lilongwe, Dowa and also facilitating community and refugee camp based SGBV prevention and victim support response through capacity strengthening of relevant structures such as local community gatekeepers, camp women groups and victim support.

*“When FACT came up with the project, we were very happy and there are plans to empower women in the camp with small scale businesses. In addition, through the 9 women group zones which we formed we are engaging women in making briquettes for easing cooking problems”* she explains and adds

*“The World Food Program gives us food aid but not charcoal for cooking”*

Cecile notes the importance of economic empowerment of women living in Dzaleka Refugee Camp as it helps in building resilience and resistance for women to stand on their own and not relying on abusive husbands and partners.

*“We want more organizations to empower us economically in this camp and not only FACT. Women with good level of income have power to decide for themselves on living peacefully. It is an effective strategy of tackling violence against women in the camp”* Pango stresses

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# EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

## RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE IN REFUGEE SETTINGS VITAL TO SAFEGUARD WOMEN'S RIGHTS

*Women and girls who live in refugee camps often face various forms of violence, encampment and confinement further places a huge challenge for women to enjoy their rights, a local organization, Facilitators for Community Transformation (FACT) is working in Malawi's largest refugee camp of Dzaleka, Dinguon Mithi had a chat with executive director, Thokozile Phiri Nkhoma. Excerpts.*



### What prompted you to design a project on addressing violence against women in Dzaleka Refugee Camp?

Malawi has several policy gaps in terms of management of the refugee situation. The provision of the 1989 refugee Act was adopted from the 1951 protocol that does not allow refugees to take up economic activities in Malawi, this has not been reviewed yet. With continued donor fatigue and decrease in external support, a food crisis is looming which will affect a total number of 36,000 refugees including women and girls in Dzaleka camp.

As a result, refugees are fleeing from the camps into host communities where they are subjected to serious human rights violations particularly women and girls.

Most of these violations are undocumented and unreported by the victims for fear of being returned to their original country. Malawi does not have a social protection policy for refugees particularly women and girls in light of its exclusivity policy.

Women and girl refugees are also abused at the camp by fellow refugees due to the fact that most of them are economically handicapped and are dependent on the perpetrators, and other social factors. In lieu of this, FACT was compelled to work with stakeholders to introduce a bill aimed at recognizing and protecting the fundamental rights of women and girl refugees on social, economic, sexual and reproductive health.

### What key challenges did you face when firstly entering the camp to start working?

The coming in of the COVID – 19 Pandemic. The pandemic changed the implementation mode of the project as activities which were supposed to be done physically could not be carried out, which saw FACT changing the initial way of implementation of activities.

Malawi has been passing through the regime change in the implementation period which has seen the change in leadership in the process. This came with political demonstrations against the past regime. The environment was not at all

conducive for effective implementation. Limitation in implementation of the revised GBV related national laws and policies. The current encampment policy remains a challenge to facilitate self-reliance opportunities for the majority of women and girl refugees.

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**What form of interventions have you undertaken to reduce violence against women in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp?**

Carrying out community mobilization environmental assessment to guide its implementation to have a benchmark of its interventions on SGBV. The strategies and instruments which are already on the ground shall be used as well so that they shall be consistent

with other partners. Engaging community action groups in monitoring and reporting implementation of the agreed interventions on EAW/G refugees within host communities and the camps. Engaging Amodzi – We are one campaign ambassadors to

raise the profile of the rights of women and girl refugees. Conducting know your rights community campaigns with the women and girls refugees. Establishing a victim support unit hotline service to expedite response to survivors of violence within refugee camps

**How is the stakeholder coordination in relation to your project in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp?**

The stakeholder coordination in Dzaleka is effective because we have referral pathways which every stakeholder uses to keep track of events happening in the camp. This ensures that the organization has adequate, up

to date information on current events in the camp. We also conduct interagency meetings every month where all stakeholders, such as Plan Malawi and UNHCR are present and

give updates on what they've accomplished during the month. During these meetings, we also discuss on how best we can work together to avoid wastage of resources.

**What form of advice can you give to other NGOs planning to develop or design gender-based violence programs in refugee camp settings?**

Get to know the beneficiaries before implementing a project so that the interventions should directly respond to their needs on the ground. Before project implementation, get to know other stakeholders who are also working on a similar project and identify existing gaps so that your project should fill those gaps.

**How is the stakeholder coordination in relation to your project in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp?**



We introduced the 'know your rights' campaign which informs people on their rights as refugees. This was in response to accelerated SGBV cases due to lack of knowledge of women refugees on their rights. Due to lack of knowledge, victims would not report cases. In terms of the future of this project, I envisage the following; Strengthened community networks and groups using systematic community organizing and movement building efforts which will be made through capacity building to allow the participants understand the concepts of SGBV. Increased effectiveness of national action plans on management of refugees aimed at preventing and ending SGBV targeted at women and girl refugees within camps and host communities. Strengthened community systems for effective prevention implementation and monitoring of SGBV targeted at women and girl refugees within host communities and camps through changes in perception, behaviour attitudes and practises by the end of the project.

# Women in Dzaleka Refugee camp build economic resilience against violence

By a Staff Writer



Part of the women refugees listen to a dialogue and media visit to Dzaleka Refugee Camp-Photo Credit-Dinga Mithi

**O**ne of the key challenges for women in Malawi's largest refugee camp is poverty and lack of financial inclusion and access to economic opportunities, in turn women get exposed to vulnerability where violence against women becomes more vicious, in the populous camp, one organization is striving to transform lives of women

Data shows that Dzaleka refugee camp has now close to 50,000 refugees, instead of the designated number of 10,000, the over influx of refugees in the camp outstrips the financial capacity of UN agencies, especially the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). At present, the UN refugee agency manages to disburse a meagre MK6000 monthly cash transfer (\$8) to refugees which is far from enough taking into account the high cost of living.

Facilitators for Community Transformation (FACT) through its flagship project financed by United Nations Trust Fund on Violence Against Women is engaging and building capacity of women in the camp to have access to economic opportunities.

So far, FACT has mobilized Community Action Groups (CAGs) to enhance tracking of cases of violence against women. In addition, a legal and policy dialogue session with the parliament committees and women rights organizations was held to discuss the findings of the policy and legal environment assessment focusing on the promotion and protection of the rights of women refugees took place on August 2020.

In addition, 5 members of parliament and

women caucus participated in the dialogue session. Findings from the assessment were shared for discussion. The oppressive and exclusive laws do not only limit refugees from enjoying their rights but increase the vulnerability of women and girl refugees to SGBV.

"Due to government policy and legislation, majority of the refugees do not have permission to work and are not engaged in any economic activity. This has got a high impact on women because they don't engage themselves in economic activities there by facing sexual gender-based violence" reads in part of FACT's progress report

Esperance, who prefers to be mentioned by her first name, fled Democratic Republic of Congo's North-Eastern region due to a growing wave of political violence and arrived in the refugee camp in 2013. She accuses soldiers from the former leader, Joseph Kabila to have arrested and imprisoned her innocent husband.

"There was a lot of political violence at home. My husband was arrested and imprisoned, the soldiers came into our village and killed one of my sons. But even here in the camp, we still face violence and it is a big problem" says Esperance

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She recalls *“Here in the camp, one day I was going to church. I met the Nyau masked dancers on the way, they harassed me and beat me up badly and I lost my unborn child. It is true we women are facing lots of violence in the camp.”*

*“I call upon FACT to scale up economic support to us women in the camp. Small scale businesses are important because they empower women and it helps reduce the vicious cycle of violence”* she observes

She also belongs to Women Forum for Action, a local camp NGO formed by Cecile Pango and through the organization are making briquettes to help solve cooking challenges faced by women in the refugee camp. A 50 Kilogram bag of briquettes costs MK5000 (\$6) and the money helps women economically.

Taking into account the economic challenges faced by UNHCR, women in the camp are commending FACT for bringing the project in the camp, but they still have huge gaps due to huge numbers of refugees in the camp in need of financial and economic support.

Another woman, 25-year-old, Zabibu narrates her story. She fled Democratic Republic of Congo due to frequent MaiMai rebel group attacks and came to the camp in 2018. Unfortunately, she lost everything back home and came to the camp with her two kids.

*“I have no small-scale business as of now, I just rely on food aid from World Food Program and UNHCR. I want FACT to also help with business capital so that I can be economically empowered to support my kids. I want a tailoring business; I love sewing clothes”* she explains



## FACT WORKS TO BUILD ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR WOMEN REFUGEES

By Dinggaan Mithi

Access to justice is something women in Dzaleka refugee camp yearn for as cases of violence keep on rising with a huge influx of refugees, despite the challenge, a local Malawian organization is leaving no stone unturned and is working hard to help the women claim their rights

**A**s part of project implementation, Facilitators for Community Transformation (FACT) undertook a perception survey which established that in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, 70% of women acknowledged the existence of a hotline service and its effectiveness in reducing sexual gender-based violence as now they are able to report cases happening without being afraid of being abused.

Cecile Pango one of the team leaders and a focal point for the project in the camp also com-

mended FACT for bringing a group of Women Judges Association to the camp who committed to help in following up on cases and making prosecutions, although progress has been bogged down by the raging Covid 19 pandemic.

Pango calls for increased stakeholder coordination to tackle violence against women in the camp. At present the camp has organizations such as Plan Malawi, Welt Hunger Hilfe, World Food Program, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, My Bucks Bank, Jesuit Refugee Services and FACT amongst others.



*A sign post sits on a dusty entrance road to the new Katubza refugee settlement camp, with a grant from Japanese Government, it is expected to host 500 families as a way of decongesting the camp.*

*Photo credit: Dinggaan Mithi*

Julie Mujinga, 48, with 9 kids arrived in Dzaleka Refugee Camp in 2016, after fleeing deadly political violence in Democratic Republic of Congo. She notes that violence against women is a huge challenge in the camp and life is hard

*“Life is very hard here in the camp, we also struggle to feed our kids. On top of that violence against women is happening in the camp and FACT alone cannot address this challenge. A certain lady was raped but we were shocked to see the Police failing to punish the rapist.*

*Although they arrested the man, he was later released citing lack of evidence” laments Mujinga.*

Lorence Waka is a 25-year-old single mother of 2. Her boyfriend left her and went to the United States of America and married another woman. At least she works in a hair dressing saloon and earns MK25,000 (\$33) which she complains is not enough to make ends meet due costs of living have gone up.

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*“Being a single mother is a huge challenge, because you have to raise kids on your own. However, we have another problem, men in the camp fuel violence against us and commonly it happens that when a single mother is beaten, the police simply play down intimate partner violence cases, saying we should resolve issues at home”* says Waka

*Judith Zawadi masked on the (left) and Lorence Waka on the (right) photo credit: Dingaan Mithi*



Despite Malawi’s reservations in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which has limitations on certain rights for refugees, the protection environment in Malawi remains favourable and conducive for hosting asylum-seekers and refugees.

Using Japanese funding, a new camp site is being developed in Katubza and Dzaleka Hill, of which if completed will host approximately 500 families each.

Though this is not enough to

address the congestion in Dzaleka camp, advocacy continues with the Government for the allocation of additional land to host more refugee and decongest the current camp capacity.

UNHCR is pushing for a settlement approach to push away from the encampment policy, to promote peaceful coexistence between refugee and nationals as well as boost self-reliance for refugees.

Judith Zawadi is 27 years old, with 1 kid. She fled Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo

and now lives in the camp. She agrees with Waka that single women in the camp are traumatized and often face violence more than married women, although this is just anecdotal evidence.

*“Single mothers in the camp face violence, other women are looking for money to survive and end up engaging in risky sexual practices just to earn something and that exposes women to abuse, sexual violence and HIV as well”* She explains