

# GAIA Update

May, 2007 - Grass roots power



We have regularly supported a remarkably resourceful Malawi woman.

The Lydia Project provides micro-loans to 60 Malawi women (the repayment rate is 100%,) and produces an HIV prevention education, counseling, and testing program among 648 youth ranging in age from 8 to 18.

It delivers HIV prevention education to nearly 600 adults, and medical support to 341 patients (including intensive nutritional boosting to HIV patients.) Lydia supplies tuitions to 95 orphaned secondary school students. Forty-four young and older adults are learning tailoring skills; 4 of these are men.

But in particular I wanted to spotlight how impoverished women are strengthening themselves through micro-loan activities. You may occasionally notice the wry style of Lydia's leader in the following vignettes, slightly edited for smoothness.

## IMPACT OF THE LOANS ON THE WOMEN

In assessing loan impacts, we looked at quality of life before receiving the loans and then after they finished paying back. The women's lives have improved tremendously.

### A. MARITAL INDEPENDENCE

Most Malawi women stay with unfaithful husbands because of their [financial dependence upon them.] Most women are illiterate and cannot find paying jobs. But the loans have enabled many to have some say in running their families. A case in point is Maggie G. from R [village.] Her husband married a second wife. When Maggie's business started thriving, the husband divorced the second wife to be just with Maggie. She is now able to tell the husband to go and buy tomatoes and run some errands. This would not be possible if the husband was the one with the financial muscles.

### B. FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

An example of this is Mrs. A., a widow who through her business income can pay school fees for her daughter and feed her five children. The other women in her group are married and from the time when they started their businesses they have become independent financially. They have earned respect from their husbands.

### C. PRESTIGE TO THOSE THAT ARE SOCIALLY LOOKED DOWN UPON

Being unmarried for Malawian women, especially in the Northern Region, puts the woman in an awkward situation. People regard her as incompatible with them. A 44 year old woman at M. centre is

unmarried and placed at the edge of society. But now she earns a living from her business, which married women cannot do. If she did not do this the married women might think that the spinster gets money or material things from their husbands.

Implementing concrete strategies bringing justice more and more into balance is no small thing, especially when the low status of women in high-HIV prevalence areas can have lethal implications.

Some of the best people in Malawi and in the U.S. are the men who struggle to "get" what it means to respect women, be a brother to them. Doing this is neither easy nor obvious, nor is the job ever finished, since being privileged means having the luxury of not making changes - unless you'd like to try becoming more fully human.

The women are the heroes, and some of us men are trying, will continue to try, to be full and equal partners. Deepest thanks to the women and men whose support helps us do the best we can at Malawi's grass roots.

William Rankin