

What do you think are the entry points for addressing this goal (Goal Five: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) in your host country, and what recommendations would you make for achieving this goal?

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In Zambia, achieving gender equality has more to do with challenging deeply rooted social norms to promote equality rather than ensuring men and women are equal in view of the law. However, there are still ways in which legally women are disempowered through Zambian laws, which underpin and give legitimacy to disempowering social norms. In Zambia, there are two structures of law, customary and statutory law. Customary law are the various tribal laws applied in a local cultural context, and statutory law is the constitutional law, and legally trumps customary law. However in areas of divergence, customary law is often given space to operate separately from statutory law. In practice, many situations which disempower women are accepted under customary law. For example, women are eligible to marry after puberty in customary law - meaning child marriages at 15 or 16 years of age do occur. Girls who are child brides are less likely to finish school or pursue post-secondary education, have the ability to support themselves, are at increased risk for HIV transmission, increased likelihood of early pregnancy and complications, and are more likely to be in abusive relationships. Also under customary law, men can take on more than one spouse in Zambia, while women cannot be married to multiple men at the same time. This custom contradicts statutory law which states one person must divorce before remarrying. When customary law clashes with statutory law, it is not always enforced and especially in more rural communities customary law prevails.

Currently in Zambia, there is a referendum to harmonize the discrepancies between customary and statutory law, which would include a new Bill of Rights into the constitution, changing the statutory age of marriage from 21, and the customary age of marriage (post puberty) to 19 years of age. As well it clearly states that marriage would be between two consenting adults of opposite gender. This proposed change would mean that constitutionally women have the right to choose who they marry, once they are 19 years old, and the number of parties in a marriage would be kept to two persons. This is a proposed change, and when the country goes for general elections on August 11, 2016, they will also vote in the referendum.

In Zambia, literacy rates among women are lower than men. This is changing for the younger age groups as the importance of education for girls is being recognized. However this means that many women that are eligible to vote in the election and referendum have barriers to understanding the referendum issues due to illiteracy. Raising awareness, or as Zambians call it, “sensitization” is a key part of empowering women - sensitizing them to issues that are relevant to them and will impact them. Sensitization itself can be very tricky and time consuming for this particular issue, as statistically illiteracy rates are higher in rural communities. Going door to door and taking the time to explain issues to women in person means that sensitization requires a lot of manual effort and can be costly time wise.

However there is an encouraging trend that radio and television programs will feature segments where these political issues are discussed, giving new avenues for those who cannot read to become informed. I see the increased utilization of media communications in Zambia as a way to facilitate the empowerment of women.

It is also encouraging in Zambia to see female candidates running across all parties. The “Vote for a Woman” campaign promotes the need to increased female participation in Zambian politics. While formally it is promising that there are no barriers preventing women from running or being active in political life, the official capacity to do something does not always translate into achieved capacity, or empowerment. Regardless of whether the referendum passes, the issues brought up are the ones that need to be addressed more urgently in a cultural context, not necessarily a legal context.

In a country with limited resources to enforce laws, equality will never legally be enforced unless it matches up with the social norms and ideals. To create the social will to achieve equality means advocacy and sensitization around the importance of gender equality. Asking why is it ok for a girl of 15 years to be married, or why it is ok for men to have multiple partner but not women can reveal the subtle reality that women do not experience equal standing culturally. When women are regarded as equal partners to men, disempowering cultural norms will not continue to be upheld.

A key entry point to socially recognizing women as equals and to advance empowerment is through education. In this regard, I think Zambia is creating a generation that will bring about important social change. More women are being educated and the importance of female education is being talked about openly in Zambian society. It is accepted that women can work outside the home and are able to support themselves. In rural communities, accessing education is still quite challenging. It is also in rural communities where customary law primarily is practiced. Making education more accessible in rural communities, as well as increased radio and television programs utilized for advocacy and sensitization to reach these communities are great entry points to start promoting and changing notions about gender equality and rights, and will ultimately result in more women and girls being empowered.