

# Violence against women: The experiences of female domestic workers in Malawi

Lucy Mkandawire-Valhmu

School of Nursing

July 21<sup>st</sup> 2005

In Malawi, a poor country in Southern Africa, the current economic climate often requires women to migrate from their homes in search of employment. A common form of employment for poor women is domestic work. Domestic work frequently requires women to live in the same home as the employers. Yet, given the power relations that exist between employers and employees, and the lack of distinction between workplace and home in both temporal and spatial terms, domestic work may place young women at risk for physical, emotional and sexual violence.

In January 2005, I traveled to the city of Blantyre in Malawi, southeast Africa, to conduct a study with female domestic workers. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of violence specifically among young Malawian women employed as domestic workers and in so doing respond to the following research questions:

1. What are the day to day experiences of young Malawian female domestic workers
2. How do Malawian women view their own experiences of working as domestic workers?
3. How do Malawian women cope with the violence they experience while employed as domestic workers?
4. What are the potential health implications of women's experiences of violence while employed as domestic workers?

The study involved conducting six focus group interviews with eight women in one group and six women in the other five groups. In addition, I conducted ten individual interviews with ten different women.

The monies that I received from the Global Studies Program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the form of the Scott Kloeck Jenson award enabled me to travel within Malawi for the six months that I was there. I used this award to travel to the two agencies where I recruited and interviewed participants for my study. I was also able to travel to other agencies such as non-governmental agencies and the police station where I collected information on the resources that are currently available to women to assist them following an incident of violence whether from their employer or anyone else. Monies from the award were also used to cover some of my living expenses while I was in the country.

While in Malawi, I came across a group of women who are interested in establishing a shelter for abused women and girls. This shelter, if it were to be set up will be the first of its kind in the country. I spoke to my academic advisor, Dr. Rachel Rodriguez in the United States about this opportunity and she decided to travel from Wisconsin to Blantyre to visit the women and see if she could assist with this project. She was able to visit for two weeks and during that time, we met with the women and drew out a plan for establishing the shelter. We have since managed to identify various organizations that may be able to assist us with funding for this project.

I am grateful to the Global Studies Program for awarding me the Scott Kloeck Jenson grant and thus enabling me to not only complete my project but to also participate in setting up a shelter for women and girls, which is an experience that has been very fulfilling and worthwhile for me.