



Joint Statement by MANEPO and Women Lawyers Association (WLA)

**ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!
WE CAN NOT CONTINUE TO WATCH SUCH GRUESOME KILLINGS OF
OLDER MEN AND WOMEN WITHOUT CONCRETE ACTION.**

Population ageing is one of the most significant trends of the 21st century. The less developed countries will experience the most drastic change. The ageing population presents both challenges and opportunities altering the way societies and economies work. Around the world, two persons celebrate their sixtieth birthday every second.

With one in nine persons in the world aged 60 years or over, projected to increase to one in five by 2050, population ageing is a phenomenon that we can no longer ignore. Increasing longevity is one of humanity's greatest achievements. Indeed, population ageing is cause for celebration. The opportunities that this presents are as endless as the contributions that a socially and economically active, secure and healthy ageing population can bring to society. On the other hand population ageing presents social, economic and cultural challenges to individuals, families, societies and the global community. It is how we choose to address the challenges and maximize the opportunities of a growing older population that will give the global a chance to realise the potential benefits of ageing demographic trend

Sadly, there is a dangerous sceptre haunting this nation in how far we have gone in entrenching our deepest disdain for elderly people. This is no longer the sceptre about how we disrespect our elderly people.

This is the scepter about how we have gone deep in normalizing the killings of our elderly people—to a point of resorting to medieval ways of exorcising innocent people through stoning them death.

As champions of the rights of the older men and women, Malawi Network for Older Persons' Organizations (MANEPO) is still in the shadows of deep and dismay at the loss of an elderly lady in Dedza who, on Monday, was stoned to death after senseless accusations of practicing witchcraft.

In this tragedy of Dedza, there is something quite spectacular that I want to bring to your attention—because it is a potent symbol of how wrought we have become as a nation.

MANEPO and Women Lawyers Association (WLA) wish to remind all Malawians that it is very unbecoming for one, let alone older persons, to live under a cloud of suspicion. We passed the era when one could do what it pleases, without being restrained by the muscle of the law. It is imperative that everyone should use proper channels to address concerns, for one cannot concurrently play the roles of an accuser, prosecutor and judge.

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. More so, the recently adopted African Union Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa calls for each African state to be responsible for developing and reviewing existing legislation to ensure older persons receive equal treatment

and protection and ensure that law enforcement officers at all levels are trained to effectively interpret and enforce policies and legislation to protect the rights of older persons.

The Malawi's Witchcraft Act of 1911 doesn't recognise existence of witchcraft and states that it is an offence to accuse anyone of practising witchcraft. The 2016 National Policy for Older Persons recognises the duty of the State to protect the rights of older persons in a country grappling with c

Just this year, we have had over 8 cases where older men and women have been killed just on suspicion of practicing witchcraft.

In these cases, the form of killings ranged from giving them poison, strangling them in the bush, tying them to a tree, heavy beatings and, in some cases, locking them in houses where they are left to starve and die.

What stood out in these form of killings is that they tried, at all cost, to keep them away from the public—especially younger ones.

The Dedza case, however, brings quite a shift in these killings. We are now seeing public exorcism where even younger ones are involved not just in parading the accused in the public but even in the actual stoning of an innocent person to death.

The message that is coming from Dedza killers is clear: They are saying that they are not afraid to stone to death, in the broad daylight with cameras on, any elderly person they decide to accuse of witchcraft.

The question is: How have we come to a point where people are now able to parade elderly women in public and stone them to death to the point where they can even take pictures for evidence?

The answer is simple: It's because the State has been complacent in ensuring that these devilish acts are nipped in the bud. As alluded to earlier, we have had over 10 cases where elderly people have been killed in this country.

However, none of the culprits involved have their cases been successfully prosecuted to their logical conclusion.

What is so appalling is that even chiefs have become so confused that they don't know their rightful roles and responsibilities, in a way, failing to protect their own subjects from such harmful actions. These mercenary chiefs, seems to me, have no idea what it means being a custodian of tradition and community values within their respective jurisdictions. The best such chiefs should do is to resign for failing to provide supportive systems to their own subjects.

No wonder the 2015 Global AgeWatch Index report described Malawi as one of the worst countries for one to grow old in. The report, which provides a snapshot of the situation of older persons in 96 countries, found that Malawi has no enabling environment for its senior citizens.

The Sustainable Development Goals, Malawi being among the signatories, promise to be universal, people-centred, age-sensitive and to 'leave no one behind. Our vision as a country needs to be ambitious and transformational, ensuring shared prosperity for all without harming anyone, including the most vulnerable members of our communities, and grounded in human rights principles, including universality, non-discrimination and equality. This is not business as usual.

In view of this, we believe enough is enough and we are demanding that the State takes a strong position to deal with these senseless killings of our elderly.

Recommendations

MANEPO and WLA are therefore calling on the following:

1. We applaud President Lazarus Chakwera for his commitment to protect older persons in Parliament this afternoon. We believe this is step in the right direction and an assurance in ending atrocities against the elderly in the country. We look forward to stronger condemnation of the vice and deliberate action from the President's office on safeguarding older persons.
2. The President should institute a National Task Force to look at such abuse cases and come up with concrete roadmap to curb the malpractice, just like has been the case with other vulnerable groups like persons with albinism.
3. The Tonse Government must provide a clear direction on the 'Malawi Okomera Tonse' with regard to elderly people;
4. We again, highly commend the Malawi Police Service for moving in swiftly to arrest the suspects. Well done our esteemed colleagues from the Police Service. However, we demand speedy trial as justice delayed is justice denied.

FURTHER ACTION

- Further to the aforementioned, MANEPO and MLA will on November 13th in solidarity with older persons from across the country hold a peaceful march to the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) in Lilongwe to present grievances to the leadership and further amplify the voices of

what is each and passing day becoming a muted and section of our population.