


A black dog enters the home: hunger and malnutrition in Malawi

Anne Dressel ¹, Elizabeth Mkandawire,² Lucy Mkandawire-Valhmu,¹ Elizabeth Dyke,³ Clement Bisai,⁴ Hazel Kantayeni,⁴ Peninnah Kako,¹ Brittany Ochoa-Nordstrum⁵

ABSTRACT

Hunger and inadequate nutrition are ongoing concerns in rural Malawi and are exemplified in traditional proverbs. Traditional proverbs and common expressions offer insight into commonly held truths across societies throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Strong oral traditions allow community beliefs embodied in proverbs to be passed down from generation to generation. In our qualitative study, we conducted 8 individual and 12 focus group interviews with a total of 83 participants across two districts in rural central Malawi with the aim of soliciting context-specific details on men and women's knowledge, attitudes and practices related to nutrition, gender equality and women's empowerment. Each interview began by asking participants to share common proverbs related to nutrition. Our qualitative analysis, informed by an indigenous-based theoretical framework that recognises and centres African indigenous knowledge production, yielded six themes: 'a black dog enters the home', 'don't stay with your hands hanging', 'a man is at the stomach', 'showers have fallen', 'we lack peace in our hearts' and 'the hunger season'. Traditional proverbs can provide insight into the underlying causes of hunger and malnutrition. Physicians, nurses and other allied health professionals around the world have a role to play in addressing hunger and malnutrition, which have been exacerbated by climate change. We have an ethical duty to educate ourselves and others, and change our behaviours, to mitigate the root causes of climate change, which are contributing to food insecurity and resultant poor health outcomes in countries like Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

Within the genre of folklore, spoken proverbs can express commonly held truths,

¹College of Nursing, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

²African Research University Alliance (ARUA) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

³Health and Social Development, Consultant, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada

⁴CARE International in Malawi, Lilongwe, Malawi

⁵Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Correspondence to Professor Anne Dressel, College of Nursing, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA; banda@uwm.edu

offer advice, confer traditional views, and are often metaphorical (Mayer and Mieder 1994, 355). Their short form makes them easy to memorise and pass down from generation to generation (Mayer and Mieder 1994, 355). The widespread understanding of proverbs, which are unique to the culture within which they exist, offers insight into people's perceptions of their lived experiences.

In our ethnographic qualitative study, we asked participants living in rural Malawi to identify traditional proverbs they used to describe hunger and nutrition. The overall aim of our study was to provide context-specific details on men and women's knowledge, attitudes and practices related to nutrition, gender equality and women's empowerment in the districts of Ntchisi and Dowa in central Malawi. In this manuscript, we discuss the hunger and nutrition-related concerns cited by participants in their proverbs, and offer suggestions for how physicians, nurses and allied health professionals can work together to improve nutrition outcomes for women, children and families.

BACKGROUND Malawi

Located in south-eastern Africa, Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 172 out of 189 in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2019) Human Development Index. Malawi has a population of 17.5 million and is 84% rural (Government of Malawi 2019), with the majority of the population practising subsistence farming (Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) 2018). Hunger and malnutrition are widespread, with 37% of children under age 5 years chronically undernourished and stunted (World Food Program (WFP) 2020). Furthermore, 63% of children under age 5 years are anaemic, as are 33% of women (United States Agency for International Development (USAID) 2018).

Approximately 80% of cultivated land in Malawi is used to grow maize (corn), which many families depend on for their daily food intake (Stevens and Madani 2016, 1). Maize is the staple crop in

Malawi, and families that rely heavily on maize for their daily diet are at risk for malnutrition due to its lack of adequate amounts of essential nutrients (Nuss and Tanumihardjo 2010, 418). Challenges also exist, especially among women in Malawi, with accessing agricultural inputs, such as fertiliser,¹ land, credit, seeds and agricultural education, which limit opportunities to grow a wider variety of healthy foods (Murray *et al* 2016, 122).

Finally, Malawi has been experiencing alternating periods of drought and flooding in recent years, which destroy crops, and has been identified as one of the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Warnatzsch and Reay 2019, 379). Climate change impacts food security, which encompasses food availability, economic and physical access to food, utilisation of food including nutrient uptake, and sustainability of the food supply (Dressel *et al* 2020, 375).

Traditional Malawian proverbs

Cultural knowledge among communities in Malawi can be illustrated through traditional proverbs used by local residents. Proverbs serve important functions across many societies in Africa (Dipio 2019, 4). For example, they can be used to convey commonly held truths, often in clever ways (Dipio 2019, 4). These expressions embody traditional knowledge, and shared proverbs can help to cohere and retain community identities (Onebunne and Obasi 2019, 3). In societies with low rates of formal education, proverbs and other oral traditions play an important role in preserving community knowledge and history (Vansina 1971, 443).

While rates of formal education in Malawi are increasing, literacy rates among older generations, especially among older women, are very low at 15.6% (Government of Malawi 2017; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2015). Thus, traditional proverbs, which are shared orally, provide an important avenue for the older generation to pass on knowledge and beliefs to younger generations. Furthermore, our theoretical framework is rooted in the proverbs themselves (Avoseh 2012, 237), as a medium for understanding traditional knowledge related to hunger and nutrition. This theoretical framework recognises and centres African indigenous knowledge production, which is culturally specific, and helps to explain the environments in which Africans, such as those in our study, live (Kaya 2014, 89).

METHODS

Our ethnographic qualitative study took place in Ntchisi and Dowa districts in central Malawi in 2017. An ethnographic approach (Creswell and Poth 2016, 70) allowed us to capture common beliefs held by community members related to hunger and nutrition. Ethnography also allowed for analysis of shared cultural beliefs (Creswell and Poth 2016, 71) that were expressed through proverbs (Ncube and Moyo 2011, 129). We conducted 12 focus group interviews with a total of 75 participants including 19 men and 56 women. Focus group interviews were conducted across two districts in rural central Malawi with two Traditional Authorities in each district for a total of four communities. Traditional Authorities are community leaders in the form of chiefs who are integrated into government districts (Cammack, Kanyongolo, and O’Neil 2009, 8). The term, ‘Traditional Authority’, refers to both the chief, as well as to the geographical area which the chief oversees. Our goal in conducting the focus group interviews was to solicit context-specific details on men and women’s knowledge, attitudes and practices related to nutrition, gender equality and women’s empowerment for a baseline nutrition project that was part of the Southern African Nutrition Initiative (CARE 2020), a project undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through Global Affairs Canada. Data for the focus group interviews were collected from three different subsamples of participants, which included: (1) Child-bearing women with at least one child under age 5 years; (2) Husbands of these women who were currently living with their female partner and who also had a child under age 5 years; and (3) Mothers-in-law of the women participants interviewed. Mothers-in-law were included because they often have influence over household food security in the communities in our study. Focus group interviews included four to eight participants, and lasted approximately 45–90 min. Each interview began by asking participants to share common proverbs related to nutrition.

In addition to the focus group interviews, we collected data from a convenience sample of community and religious leaders, including two male religious leaders, four male local chiefs and two female community leaders, which allowed us to triangulate the focus group interview data. The total number of individual interviews was eight. All interviews were

conducted in Chichewa, audiotaped and transcribed. The interviews were translated into English by two bilingual members of the research team.

A member of the research team then read the transcripts line by line to identify proverbs and common expressions, and to understand the context of each interview in which the proverbs and common expressions were communicated. These findings were shared with two other members of the research team, both originally from Malawi, for verification.

Ethics

The purpose of the study was explained verbally to all participants. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and they were assured of confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, which was most often via a thumbprint, due to limited formal education among the participants. Participants used pseudonyms during focus group interviews to ensure confidentiality.

RESULTS

The sampled participants from rural communities in Malawi shared proverbs and common expressions related to hunger and nutrition, which exemplified the lived realities of food insecurity among many families. Their responses indicated that hunger, malnutrition and poverty were ongoing concerns.

A black dog enters the home— ‘Pakhomo palowa galu wakuda’

Several participants described hunger as a black dog. One participant said, “We mention ‘black dog’ to speak of hunger entering the home”. Another said, “‘Black dog’ means there is hunger in the home”. A variation of this expression was shared by another man who said, “I just want to add to this issue that has been discussed regarding when hunger has entered the home, the words we use as proverbs, the words we say are at this home ‘a black dog has passed’, we mean that there is no food fitting for a human for them to be happy in the family”. Darkness was a common theme when describing hunger, with another participant stating, “There is darkness’ meaning in the house people are sleeping with hunger”.

Relatedly, participants connected the black dog proverb with poverty, limited food options and unhappiness. For example, one man said, “...for a person to be happy in the family or for children to be happy then it means that food like

nsima (staple corn-based food) or whether it’s beans, we take the food. So, if we don’t have food like this in our home then it means our family is really poor and even the parent is very worried because there is no support for the children. And so we say ‘a black dog’. But when your family has food, they are happy, even the child is happy. When you tell them to go to school, they go freely”.

Don’t stay with your hands hanging— ‘Osamakhala wa manja lende’

Given that most families in rural Malawi rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods, proverbs related to laziness were cited by participants as reasons for hunger. For example, one participant stated, “There are a lot of ways that we can use (proverbs) to explain nutrition. First, you need to have strength in order to find resources such as fertiliser, good seed and then you should go and farm. When you farm, that is one way for you to find food. You should not just stay with your hands hanging, a lazy person’. Another said, “‘Hands hanging’ meaning someone who just receives (and does not work to grow food)”. Related to the physical labour involved in growing food, one of the religious leaders said, “There are a lot of proverbs that are said ... here in our area we are Chewa but also we use proverbs. But in terms of nutrition ... the main thing we say is that as a person ‘you eat your sweat’ meaning that a person needs to work and that is how you find food or things that you want...”.

A man is at the stomach—‘Mwamuna mpamimba’

Traditional gender norms in Malawi include expectations that women should prepare the food. Participants from several different focus groups cited proverbs that reflected this social norm. For example, one man said, “Yes, some say a man is at the stomach ... Then it means that he has eaten food that strengthens the stomach ... When they say a man is at the stomach it means you are telling the wife to cook you food, you are hungry...”. Another participant shared, “We explain to them ... we say a man is his stomach ... (that means) the woman, when she sees that the man is just sitting, she should not just look at him. She needs to get up and go and cook. If he goes without eating, that creates confusion”. Confusion, in this case, implies that a gender norm has been broken, if the woman is not cooking for the man when he is hungry. Traditional

gender roles proscribe that a woman must feed a man to keep him happy.

This proverb has also been understood to mean a man works better on a full stomach, which again speaks to the physical labour that is required to obtain food among subsistence farmers in rural communities.

Showers have fallen—'Mvula ikugwa'

Nsima is the corn-based staple food of Malawi. Participants frequently spoke of the tradition of eating it every day, and that they appreciated the satiety it provided. For example, one man shared, "Showers have fallen' means that the nsima I have eaten, did really fill my belly". Another stated, "When we say someone has eaten well, he must eat three times in a day ... in the morning porridge, afternoon nsima and evening nsima".

As a corn-based food, however, nsima lacks many nutrients that are necessary for a balanced diet. One participant shared, "Nutrition here is a little challenging. We are unable to find a variety of foods and so in the morning, we just eat porridge, in the afternoon nsima, in the evening also nsima". Another woman stated, "In our area nothing has changed a lot because for us when we say we have eaten, it means it's nsima ... This is also why the growth of the children is such that they are stunted because they lack food in their bodies because of the poverty that people have here in Kalumo. When people say they have eaten, it's just nsima".

We lack peace in our hearts—'Timasowa mtendere mu mtima'

Given shortages of food and other resources in rural Malawi, envy of those who had better harvests was noted by several participants. Historically, Malawians have a tradition of sharing food and communal meals. This tradition, however, has waned, resulting in some families having more to eat and some having less, depending on their harvests. One woman shared, "There are a lot of foods that we desire, a lot ... We lack peace in our hearts because we envy our friends who have food". Another said, "There cannot be peace because peace begins with food...".

Participants from all focus groups blamed poor harvests and the resultant dearth of food for their own families on a lack of access to fertiliser. For example, one participant said, "In terms of food like nsima then we take it like maize, we harvest well when we have fertiliser ... our farming goes well. But if we don't have fertiliser our harvests are also very poor.

Then it means we also have very poor nutrition because we have poor harvests".

Hunger season—'Nthawi ya njala'

Participants used a common expression, 'the hunger season', to describe the time between harvests when food stores have run low. One participant said, "During hunger season, as we have explained that food is difficult for us ... So when hunger season arrives, we agree in the home... 'We have stayed for 2 days without eating. Let's go and look for ganyu (piece work to earn cash).' So when we find ganyu, we go and do it". Earning cash by doing ganyu allowed families to then purchase some food.

Lack of eating also impacted children. As one participant said, "Sometimes, you don't have food in the home so we can buy a fritter and we buy sugar, and the children can drink some tea, that means they have eaten".

DISCUSSION

Focus group participants shared numerous traditional proverbs and common expressions related to hunger and nutrition. Hunger is widespread in Malawi, and proverbs about 'black dogs' and 'darkness' reflect the heavy burden of this ongoing challenge. Hunger and lack of food options are intricately connected to poverty (Brugh *et al* 2018, 19), which was cited by many participants. Poverty is one of the primary causes of poor health in Malawi, with rural communities, like those in our study, experiencing higher rates of poverty than urban areas (Gondwe *et al* 2021).

Poverty has implications for malnutrition, and each exacerbates the other, creating a vicious cycle (Siddiqui *et al* 2020, 3). When a family does not have money to purchase enough agricultural inputs such as seeds or fertiliser, the food they grow may be insufficient to ensure an adequate and nutritious diet. Participants noted they lacked agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser, which they perceived could help to increase crop yields. In the districts of Dowa and Ntchisi, the lack of inputs was cited as the main reason for food insecurity, more so than drought or high food prices (Government of Malawi 2017). Without a nutritious diet, a person may lack the necessary strength to tend a home garden, for example. The hard work required for growing and accessing food was captured in the proverbs about the physical labour involved in subsistence agriculture, in expressions of needing to 'eat sweat' and not leaving one's 'hands

hanging' idly. Subsistence farmers in rural communities must work hard to produce food. This hard work is made difficult or sometimes even impossible if people do not have food or they are not sufficiently nourished.

Poverty also impacts dietary diversity (Megbowon and Mushunje 2018, 10). The lack of dietary diversity was noted by participants in our study, who shared that 'showers have fallen', indicating they had eaten nsima. While most male participants were content with the feeling of satiety that nsima provided, women recognised that a more diverse diet is necessary for good health, and cited an inadequate diet as a reason for stunting among their children. As a corn-based staple food, nsima is lacking in essential nutrients (Nuss and Tanumihardjo 2010, 418). Increasing dietary diversity could help to improve nutrition among Malawi's rural communities (Kuchenbecker *et al* 2017, 2). As participants noted, however, nsima was frequently the only staple food available and consistently eaten. Further research is needed to learn how best to support families in Malawi, so they are able to diversify their diets, while accounting for poverty and limited resources.

While women were aware of the health impacts of the lack of dietary diversity, women and men both shared that it was the woman's responsibility to prepare food. In Malawi, and in many other parts of the world, women have the primary responsibility for preparing household food (Dressel *et al* 2020, 373). Women's productive roles mentioned during this study depict the gender imbalance in the distribution of household chores, including food preparation, which can impact household nutrition security. Many nutrition projects focus on helping children under 5 years and pregnant or lactating women (Desyibelew and Dadi 2019; Erzse *et al* 2020). However, proverbs such as 'a man is at the stomach' suggest that food may be prioritised for men more so than for women or children (Mandala 2005, 224).

It is also important to point out that specifically in Traditional Authority Kasakula, women, as the ones who were primarily responsible for fetching water for cooking and other household uses, also spoke of the unavailability of water and how it impacted their livelihoods. Women at Kasakula specifically spoke of having to wake up at 03:00 in the morning to wait in line for water at a water source on which five different villages depended. Women spoke of conflicts arising at the water source due to

some women collecting what was considered too much water while everyone else waited in line. Fetching water consumed much of women's time, impacting their ability to perform other gender-related tasks as they spent hours waiting in line to fetch water from the only water source in the community.

In addition to limited access to water, participants noted that shortages of food led to envy of other community members who had more food, and participants shared that they 'lacked peace in (their) hearts'. Historically in Malawi, there had been a strong tradition of sharing food, called 'chidyerano', among community members and at communal meals (Mandala 2005, 14). Older participants in our study recalled the tradition, and remembered that years ago, sharing food was common. Mandala (2005, 14, 137) posited that communal meals were unsustainable as recurrent hunger and food shortages became more common over the years, due to a shift to growing cash crops such as cotton, which farmers could not sell at prices high enough to cover production costs. Growing cash crops instead of food resulted in less food available for household consumption or to share at communal meals. This is a very understudied area of research that warrants further investigation. Working with community members to revive older cultural traditions, such as sharing food, could help to ensure access to food among more families.

In addition to envy, intracommunity blame is contributing to discord in rural communities in Malawi. As participants in our study noted, hungry people were envious of their neighbours who had more food, women were blamed for not preparing enough food or not preparing food quickly enough for men, and hungry people themselves were blamed for being lazy if they did not have enough to eat. Hunger impacts social structures and creates hardship and suffering (Hastrup 1993, 727). Thus, hunger is a social issue, as much as it is a nutritional one (Hastrup 1993, 730). It is important that interventions attend to broader community social norms, which may be changing, to address malnutrition more effectively.

Food shortages and hunger have also been exacerbated by climate change, which has impacted seasonal food deficits. The concept of a 'hunger season' (Cotty, Soubeyran, and Subervie 2019, 1115), when families are between harvests and food stores have run low, is not unique to Malawi. Participants' common use of this expression indicates it is a regular

occurrence. Climate change exacerbates severe weather events (Stott 2016, 1517), which may prolong the 'hunger season', or make the timing of that season less predictable (Matewos 2019, 2). Climate change worsens hunger, especially in rural communities, where subsistence agriculture is widely practised (Mugambiwa and Tirivangasi 2017, 1). Families in rural Malawi, who work hard to produce their food, have experienced alternating periods of drought and floods in recent years, which have destroyed or greatly reduced expected crop yields (Joshua *et al* 2017, 194). This intensification of severe weather events in Malawi, such as drought and flooding, can be attributed to climate change (Warnatzsch and Reay 2020, 3).

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Healthcare professionals have an important role to play in prioritising nutrition to promote good health and well-being. Recent studies from the UK, Ghana and the USA have found that physicians and medical students recognise that nutrition is important to health, and that it is important for doctors to integrate nutritional care into their practice (Frantz *et al* 2016, 529; Macaninch *et al* 2020, 43; Mogre *et al* 2018, 4). Most, however, felt that the nutrition education they received in medical school was insufficient (Macaninch *et al* 2020, 44; Mogre *et al* 2018, 4). Thus, increasing the quantity and quality of nutrition education in medical school curricula is a strategy that may help physicians address malnutrition among their patients.

Specific to physicians practising in Malawi, the University of Malawi College of Medicine launched the School of Public Health and Family Medicine in 2013. The school offers a Master of Medicine programme in Family Medicine that trains physicians to practice in rural areas of Malawi, with the goal of addressing community health needs (Makwero, Lutala, and McDonald 2017, 313). Family physicians are also trained to work with nurses and other allied health professionals such as health surveillance assistants (HSAs) (Makwero, Lutala, and McDonald 2017, 315). HSAs provide nutrition education in rural areas, and support nurses in health promotion efforts (Dressel *et al* 2020, 372). Increasing the number of physicians practising family medicine in Malawi and strengthening interprofessional collaborations among physicians, nurses, HSAs and nutritionists, could help to address hunger and

malnutrition among rural communities in Malawi.

Healthcare professionals seeking to address malnutrition may also benefit from incorporating and exploring the meaning of traditional proverbs, which could explain some of the underlying causes of malnutrition in communities that they serve and inform interventions. Previous research has shown promising results using other traditional methods of conveying information, such as songs, to improve health outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa (Bunn *et al* 2020). In addition, grandmothers play an important role in passing on proverbs and nutrition information to their families. Targeting grandmothers and mothers-in-law in nutrition education initiatives could improve health outcomes (MacDonald *et al* 2020), and is an area of research that could be further explored to improve malnutrition in Malawi.

Healthcare professionals around the world can play a key role in addressing the inequities of climate change, which contribute to hunger and malnutrition in Malawi and elsewhere. Ongoing research in the USA, for example, found that primary care physicians are the most trusted source of information about climate change's impact on human health (Maibach *et al* 2015, 404), even if doctors and other healthcare providers feel they are not prepared to address the issue (Maxwell and Blashki 2016, 15). As the most trusted profession in the USA (Milton 2017, 15) and in other high-income countries, nurses can also play a role. Educating ourselves about the health impacts of climate change, and sharing our knowledge with the communities we serve, can make a difference (Goldberg *et al* 2019). We must also advocate for policies that mitigate the causes of climate change (Nicholas and Breakey 2017, 613); doing so can lead to improved health and well-being for all, and has the potential to improve food security and nutritional outcomes for rural communities in countries like Malawi.

Climate change exacerbates food insecurity (Kabubo-Mariara and Kabara 2018, 56) and has, and is predicted to continue to have devastating impacts on low-income countries, especially across sub-Saharan Africa (Connolly-Boutin and Smit 2015, 386). While high-income countries contribute the most to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions, it is low-income countries like Malawi that suffer the most devastating impacts, even though they contribute the least to the problem (Blicharska *et al* 2017, 21,

23). Thus, all healthcare professionals in high-income countries have an ethical responsibility to take action (Dressel and Mkandawire-Valhmu 2019, 145–146; Friel, Butler, and McMichael 2011, 198–199; Nicholas and Breakey 2017, 613).

CONCLUSION

Traditional proverbs and common expressions offer insight into understanding how rural Malawians experience hunger and malnutrition. Interprofessional collaboration is needed to address the lack of dietary diversity, gendered expectations related to social roles and food access, poverty, and the root causes of climate change to improve health and well-being among rural Malawians. Working together, we can change the narrative.

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ORCID iD

Anne Dressel <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2254-1815>

NOTES

1. We are not advocating for the use of commercial fertiliser, which has contributed to soil erosion and land degradation in Malawi, but this is what farmers in Malawi have become accustomed to as a result of the Green Revolution.

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