



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Building Women's Economic Agency and Advancing Gender-Responsive Disaster Management in Malawi

Tione Taweni Chakhwantha



Malawi is a landlocked nation in Southern Africa which grapples with entrenched gender inequality, economic fragility, and recurrent climate shocks. Despite significant progress in education and governance, women continue to face disadvantages. According to the World Bank, as of 2024 only 24% of girls completed lower secondary education in Malawi, which is lower than the rates in sub-Saharan Africa (43%) and low-income countries (37%); additionally, one in three women have experienced intimate partner violence, exceeding the global average; and women occupy only 21% of parliamentary seats in 2024, unchanged since 2010. Patriarchal norms still restrict women's participation in decision-making and economic activities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Malawi's vulnerability to climate-related disasters compounds these inequalities. In March 2023, Cyclone Freddy struck with unprecedented force, affecting 2.27 million people, displacing nearly 660,000, and destroying 50,000 hectares of farmland. The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment estimated damages at more than US\$500 million. Women were disproportionately affected but rarely were able to voice their concerns, highlighting the urgent need for gender-responsive disaster risk management (DRM) and inclusive recovery strategies.

Against this backdrop, Tione Taweni Chakhwantha has emerged as a transformative leader, bridging research, advocacy, and grassroots action. Since completing her

Master's in Gender and Development at the renowned Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex under a Commonwealth Scholarship, Tione has led community-based women's empowerment initiatives, spearheading Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) that build women's capacity in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and leadership. She has collaborated on gender-responsive disaster risk management research, influencing policy dialogues and improving coordination within Malawi's Department of Disaster Management Affairs. And as Vice President of the Malawi Commonwealth Alumni Association Network (MCAAN) and a member of the Commonwealth Alumni Advisory Panel, Tione has championed equal access and gender inclusion through advocacy, mentorship, and alumni engagement.



Tione Taweni Chakhwantha is a 2021 Commonwealth Alumnus from Malawi who earned an MA in Gender and Development at the University of Sussex through a Commonwealth Scholarship, and is the Executive Director and founder of the Centre for Human Rights and Community Development (CHRCD). Committed to gender equality and social inclusion, Tione has led initiatives that empower women through Village Savings and Loans Associations, enhancing financial literacy and entrepreneurship. She has contributed to gender-responsive disaster risk management research, shaping policy dialogues in Malawi. Her leadership as Vice President of the Malawi Commonwealth Alumni Association Network (MCAAN) and member of the Commonwealth Alumni Advisory Body has advanced advocacy for equal access and inclusion. Currently pursuing a PhD in Management (Entrepreneurship & Strategy) at Lancaster University, Tione focuses on how displaced women in Malawi's Dzaleka Refugee Camp build livelihoods despite institutional gaps.

A Life-Changing Catalyst through a Commonwealth Scholarship

'I reminded myself that the Commonwealth Scholarship was not just an opportunity for me alone. It was a gift that carried the hopes of my family, my kids, my community, and the women at large, who look at education as a way out of adversity.'

Before applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship, Tione's life was at a crossroads. Emerging from a painful divorce and raising two children as a single mother, she recognised the systemic challenges women face in Malawi—challenges she had lived herself. She felt a growing need to pivot towards advocacy and gender-focused development through further education.

Her first application for a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2019 was unsuccessful. Yet, she persisted. In 2020, she reapplied, and this time she was successful, choosing to study for an MA in Gender and Development Studies at Sussex—a decision that would redefine her trajectory and identity.



Tione at the University of Sussex.

'Prior to that, I think I wasn't really sure what it meant to be a woman to fight for your justice, equality, equal opportunity, equal access, equal everything. I really did not understand more like the way I am now, after the Scholarship...through this gender and development, I gained not just theoretical and analytical skills, but also the confidence to turn my lived experiences into advocacy. I learnt to see my story as a woman, a mother, a survivor, a source of strength and leadership.'

At Sussex, Tione immersed herself in modules on gender and development studies. The academic training equipped her with critical thinking skills and methodological rigour, enabling her to tackle complex social issues with

evidence-based approaches. Her dissertation, which explored women's political representation in Malawi's post-democratic era, was the only one in her cohort to be based on primary data. She interviewed women councillors, Members of Parliament (MPs) and the gatekeepers from the four main political parties in Malawi, determined to understand how political parties promote or hinder women's participation in politics in her home country. This resilience became the foundation for her future impact work, combining academic insight with grassroots action to empower women and influence policy.



Tione at Connect & Collaborate in London with her classmate Sylvia from Uganda, 2022.

The Commonwealth Scholarship also opened doors to a global network of peers and expanded Tione's global outlook. Interacting with scholars from Africa, Asia, and beyond exposed her to diverse perspectives on gender and development. This exposure led her to listen more attentively, validate others' ideas, and appreciate what others shared. She tended to network and communicate more.

'[My Commonwealth Scholarship] connected me to the most vibrant scholars in the world, interacting with different countries. It opened my eyes to the shared struggle and the triumph across the continents that I was exchanging with my fellow Commonwealth Scholars.'

The networks she built later became catalysts for collaborative research and advocacy initiatives. Her first publication— 'This one caught us unaware: Disaster Politics and Institutions during Cyclone Freddy Emergency in Malawi'—was a collaboration with another Commonwealth Scholar from Zambia.

Tione recognised that the most significant changes she experienced from the Commonwealth Scholarship were her self-perception and her approach to community issues.

‘The most significant personal change resulting from my Commonwealth Scholarship has been my transformation into a confident researcher, educator, and advocate for gender equality. Before my MA in Gender and Development, I had a practical understanding of community issues but lacked the theoretical and analytical tools to address them systematically.’

Building Women’s Economic Agency through fostering Self-Financing Cultures

In rural Malawi, entrenched patriarchal norms and economic dependency have long constrained women’s agency. Many women rely entirely on their husbands for household needs, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence and exclusion from decision-making. Limited access to credit and financial literacy perpetuates poverty, while cultural attitudes discourage women from pursuing leadership roles or entrepreneurship.

Recognising these barriers, Tione set out to transform the way women perceive themselves, from dependents to active economic participants.

However, deep-rooted cultural norms resisted change, and initial funding was scarce. Tione addressed these challenges by fostering a savings culture within the groups, ensuring sustainability through self-financing.

She developed a proposal and won start-up funding to spearhead women’s empowerment initiatives through launching Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) in her home district. These associations provide women with a platform to save collectively, access small loans, and invest in income-generating activities. Each VSLA operates on a self-financing model. Women contributed small amounts regularly, creating a communal fund that enabled borrowing without reliance on external donors.

To date, around 50 women have participated in VSLAs, organised into smaller groups of 5 to 20 members. These women have launched diverse micro-enterprises—baking, tailoring, and livestock rearing—boosting household income and reducing dependency on spouses.

Tione complemented this initiative with capacity-building workshops on financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and leadership. Many women who participated in the workshops transitioned from dependency to self-sufficiency. They learned how to manage savings, calculate interest, and reinvest profits, skills that were previously inaccessible. Over 100 women were trained to establish and

manage small businesses, with 75% of survey participants reporting successful small-scale enterprise launches within six months, contributing to increased household income and improved economic resilience.

The ripple effects extend beyond economics. Several women now hold positions on community committees, including education, nutrition and building. This shift signals a profound change in gender dynamics, with women emerging as decision-makers and role models: mothers who can now pay their daughters’ school fees, households with improved food security, and communities where women’s voices shape local development priorities.

Tione deeply believed that with advocacy and mentorships, one step at a time, the traditional beliefs that women should be inferior or completely depend on men financially would be gone.

Reflecting on what has been the most significant change in her community (and beyond) as a result of her Commonwealth Scholarship, Tione is proud of her work in transforming women’s self-identity and agency in her community.

‘The most significant change I have brought to my community is transforming how women perceive their roles — from dependents to active economic participants.’

Before my interventions, many rural women in my village had limited involvement in community decision-making and lacked access to financial resources.

Through the establishment of Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) and training workshops on entrepreneurship and financial literacy, women gained confidence, started small enterprises, and began participating in local leadership structures.

The change is not only economic but also social, women are now recognised as decision-makers and innovators in their communities. This, for me, represents the most tangible and lasting impact of my Commonwealth experience.’

Advancing Gender-Responsive Disaster Risk Management

The absence of women’s voices and agency is not just limited to daily life in Malawi; it is also missing in disaster responses and recovery. When Cyclone Freddy struck Malawi in 2023, the devastation exposed a critical weakness in disaster response systems: the exclusion of communities in disaster response planning and management.

Tione is interested in whether there are any gender gaps in disaster risk management. Drawing on her academic training in gender and development, she collaborated with a researcher at the University of Leeds, using Cyclone Freddy in Malawi as a case to explore disaster framing and responses across gender. They interviewed stakeholders from the Disaster Risk Management Department as well as women who suffered from the disaster, finding that women as ‘homemakers’ were most affected, but excluded from mainstream management committees.

Emergency shelters were overcrowded and lacked separate facilities for women, increasing risks of gender-based violence. Aid distribution overlooked women’s specific needs, and decision-making committees rarely included female voices. These gaps were not isolated; they reflected a systemic failure to integrate gender considerations into disaster risk management, leaving women vulnerable and invisible in crisis response.

Their research was presented at the Development Studies Association (DSA) 2024 Conference, SOAS, University of London, revealing how institutional blind spots worsened the vulnerabilities of women and girls.

Armed with this evidence, Tione initiated advocacy dialogues with Malawi’s Department of Disaster Management Affairs and local stakeholders, pushing for gender-responsive frameworks in disaster preparedness and recovery. The findings have been shared with local policymakers and NGOs, with ongoing discussions to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into disaster recovery programmes.

‘If you include women in those scenarios, they can speak for themselves. They know more about how they are affected than what men can tell.’

However, change does not happen straight away: institutional inertia and resource limitations made reform difficult. Disaster management structures were traditionally siloed, with limited coordination between government agencies and NGOs. Tione bridged these gaps by presenting actionable recommendations and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Her approach reframed community and gender integration as a practical necessity for effective disaster resilience, not an optional add-on.

‘The Department of Disaster Management Affairs is now more able to coordinate with other stakeholders who are involved in this fight for disaster risk management. Instead of working in isolation, they are able to consult, they are able to make meetings, they are able to prepare better than the way it was at first.’

Championing Widening Access and Gender Inclusion through Alumni Leadership

While pursuing her own academic and professional growth, Tione recognised that many talented Malawians, especially women, were unaware of opportunities like Commonwealth Scholarships or did not have the guidance to help them to successfully apply. She was determined to raise the awareness of Commonwealth Scholarships for future fellows and continued to do so when she became the Vice President of the Malawi Commonwealth Alumni Association.

‘I have advocated for Commonwealth Scholarships, not only just as a Vice President, but as a Commonwealth Scholar itself, because, for me, I feel like most people lack the information about the scholarship, with some who don’t know what it is.’

Tione is committed to advocating for and sharing resources with fellow scholars interested in applying for Commonwealth Scholarships. She addressed misconceptions about scholarship applications by demystifying requirements and guiding applicants through the process. She organised pre-departure briefings, webinars, and networking events to help Commonwealth Scholars studying in the UK prepare for their transition and enhance their learning experience. She also collaborated with the local partners in Malawi to strengthen alumni activities and create spaces for knowledge exchange. She also frequently writes about Commonwealth Scholarships on her Facebook and LinkedIn pages, which have received many messages from potential candidates seeking information about the scholarship, the application process, and the requirements.



Tione at the 2022 CSC Farewell Event at the FCDO.

Tione was also a member of the Commonwealth Alumni Advisory Panel (2023-2025). She used this platform to promote gender equity and inclusion. She provided recommendations on integrating gender equity into Commonwealth development initiatives, which supported the Commonwealth Alumni Association in creating a gender equity framework to guide alumni projects. Under this framework, three alumni-led initiatives in Malawi have been implemented to address gender disparities in education, health, and economic participation.

‘Serving as Vice President of the Malawi Commonwealth Alumni Association Network (MCAAN) and as a member of the Commonwealth Alumni Advisory Panel allowed me to apply my learning beyond academia, mentoring young leaders, advocating for inclusion and driving gender-focused development initiatives.’

Shaping Inclusive Futures: Research, Policy, and Leadership

The Commonwealth Scholarship did more than bolster Tione’s academic credentials—it reshaped her sense of purpose. Emerging from personal adversity, she transformed into a confident researcher, advocate, and leader. Her experiences at Sussex and subsequent impact work have positioned her as a voice for inclusion and gender equality. Today, Tione is pursuing a PhD in Management (Entrepreneurship and Strategy) at Lancaster University, focusing on displaced women entrepreneurs in the context of refugees in Malawi.

Malawi hosts about 57,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, and Ethiopia at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. The country’s encampment policy restricts refugees’ movement and economic integration, limiting their ability to establish sustainable livelihoods. Women, who make up 93% of camp residents, face compounded vulnerabilities such as legal restrictions, resource scarcity, limited market access, and social isolation.

Tione aims to examine how displaced women in Dzaleka Refugee Camp navigate institutional gaps to build livelihoods under Malawi’s restrictive encampment policy. Her goal is to produce evidence-based recommendations for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Malawi’s Department of Refugees within the Ministry of Homeland and Security Affairs, development partners, and Non-Government Organisations, advocating

for policy reforms that enable refugee women to access finance, networks, and markets. She envisions a future where displaced women are recognised not as passive recipients of aid but as innovators and contributors to national development.

Looking ahead, Tione aspires to join international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank Group, working at the intersection of refugee integration, inclusive entrepreneurship, and gender-responsive development. She also hopes to serve as an ambassador for Commonwealth Scholarships, continuing to use her story to inspire others.

More about Tione Taweni Chakhwantha:

Profiles

[Tione’s LinkedIn profile](#)

[Tione’s Google Scholar profile](#)

Journal Articles

[Manda, S., and Thindwa, T.T.M. \(2025\). “This one caught us unaware’: Disaster Politics and Institutions during Cyclone Freddy Emergency in Malawi. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, Vol.117 \(2025\).](#)

[Kayuni, H, Chasukwa, M, Kapanga M and Tione Taweni Chakhwantha \(2025\) ‘Defiance Within Compliance’: Statehood Without Secession in Mzimba, Malawi. African Journal, 2025 - Taylor & Francis, Volume 83 \(2024\).](#)

Conference Paper

[Tione Taweni Chakhwantha and Dr Simon Manda \(2024\) ‘Power Dynamics and Gender Integration in Flood Disaster Responses: Insights from Cyclone Freddy Disaster in Soche Hill of Malawi’. Development Studies Association \(DSA 2024\) Conference, SOAS University London, 26th to 28th June 2024.](#)

Media Coverage

[Malawi’s response to Cyclone Freddy offers lessons in managing disasters: first up, don’t leave people in the lurch](#)

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