ONE WORLD ACTION
FOR A JUST AND EQUAL WORLD

# Making a Difference

Citizen's and their organisations and networks contributing to change

OWA PPA 2008-9: Case study 12

| Title of Case Study: | Coalition Of Women Living With HIV/AIDS (COWLHA) |
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| 1. PPA partner name | One World Action |
| 2. Countries highlighted in case study | Malawi |

## Coalition Of Women Living With HIV/AIDS (COWLHA)

COWLHA is the first platform that is enabling women living with HIV in Malawi to express their problems. Women are often blamed for the HIV infection and many times have no means of supporting themselves. COWLHA helps women to become stronger and resist discrimination. They want to focus on women living with HIV but also work with non-infected women. They feel that all women need a platform such as COWLHA because Malawi is a male dominated society and nobody seems to be fighting age-old culture and tradition that oppress women. They acknowledge the need to work with men, especially on issues such as violence against women and being open about their HIV status, but their main focus will continue to be women.

COWLHA was formed on June 29, 2006. On March 8, 2007, COWLHA launched a three year campaign *'Ending HIV/AIDS and Violence Against Women'* which was inaugurated by President Bingu Mutharika. As of December 2007, COWLHA had 50,000 registered members from all districts of Malawi. They have managed to achieve this level of organisation with very little funding and with only volunteers. The lack of core funds has hindered COWLHA's development as an organisation and OWA's contribution towards core funds comes as a great support to them. This way they will be able to set up a secretariat, hire three staff members and strengthen their capacity.

COWLHA follow a very simple strategy in their organising – *they organise after the main organising is done*. Civil society organisations and faith-based groups in Malawi spend considerable time and human resources in organising grassroots support groups of PLWHIV. COWLHA then mobilises the women within these support groups to become members. Members give time to their regular support group but also separately commit time to COWLHA.

COWLHA district committees are registered and are formally recognised as CBOs in their own right by the local government District AIDS Coordinating Committee. COWLHA is also represented in most District, Community and Village AIDS Coordination Committees. They just do not have formal representation in the National AIDS Commission but this is compensated by the fact that COWLHA is a member of MANET+ which is represented. The National AIDS Commissioner is herself a woman living with HIV and a strong supporter of MANET+ and COWLHA.

According to COWLHA, most organisations working on HIV/AIDS do not work at the village level. Daphne Gondwe, National Coordinator of COWLHA, insists that all their members are from the villages and that they are the only women's network that has members all over the country. COWLHA is led and managed by women living with HIV. The issues that are crucial to COWLHA are not external ones but rather issues that are brought to the table by women living with HIV from the villages. Despite the voluntary nature of the organisation and the fact that many members are facing huge challenges in their day to day lives, COWLHA has been very successful in raising the profile and voices of HIV positive women. They are now one of the strategic partners of the Ministry of women and the Office of the President.

COWLHA has been selected as a winner of the Red Ribbon Award 2008. From a pool of over 560 organisations, the Technical Review Committee of the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) considered the action and leadership of COWLHA exceptional in terms of sustainability, adaptability, impact, innovation, empowerment, involving PLWHIV and developing strategic partnerships.