

Anita Chitaya, scene from the film

The voices of the women facing climate change

Yasmin Dahnoun sees resilience and hope in a new documentary film that explores the impact of climate change on the women of a pastoral community in Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country in Southern Africa. Over the last decade, the region has experienced devastating climate shocks, including erratic rainfall followed by months of drought. And this year storm Ana struck the region, destroying homes and livelihoods.

In Malawi, such occurrences are particularly devastating, since 90% of the population depends on rain-fed agriculture. In turn, the poverty that ensues has forced people into short-term coping strategies, including deforestation.

Looking through the lens of a western narrative, these communities have always been seen as victims, so when Raj Patel, a British Indian academic, journalist and activist, set out to make a film that would tell the story from the perspective of those people affected, he discovered that the reality was radically different from what he had anticipated.

"I went to present the idea of making a film to the village, saying, 'Hello, I'm from America, I'm here

to make a film about village leaders,' and there were two women at the back throwing shade on everyone, saying, 'This guy is an idiot, and that guy is an idiot.' They were calling me out, they were calling us all out, and so the camera panned to those two women at the back of the room," he recalls.

It was clear from this moment that the people with a real story to tell were the women of the village, who were on a mission to smash traditional values of patriarchy, not only to improve their own lives and wellbeing, but also as an integral response to the need to become climate resilient.

Esther Lupafya is one of these women. She is the village midwife and a co-founder of Soil, Food and Healthy Communities, a farmer-led non-profit organisation that uses agro-ecological methods to improve food and nutrition in Malawi. Starting from the roots, the group aims to regenerate the local culture as well as barren soil. This is a transition that can be clearly seen in the 10 years it took Patel to make the documentary.

In a gentle introduction to village life, peppered with the singing of women while they work, we see Esther's friend Anita Chitaya walking through the acre-large plot of cassava plants with her husband. Maize, beans, pigeon peas and pumpkin are among the staple crops for the village. While some of the crops offer shade, others promote soil fertility. If one crop fails, another is available.

Yet a drastically changing climate has thrown weather patterns off-kilter, and crop failure has become an increasingly more likely occurrence. And once again, despite the fact that the country's greenhouse gas emissions are so much lower than those of western countries, Malawi is bearing the brunt of climate change – and the women are the first to feel its effects. Rising levels of poverty inevitably widen an already gaping gender gap within the community, since women must work harder and walk further to support their families.

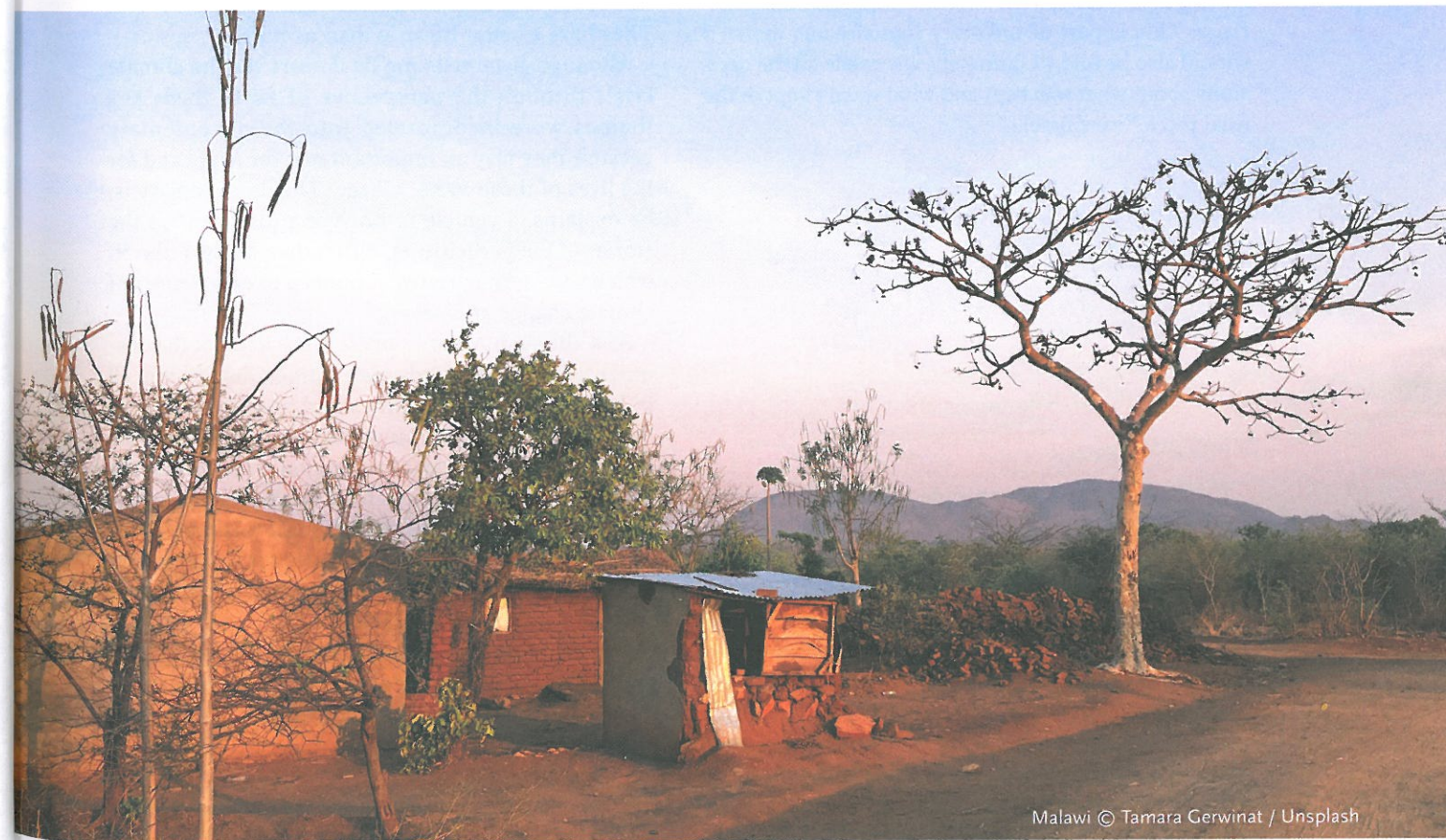
In a recent survey of 213 women in Malawi carried out by Glasgow Caledonian University's Mary Robinson Centre for Climate Justice, more than 86% said their mental health and wellbeing had been affected by the changes in weather patterns. Participants reported being victims of gender-based violence and/or suffering from emotional pain. Such feelings included feeling devastated, traumatised and stressed. For mothers, the guilt largely centred on not being able to properly nourish their children.

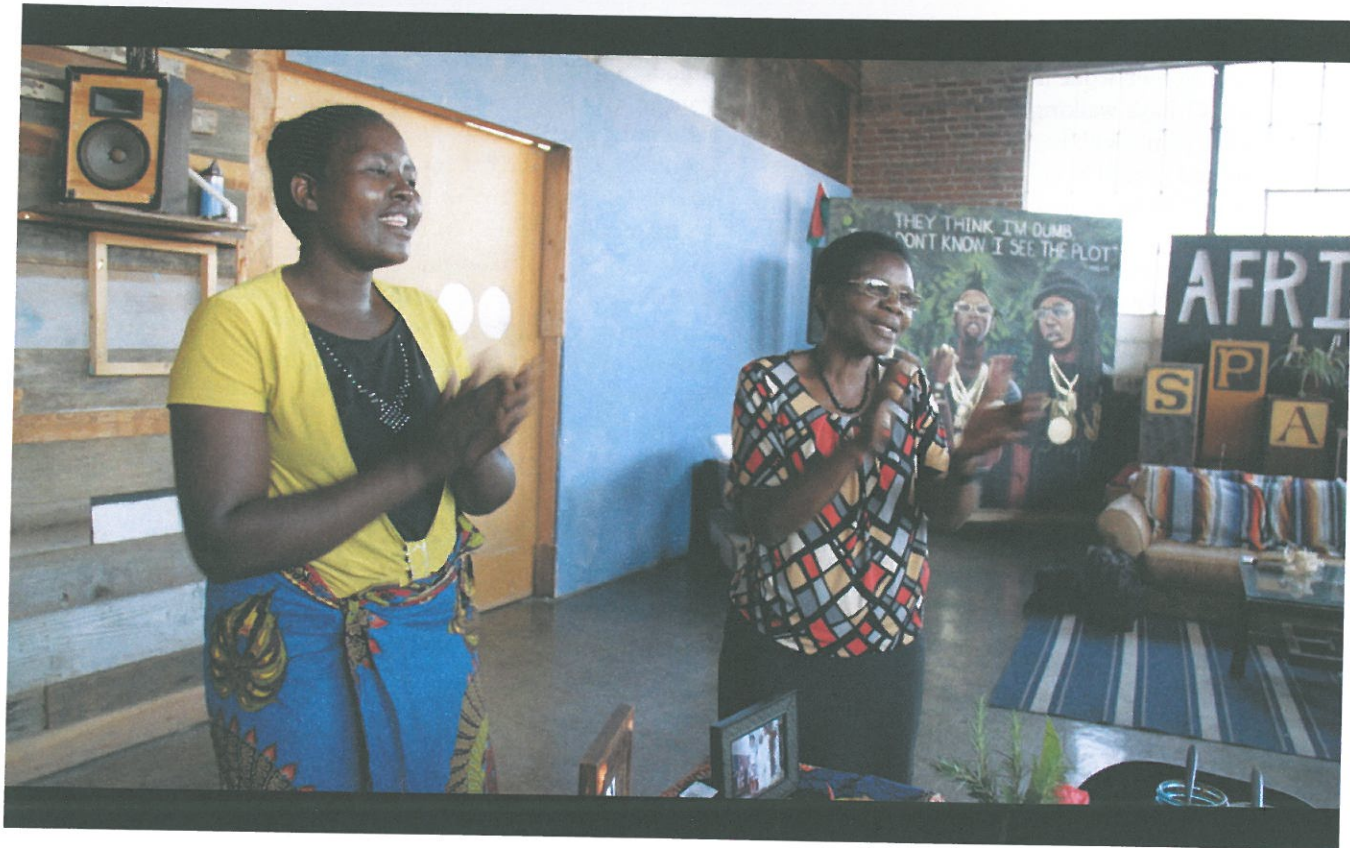
In another scene in the film, dawn breaks as we see the silhouettes of two people collecting water, large pots stacked on their heads against a crimson sky. Pans clatter, the chickens clutter. A day's work has already begun for Anita and her son. "When he grows up, he'll be able to do anything," Anita says. She casts shadows on his dreams of becoming a pilot though. "Those trails in the sky are fumes, and those fumes are what contributes to global warming," she tells him.

"Women have been affected in a way that men haven't," Anita tells us. "We cook and prepare food. We fetch firewood. Firewood only lasts for days before we go and fetch more, travelling long distances in order to do so. There is no electricity here. Maybe if we had electricity, we could have easily prepared food, while letting trees grow."

"Bringing forward climate justice is not all about eating kale or having a tote bag or using metal straws. This is big"

"If you love your wife, you wouldn't sit back and let her do everything," says Anita's husband, while washing clothes and hanging them out to dry. He is part of this slow transition that is taking place thanks to the





Anita and Esther, scene from the film

work of Soil, Food and Healthy Communities.

Anita herself is a survivor of gender-based violence, having been kidnapped, beaten and forced into marriage. This is part of the story that she has insisted should also be told. “Ultimately, she made all the decisions about what was kept and what wasn’t kept in the final piece,” says Patel.

This documentary gives a platform for the stories of the participants, rather than being a western narrative applied to experiences of climate change and poverty

It was Anita, too, who decided to visit the United States with the film-maker so that she could directly confront climate leaders, farmers and climate deniers on their own soil. Whilst her world is very different from those she met there, Anita found herself swapping seeds, guidance and support with projects that share a similar fight for food advocacy directly related to racial justice.

Anita says the part of her trip to America that touched her heart was talking to climate leaders about how and why they need to reduce emissions. “This message needs to be shared,” she says. “[In Malawi]

water is scarce, while for our friends in America, water is abundant, and firewood is everywhere. So I learned that our friends in America had been favoured by God. They have a better lifestyle than us here.”

Although Patel tells me he doesn’t see the climate crisis through the perspective of faith, these key themes were incorporated into the documentary because they play an important role for Anita and for the lives of those in her village. The documentary is, he explains, a vehicle to provide a platform for the stories of the participants, rather than being a film in which a western narrative is applied to experiences of climate change and poverty.

And although Anita’s story is at the heart of the documentary, Patel reminds me, “Anita didn’t do this all by herself. She has an entire social movement behind her. That’s the whole thing, isn’t it? That maybe the final idea is that we can’t fix this alone. That’s why the film is called *The Ants and the Grasshopper*. It’s about people coming together, realising that this problem is too big for them. The way you fix that is not by going, ‘Forget it, I’m not going to do anything,’ but by organising in the way that Anita does.

“Bringing forward climate justice is not all about eating kale or having a tote bag or using metal straws. This is big stuff. And the big changes can happen when we come together.” R

Yasmin Dahnoun is a member of the editorial team at *Resurgence & Ecologist*.

“We all have an unexpected reserve of strength inside us that emerges when life puts us to the test.”

Isabelle Allende