



## Basic Etiquette in Malawi

Malawi is a unique land-locked country filled with many tribes, languages and customs. International travel can present its own challenges and difficulties in adjusting to customs and practices different from your own. This guide is meant to be used as a general overview of the cultural etiquette in Malawi.

If you should have any questions about etiquette during your time in Malawi, it is always best to seek advice from your Program Director or those with whom you are working with.

### Greetings

Greetings can be quite formal in the Malawian culture and can vary in form between men and women.

**Greetings between men:** A handshake with the right hand is appropriate in most situations. Handshakes tend to be firm and very often linger a bit. Often people will hold their wrist with their left hand while shaking to show respect. When greeting a chief, it may be appropriate to get down on the ground and kneel depending on the chief's position.

**Greetings between women:** A handshake and/or bow is appropriate in most situations. If you would like to show great respect you may also place your left hand over your right elbow when handshaking and bowing. Handshakes tend to be energetic and very often linger a bit. Good friends and family may engage in light hugs as well.

**Greetings between men and women:** Appropriate greetings depend on the nature of the relationship. If the man is Muslim a woman may bow and greet but handshakes are not appropriate. For all others a handshake and/or bow is appropriate but it is best to wait for the woman to extend her hand, otherwise a bow or a nod of acknowledgment will suffice. In certain areas, women will kneel when greeting a man. If they are older and the man is younger then they might just shake his hand.

### Communication Style

Some things to consider when communicating with a Malawian:

- Malawians do not tend to be direct in their communication style. It is usually considered rude when someone is too direct in their speech.
- Most people choose a roundabout way to explain things assuming that the listener will understand what the speaker is trying to communicate.

- People usually don't want to disappoint so they will tell someone what they think that they want to hear instead of what they actually want to say.
- It is a good idea to ask the same question in a variety of ways in order to make sure you are getting the whole truth.
- Public displays of anger and frustration are rare and considered bad form.
- It is important to be humble and polite. Most Malawians are sensitive to arrogance.

### **Day-to-Day Interactions**

- Personal space differs from place to place based on tribal and religious influences, but people tend to speak to one another at very close distances. Generally, an arm's length is appropriate.
- Personal space tends to be less between members of the same gender and considerably greater between members of opposite genders.
- It is common for men to touch each other when speaking; sometimes on the arms hands and legs no matter what the relationship; business, family, stranger, etc.
- Men and women rarely touch in public.
- It is also appropriate for two men to walk hand in hand in public. This does not have any implication on their sexual preferences; it's just a sign of friendship and closeness. This is the same for women.

### **Gestures and Eye Contact**

- People gesture to one another with the palm facing out and fingers shifting up and down in a scratching motion. It generally means come here.
- People will hit an open palm to a closed fist as an action expressing "full" or "a lot."
- People may often hiss (as in saying psst) to get someone's attention.
- They often use both hands to give and receive objects.
- It often tends to be rude to make too much eye contact with elders, chiefs or anyone you're trying to respect. Many times the speaker won't look the listener in the eyes while s/he is speaking and the listener will also avoid eye contact.
- Women generally don't look at men when they talk to them.
- Eye contact among peers is common.
- **Important:** The use of the "ok" sign, with the thumb and index finger forming a circle is seen as an obscene gesture and should never be used in public.

### **Perceptions of Time**

The perception of time is one of the biggest differences between Malawians and the west. Below are some things to consider when scheduling meetings or setting appointments.

- It is common for people to be late. For example: if someone tells you to be somewhere at 8 am, they most likely mean around 10 am. If they tell you noon it's more likely to be 2 pm. Often times it's not considered rude to not show up at all.
- While people tend to be more punctual in business settings vs. social ones, deadlines are often not met.
- Generally speaking, people are relaxed when it comes to time and give their time freely, living in the present rather than the future.

### **Issues on Gender**

- In the villages it is a traditional common belief that women are not equal to men despite the fact that women tend to do most of the work at home and in the fields. This belief is still common in modern society and tends to be the case in urban environments as well.
- Women in the villages never show their knees in public and often wear a 'chitenje' or a wrap.
- It is also socially unacceptable for women to smoke or drink. Foreign women must be cautious on how they present themselves in public, as women who smoke, drink and show their knees are considered to be prostitutes in the villages. However, most men will understand that foreign women are coming from a different culture; it could still present unwanted attention.
- The dress is usually more relaxed in urban environments; however volunteers should consider dressing more formally than they are used to.
- Usually, men do not wear shorts and women do not wear pants. Also, if someone is underdressed or appear messy in form, it could change the way they are treated by the locals.