



Gender and land study in Phalombe and Lilongwe districts

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Table of contents

1. Background.....	3
2. Gender equality in Malawi.....	4
2.1 The institutional framework.....	4
2.2 Gender issues, participation, and practices in agriculture.....	4
2.3 Sociocultural structures and practices, differences between Phalombe and Lilongwe districts.....	5
3. Land tenure and customary practices.....	6
3.1 Historical overview of land usage, tenure, and other struggles.....	7
3.2 Land tenure systems and customary practices.....	9
3.3 Access to land and inheritance systems: differences and similarities among districts...	12
4. Roles and Responsibilities of men and women involved in agroforestry.....	16
4.1 Division of labor in agroforestry.....	16
4.2 Division of labor at the household level.....	19
4.3 Power and Freedom (agency).....	20
5. Land and gender-based constraints in agroforestry.....	22
5.1 Participation in agroforestry.....	22
5.2 Performance.....	23
5.3 Benefits.....	23
6. Potential impacts on projects activities and strategies.....	25
7. Conclusions and Recommendations.....	27
8. References.....	30
9. Annex.....	33



Cover photo: Mr. & Mrs. Kanjelwa, farmers working in agroforestry in Phalombe district.

1. Background

Since July 2020, Inter Aide has implemented two pilot agroforestry projects in Lilongwe and Phalombe districts. Tree planting brings multiple benefits such as autonomy in wood and non-wood forest products, additional income, soil, water conservation on the plots, fight against drought and soil erosion, improvement of soil fertility, biodiversity conservation, contribution to ethnomedicine, etc. Trees help to delimit the land and ensure the right to use or the ownership of a particular plot. To best help communities and bring the most benefits in the future, it is paramount to understand the land regulations and customary practices and how these can influence technical decisions.

While women are most involved in agroforestry and in preparing agroforestry plantations (implementation and management of nurseries), men's role and influence seem to play an important role. Men could be detrimental to achieving the project's objectives if the current dynamics are poorly understood. Therefore, it is essential to understand the current gender dynamics, including the distribution of agricultural and agroforestry tasks within households, access to productive resources, decision-making power concerning planting and management of trees, rights of exploitation and management of trees, control of tree benefits, and so forth.

This study aims at understanding to what extent the factors of gender and land could potentially influence the strategies and the results of the agroforestry programs in both Lilongwe and Phalombe districts. It is, therefore, necessary to explore and understand the historical and sociocultural structures that may shape the existing gender-based issues in the selected contexts to develop a more integrated and inclusive approach and its assertive implementation.

The report relies on qualitative information from interviews conducted with key informants and complementary data from secondary sources.



Image 1. Woman smallholder farmer producing seedlings in her backyard. Phalombe, 2022.

2. Gender equality in Malawi

The Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) is the governmental structure promoting socio-economic empowerment and protection of the vulnerable using community and welfare approaches. But the political will of the government of Malawi to address gender inequalities also embraces the adoption of national plans, strategies, policies, and legal frameworks.

2.1 The institutional framework

Reaching gender equality has been a sound principle of democratic Malawi, recognized in the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Malawi and further captured by the various international and regional commitments to which Malawi is a party (see Annex for complete list).

In 2000, the government issued the first National Gender Policy (NGP), updated through a second edition published in 2015. And relevant laws addressing gender issues include the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2006; the Deceased Estates (Wills, Inheritance, and Protection) Act of 2011; the Gender Equality Act of 2013; the Marriage, Divorce, and Family Relations Act of 2015; and the Land Act of 2016; among others.

Pursuing gender equality through public policy may at least create an encouraging environment on paper. According to UN Women (2021), 83.3% of the legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality focusing on violence against women are in place in Malawi. Nonetheless, despite the significant progress made, there is still a long way before reaching gender equality and achieving social justice.

“To obtain equality for women through (i) full participation in all spheres of Malawian society on the basis of equality; (ii) the implementation of the principles of non-discrimination and such other measures as may be required; and (iii) the implementation of policies to address social issues such as domestic violence, security of the person, lack of maternity benefits, economic exploitation, and rights to property.” Section 13, Malawi’s Constitution 1994 (rev.2017)

“Women have the right to full and equal protection by the law and have the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their gender or marital status.” Section 24, Malawi’s Constitution 1994 (rev.2017)

2.2 Gender issues, participation, and practices in agriculture

In Malawi, a little more than half (52%) of the people residing in rural areas depending on subsistence agriculture as their main livelihood are women. Even though women and men are highly engaged in the agricultural sector, women remain the principal agrarian labor force (estimated at 70%) and still experience unequal access to agricultural education and information. More than half of women (58.2%) engage in casual labor (*ganyu*) compared to 47.4% of men. And only 6.6% of the women population receive a wage, salary, or any payment in kind compared to 10.6% of men, which may also explain the high participation of both men and women in informal employment (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2020; Netsayi N. Mudege et al., 2017).

In rural areas, almost one-third of the households (29%) are headed by women and are particularly vulnerable as they face more challenges accessing services and productive resources (NSO, 2020, Interviews 2022). A slightly higher proportion (88.6%) of women-headed households than men-headed households (82.7%) engage in agriculture. **However, women-headed families have smaller plots (0.9 acres) compared to 1.5 acres for men; they have lower yields; experience more food shortages; have insufficient food security; less access to hired labor, inputs, credit, or loans; less access to rent or purchase a piece of land¹; lower enrolment rate of pupils in primary and secondary school; and fewer opportunities to engage in other income-generating activities** (Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2019, NSO, 2020, Interviews 2022).

“Most things that a woman cannot do is because of the husband at home that brings her down, so she needs to end the marriage.”

Woman smallholder farmer, Lilongwe, 2022

Only a few percent of women who head their household are married (NSO, 2020), which makes civil status play an important role, coinciding with Chikapa, 2017, who argues that most women heads of households are likely to be lone mothers. According to interviews with women in 2022, harmful household dynamics like those over income control are pushing women to believe that they need to give up on marriage to exert their free decision-making power and get a benefit. Mainly, women become head of their households when they lack male representation in their village context and due to men’s migration. Almost all women heads of their homes (91.2%) are either divorced/separated or widowed. And for those households whose leaders are married, 91% are led by men (NSO, 2019, 2020).

Women bear the brunt of performing household chores, including fetching water, collecting firewood, and cooking for family members. These gender-based roles and responsibilities added up to the lower literacy rate of women, at 64.8% compared to 80.6% of men; the high rates of gender-based violence and school drop-out due to pregnancy, marriage, or household responsibilities, further restrict women’s participation in the labor market and other activities, including those generating additional sources of income (NSO, 2019, 2020).

“As women, we face many challenges. When we come from the field together with the husband, we are exhausted but still expected to do household chores and cook for the family.” *Woman smallholder farmer and tree producer, Phalombe, 2022*

2.3 Sociocultural structures and practices, differences between Phalombe and Lilongwe districts

Over the centuries, more than ten ethnic groups have taken part in Malawi’s history while sorting out external pressures and adapting to their living context. Nowadays, some of the most prominent ethnic groups include the Chewa (34.4% of the population), Lomwe (18.9%), Yao (13.3%), Ngoni (10.4%), and Tumbuka (9.2%) (NSO, 2019).

¹ A 5.8% compared to 9.5% of men for rent land, and only 2.3% of women heads of households purchased land compared to 4.2% of families with male heads of households (National Statistical Office (NSO) (2020).

However, the identities and cultural heritage of the groups are preserved generation over generation through oral tradition, dances, rituals, arts, and crafts that transmit diversity of messages, including those related to gender roles, social norms, and practices.

In the Lilongwe district, over 90% of the population in rural areas belongs to the Chewa tribe, which has inhabited a vast territory for centuries. Chichewa is, thus, the most spoken language. One of their most remarkable traditions reflecting traditional values and contemporary issues is the *gule wamkulu*, “The great dance,” communicating with the ancestors. The *gule wamkulu* remains a significant aspect of the village life, present in important moments of individuals and the community to remind the code of moral conduct and the way of living among the community. It is also in this tradition that gender roles are transmitted, and as depicted by Boucher (Chisale) (2012),

“The gule wamkulu may be a manifestation of a largely male worldview, but it is one of a world where women are expected to carry so much of the responsibility that men have abrogated through their debauched and dissipated ways. If indeed the gule wamkulu is at least in part a vehicle for male protest in a female-dominated power hierarchy, then we can add one more irony to the great dance: that of reinforcing the very power base that the indignant men may berate and bemoan.”

In the Phalombe district, the nowadays predominant Lomwe community originally migrated from Mozambique. In the majority, and despite having their language, few Lomwe people speak their language openly because of past times' memory of being regarded as a lower social status tribe due to the vulnerable position that brought them to the country. However, this situation started to change during the first decade of the 21st Century, when the elected president of Lomwe origin revived the community's cultural identity. He founded the *Mulhakho Wa Alomwe* cultural group in the Mulanje district that yearly organizes activities and displays for people to learn more about songs, dances, food, and other traditions of the Lomwe cultural heritage (Kayira & Banda, 2013).

Chewas and Lomwes are traditionally matrilineal descent groups through which the transmission of land and lineage passes from mothers to daughters. Other groups follow the patrilineal tradition as the Tumbuka people in the Northern region. Ethnic diversity forms a mosaic of cultural norms and practices in the country, sometimes merging in intertribal marriages and, thus, adapting to an ever-changing context that includes land inheritance norms and practices.

3. Land tenure and customary practices

As social entities depending on the surrounding environment, we, humans, encounter and interact with nature and mutually transform. Land symbolizes autonomy, gives a sense of belonging, and has particular social, historical, and cultural features that outline its inhabitants' path of co-evolution. To rural livelihoods, the land is essential for its economic value as a productive asset and a source of capital, likewise for its socio-cultural meaning.

The high population growth rate and population density increase anthropogenic pressure over land and natural resources in Malawi. As a result, available land is becoming scarce, and inherited land is smaller. For example, Phalombe and Lilongwe districts have 325 and 282 persons per square kilometer, respectively, above the regional averages.

Securing land is becoming a cause of conflicts among family members, directly affecting livelihoods and hindering long-term opportunities and investments like agroforestry activities. Therefore, it is paramount to understand how women and men can access and control the land they inhabit and use in the Lilongwe and Phalombe districts.

3.1 Historical overview of land usage, tenure, and other struggles

Malawi's history reveals much about the struggles for land experienced nowadays. Thus, it is crucial to understand the evolution of these historical events, mainly because they are part of the collective memory and cultural references that guide many of the recent decisions taken over the land, particularly in the Southern region.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, Malawi's social structures prompted the change from loosely related clans to more centralized kingdoms, resulting in the people we know now as the Chewa. By the 18th century, the most important kingdom of Maravi, which covered much of nowadays southern Malawi, northern Mozambique, and eastern Zambia, gradually collapsed and split into several less powerful groups. While in the north of Malawi, home of the Tumbuka people living of trade and in loosely related clans, similarly went into decline. Neither southern nor northern chiefdoms could resist the intrusion of newcomers (Yao people in the 17th century and Ngoni people in the mid-19th century) that subjugated and dominated them economically and politically.

During the 19th century, the Yao, the Ngoni, the Omani, and the Portuguese, made specific alliances to keep profiting from the ivory and slave trade. A period of inter-tribal unrest followed. Around 1859, the arrival of a Scottish missionary and explorer named David Livingstone boosted a wave of mission stations being established and increased the interest of white traders and settlers over the former land of the Chewa. From 1870 onwards, white settlers began to acquire land from local chiefs. In a brief period, alienated forms of land ownership appeared through appropriating large areas of land and mining concessions.

In 1891, the British government pressured the Portuguese to withdraw their troops from the Shire Highlands in the south and keep control over the territory; present Malawi was annexed to the British Central African Protectorate as Nyasaland in 1893. By that time, the Crown claimed control over so-called wasted and unoccupied land that they would give to settlers under freeholds or leasehold terms to promote export-oriented agricultural products produced on a large scale (Bae, 2021; Chinigò, 2015; Lodge et al., 2002). Already in 1894, 15% of the land of Malawi, including one of the most fertile areas—the Shire Highlands, was under colonial or settler control. This was mainly due to the unscrupulous attitude of early governors who claimed to have bought land from local chiefs. Yet, leaders were willing to let settlers utilize the land based on the fundament in which usage rights did not equal ownership rights.

In 1902, through an Order in Council, all land in Nyasaland, except private land where Europeans settled, became Crown Land. People living in and within the boundaries of the private land (estates) became tenants, forced to work for the European landlords producing tobacco, cotton, and tea. This situation led to a tenancy system. People living in those private lands lost all their land rights and were obliged to pay colonialists the right to reside and cultivate 'their' land through *thangata* (labor), which later transformed into a "hut tax." For the following years, any promise or attempt to give security of tenure to the original inhabitants was never enforced. Local people,

especially young men, started to migrate by thousands seeking work as wage laborers in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, present-day Zambia, and Zimbabwe, as they were offered significant benefits (Bae, 2021; Boucher (Chisale), 2012; Chinigò, 2015; Jul-Larsen & Mvula, 2007; Lodge et al., 2002; Pachai, 1973)

By the end of the 19th century, people from the Lomwe community in Mozambique migrated more and more to Malawi, fleeing from famine, droughts, tribal wars, and oppressive conditions in their country. Aligned with the demand for labor, especially in tea estates, the Lomwe community replaced local farmers as an alternative labor force, and the need for land increased. Since the land was under the control of a few prominent estate owners, there was practically no land available to settle exempt from *thangata* in the Mulanje and Thyolo districts. Consequently, many Lomwe migrants settled in the nearest Crown land/communal land in Phalombe (Kayira & Banda, 2013; Le Danvic, 2009; Lodge et al., 2002). That explains mainly why the Phalombe district, where the land was though not very fertile, became quickly one of the most densely populated districts in Malawi.

Between 1914 and 1918, about 200,000 men were called upon—essentially forced—to serve as soldiers and laborers during World War I. **The migration escaping *thangata*, in addition to the military laborers for the war, resulted in acute absenteeism of men that disrupted familial institutions and practices, including the division of labor and the organization of work** (Boucher (Chisale), 2012; Page, 1978). The male labor migration wave continued at such a rate during the following decades that, by 1948, it was estimated that 40% of all men able to work were abroad (Mitchell, 2013).

The Colonial Office did not recognize communal land rights until the mid-1920s. And by the 1950s, the colonial land policy further strengthened the dual agrarian system (estates and subsistence farming) and the marginalization of worker-peasants in customary areas. Finally, in the words of Chinigò (2015), the colonial system created and reproduced a dual agrarian system that shaped a rural model of land and labor relations that remains dominant today.

Social movements towards independence became synonymous with land redistribution, and Nyasaland became the independent state of Malawi in 1964. However, in the decade and a half after the independence, the Malawian Government sought to transform its economy based on estate agriculture focusing on export crops (mainly tobacco, tea, and sugar), an objective far from land redistribution. This strategy boosted the opportunities to reach global markets while intensifying the process of land alienation and displacement without creating alternative sources of income for middle and poor farmers (Chinigò, 2015; Le Danvic, 2009; The World Factbook [WFB], 2022).

The first Land Act was issued in 1965 and amended two years later. These legislations recognized three types of tenure: public, private, and customary land. They allowed converting the latter into private leasehold, which led to the conversion of 1.2 million hectares of land (about 10% of the national land) for producing tobacco between 1977 and 1997 (Chinigò, 2015); other sources report 400,000 hectares transferred to leasehold between 1977 and 1983 (Tschirhart et al., 2018).

Alongside the Land Act 1965, the Chiefs Act formalized the Traditional Authorities (TA) role in customary areas by recognizing their role as intermediaries between the people and the state. Chiefs retained the power of land distribution and dispute adjudication in customary land and negotiated the conversion into a lease as stipulated in the land act 1965 (Chinigò, 2015).

The Malawi National Land Policy was approved in 2002. Still, the Land Act was updated until 2016, followed by the approval of a series of related laws, including the Customary Land Act of 2016 and the Registered Land (Amendment) Act of 2016 that entered into force in 2018, the Land Acquisition (Amendment) Act of 2016, and the Customary Land Regulations of 2018.

3.2 Land tenure systems and customary practices

While varying among ethnic groups, Malawian communities have a set of [institutions](#)² (social norms or rules) based on beliefs and practices that express intrinsic matters to their values and worldviews. These customary laws and practices are central to how local communities preserve their culture and shape their identity and social structures (WIPO, 2013). The traditional law varies from community to community. Still, it guides most Malawians on using and accessing natural resources, including land, inheritance, transfers, dispute resolution, and many other aspects of life and living.

The customary land tenure system has the traditional concept of considering land belonging to the community (the clan). However, individuals have the right to cultivate it and sometimes use it as though they were the owner (Matchaya, 2009). Before colonial times, *“In Malawi, the land belonged to the family, the local community, and the village. There was no clear concept of absolute ownership but rather useful occupation”* (Bae, 2021). The land was the preserve of the departed ancestors, their living representatives, the current occupants, and the future generation (Bae, 2021; Pachai, 1973). Currently, the customary system continues somehow to resist the influence of embedding the concept of land as a merely economic and individual asset. Yet evolving, coexisting, and slowly merging with a legal system that recognizes and regulates private ownership.

“ There are two types of land, one that you can buy and register ownership, and the second type of land that belongs to the family. ” Man GVH, Phalombe, 2021.

The Land Act, 2016 recognizes two types of tenure³: public and private leasehold. Private land is owned, held, or occupied under a freehold title, leased to individuals or corporations, or a registered customary estate. Public land means all land held in trust for the people of Malawi and managed by the government, a local government authority, or a Traditional Authority (i.e., schools, hospitals, forest reserves, etc.).

The customary land refers to “all land used for the benefit of the community as a whole and includes unallocated customary land within boundaries of a Traditional Land Management Area (TLMA)⁴.” Residence on customary land includes the right to collect fuelwood and timber and graze livestock on the village commons, *dambo*⁵, and agricultural land during the dry season (Msiska, 2017). Traditionally, the customary land is from the community, so it cannot be owned, bought, or sold by an individual. Legally, customary land can be either public or private land. For

² In this document, institutions refer to the set of social norms or rules and constraints on human interaction that limit the choice of individuals to establish a stable order—not necessarily efficient.

³ Tenure refers to the way land rights are held and includes duration, protection, and robustness of rights (Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994, 252 in Tschirhart et al. (2018)).

⁴ Traditional Land Management Area refers to the area demarcated and registered as falling within the jurisdiction of a Traditional Authority.

⁵ *Dambos* are wetland areas with residual moisture over the dry season/seasonal or perennial marsh, normally fringing a river. *Dimbas* are low-lying areas with water available year-round, like plots next to rivers, shallow wells, etc.

instance, unallocated customary land falls into the category of public land. On the other hand, any customary land held or occupied within a TLMA can be registered as private land and denominated as customary estate. This allows men and women, groups, or two or more Malawians living on customary land to apply and obtain land titles to secure their land rights⁶.

About 65-70% of Malawi's land is customary (Bae, 2021; Takane, 2008). In Lilongwe, this percentage is reported to be 24% or less according to the socioeconomic district profile because much of the land has gone into public land and private leasehold (Bae, 2021; Msiska, 2017). Nevertheless, the current proportion of the area corresponding to each type of tenure remains rough estimations due to the shifting from one tenure type to another, land grabbing⁷, and encroachments.

Smallholder farmers and traditional leaders interviewed seldom mentioned land title acquisitions. As a result, people do not feel at risk of losing land due to the reliance on customary rules, although smallholder farmers could lose land use rights in specific situations.

Chiefs are the custodians of local traditions and culture, including land (Chinsinga, 2006). Therefore, chiefs allocate the land to the heads of households or a single mature person requesting land for cultivation. Acquiring land does not equal individual ownership but gets the use rights over the land, which the kinship can inherit.

In both study areas, anyone from the community or an outsider could request access to a piece of land from the local authorities. Consequently, the Village Headman (VH) is the first authority to assess if the interested person is entitled to access a piece of land. Afterward, the Group Village Headman (GVH) and the VH request authorization from the Traditional Authority (TA), who holds the land in trust. Suppose the person is entitled to access the land. In that case, an event is organized with the community and the new member, who also brings something to the GVH to express appreciation for the land, like a special meal or a monetary contribution.

In the Customary Land Act of 2016, a land committee composed of six persons of the community (at least three women) and chaired by the GVH should manage the land allocation with prior authorization of the TA, including the registration of land into customary estates. According to the 2020 Fifth Integrated Household Survey (IHS5) Report, only 9.4% of rural households obtained land through local leaders, indicating an increasing scarcity of unused land for cultivation.

⁶ A customary estate is still liable even after registration, subject to government acquisitions in the public interest: "The Minister may acquire land for public utility either compulsorily or by agreement and pay compensation therefore as may be agreed or determined under this Act" Bae (2021); Matchaya (2009); Mlaka (2018). Meaning that customary land can directly turn into public land when considered necessary to serve the public interest.

⁷ There are four documented cases of land grabbing in Malawi involving a vast surface taken for sugar cane production Bae (2021). Testimonies show recent cases where families have lost a piece of land from someone external to the kinship, classified as grabbing or encroachments (Interviews 2021-2022).

Interviewed traditional leaders (GVHs and VHs) in Phalombe and Lilongwe districts said that all arable land in their villages is already allocated among the community members. No land is available for potential cultivation anymore, and few forest areas persist as communal grounds, such as the village forest areas and sacred places like graveyards. These findings dauntingly match Li et al. (2021), who found that just over 5% of the total land in Malawi remained as potentially available cropland for future expansion. This finding points out the increased pressure on land in Malawi. It suggests that “the land scarcity and the growing land demand are pushing smallholder farmers to cultivate in areas with unfavorable conditions,” usually at higher elevations and further away from rivers leading to deforestation.

“*In the past, I was doing the sharing of the land with the village, to everyone, including my children. But now, people are inheriting from their families because there is no more land available. Children are inheriting from their father or mother and not getting it from the chief.*”

Man GVH, Lilongwe, 2022.

In response to the land scarcity, an informal rental market emerged, often as the only alternative to access more land among some community members. According to the IHS5 Report, 8% of households in rural areas accessed land through rental agreements. In the study areas, renting land is done through oral agreements, dominated by short-term arrangements for as few as one season. The costs per season reported in interviews ranged from 8,000 to 9,000 MWK (7.8 – 8.8 USD⁸) for ¼ acre of a *dimba* and between 15,000 to 20,000 MK (14.6 – 19.5USD) per acre of a dry field. The challenge is that people can also rent a piece of land to two persons simultaneously.

The same IHS5 Report also estimates that only 3.7% of the landholders obtained land through purchases. Sales of pieces of land are taking place in the study area, mainly observed in the Lilongwe district where people “*from outside the community -even from town and other TAs buy land, but they just come to cultivate crops. Once they collect the harvest, they return to their respective homes*”. According to the interviews, elders and uncles must agree on selling a piece of land in customary land, and the TA authorizes the sale transaction. However, some smallholder farmers have never witnessed a land purchase by individuals in their communities. In Phalombe, some farmers claimed to have purchased a piece of land, and the GVH authorized the transaction. It is not clear if the authorization also reaches the TA.

In Phalombe, informants shared that **when selling a piece of land, trees can be sold separately or added to the land’s price**, making it more expensive than a plot of bare soil. One female farmer, for example, bought a field with two fruit trees on it. However, these trees were producing fruit that relatives of the former owner were collecting. Therefore, she cut down one tree to avoid further disputes but left the other and kept allowing the relatives to collect fruit from the tree.

Land use rights are well established under customary law, but there is an almost inexistent formal land market (Lovo, 2016). It appears that the informal selling and renting of land is somehow working in a way that specific individuals take advantage (un)purposely, giving ground to disputes, and only a few can afford the expense.

“*I have never sold a piece of land. I don’t even know its price.*”

Man VH, Lilongwe, 2022.

Thus, the main route to access land for a significant part of the population is through a family member (56%) and inheritance (13%) (NSO, 2020). In the study areas, land allocation and inheritance practices continue to follow the rules of customary law. As

⁸ Considered exchange rate 1 USD = 1024.0211 MWK on 27 June 2022. National Bank of Malawi.

mentioned in the previous section, Chewas and Lomwes follow a matrilineal inheritance system. Yet, there are slight differences regarding access to land and inheritance practices among districts, presented in the following section.

3.3 Access to land and inheritance systems: differences and similarities among districts

“ *Children belong to their mothers, and the land will be allocated based on that.* ” *Man GVH, Lilongwe, 2021*

“ *The land ownership in the southern region originally belonged to the daughters. There is a minimal chance for a son to get the land; they are supposed to go to their wife.* ” *Man GVH, Phalombe, 2021*

According to the matrilineal tradition, an individual belongs to the same descent group (clan) as their mother. Therefore, the inheritance system design keeps the land within the mother's kin line (Tschirhart et al., 2018). Both gifting and inheritance of land give preference to those residing in their natal village over those living elsewhere (Takane, 2008). In principle, both study areas follow this tradition. Yet, there is a nuance of practices, and cases learned from farmers and leaders showed that the inheritance system is flexible and constantly evolving.

Literature mentions male matrilineal kin as brothers or uncles (*nkhoswe*) who ultimately safeguard the land (Kaarhus, 2010), and have an essential role over the descendants of the clan, named *mbumba*. Yet, when discussing inheritance and decision-making over the land, interviewees rarely mentioned *nkhowse's* roles. “...because of tradition, my sister's children depend on me; they are 36 children, all living around.” *Man VH, Lilongwe district, 2021*

In both study areas, individuals inherit land rights upon the landholder's death, marriage, or when the person is mature enough to form an independent household or has the will to cultivate their field to maintain an independent life. **Young adults** are entitled to access a piece of land, and some get it before reaching 18 years old (cases found in Lilongwe district). This may change from village to village, as Lindsjö et al. (2021) reveal that very few youths⁹ had access to land in their study area. Many young people depend on their parents and farm together because they still attend school. However, some older youths that drop out of school have limited access to land. **Besides, the substantial increase in life expectancy rate suggests that land transfer is postponed and that the younger generation needs to wait longer to own their land unless they have an alternative to inheritance.**

Chinsinga & Chasukwa (2018) in Lindsjö et al. (2021) also found that rural youth in Malawi considered having difficulties convincing their families to be allocated a piece of land on their own. However, in both study areas, farmers are said to be sharing a part of their land with their children before passing away, or parents rent out the land. Perhaps, this specific situation needs further exploration in the study areas.

In Phalombe, land rights pass from mothers to daughters to granddaughters. Sometimes, aunts can give the land rights to nieces, or one additional piece of land can be shared by siblings, though

⁹ Lindsjö et al. (2021) consider that all individuals interviewed aged between and including 18 to 35 years old are identified as youth-headed households, and all youth is considered from 10 to 35 years old.

it is not such a common practice, “My young sister and I own a plot, and if I die today, my young sister will inherit it.” Woman GVH, Phalombe, 2021.

“If the land is shared among children, only daughters will get it. The sons will move to the wife’s land. Sons only get land if they purchase it on their own.” Woman GVH, Phalombe, 2021.

During the interviews, some men said they accessed land by inheritance in Phalombe. Again, though, it is not such a common practice. After hearing many cases and stories over land, the interpretation of those situations is that men inherit when land is purchased and therefore does not belong to the clan’s land and when it is given explicitly as a gift by a relative or a person external to the kin. In Lilongwe, even though the inheritance follows the principles of matrilineality, the system is more flexible or maybe has been more alienated. Perhaps because of the proximity to the Northern region with a customary patrilineal system, due to the external influences of policy reforms (see Box1), and probably also because different coping strategies arose in both districts from the increased land scarcity. In all three villages studied in Lilongwe, it was said that mothers and fathers transfer land use rights to sons and daughters.

BOX 1. The Lilongwe Land Development Programme

The Lilongwe Land Development Programme (LLDP) followed the Land Act of 1965. It was founded by the World Bank in 1967, targeting about 1000 villages in the southwest area of the district. The program intended to ascertain and record individual rights by giving land certificates of ownership, promoting tobacco production, and being biased toward strengthening men’s role in cash crop agriculture. The program assumed that the descent group would be led by a senior male member, the *nkhomwe*, and the land tenure certificate would also be given to the male “family representative.” However, the program reform created a model of large landholdings within assembled “umbrella family units” that comprised members that were not necessarily related by kinship or marriage which increased internal tensions and rivalries for leadership (held by men). (Kaarhus, 2010). According to Msiska (2017), TA Chadza was part of this program and, all of its area was allocated to family units as freehold land.

“Here, the parents can share the land with the daughter or son. Depending on the parents’ wish. Grandparents can also share with granddaughters or grandsons. Mostly, the share is the same among women and men. It changed around 20 years ago.” Man GVH, Lilongwe district, 2022

The land distribution is done by the parents, grandparents, or the eldest child if the landholder passes away. However, the distribution is not done equally since some factors, such as the elderly and being a daughter or a son, influence the size of the piece of land to inherit. “Traditionally, the women will get more piece of land because they will bear children.” Woman, Lilongwe district, 2022.

“Normally, the distribution of land is done equally among children. But if there is an elder son, since he controls the sharing, he makes sure to have a larger portion.” Man GVH, Lilongwe, 2022.

According to Kaarhus (2010), some families only pass land rights to one child to avoid splitting the land into smaller plots. During the interviews, this case was not identified.

In both study sites, the matrilineal social organization and land use rights transfers are closely linked to marriage and residence rules (Takane, 2008). Marriages in both study areas are traditionally matrilocal/uxorilocal (*chikamwini*), meaning that men move to the wives' family village

(Kaarhus, 2010). Still, men can have the power to control women's land and assets to some extent, but not over the land use rights transfer decisions. **Upon divorce or separation, the men are expected to move out of the village, leaving the property and land to their wives and children** (Takane, 2008; Interviews, 2022).

These marriage practices are somehow flexible in both study areas. In the words of a woman interviewee in the Lilongwe district, *“men go to marry so they can move. It is not a rule but is valued”*.

According to the interviewees, the place of residence depends on the couple's decision. Thus, marriage can also be under patrilocal/virilocal (*chitengwa*) arrangements, meaning the woman moves to the husband's family land under his matrilineal kin use rights. Kaarhus 2010, argued that patrilocal arrangements were somehow the result of men's negotiating power in relation to women, especially when men have a wealthier position. However, I also interpret that given the land scarcity situation, when the traditional rules are not followed, **the amount of land available from each side (wife and husband) may play a more significant role while deciding where to establish a new home.**

Some women who accept moving to the husband's land keep cultivating their family land at their natal village to secure it for themselves and their children. However, maintaining their land-use rights is not always feasible. Due to the pressure on land, the plot may be allocated to someone following the matrilineal tradition or too small to provide a living (Kaarhus, 2010). Therefore, **women in *chitengwa* marriages who gave up their right to use their family's land or are not entitled access anymore are perceived to be highly vulnerable to being landless in case of divorce/separation, husband's death, domestic violence, or when the husband's matrilineal kin take back control over the piece of land used by the couple.**

“If a family uses a plot belonging to the husband, there is a high risk of losing it, and if there is a divorce or separation, the wife will not have any part. Unless the divorce goes to court and the husband is charged to support the wife and the children.” Woman smallholder farmer, Phalombe district, 2022.

“Before, my mother had banana plants on her plot. But it was from my father's relatives. And then, my mother lost the field because the relatives decided to take back the land. My father did not die; they were still together. It was a dimba.” Woman smallholder farmer, Phalombe district, 2022

Peters and Kambewa (2007) identified a few cases in Zomba where men were using the clan's land because they were young or in between marriages and thus considered to need 'help,' or when the matrilineal group had sufficient land relative to the 'daughters' claiming land. Their report and the cases heard along with this research had in common that men's use of clan land created tension within their matrilineal kin, and often men were forced to move out and give up the piece of land. Nevertheless, in Phalombe, people are more reluctant to allocate the clan's land to their son's hands. *“For example, a man marries, and if his wife has less land, he could be invited to use land in his village. But, keeping in mind that the land is not his, it is from his sisters, the clan. He must be prepared to return it if his sisters need it.”* Man GVH, Phalombe district, 2022

It is crucial to highlight that, particularly in Phalombe, the risk of losing land in the case of *chitengwa* marriages is not taken only by the woman who left behind her family village and, with it, the right

to use a piece of land. Instead, the risk is for the whole family unit, as this story illustrates:

“I have an uncle who was managing a big piece of land from the clan and was working it because his sisters (including my mom) were too young to work the land. He shared the land with his children who worked the land, and eventually, the grandchildren also got some. Once his sisters grew up, they asked him for the land back, but he was not willing. His sisters took the case to the GVH, who solved the issue by allocating a small piece of the land for my uncle to have food. The rest of the land returned to his sisters. So now my uncle, his wife, his children, and grandchildren are renting land because they became landless. My uncle married the first-born daughter of her family, so she had a piece of land. But my uncle told her to give up her share and use his land. Now, there is nothing for the daughter and granddaughter of my uncle. During the judgment, the GVH said that once my uncle dies, his wife will give back the tiny part of the land allocated for him to his sisters. By then, maybe the grandchildren will rent some land for my uncle’s wife, or her relatives will feel pity for her and share the land they have with her.”

Woman smallholder farmer, Phalombe, 2022

Through the story and by echoing Matchaya (2009), we can understand that in matrilineal systems, a man born of a woman from a core lineage (the uncle, in the story) should feel some safety towards land allotted to him, but that comparatively, such security is less than that of a woman from a core lineage (uncle’s sisters). The uncle, after the struggle, still had some land to sustain, but neither his children nor his wife.

In Lilongwe, the general perception seems to be that land-use rights are somehow equal for men and women. **However, women still face a higher risk of being landless in *chitengwa* marriages or depending more on their children or kinship to access land because the inheritance goes directly to the descents.**

This situation may change depending on the type of household. For example, during discussions with women head of families, they considered giving land to daughters. But, at the same time, sons could get a piece of land if staying at their natal village, and daughters living in *chitengwa* marriages could keep a piece of land to work. Yet, the contrast exists among perspectives because, during discussions with men, some consider sons are the ones to acquire the land. After all, “men are supposed to take care of the woman.”

“*When the husband dies, if they were staying in the wife’s village, the land automatically goes to the wife. If they were in his village, the wife must go to her home, and the land goes to the children. She must get married somewhere else. If the woman is older, she will stay with the children until she dies. But if she is not that old, then moves to get married again and get a piece of land from the new husband.*”

Man GVH, Lilongwe district, 2022

4. Roles and Responsibilities of men and women involved in agroforestry

Beforehand, it is essential to share the participants' perceptions of what it meant to be farmers involved in agroforestry. For two women groups and one men group where the research team raised the question¹⁰, all participants considered farming their main livelihood to cover basic household needs, including the firewood or charcoal they sell or use from their planted trees. For example, women in Lilongwe highlighted the importance of selling firewood for income and solving immediate family needs. At the same time, men shared their motivation to form a savings and loan group to sustain the firewood business. In Phalombe, women saw farming as a way of having more capacity to purchase assets as desired, considering that farming gives them eligibility to make household decisions.

Box 2. The term **gender** has developed into a Chichewa word appearing in the dictionary as *Jenda*, translated as “not differentiating between men and women at work,” with an annotation that is originally an English word translated as “gender equality.” Thus, gender is constructed as a practice people do to reduce gender inequality (Adolfsson & Madsen, 2020). Therefore, the research team never mentioned the word gender during the focus group discussions and interviews to avoid bias some informants may have over the meaning of gender.

4.1 Division of labor in agroforestry

The Gendered Roles and Responsibilities in a Value Chain¹¹ exercise for focus group discussions was the tool chosen for collecting data on the division of labor in households involved in agroforestry. The discussion included topics from general agriculture activities and tree production to price negotiations and household chores. The exercise identifies and indicates who does what, including girls and boys, followed by narrative explanations when there is a strict division of labor or diverse practices among families and geographies. One of the most relevant features of this exercise is that it captures various participants' perceptions of reality—allowing them to share different situations and experiences among families.

When interpreting these findings, it is crucial to consider that the labor division depends on each family's situation and negotiation among couples. For example, a couple living together can decide to plant separately and harvest/sell together; if it is a single-headed household or has a sick family member, there is more need for casual labor, etc. Among the respondents were widows/separated women or married but had husbands with health problems, highlighting the perspectives of women-heads of households working mainly alone.

As one of the most vulnerable households, **women leading their homes mostly rely on themselves** for most work at the farms. **They hire casual labor for all those activities considered for men, like preparing the land, digging holes, and pruning trees.** But then, when young sons can help at the farm, they are the primary support to their mothers, *“It is our responsibility to train the boys on whatever we are told by the extension workers at all activities a man should do at the household.”* Woman smallholder farmer, Phalombe, 2022.

¹⁰ The research team included this topic in the discussion after the first focus group session, which is why the first men's group did not address the question.

¹¹ Sebstad and Manfre (2011). FIELD Report No.11. Behavior Change Perspectives on Gender and Value Chain Development. Tools for Research and Assessment. USAID, ACDI/VOCA through the FHI 360-managed FIELD-Support LWA.

In both study areas, men and women have different perceptions of their participation in agricultural and agroforestry activities. Women generally considered that they provide most, if not all, of the labor for farming activities, including tree production, **except for pruning**. At the same time, women said men participated in a few tasks, and even so, they indicated that these were activities where women were more involved than men. On the other hand, men were prone to respond that both were taking part or that they were the most engaged in certain activities. **However, men and women coincide in that both participate in harvesting crops and selling firewood**. Figure 1 shows a summary of the division of labor for the main agroforestry activities done in the Phalombe and Lilongwe study areas. Additionally, Table 1 in the Annex is available with all the responses of each FGD for further consultation.

Men and women report their involvement in tree production at the field and the nurseries. In Phalombe, men, however, are most involved in those activities that require physical strength and mention a more detailed list of activities related to crop production than those related to tree production. In addition, men indicated they participate in making the fence and fetching water/irrigating (see Box 3) in the nursery; at the field, **both men and women agree that men are responsible for the land preparation and digging holes for planting the trees**.

Women's list on tree production activities was, however, much more detailed, explained perhaps by the orientation of the discussion, combined with women's perception of men's significant involvement arriving again only once the trees are mature for harvest and sometimes playing a "mediator" role by offering to do casual labor instead of cutting the tree, *"When trees are grown, men voluntarily take over on the management of the trees. For example, on how to use the tree. Sometimes we can help because we are the ones that planted the tree."*

Women report to be most commonly responsible for:

- Seed pretreatment
- Applying manure when planting.
- Planting the tree.
- Watering trees at home and in the field.
- Tree protection.
- Weeding trees in the field.

In Lilongwe, men reported their involvement in making fences and watering trees in the nurseries. In the field, they participate in digging holes for the trees, planting crops and trees, and consider themselves responsible for tree protection. Men did not mention any action related to trees' management in the field¹². On the other hand, women recognized men helping at the nurseries, even though they felt more women were helping than men.

Women considered that they were more involved than men in most tree production activities, including transporting seedlings from the nursery to the field, planting, making the basin, watering, doing tree protection, and weeding around the trees. In addition, women highlighted the need for assistance from boys (teenagers) and hired casual labor for pruning trees when no men were present in the household or when it is difficult to reach the branches.

¹² The men's group discussion was shorter in Lilongwe and, therefore, less fruitful than in Phalombe because there was a funeral ceremony in the village. However, individual interviews give complementary information on the activities identified.




Activity				
	Location	Phalombe		Lilongwe
Preparation of nursery	XX	XX	XX	XX
Seed pretreatment	XXXX	-	XXXX	-
Fill polytubes and sow	XX	XX	XX	XX
Watering and fetching water for nurseries	XX	XX	XX	XX
Preparation of land	X *	XXX	XXX *	X
Digging holes for trees	X *	XXX	XX *	XX
Planting trees + applying manure	XXX	X	XXX	X
Tree protection	XXX	X	XXX	X
Pruning trees	XX *	XX	X *	XXX
Watering trees at home and farm	XXXX	-	XXXX	-
Weeding trees in the field	XXXX	-	XXXX	-
Transport fw to market	XX	XX	XX	XX
Selling firewood	XX	XX	XX	XX
Price negotiations	XX	XX	XX	XX

Figure 1. Division of labor for main agroforestry activities in Phalombe and Lilongwe study areas. * Note indicates activities where women hire labor when needed, receive support from children, or do the activities alone.

Historically, Malawi had relied on women’s work in agriculture since the 20th century, when most men were absent from their homes. This situation may also persist nowadays. It is possible, for example, that because men are often engaged in casual labor—continuing the male labor migration dynamic and male absenteeism, the responsibility of farming and taking care of the trees (and the household) continue to lie on women. **Yet, perhaps, women perceive men’s participation as more of a help than a responsibility**, especially in matrilocal (*chikamwini*) marriages. “*I do the work alone at the field because it is my original village, my husband only supports. But for her [another participant], her husband is originally from here, so they negotiate*”. Women interview, Lilongwe, 2022.

During fieldwork in both locations, some men took responsibility for the tree’s management after the nursery. **Thus, the legitimacy/responsibility for trees’ use and management and the fields also relate to land use rights.** For example, men farmers planted and managed trees on their inherited plots, and some started a seedlings business. And based on women respondents’ profiles, they likely planted the trees on the field belonging to them, taking responsibility for the trees.

When discussing business practices, men and women report equal participation in selling crops, firewood, and fruit. Sometimes, having joint decision-making on how, where, and when to sell. However, **married women perceive that they only have control over the sales of trees (firewood, poles, charcoal, or fruits) because the husband controls when to sell and receive the payments for the crops.** Furthermore, **when negotiating prices, men perceive themselves as more capable than women**; women find it challenging to negotiate and hire casual labor.

Box 3. “The tradition denies us [men] to carry a bucket on our head”: A case in the study area of Phalombe.

Women mostly fetch water, and it is problematic for a man to carry a bucket of water on his head, even if he is willing to do so. For villagers in the study area, seeing a man carrying a bucket [plastic pall] on his head is awkward (but if he uses a bicycle or a jerry can, it’s okay).

“*The first thing that comes to mind is that something is happening at home. So, we would think, “why did the wife allow him to carry the water on his head?”. Secondly, maybe he is doing it because he doesn’t have a bicycle or doesn’t have a jerrycan that he can carry only with his hands. Otherwise, it means that the wife has taken some love medicine or given local charms (witchcraft) to her husband, and whatever the wife says and commands in the house should be done.” Men FGD, Phalombe, 2021.*

However, the community borehole is shallow, and from August to the rainy season, it is impossible to get water by the end of the day. To overcome this challenge, villagers move greater distances, and the activity shifts from women to men, who bring water by bicycle. This period coincides with the set-up of nurseries requiring irrigation and the time men are supposed to till the fields twice a day. Thus, if water is unavailable at the nearest point, men go to fetch water missing the tilling session in the afternoon, probably leaving women to prepare the land instead.

“*We start from here to Kambale village which is 7km from here. Sometimes we also go to the Phalombe river by bicycle, it is about 5km away.” Men FGD, Phalombe, 2021.*

4.2 Division of labor at the household level

Many cultural beliefs and taboos around men getting involved in household chores make it challenging to change the paradigm. Therefore, most household activities like cooking, fetching water, fetching firewood, and washing clothes are still exclusively women’s responsibilities with the help of children, especially girls. Yet, men in Lilongwe considered being the ones taking care of children because they have the financial means to pay for health care. The unequal division of labor overwhelms women, yet men’s involvement is discouraged,

“*Little by little, some men started to do this to bring balance but have been frustrated by some women who see their friends’ husbands doing it. And these women are not happy seeing their friends’ husbands doing these activities, and the first thing that comes to the women’s mind is that a love charm has fooled the husband. Without knowing that the guy is doing it to help the wife.” Men FGD, Phalombe, 2021.*

“*Even if the couple is negotiating well for doing activities, other women come to gossip and tell him not to do it, so the husband changes. Those women feel jealous.” Women FGD, Phalombe, 2022*



Image 2. Women cutting a tree for firewood in Lilongwe, 2022.

Despite all, gendered roles have changed over time in both study areas. For example, nowadays, women are doing activities that society thought were exclusive to men, like cutting firewood and grass for roofing, planting trees, carpentry, weaving mats, tailoring, building houses and toilets, and participating in training sessions and meetings.

While men also start breaking paradigms with positive masculinities, some men nowadays bathe the children, go to the maize mill, and cook (yet only 2 of 7 participants cook in their households), “when it is holidays the children cook and when is school days, my husband does.” Woman GVH, Phalombe, 2021.

4.3 Power and Freedom (agency)

The Ladder of Power and Freedom (P&F)¹³ is a qualitative data collection tool used to explore the perceptions of the focus group participants’ agency and decision-making power to make significant decisions in their lives, with a particular focus on the choice of agroforestry activities and the reasons for changes (if any) in these conceptions over time.

Agency refers to the capacity to know and act attributed to all networks and persons (Long, 2007).

The tool is an interactive ranking exercise that provides a numerical value of power and freedom for the members of the community, along a 5-point scale where the lowest rung of the ladder (1) is almost no power and freedom to make decisions and the highest rung (5) is having power and freedom to make most decisions.

In Lilongwe, men associated having power and freedom to make decisions with authority and knowledge; they perceived that 15 to 25 years ago, before planting trees, they were at level (2) of P&F because most people were uneducated. Nowadays, men perceive that most women and men in the community raised their P&F levels to (4). According to men, project participation was crucial in increasing decision-making power. **Women advanced on the P&F ladder because now they speak in groups, participate in training sessions, and become trainers in their clubs**, “*Women started participating in training sessions when Inter Aide came. In the past, it was not like that; it was only for men. So now we are getting used to seeing women participating.*” Men FGD, Lilongwe, 2022.

Not long ago, women considered having almost no power over decision-making and echoed men's perception of having better opportunities than the older generation. Nowadays, “*we can at least make some decisions of our lives such as to crop separately from the husband or crop together and get money.*” Women FGD, Lilongwe, 2022.

In Phalombe, men considered that at the highest level (5), men have the power, responsibility, and mandate to decide how and what to do without consulting anyone else. At the same time,

¹³ Petesch, P. & Bullock, R. (2018). Ladder of Power and Freedom: Qualitative data collection tool to understand local perceptions of agency and decision-making. GENNOVATE resources for scientists and research teams. Mexico City, Mexico: CIMMYT.

men in lower rungs must seek advice from other people. Thus, men of the community are positioned mainly at level (4), with others either in level (5) or level (2), showing that some men also face challenges in exerting agency. As Khoza (2022) describes, “*men’s lived experiences and realities may also point to their marginalization at the peripheries of power and privilege, such as poverty, income inequality, unemployment, or racial inequality, [and, as identified in this study marital status, and thus, land use rights] which may intersect with gender.*” As a result, subordinated and marginalized men (probably landless widowers and elders, unmarried men, and youth in the study areas) may be vulnerable alongside other categories of women and excluded from projects and interventions based on misconceptions that all men are privileged.

Though there is an overall perception of having more P&F to make decisions in both study areas, **women have less control over or/and access to benefits (income) compared to men.** Particularly, married women have less capacity to make decisions over essential aspects of their life, including activities at the farm, having the minimum level of P&F (1) compared to single women heads of households who are considered autonomous and on the highest rung (5). If a woman is more empowered to make decisions while married, who is at level (4), “*sometimes people can say that the husband has been given charm (witchcraft), without it, he cannot change.*” *Woman FGD, Phalombe, 2022.*

The following statements from women in Phalombe may illustrate the situation the best:

“*As single women, we go to harvest alone, process and take the crops to the market, then manage the cash.*”

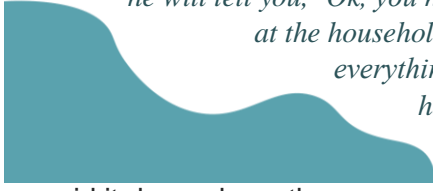
“*For married women, we go to the field to harvest the crop, bring it home, dry it, process it, and then give it to the husband to go to the market and sell. Then, after trading, he comes home and doesn’t show us the money but tells us how much he sold. Then he tells you to keep the money, but if you want to keep the marriage for a long time, you deny.*”

It was alarming to find women from both study areas reporting that despite being more active during the production activities, **they have almost no control over crop sales nor access to the income it generates.** Instead, **men control the money except for tree products, although the latter also depends on land use rights, as described in the 4.1 section.** Moreover, married women’s limited control over resources and benefits makes them vulnerable to gender-based violence, including economic violence. As a result, some women perceive to be better off by giving up their marriages.

“*At home, if I need to solve a problem and take the cash available in my husband’s absence and use it, I will be in trouble when he returns.*” *Women FGD, Phalombe, 2022.*

“*Sometimes, husband and wife plant separately but harvest together and mix the crop for selling. One day, when she leaves the house, her husband will call a vendor to sell. Then, when she returns, he will only give excuses, and all the money will be gone, or he will give just a little for the household. There is no solution; she needs to end the marriage.*” *Women FGD, Lilongwe, 2022.*

“With the cash, your husband will decide what to do. But if you accept to take the money from him, he will tell you, ‘Ok, you have taken your money, you’re going to take charge of everything at the household because you’re taking over the lead by accepting that cash. So, everything will rely on you. I’ll not do anything in this house because you have taken your money.’ It happens.” Women, FGD Phalombe, 2022



Men's perception of control over income is quite different.

They said it depends on the money source: They control it if it is a salary (*ganyu*), but if it is sales from crops, they consider it to be for everyone. In Phalombe, men said to consider their wives' opinions on what to do with the income when the economic means of the household are limited, but the decision still relies on them.

Supposing that men spend most of their time doing casual labor and selling crops, they have control over the primary income sources of the household and the power to decide how to use them. Consequently, most married women might depend on what the husband wishes to share while relying on selling other products (including trees) and casual labor to gain cash. But, overall, all women continue to spend more time working on the farm and caring for the family, having fewer possibilities to access money.

In Lilongwe, one of the alternatives for women is the village groups, mostly of women known as “*Banki Nkhonde*¹⁴,” from which they can take a loan to invest in a seasonal business, like selling vegetables. However, in Phalombe, women are afraid to ask for loans because they face a high risk if they fail to pay back (they can lose their goods, including the roof of the house, bricks, poles, and even a piece of land). So instead, women have alternative helping groups but still struggle to repay.

“The major challenge for women at the farm and household is the lack of money to employ ganyu at the farm. And they fail to buy basic needs if they don't have money. It happens because women have fewer ways of getting money than men.” Men FGD Lilongwe, 2022.

5. Land and gender-based constraints in agroforestry

This section explains the main factors identified that facilitate or constrain women's and men's participation in agroforestry, followed by the factors that may reduce or impede women's and men's opportunities to upgrade their performance in tree production and further explains the differences between men's and women's ability to access and control the benefits derived from agroforestry.

Gender-based constraints are the restrictions men and women face to access resources and opportunities based on their gender roles or responsibilities (Rubin et al., 2009).

5.1 Participation in agroforestry

To participate in agroforestry, farmers must have secure land, seeds/seedlings, polytubes, water, and labor for production and harvest (pruning) activities.

¹⁴ For this kind of saving group, each member contributes a share of money to enter. Then, they can ask for a loan for certain number of shares upon interest, which the group members share after a period, usually of one year.

The type of family and residence place might play a vital role in decisions over investment for both men and women, which means that there might be more chances for men and women to be actively involved in agroforestry when they hold land-use rights. Kishindo 2010 in Lovo (2016) observed that men in matrilineal marriages are less willing to make long-term investments. During a focus group discussion in Phalombe, women raised this situation, which may explain, at least partly, their increased involvement in agroforestry within matrilineal settings, *“For example, my husband said: “I don’t need to take part in planting trees because if I leave, after divorce, the trees will not be mine; they will be yours and your children.” Woman, Phalombe district, 2022.*

Limited land available might be a constraint for both men and women to engage in agroforestry or to expand their activities to future generations. *“Because you need to give a piece of land to each child, the area is getting smaller every time.” “If you have a little plot, then you do ganyu during the dry season to get the 15,000MK to rent a piece of land and start planting in the rainy season.” Women FGD, Lilongwe, 2022.*

5.2 Performance

For the agroforestry sector to develop and improve, it is required that farmers produce quality products enough to cover the demand. Therefore, knowing where and when to sell the products while having the technical and managerial skills are essential to developing a sustainable business.

Women’s and men’s ability to improve tree production depends on technical skills and knowledge. For example, seed pretreatment is critical for enhancing germination rates and is a task almost exclusively done by women. However, both men and women shared concerns and interests in improving their knowledge to acquire grafting and management skills and learn new tree production technologies. Unfortunately, there are few extension services options besides projects and government interventions.

Men are more likely to operate as traders outside their villages and districts by reaching higher price marketplaces. On the contrary, women are more focused on selling in markets at the village level, with lower prices and volumes. The increased competition and long-distance required to reach larger trading centers demand more time investment for men, which contributes to being absent from the household and missing their work in the fields, but with the option of accessing cash quickly.

Social beliefs are persistent, and it might be challenging to improve women’s position in the production and trading of agroforestry products. *“It can be difficult for women because most are weak, and men are strong.” Men FGD, Phalombe, 2021.* Still, women challenging the status quo can be an example for other women and may be an entry point to build networks of women involved in agroforestry to help each other. *“At first, doing the pits was hard. We were drawing the shape, but now we got used to doing them and the size.” Woman interview, Lilongwe, 2021*

5.3 Benefits

Planting trees contributes to economic benefits from sales of firewood and fruits and gives the household increased food security, particularly during the rainy season when food may be available but not the firewood to cook. In addition, trees protect houses from heavy winds, give shade, improve soil fertility, reduce soil erosion, and provide many other environmental services. However, some benefits impact women and men differently, and others also relate to the tree-use right.

The provision of fuelwood from planted trees benefits women and girls as it reduces their burden of traveling long distances in search of it. Non-economic benefits include time gained by not fetching firewood somewhere else, allowing having a reliable fuel source to cook during the rainy season, and girls to do other activities instead.

Tree planting provides other products for self-consumption in the household and selling that otherwise would be challenging to afford or to find. For example, some farmers use their trees to build their houses, and those involved in tobacco production make barns. Particularly in Phalombe, fruit trees are highly valued for self-consumption but primarily for children's nutrition. Nevertheless, rights over tree use depend on the landholder, and sometimes other people access them. For example, a man in Phalombe could harvest avocado fruit from the trees on his former wife's land for selling and pay the child's school fees with the earnings. And a woman had issues with other people collecting the mango from her tree: *"By the time we bought this land, there were two mango trees, and once belonged to the former landowner. Relatives came to collect fruit from trees, so I had to cut the other tree. Now there is one remaining, I was allowing them to collect fruit from that tree, but when I started to plant other fruit trees, I didn't allow them to collect anymore."* Women smallholder farmer, Phalombe, 2021.

The absence of appropriate tools and labor can restrict women from getting the full potential benefits from agroforestry. Although this constraint affects both women and men engaged in production activities, women working alone (approx. 30% of families) face an extra challenge when the task requires a strong labor force. In addition, the absence of appropriate tools that facilitate the work and the impossibility of asking for help or hiring casual labor reduces the potential benefits. *"Last year, I did pit compost and applied it to this field, but as I had a lot of it, I took it to another plot that was far. I forced myself to transport the compost, and I suffered a lot. I was sick, but the production of the portion where I applied manure was massive. I am very proud today because even my nephews have enough food thanks to my fertilizer. Even today, I manage to have food thanks to what I did."* Woman smallholder farmer, Phalombe, 01.12.2022.

Women's reduced mobility limits the potentially reachable marketplaces for tree products. Women do not transport large quantities of firewood or other products like fruits; they sell at home or in marketplaces reachable by walking. Some women have access to transport means, but household responsibilities restrict their time to reach more distant marketplaces such as trading centers and Lilongwe city. The reduced mobility of women in rural areas and the physical effort required explains why men dominate firewood sales in larger marketplaces. In response to the mobility constraint, women use different approaches to accommodate their needs. For example, one young lady in Lilongwe is charging someone to sell her firewood in another village, and after three days, she gives 500MK as payment to the person that sold her firewood. Other women do not take the product to the marketplace but seek the buyer in nearby villages, and the clients themselves cut the tree branches or fruit by their means.

Women are more limited in getting income during the dry season. Linked to reduced mobility, women mainly sell firewood during the rainy season compared to men, who move to the marketplaces during the dry season and primarily control the household income. Hence, women seek other ways to get income and engage in alternative businesses or casual labor during the dry season. *"Sometimes we do the ganyu together, but since the husband manages the budget, that money disappears."* Woman FGD, Lilongwe, 2022. For example, in Lilongwe, women invest in selling vegetables, while in Phalombe, women and men owning fruit trees sell *Zizyphus (masau)*, bananas, papaya, and passion fruit in the dry season. *"I find tree production very helpful, especially these days men are not helping at the household. But because firewood sales are seasonal, sometimes we have nothing to sell, and it is more difficult to cover household needs."* Woman smallholder farmer, Lilongwe, 2022.

The inequitable household responsibilities constrain women from engaging in other activities. Women are expected to cook and take responsibility for different tasks at home. Without a support circle, women also have fewer options to benefit from alternative income-generating activities, training sessions, and meetings. *“For me is not difficult to do this fruit business because relatives take care of the children back home”* Woman fruit trader, Phalombe, 2021.

6. Potential impacts on projects activities and strategies

To participate in the agroforestry projects of Inter Aide, the only condition is that the interested farmer must have a piece of land to plant trees in the project area and participates in the nursery and training sessions. However, **there is a risk of excluding women from the training benefit if the registered person is the only one included in the project’s activities.** At least in the last cohort, more than half beneficiaries registered were men. No data is available to know if the registered person holds land-use rights.

The type of family and land-use rights may play a vital role in engaging in agroforestry activities for both men and women. Based on the kind of family, residence, and land-use rights, **a person involved in the project can eventually decide to plant the seedlings in a plot from their natal village instead of the place of residence,** which does not represent a significant problem unless the selected location for planting trees falls outside the monitored area of the project, and follow-up fails. For example, *“...at the time when the project came to establish nurseries, I was at my husband’s place. But during planting, I was bringing the trees here, at my home village.”* Woman tree producer, Lilongwe, 2022.

On the other hand, this situation may bring more participation from either men or women. **For example, 70% of the fields are under patrilineal tradition in the new project area of TA Chadza in Lilongwe. In contrast, 80% of the fields in TA Kalumbu, the neighboring TA, follow the matrilineal practice.** Therefore, if the investment decision relates to land-use rights, the project would expect more men to be involved in the patrilineal area and more women in the matrilineal area. **However, more than half of the beneficiaries registered are men accounting for 70% and 60% for TA Chadza and TA Kalumbu, respectively.** It is yet to confirm if the person registered holds the land-use rights.

Disputes over land-use rights can arise after planting trees. Smallholder farmers and traditional leaders interviewed seldom mentioned land title acquisitions. Farmers do not feel at risk of losing land due to the reliance on customary rules despite there are situations where land-use rights can be lost. In the villages, allocated customary land will remain under the custody of the landholder or their kin until all members die, move out of the village, or upon agreement, the land is used for other purposes, including those activities for community development, i.e., to build a school for the community, a woodlot, or a nursery.

Disputes among community members and within families often start because of land issues, and many times, trees are involved. The spectrum of disputes is vast, from the right to collect fruit and use it for firewood to the encroachment of the land and loss of all assets, including trees. **The most common issues are from farmers planting trees within boundaries, which neighbors uproot; farmers using a piece of land for a long time and suddenly claimed back by relatives, who can take control of the trees; farmers renting out land with trees face the risk that the tenant uproots them.**

Traditional authorities solve some quarrels over land, and others reach the District Council. Still, conflicts can escalate in terms of violence and end as criminal offenses with police involvement

and taken to the magistrate court. According to the law, damaging someone's trees is a criminal offense and can be taken to the chiefs or court. The authorities issue a penalty to the offender and/or compensation payment in cash or in-kind for the damage caused. Cases of wrangles show that rules, either customary or based on the legal framework, are not exclusive from each other.

“An uncle bought a piece of land from his brother 30 years ago. The late father had a title deed, but the uncle failed to change the title's name, used the field, and planted many trees. The late father's children now claim that the land belongs to them. These children went further and cut down all the trees of the old men's field.” Magistrate, Phalombe, 2022.

Bylaws are an important mechanism to maintain the active participation of men farmers in strict gender roles like the ones related to water. Nonetheless, there is a risk that women will take over the task if those rules are not enforced.

Women's opportunities to increase tree production are constrained mainly by limited access to labor and cash. The number of seedlings per household depends on the planting capacity of the family and the available land for planting trees. Women working alone face an extra challenge to increase their tree production even if they have land available, as they mostly rely on their labor force and that of their children. Expanding tree production would probably increase the need for hired labor and be more challenging to cope with household responsibilities.

Youth might be vulnerable to being excluded from participating in the project if they do not have access to their own land. Considering Lindsjö et.al. (2021) reporting that “most youth in the village do not have access to agricultural extension services. A very few youths acquire such services through their parents when they are assisting in the field.” In the study areas, boys are the primary support to their mothers. On the other hand, elders with land-use rights are also vulnerable as their options to get their living and engaging in high requiring labor activities such as farming are reduced with age.

Elders may face more challenges in holding tree production activities over the years due to their perception (and from others) as relatively weaker, lacking energy, and hence less productive than when they were younger. From all women interviewed, the eldest, married, perceived herself to have the least power and freedom to make decisions because of her physical condition, for not having a healthy husband to support her, and for having a low capacity to hire people to help her work the land. If elders do not have appropriate support, they are forced to depend on others and, most possibly, rent out their land with the risk of losing the trees due to a lack of management. Even though some elder farmers are investing in trees, they consider it heritage to their kin and more convenient than traveling long distances.

There is no quota or recommendation on the minimum of women involved as trainers and in nurseries committees. Having women trainers can facilitate other women to engage in agroforestry activities. Since persons are nominated by the Village Development Committees and the members of the clubs vote for the favorite candidate, there is a risk of leaving women unpowered or underrepresented.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis helped identify existing mechanisms and recommendations to facilitate women and men gaining access to resources and their involvement in agroforestry. Based on these findings, the project's priority should focus on immediate actions (1 & 2 in Figure 2) that will help build on other notions that might need further investigation on how to implement them. A proposed roadmap to start integrating a gender approach is presented following:

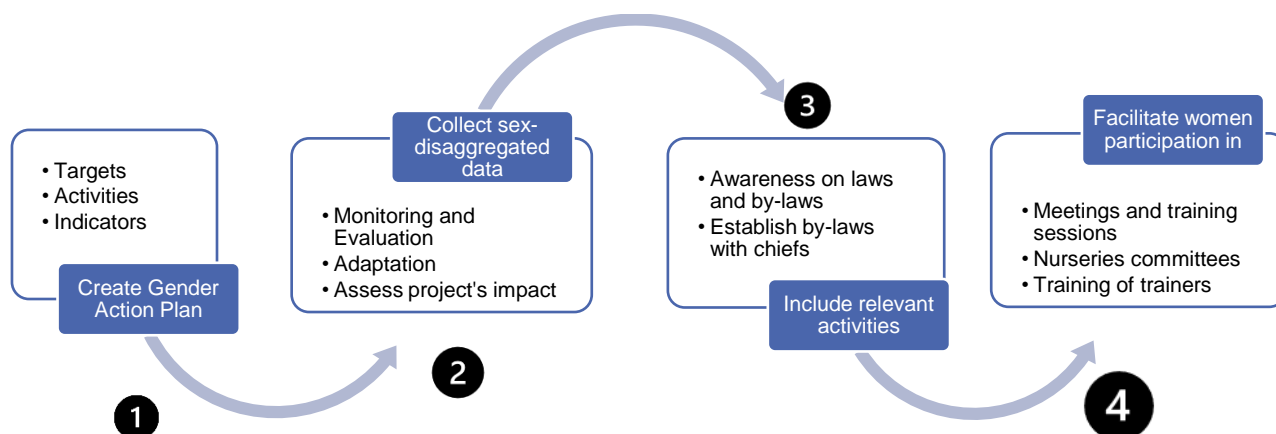


Figure 2. Proposed roadmap for integrating a gender approach into the project strategy.

This section gives a concise proposal of actions the project can take to integrate a gender approach into its future strategy and elements to address obstacles arising from land control and access constraints.

- **Creating a gender action plan** can facilitate avoiding obstacles arising from poor consideration of gender constraints and land aspects in the intervention areas while monitoring changes over time to adapt effectively. This action plan should consider integrating gender at all project levels, including staff and beneficiaries. In addition, it should be clear on how to collect sex-disaggregated data and what to use it for, draw on strategies and targets to ensure that project's activities reach and benefit both women and men equally, propose specific gender-related actions, and serve as a reference point for activities' implementation.
- **Sex-disaggregated data is paramount to identify trends and constraints affecting men and women in different ways and assess the project's impact.** These data could be collected paired with other activities to reduce the staff's time investment or explore the support of committees to compile information. The data should also collect age groups to identify youth and elders that might be more vulnerable families. The data disaggregation will also help to understand other district trends, like drop-out, performance, and participation. For example, comparing survival rates in fields managed by men or women can indicate gender differences in tree management.
- **The project can advise farmers to ensure that the field or properties where they plan to grow the trees are under their use rights and do not risk the land being taken** by relatives claiming kinship rights during an unforeseen event. Furthermore, if married, they need to know what laws apply in their marriage system and how to proceed with the inheritance to avoid future disputes.
- **Increase awareness on field boundary conflict prevention for tree planting and the existing mechanisms (laws) that protect trees and land in the customary rules and the**

statutory law. Therefore, the project can plan to include information about this topic during training sessions or meetings with the support of traditional authorities.

- **The project should work more on establishing by-laws with the chiefs before starting activities.** Bylaws play a significant role in the engagement of participants during nursery activities, and they can be of more substantial benefit to backstop farmers in case of tree damage in their fields. Besides, bylaws are recognized at the statutory level when solving land disputes. *“At first, we thought the VH was cruel because if anyone did not grow trees, they wouldn’t be allowed to fetch wood to build the coffin for our dead. That worked very well because everyone was afraid. We also agreed that if someone is absent from the nursery, this person will not receive any seedlings at the end.”* Woman smallholder farmer, Lilongwe, 2022.
- Given the increasing practice of renting out land, **a detailed survey in the study area will be crucial to understand and better inform if land-use rights holders intending to rent out their land are willing or not to plant trees.**
- **Firewood is one of the only products that remain under the control of women.** Yet, women have fewer ways to get money. Firewood sales already represent a good opportunity to increase incomes under women’s control during the rainy season, which is a difficult period for households regarding food security and access to basic services such as health care. **Finding alternative activities to generate income or ways to increase women’s control over firewood incomes during the dry season would bring significant benefits to them and their homes.** For example, beekeeping for places where bees can forage can be a future strategy. Increasing the number of trees could be another strategy for harvesting firewood for commercial purposes during both seasons. Nevertheless, to sell trees year-round, farmers involved in the business have at least 100- 200 trees planted in different plots with distinguished purposes and management techniques (pollarding, coppicing). The effectiveness of the latter strategy will depend on farmers' access to enough land for planting more trees and the labor capacity to manage them.
- **Fostering collective marketing options may provide additional market prospects and benefits for farmers in further project stages for both men and women.** For now, the project could build the strategy at the village level and more as a network that facilitates linkages among producers and consumers, which can be as simple as making a network to create more opportunities for women with mobility constraints due to household responsibilities.
- **Assessing the possibility of facilitating the access to tools that reduce the difficulties women and men face to make the most benefit from agroforestry** may help not only to encourage the engagement of participants but would bring more significant benefits to their households, if farmers do what is expected like making and applying compost, protect the trees, have good pruning/management techniques, etc.). For example, providing tools such as a saw or wheelbarrow per group through the nursery committees could facilitate those men and women engaged in the project to use them whenever needed.
- **Knowledge sharing is crucial for sound management of the trees.** Inviting both husband and wife, mother and son, or whoever helps at the farm to the training sessions can help close knowledge gaps. In addition, it would be desirable to develop training materials to help women and men build their management skills. Nevertheless, illiteracy remains a challenge.

- **Taking care of not setting meetings or training sessions at the busiest time for women gives support for them not to disturb their household responsibilities and facilitates their attendance.** For example, women cook around 12hrs quitting meetings at that time, as happened during some interviews that lasted a long time in this research. Afternoons, around 14hrs, are ideal to request appointments according to women or, as observed, in the morning but finishing before 12hrs. Nevertheless, asking participants before setting the meeting or training session is paramount to allow them to organize their tasks in advance.
- **Foster the selection of women as trainers.** Establishing a quota or a minimum of women involved as trainers and in nurseries committees can facilitate other women's engagement in agroforestry activities and avoid leaving women unpowered or underrepresented.
- **In Phalombe, increasing fruit tree production seems to be an alternative for women's empowerment that is worth further exploring and developing.** However, fruit tree availability is also linked to nutrition, and most farmers interviewed prefer to consume the fruits rather than sell them. Mainly to make them available for children, turning this component a very relevant initiative to consider. Yet, since fruit tree production requires a high commitment for most species while growing, it would be essential to seek viable strategies for farmers to succeed.
- **Women are commonly responsible for tree production activities and are mainly involved during trees' early growth. For example, seed pretreatment, planting trees, applying manure, watering young trees, weeding trees in the fields, and protecting them.** It is, therefore, essential to consider that project strategies do not further increase the already heavy workload of women.
- As further research steps, it is essential to explore the decision-making dynamics over where to plant trees. A deeper **understanding of the decision-making dynamics is vital to clarify why one field is chosen over another, how is the planting pattern defined, which species, and the number of trees that are preferred to plant on which type of plot (homestead, *dimba*, field).**
- **Well-informed farmers regarding market prices and demand could bring them more confidence in negotiating prices.** Men and women farmers agreed on the difficulty women face in bargain or negotiating better prices. *"Because I am a woman, it is more difficult to negotiate the price of trees. It would be easier if I would buy trees from a fellow woman."* Woman tearoom owner, Lilongwe, 2021. The project could therefore contribute to increasing women's negotiating skills, for example, by facilitating access to market information through extension services, the nursery committees, radio, or other means available. Besides, some men and women farmers struggle to determine a price of a tree or branches during interviews as they mostly set the price according to what they need, selling the trees at a lower price.
- In theory, most of the activities related to agroforestry are most of the time equally implemented by women and men. However, **some tasks, like land preparation, pitting holes before tree planting, and pruning trees, are challenging for women-headed households or women working their plots individually.** These women sometimes need to hire casual labor if they don't have adult children capable of doing them. Therefore, hiring casual workers might decrease the gross margin made by those women in terms of those activities and increase the opportunity cost of producing their firewood. **The project could**

think of some solutions to support women-headed households to avoid or decrease such costs.

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Interview materials

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- Interviewer: Aceves Cárdenas, Regina; Translator: Chidoola, Fanny (2022): Division of Labor, Power and Freedom in Agroforestry Activities. Focus Group Discussion with women. Lilongwe District.
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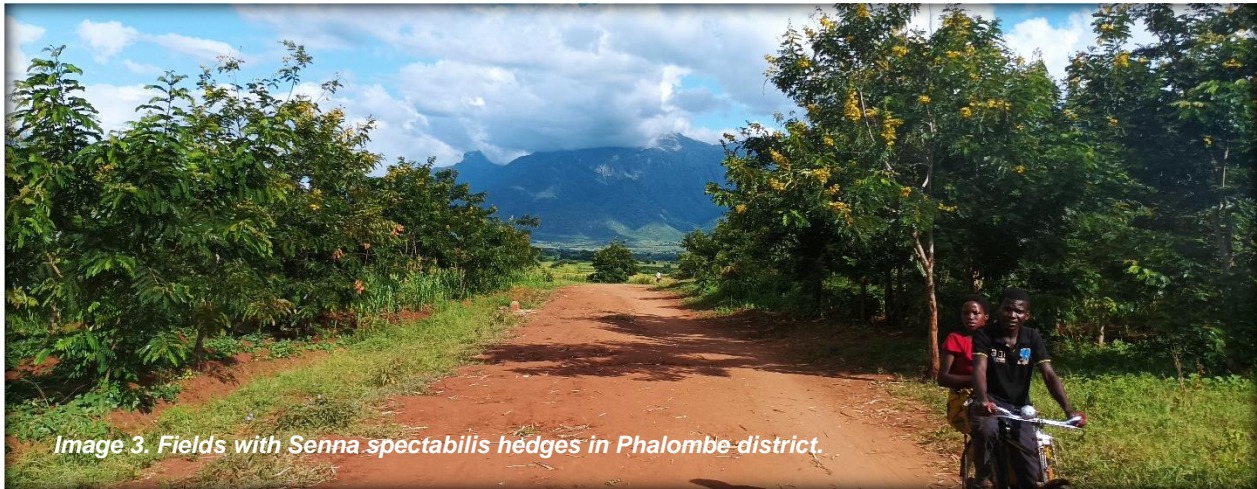


Image 3. Fields with Senna spectabilis hedges in Phalombe district.

9. Annex

Complementary information for Section 2.1 Institutional Framework:

Malawi has ratified the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development in 1997, and its addendum on the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women and Children in 1998, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, better known as the Maputo Protocol in 2003, and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development in 2008.

Underpinning all sectors, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III (2017-2022) recognizes gender equality as a cross-cutting issue. Additionally, the Malawi National Social Support Programme II (2018–2023), the National Plan of Action to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Malawi (2016 – 2021), the National Action Plan for Women Economic Empowerment (2016-2021), and the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriages (2018-2023), and the Gender, Children, Youth, and Sports Sector Working Group Joint Sector Strategic Plan (2013–2017).

Complementary information for Section 4.1 Division of labor in agroforestry:

Answers of the division of labor exercise during focus group discussion with men and women farmers involved in agroforestry. Codes: W=women, M=men, X=Participation, XX= equal participation, XXX=major participation, XXXX=exclusive participation, *=boys in M column, *=girls in W column, — =activity not identified by participants, H=hire casual labor.

Table 1. Division of labor of households involved in agroforestry for both Lilongwe and Phalombe districts.

Activity	Phalombe Men		Phalombe Women		Lilongwe Men		Lilongwe Women	
	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M
Getting land	XX	XX	XXX	X	X	XXX*	XXX	X
Materials / Holes	XX	XX	—	—	—	—	—	—
Preparing land	XX*	XX*	XXX	X	—	—	XXX	X
Selecting trees at field		XXXX	—	—	—	—	—	—
Collecting seeds (crops & trees)	XX*	XX*	—	—	—	—	—	—
Digging holes for trees	XX*	XX*	XXXX	*	X	XXX	XXXX	
Seed pretreatment	—	—	XXXX		XXX	X	—	—
Planting crops and trees (rain fed-direct sow)	XX*	XX*	XXXX	*	X	XXX	XXXX	
Tree protection	—	—	XXXX	*		XXXX	XXXX	
Doing basin for tree	—	—	—	—	—	—	XXXX	
Preparation of Nursery	XX*	XX*	—	—	—	—	XXX	X
Fetching water and watering seedlings	XX*	XX*	—	—	XX	XX	XX	XX
Moving seedlings from nursery to farms	—	—	—	—	—	—	XXXX	
Weeding crops	XX*	XX*	—	—	XX	XX	—	—
Weeding trees at farm	—	—	XXXX	*	—	—	—	—
Pruning the trees	—	—	XX	XX*	—	—	X, H	XXXX*
Watering trees at home and field	—	—	XXXX	*	—	—	XXXX	
Fertilizer application	XX*	XX*	XXXX		—	—	—	—
Second weeding	XX*	XX*	—	—	—	—	—	—
Second Fertilizer application	XX*	XX*	—	—	—	—	—	—
Banking	XX*	XX*	—	—	—	—	—	—
Harvesting crops	XX*	XX*	XX	XX	XX*	XX*	XX	XX
Transport field-home	XX*	XX*	XXXX	*		XXXX	—	—
Selling crops and fruits	XX	XX	—	—	XX*	XX*	—	—
Selling firewood	—	—	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
Pesticide application		XXXX	—	—	—	—	—	—
Packing & Storage crops		XXXX	—	—	—	—	—	—
Transport to market	XX*	XX*	XXXX	—	—	—	XXXX	—
Negotiation of price	XX	XX	—	—	X	XXX	XX	XX

<i>Going to bank for loans</i>	—	—	—	—	X	XXX	—	—
<i>Receiving payments</i>	XX	XX	—	—	X	XXX	X	XXX
<i>Decision on how to spend the money</i>	XX	XX	—	—	X	XXX	—	—
<i>Feeding/taking care of animals</i>	XX	XX*	XX	XX	—	—	—	—
<i>Sweep the house inside</i>	XXXX*	*	XXXX*	*	—	—	—	—
<i>Sweep outside</i>	*	XXXX*	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Fetching water</i>	XXXX*	*	XXXX*	*	XXXX	.	XXXX	.
<i>Cleaning of kitchen</i>	XXXX*	-	XXXX*	*	—	—	—	—
<i>Boiling water (bath)</i>	XXX*	X*	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Putting water into bathroom</i>	XXX*	X*	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Cooking</i>	XXX*	X*	XXXX*	*	XXXX	—	XXXX	.
<i>Take care of children</i>	XX	XX	—	—	—	XXXX	XXXX	.
<i>Fetching firewood</i>	—	—	XXXX*	-	XXX	X	XXX	X
<i>Washing clothes</i>	XX	XX	XX	XX	XXXX	—	XXXX	.
<i>Attending meetings</i>	XX	XX	—	—	*	XXXX*	XX	XX
<i>Cleaning graveyard</i>	XX	XX	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Digging graveyard</i>	-	XXXX	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Organization of meetings/funerals/etc.</i>	XX	XX	—	—	*	XXXX*	—	—