

Gender and land in the Lilongwe and Phalombe districts



Lessons and recommendations for sustainable agroforestry initiatives with smallholder farmers

This document was prepared by Regina Aceves Cárdenas for Inter Aide. Contact: reg.acevesc@gmail.com

Since July 2020, Inter Aide has been implementing agroforestry projects in Malawi's Lilongwe and Phalombe districts. One of the objectives is to increase rural households' energy autonomy and generate income by selling wood-based products. Yet, trees bring along multiple benefits, such as autonomy in fuelwood, water conservation on the farmlands, resilience against drought and soil erosion, and improve soil fertility. For farmers, tree planting and management are closely related to the delimitation of their land and the right to benefit from the products of a particular plot. Women are most involved in agroforestry and nursery setup and management.

In order to better understand the current gender dynamics in agroforestry, Inter Aide conducted a study to explore to what extent the factors of gender and land could potentially influence men's and women's capabilities to participate, access, and benefit from agroforestry programs in two districts of the country.

Even though men and women residing in rural areas depend on subsistence agriculture, women remain the principal labor force in Malawi. 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. For example, women-headed families have smaller plots (0.9 acres) compared to 1.5 acres for men; they have lower yields and more food shortages, insufficient food security, less access to hired labor, inputs, credit, or loans, and fewer opportunities to engage in other income-generating activities.

In Malawi, the cultural heritage and identities of the diverse ethnic groups transmit various messages including those of gender roles, social norms, and practices. The Lilongwe district in the central region is predominantly Chewa, and the southern district of Phalombe is home to the Lomwe community. Both Chewa and Lomwe groups follow the matrilineal tradition, through which the transmission of land and lineage passes from mothers to daughters, keeping the land within the mother's kin. Yet, practices have a nuance, showing that the inheritance system is flexible, constantly evolving, and

« 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. »

adapting to its environment. For instance, in Lilongwe's new project area, 80% of the fields in the Traditional Land Management Area (TLMA) of Kalumbu are under matrilineal tradition. In contrast, 70% of the fields in TA Chadza, the neighboring TA, follow the patrilineal practice.

Land use rights are closely linked to marriage and residence rules. **Traditionally, marriages are matrilineal/uxorilocal (*chikamwini*), meaning that men move to the wives' family village. Upon divorce or separation, men are expected to move out of the village, leaving property and land to their wives and children.**

Some women may move to the husband's land under his matrilineal kin use rights (*chitengwa* marriages). If these women have access to a piece of land in their natal village, they might keep cultivating to

« 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. »

secure it for themselves and their children. But, women who abandon their right to use their portion of the family land or are not entitled to access it anymore are highly vulnerable to becoming landless in case of separation from the husband, husband's death, domestic violence, or when the husband's matrilineal kin claim back the used farmlands. In Phalombe, the risk is for the whole family unit, contrary to practices in Lilongwe, where descents have access to land.

Gender roles and responsibilities in agroforestry

Women are commonly responsible for tree production activities and are mainly involved during trees' early growth, e.g., seed pretreatment, planting trees, applying manure, and watering young trees. On the other hand, men are mostly responsible for land preparation, digging holes for planting trees, and often pruning (see Figure 1). Yet, women perceive men's participation as more of a help than a responsibility, especially in matrilineal marriages. But, while men and women coincide in that both participate in harvesting crops and selling firewood, the legitimacy for trees' use and management and farmlands also relate to land use rights. Except for tree products, women have less control over or access to benefits (crops' or casual labor income) compared to men at the household level. As a result, married women have less capacity to make decisions over essential aspects of their life, including farming activities. Therefore, single, divorced, or widowed women are the only ones deemed autonomous despite being more vulnerable socio-economically.

Activity	Phalombe		Lilongwe	
	XX	XX	XX	XX
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 firewood 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: Hired labor.

Land and gender-based constraints in agroforestry

Agroforestry needs minimal but critical inputs, including access and right to land, planting material, water, and labor for production and processing (pruning, cutting). On the other hand, the interest to adopt agroforestry practices may vary among women and men. The study shed light on the understanding that the type of family (i.e., men or women head of household, marital status) and residence place might play a vital role in decisions over investment. In addition, limited land available may also be a potential constraint for both men and women to engage in agroforestry or to expand their activities to future generations. Notably, youth might be more vulnerable to being excluded from participating in agroforestry projects considering that accessing land is becoming a challenge.

Benefits from agroforestry impact women and men differently. Women have mobility constraints mainly due to household responsibilities, so having direct access to products like firewood for cooking from agroforestry helps them spend less time and money to get them. However, **because of the same constraints, most women can sell wood products like firewood only at the village level, with lower prices and volumes.** On the other hand, men do not have mobility restrictions. They are, therefore, more likely to operate as traders outside their villages and districts by reaching higher price markets, especially during the dry season when roads are in good condition. Moreover, because husbands usually control crop sales and income during the dry season, **married women perceive that during that season, one of their main assets under control remains tree products, mainly firewood, poles, or fruits.**

In terms of labor, women leading their homes or working their plots individually mostly rely on themselves to do the work. Nevertheless, they often hire casual labor to perform tasks like land preparation, pitting holes, and pruning trees, which decreases their margins when producing and selling firewood or other wood products such as poles compared to men. Furthermore, social beliefs are persistent, and when negotiating prices, **men perceive themselves as more capable than women, while women find it challenging to deal with and hire casual labor.**

Key recommendations

Since disputes over land-use rights can arise even after planting trees, it is crucial to increase awareness about tree planting conflict prevention and the existing mechanisms (laws) that protect trees and land in the customary rules and the statutory law. Agroforestry projects need to ensure that farmers have the certainty to secure the plots where they plan to grow trees under their use rights to avoid losing access to the piece of land and trees in the future. In addition, renting out land is an increasing practice (8% of households on average at the national level, especially close to urban areas and large trading centers), and it will be crucial to understand if land-use rights holders intending to rent out their land are willing or not to plant trees. Besides, based on the kind of family, residence, and land-use rights, a person involved in an agroforestry project can eventually decide to plant the seedlings in a plot from their natal village instead of the place of residence, making it hard for the project to monitor and provide proper advice on-site.

Women are most commonly responsible for tree production activities, playing a pivotal role during trees' early growth. It is, therefore, essential to consider that project strategies do not further increase their already heavy workload. **Interviewed women consider having reasonable control over income from the sale of firewood during the rainy season, which is a good development for them during those difficult months regarding households' food security and access to essential services such as health care.**

Since their control and benefit over firewood sales is mainly in the rainy season (due to the high demand at their residence village and because selling is done by foot), finding alternative income-generating activities or **ways to increase women's control over wood products' incomes during the dry season would significantly benefit them and their homes.** However, it is important to keep in mind that women's opportunities to increase tree production or to engage in other income-generating activities are constrained by limited time, mobility, access to labor, and cash. For instance, actions to facilitate **access to tools can reduce the difficulties women and men face when managing and producing trees**, while releasing for women headed households the burden and cost of hiring labor for activities requiring time and physical effort, such as pruning.

Besides, for women to access knowledge and techniques to manage trees, it is crucial to set meetings or training sessions at a time that does not disturb women's household responsibilities. Additionally, having fellow women trainers or lead farmers could encourage their attendance. In addition, **well-informed farmers regarding market prices and demand could become more confident in negotiating prices, especially women.** Finally, it remains a must for an agroforestry project to collect sex-disaggregated data to identify trends and constraints affecting men and women differently, assess the project's impact, and address the findings accordingly.

For more information, contact:
Manuel Milz, Area Manager for Malawi
manuel.milz@interaide.org
Tel. +265 991 787 360, www.interaide.org