



## MALAWI: Gender transformative effects through the implementation of land rights for women

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Karin Gaesing

## Gender transformative effects through the implementation of land rights for women in Malawi

The Customary Land Law, i.e. the law concerning land that is traditionally owned, was newly enacted in Malawi in 2022 after lengthy consultations with civil society organisations and the traditional village heads (*chiefs*). In contrast to common practice in patrilineal societies in northern Malawi, it provides for land rights for women. However, the implementation of this law is still in its infancy in Malawi. The majority of people in rural areas are unaware of the law, and women in particular are not aware of their rights. In the patrilineal society, a woman moves to her husband's village when she marries and rarely owns land independently to cultivate. Land is usually owned jointly with the husband to cultivate. The women also work in the family fields, but it is often the men alone who decide how to utilise the proceeds. After divorce or the death of the husband, women are usually required to return to their parents and must usually leave most of their possessions with the husband's family.

The „Land Rights for Women and Marginalised Groups“ project, which is funded by Misereor and implemented by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) of the Diocese of Mzuzu, is working with the Ministry of Lands to implement access to land for women and the issuing of land titles for women in the Rumphi district in northern Malawi. The project also encourages women to implement agro-ecological farming techniques in the project impact areas

Widows and divorced women in particular, who are treated more or less with disrespect on their parents' farms, can not only feed themselves and their children by owning and independently cultivating land while applying agro-ecological farming methods but also generate income by selling part of their harvest, which they can invest in their children's schooling, in the purchase of more land or in starting some other income-generating activity to support reinvestment in agriculture. They also become respected members of their society again, participating in the decision-making process in the village.

*Land rights for women, gender transformative effects, Malawi*

## Country and project background

Around 21.5 million people were living in Malawi in 2024 (UNFPA, n.d.), 81.7% of them in rural areas in 2023 (CIA 2025). With 4.41% per year the urbanisation rate is very low compared to other African countries. According to an estimate by the World Bank (2023), around 70% of the population live below the poverty line of US\$ 2.15 per day – this situation has not changed since around 2010. Food insecurity in the country is also relatively high. The number of people suffering from famine was 19.9% in 2022 and has risen steadily since 2011 (United Nations n.d.).



Malawi ranks 172nd out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI), placing the country in the category of least developed countries (UNDP 2024). In terms of the Gender Inequality Index, it is 174th out of 191 countries, which is mainly due to discriminatory practices, very low participation of women in the political sphere (22.9 % share of women in parliament in 2021) and a high incidence of violence against women (UNDP 2023). Although overall women make up a higher proportion of the labour force in agriculture, the land cultivated by women is 25% less productive than that cultivated by men. This is due, among other things, to poorer access to land, labour, agricultural inputs and technologies as well as lower participation in value chains (Hettinger et al. 2021).

The ethnic groups in the centre and south of the country are predominantly matrilineal, while the ethnic groups in the north of Malawi are patrilineal and virilocal, i.e. the woman moves in with the man on marriage. The man or the man's family must pay a bride price for the wife. Poor families in rural areas in particular therefore marry their daughters off early, often to older men in second or third marriages, which often leads to problems and separation. According to the CIA World Factbook, in 2020 7.5% of girls up to 15 years of age were married, compared to 37.7% of girls up to 18 years of age and only 7% of boys up to 18

years of age. In the Gender Inequality Index, the Human Development Report records 117 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 2022 (UNDP 2024).

According to traditional land law, only men or sons are entitled to own land. Women usually jointly own a piece of land with their husbands in the husband's village to farm. In the event of divorce, separation or the death of the husband, it is customary to send the woman back to her parental home. She must give the land which she farmed together with her husband during the marriage, her home and the livestock she owned together with her husband, to the family-in-law and the husband's relatives. This leads to a situation in which the woman returns to her parents with her children, destitute, and has to be supported by them.



The Malawi Land Act of 2002 (GRM 2002) with amendments in 2022 (Malawi Government 2022) aims to fundamentally change this situation by granting female and male children equal inheritance rights to land: „...this policy dictates that all children inherit land and real property belonging to parents equally.“ (GRM 2002: 24). However, in rural areas this law is implemented only to a limited degree, mainly due to inadequate financial and technical capacity on the part of the responsible authorities; some particularly conservative village heads even openly refuse to recognise the law because land in women's hands is against the tradition.

## Goals and activities at a glance

The Diocese of Mzuzu in northern Malawi is one of eight dioceses of the Catholic Church. The „Land Rights for Women“ project, which is supported by the German NGO Misereor, was launched in 2018 and is currently in its third phase, which is planned until 2027. The local organisation in charge of implementation is the Catholic Commission

for Justice and Peace (CCJP), a social arm of the Catholic Church founded by the Malawian Bishops' Conference in 1992. Its current head is the Bishop of Mzuzu. According to estimates from 2018, around 17.2% of the Malawian population was Catholic (CIA Factbook). According to The ARDA (2020), this figure is as high as 33.19%. In the diocese of Mzuzu there has been a steady increase in the number of Catholics: while their share of the population of Mzuzu was 18% in 2000, it was 39.9% in 2021 (<https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dmzuz.html>).



The overall objective of the project is to help ensure that women and marginalised groups have access to and lifelong ownership of land in order to secure their rights to food and socio-economic development. This is to be achieved through two sub-objectives:

1. The responsible institutions at district and village level in the Rumphi and Nkhatabay districts promote and protect land security in customary land ownership for the target group of women (married, unmarried, widowed).
2. The target group of women and marginalised groups use their land through agroecological cultivation techniques to realise their rights to food and socio-economic development.

To achieve these goals, CCJP works closely with the Ministry of Lands, which is supported by the project in informing the village *chiefs* in the project area as well as other village officials, catechists and members of the *CCJP parish committees* about the prevailing land law. First, the members of the *CCJP Parish Committee* and the catechists are informed and trained about the project in order to sensitise the population about land ownership for women and girls and to work as volunteers in the villages of the project area or to recruit volunteers who, after appropriate training in the villages, are to identify and document

cases in which women are not granted land when they return to their home village after divorce / separation or widowhood. The *chiefs* are then informed and trained in accordance with the objectives of the project.



Radio programmes, the development of information and training materials and regular lobby meetings among others with the land authorities, representatives of the village judiciary and *chiefs* are also used to provide information about land rights and to promote the allocation of land to returning women. The project currently reaches around 800 women, 400 village *chiefs* and 80 volunteers. Once the land rights in a village are regulated through the contribution of the project, it is the task of the Ministry of Lands to survey and register the women's plots and issue the women with a title deed.



CCJP is committed to an agro-ecological approach. Project staff first train the volunteers in agro-ecology and organic farming methods, who in the current phase train around 400 women in these methods. They are mainly taught how to produce their own organic fertiliser from *Tithonia* (picture 5), vetiver grass, the bean species *Tephrosia vogelii*, *Moringa*, species of *acacia*, *Faidherbia albida* and animal dung. In addition, compost preparation and the construction of small mounds running parallel to the slope contour lines are encouraged. The mounds serve for slowing down rainwater run-off and thus for improving

its infiltration into the soil. Small rectangular pits are also dug across the arable land and filled with organic fertiliser to benefit the plants growing around the pits.

## Project impacts achieved to date

The results of this good practice study are largely based on the author's research visit, in January 2025, who is a staff member of the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) of the University of Duisburg-Essen, in the course of which ten focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews were conducted with 45 affected women as well as numerous other villagers, *chiefs*, members of village committees and the Catholic Church, employees of the Ministry of Lands and NGOs, among others. The results were presented locally both to representatives of the German Embassy and the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in order to generate synergies.

Through the intervention of the CCJP, women who return to their parental homes after divorce or widowhood receive land from their families, usually between 1 and 2 acres, sometimes even more (1 acre corresponds to approx 0.4 ha). Of 26 women interviewed directly about their land area, six owned 2 acres each, 13 owned one acre. The land is surveyed and registered by the land authority, and the women are then issued with a land certificate. This means that the land belongs to them for life and no one can take it away from them. If the woman's family does not have enough land, a request is usually made to the chief, who generally owns larger areas, for a piece of land for the woman. The land title gives the women the security to invest in their land, which they do.

Cultivating their farmland by applying agro-ecological techniques maintains and improves soil fertility in a sustainable way. As such, this leads to improved food security, according to farmers and development experts. Farmers proudly reported on their own experiments with both, conventional and agroecological methods on neighbouring plots.

The analysis of the gender impacts of the programme according to the Reach - Benefit - Empower - Transform concept produced the results presented below.

**Reach:** The women who have returned to their families are reached by the project through the extensive network

of the Catholic Church with its catechists, the CCJP Parish Committee and above all the CCJP volunteers, even in very remote villages.

**Benefit:** By cultivating their own fields, the women can sufficiently feed themselves and their children and often have money left over to pay for their children's schooling and to meet their basic needs, e.g. buying soap. They invest additional income in building houses, in the purchase of additional land, in hiring labour during peak periods of agricultural work, in starting non-agricultural income-generating activities such as buying and selling food, baking and selling doughnuts (*mandasi*), etc.



**Empowerment:** A general distinction is made between four types of empowerment (e.g. by Friedman 1992), all four of which are achieved by the project. Firstly, because now the women own their own land and can this way take care for themselves, they feel like responsible adults again and are viewed as such by their families. Respect for them is growing and the women themselves are more confident (**psychological empowerment**). On the other hand, both men and women report in the FGDs that there is now more peace and mutual respect in the families and village communities. The returned women report that often they had hardly any decision-making powers in their marriages before and that the husband withheld the income generated by their joint labour in the family fields from them. In individual cases the husband even claimed the money earned by the wife through petty trading and spent it on alcohol. If they were to enter into another marriage, they would not tolerate such behaviour again, as now they owned their own land and could leave a man who treated them badly at any time (**social empowerment**).

By harvesting from their own farmland, the women can feed themselves and their children and are no longer dependent on outside help. The sale of surplus harvested

produce enables them - even if not in the first year - to start other income-generating activities and thus to build up reserves and a certain degree of resilience. Women who report having been welcomed with open arms and generously supported by their families also emphasise that they longed for independence and achieved this independence by cultivating their own land. Many women are also organised in village savings and credit groups (*village banks*), they save together and grant each other loans. This form of saving was not possible for women before the project began, mainly because they did not have the money required to join such organisations (**economic empowerment**). Unthinkable before the project, the returned women are now active in village organisations and committees, often even in leadership positions. For example, women who took part in the FGD said that they were active in the *Village Development Committee* (VDC), *Area Development Committee* (ADC) and the *Customary Land Committee* (CLC). The *chiefs* and other officials interviewed emphasised that women had previously not been accepted for leadership positions, but that now they were able to fill these positions competently after having received appropriate training from the CCJP (**political empowerment**).



**Transform:** Overall, the effects of the project can be described as gender-transformative. The allocation of arable land and certified land titles to women is a structural change that gives women more independence, decision-making power and opportunities than before, even in the long term. Women's membership in village decision-making and planning institutions also gives them the opportunity to help shape the interests of their communities, especially if they hold leadership positions. A gender-transformative impact is also achieved by the sensitisation of the *chiefs* and the training of the different committees and CCJP *Volunteers* in gender aspects.

## Challenges and conditions for success

► The implementation organisation CCJP, and therefore the Catholic Church, is represented in the most remote villages by its catechists, the CCJP *parish committee and volunteers*. Thanks to this structure and its very broad network, the project is able to reach all villages in the diocese and spread the word about the project, as well as identifying women in the villages who have returned to their home villages after divorce, separation or widowhood.



► Both the catechists, members of the CCJP parish committees and the volunteers interviewed showed a high level of motivation to work for the project. However, the volunteers complain that sometimes they have to travel long distances between villages, due to very poor road and transport conditions. It is also discouraging when afterwards people do not apply the agro-ecological farming methods they are taught.

► The success of the project measures stands and falls with the *chiefs*. The plan to implement the project measures in the Mzimba district was dropped after fierce opposition from the local *chiefs* to land in women's hands. In the diocese of Mzuzu, however, Traditional Authority Mwankhunikira in the project impact area in Rumphidistrict, an educated and cosmopolitan man, was won over to the project. He claimed to be an advocate for women's rights and to set a good example himself by promoting the issue of a land title for his wife (picture 9). The *chiefs* in his sphere of influence were obliged to follow his lead, he explained.

► The use of agro-ecological methods helps to break the dependence on the use of increasingly expensive artificial fertilisers. This makes a good harvest possible even for poor farmers. However, it is lamented that the necessary resources for organic fertiliser production, such as cow

dung, tithonia and containers for the production of liquid fertiliser, are not available in sufficient quantities everywhere.

► Women have difficult starting conditions both in their home villages and in their husbands' villages. There are also hardly any female role models to show them that women can be economically, socially and politically successful.



► The implementation of the land law is only progressing on a pilot basis because the Ministry of Lands lacks the financial resources and technical equipment to survey and register the land and issue land titles. Despite these deficits, employees of the Ministry of Lands emphasise that they would prefer the systematic treatment of all agricultural land rather than only the registration of land belonging to women, as is currently practised in the project.

## Conclusions for development cooperation in general

► An institution such as the Catholic Church with its committees, which is networked far into remote villages, is ideally suited to reaching a large number of women and men of all social statuses. In the very religious Zambian society, the Church also has a high level of legitimacy, so that its messages are widely recognised. Cooperation with such institutions is very beneficial for the success of the project.

► The support of influential local leaders such as the *chiefs* or, in this case, even Traditional Authority Mwankhunikira, can be very conducive to the implementation of gender transformative measures, even in a traditionally patriarchal region. An attempt should be made to identify

such personalities and to win them over to gender aspects.

► Stronger cooperation with NGOs such as the Women's Legal Resources Centre (WOLREC), which campaigns for legal and social justice for women and girls in Malawi and is closely networked with the international Land Coalition in Rome, could provide the project with interesting impetus and further dissemination, as is the case in Ethiopia, for example, with the cooperation between GIZ and the NGO Stand for her Land in the land sector (Gaesing 2025).

► The issuing of land titles creates security for farmers in the long-term cultivation of their land and therefore also has a decisive influence on their investments in the land. This is an essential step for the women farmers in Mzuzu. Comprehensive surveying and registration of the land, explicitly taking into account the issuing of property titles for women or joint land titles for married couples, as in Ethiopia, is desirable.

► Advising farmers on the application of agro-ecological methods is, so to speak, the prerequisite for poor people to be able to utilise their land profitably and should definitely be continued. Networking with local financial services providers, possibly in cooperation with other projects that support this sector (e.g. GIZ), is advantageous in order to enable farmers to take out loans for seeds, labour or solar pumps for small-scale irrigation.

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## Illustrations

Cover picture: FGD with women who have received land through the work of the project, 1. Many villages are difficult to reach, especially in the rainy season, 2. Lorry with day labourers, 3. Office of the Diocese and CCJP, 4. In the project region, 5. Tithonia, 6. A couple cultivating their fields (maize and tobacco) 7. Maize cultivation in rows and without heaping, as propagated by CCJP, 8. Discussion with chiefs, 9. Traditional Authority Mwankhunikira and his wife.

All photos by Karin Gaesing

## Project characteristics\*

B4 – Processing intensity by research team  
G1 – Gender identifier  
P2 – Participation  
A1 – Target groups Identifier

\* For an explanation see Good Practice handout or [www.uni-due.de/inef/inef\\_projektreihen.php](http://www.uni-due.de/inef/inef_projektreihen.php)

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31b Ethiopia: Gender-transformative effects of landtitles for couples

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## INEF - Research Project

The research project aims to develop recommendations for state development cooperation. The aim is to identify measures that can better reach poor, vulnerable and food insecure population groups and efficiently support them in improving their living situation in a sustainable way.

We examine the interdependencies of poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity as well as gender transformative activities and impact in order to identify both blockages and success factors for development cooperation.

Based on literature analyses and surveys of professional organisations at home or abroad, successfully practised

approaches (“good practices”) are to be identified and intensively analysed within the framework of field research. In addition to a socio-cultural contextualisation, the gender dimension is consistently taken into account throughout. The local investigations focus on the participation of the affected population in order to capture their perception of the problems and ideas for solution.

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