

ANALYSIS OF INTRA-HOUSEHOLD GENDER DYNAMICS IN OIL PALM PRODUCTION AMONG INDIGENOUS RURAL FARMERS IN KARONGA DISTRICT, MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

This study analysed the intra-household gender dynamics in oil palm production among indigenous rural farmers in Karonga district, Malawi. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to solicit information from indigenous rural farmers involved in oil palm production. The findings revealed striking incongruity between the perceived division of labour and decision-making authority among indigenous rural farmers involved in oil palm production. While there is a perception of equal participation in decision-making processes, the reality is far more nuanced, with women consistently marginalised in their control over income and access to land inheritance. The unequal land inheritance not only undermines women's socio-economic status but also perpetuate cycles of dependency and vulnerability among women. The study recommends that addressing the root causes of gender disparities requires multifaceted strategies that challenge discriminatory norms, promote women's rights, and create enabling environments for women's empowerment.

Keywords: Decision making, Gender roles, Rural farmers, Intra-Household, Inheritance, Oil palm production

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture remain fundamental for addressing socio-economic challenges in developing countries such as Malawi. Agriculture plays a key role in food security and economic development as most of the rural world population depend either directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihood (Udemezue and Osegbue, 2018). However, gender issues in agriculture such as decision making and distribution of labour within households, cannot be overemphasised.

Intra-household gender dynamics among indigenous rural farmers play pivotal role in shaping agricultural practices, including resource allocation, decision-making processes, and overall household well-being (Mehraban et al., 2022). Cole et al. (2015) in the analysis of gender and agriculture, noted that among rural farmers, questions such as who control resources between men and women in agriculture? Who has the upper hand economic gains from the agricultural activities?, among others, are paramount and worth reflecting. This is the case as issues to do with gender inequality start with unequal access to resources. Also, the inequalities are driven by weak positioning in intra-household bargaining that originates in unfavourable marital and inheritance laws, and family and community norms (Zafar, S et al., 2022).

In principle, the concept of gender distinguishes itself from biological differences denoted by the term gender (pertaining to nature). Gender, aligns more closely with social perspective, encompassing a set of roles that define what is expected or deemed appropriate for men and women, as well as what they are discouraged from doing (involving socio-cultural interpretations) (Lindqvist et al., 2021). Gender is an interplay of societal norms, behaviours, and cultural expectations that shape the understanding of gender roles.

Gender analysis of rural farmers involved in oil palm production reveals that even in the absence of explicitly gender-specific roles or policies, this agricultural activity is characterised by unequal gender power

dynamics (De Vos and Delabre, 2018). Men usually occupy the decision-making roles and highly skilled positions that provide them with access to resources and power to maintain and even reinforce the unequal gender roles. Further, there is lower access to resources and opportunity for women. Again, men are engaged in heavy physical aspect of labour such as clearing bushes and planting seedlings, while women are most of the times engaged in processing and packaging activities (Rowland et al., 2022) (Matchaya. G, 2009). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that gender division of labour is done with a consideration to suit the knowledge level of the genders, with men assigned to tasks that require more expertise or knowledge, while women involved in activities that are less tedious (Maharani et al., 2019). The implication here is that, gender division of labour contributes to the gendered discrimination of women in the oil palm production while simultaneously making men the more important participants.

Nevertheless, gendered differences as a result of assigned roles are not seen as gendered injustices, including marginalisation, discrimination or the imposition of multiple burdens (Li, 2015). Sarku (2016) revealed that increasing gender equity among rural holder farmers involved in oil palm production requires increased awareness of the inequalities that exist as well as reducing barriers that limit the involvement of women. Policies need to be implemented that ensure gender equality in terms of access to land, resources, tools, extension services and market information (Connelly. L, 2020).

In Malawi, oil palm production is an old tradition of Nyakusya people who reside in Karonga district. These farmers have been involved in this agricultural activity since time immemorial. Men are involved in plucking fresh fruit bunches from trees whilst women are involved in boiling fresh fruits to produce oil. Since the inception of oil palm production among indigenous rural farmers, little or no exploration has been on intra-household gender dynamics affecting oil palm production. Therefore, this study analysed the intra-household gender dynamics among indigenous rural farmers involved in oil palm production. The study was informed by the following questions, what are the intra-household gender dynamics that influence oil palm production? What are the intra-household gender dynamics that affect the realisation of benefits from oil palm production among indigenous rural farmers?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling Method

In conducting the study, researchers adhered to a prescribed methodology encompassing the collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting of data (Creswell and Clark, 2018). Upon identifying research problem, mixed method approach and sequential explanatory research design were used. The choice of this design was motivated by the understanding that the initial analysis of quantitative data would provide broader understanding of research problem, enabling a more in-depth exploration (Ansah, 2020; Subedi, 2016). Subsequently, the collection and analysis of qualitative data aimed at refining and offering explanations for the quantitative findings, particularly in exploring participants' and discussant's viewpoints (Takane, T 2008).

The study was conducted from four selected communities under the Traditional Authority (T/A) Mwakaboko of Karonga District, Malawi. Lottery method within simple random technique was used to select households engaged in oil palm production as respondents to the study. With a total population of 680, and using Slovin's formula, the sample size of 477 was used to which the questionnaires were administered. Slovin's formula is calculated as: $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$, where:

n = sample size

N = population size

e = acceptable margin of error (accepted error margin of 0.05)

To meet the qualitative demands of the study, purposive sampling was used to select participants, targeting key informants particularly chiefs and opinion leaders from selected communities. A total number of eight (8) in-depth interviews with key informants, guided by interview guide, were conducted. The composition of key informants included five men and three women from selected communities. Further, convenient sampling was used to select discussants. Four (4) focus group discussions were formed involving 39 discussants. The focus group discussions were guided by a discussant guide. Focus group discussions were composed of both men and women involved in oil palm production from selected communities. Each focus group had five men and five women, except on group which had five men and four women.

Data Analysis

In analysing quantitative data, measures of frequency, correlation, Chi-square, logistic, and linear regression analyses were conducted. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 27) software was used to manage and organise data. The outcomes of these analyses were presented in tabular and figure format, providing an overview of the numerical insights derived from the study.

Further, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse qualitative data. This approach allowed researchers to have in-depth exploration of participants' and discussants' experiences, perceptions, and the underlying challenges affecting their farming. Through a rigorous and iterative process, themes from both quantitative and qualitative data were developed. These thematic outcomes were then thoughtfully presented, offering a qualitative narrative that complements and enriches the quantitative findings, contributing to a holistic understanding of the challenges confronting oil palm production by indigenous rural farmers.

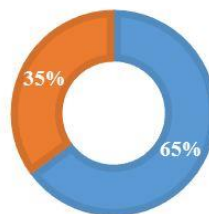
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Composition of Farmers

The analysis of gender within the surveyed population in the dataset was not only for understanding the distribution of male and female respondents but also for uncovering valuable insights in the role of gender in social, cultural and economic dynamics of farmer involved in oil palm production (Li, T M, 2015).

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF OIL PALM FARMERS

■ MALE ■ FEMALE



Source: Field Data (2023)

FIGURE 1

Gender Dimensions of Oil Palm Farmers

From figure 1, a total of 65 percent of farmers involved in oil palm production are male, while 35 percent are female. The male dominance in this agricultural activity suggests patriarchal and land acquisition system among farmers, revealing existing social norms, cultural practices, and structural barriers that limit women. In the course of interviews, Nyauzedi, one of the female key informants reported that land belongs to the husband's side.

This is the case when a woman gets married, she has to move to the husband's side. In the event that the husband dies, the husband's side may repossess the land leaving the woman with no place to cultivate. This was further collaborated by Dambuyo, one of male key informants who said that land inheritance favour boys as compared to girls. When a young man marries, parents take a portion of land and give it to him to cultivate such that the proceeds from farming can help him to take care of his family. It can be deduced that among indigenous rural farmers, patriarchal system leads men to have upper hand in land acquisition. Consequently, this kind of system disadvantages women. For example, in terms of accruing benefits from oil palm, men will be advantaged compared to women (Kilic et al., 2015). It can therefore be concluded that the skewed gender ratio between men and women among indigenous rural farmers may have implications for resource allocation and decision-making within households. In contexts where men dominate agricultural production, they may exert greater control over land, inputs, and income generated from oil palm production.

Intra-household Gender Roles

The adoption of oil palm production among indigenous rural farmers in Karonga district, Malawi, has gender-specific consequences that extend to the reconfiguration of labour dynamics within households. These affect the distribution of tasks and responsibilities and decision-making power of household members.

Intra-household	YES		NO	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
Men and Women make decision equally	455	95.4	22	4.6
Division of labour within the family	462	96.9	15	3.1
Land is possessed equally regardless of gender	435	91.2	42	8.8
As a man/woman, I am able to inherit land	370	77.6	107	22.4

Gendered Division of Labour

From table 1, a cohort of 96.9 percent of surveyed respondents reported the existence of division of labour within their households. This statistical figure underscores the perceived division of labour within the households of indigenous rural farmers involved in oil palm production. However, in most rural African communities, the division of labour within households often reflects traditional gender roles, where certain tasks are assigned within the household based on gender. In the course of focus group discussions, Namoyo one of the female discussants from Mwangulukulu village revealed that at a household level, men are involved in plucking fresh fruits bunches from trees. Women are involved in plucking fresh fruits from bunches, boiling fruits and produce cooking oil which is used in our houses. Also, Ngwangwa one of the male discussants from Mwakaboko village said that men are involved in physical works, such as plucking palm fruits from trees, as women cannot pluck fruits from trees. Women take charge of boiling palm fruits and produce cooking oil and soap.

Namoyo and Ngwangwa's account highlight specific tasks assigned to men and women in the process of oil palm production. As men are tasked to plucking fresh fruit bunches from trees, this involves physical labour and requires strength and agility, which aligns with traditional notions of masculinity associated with agricultural work, while women are involved in boiling fruits and producing cooking oil, signifies domestic activities traditionally

assigned to women. In line with Mawardati et al. (2022) gender-based role distinctions within agriculture, typically include men being engaged in tasks demanding physical strength, while women undertake labour-intensive activities necessitating meticulous attention to detail and time commitment.

Also, the division of labour among these indigenous rural farmers underscores the significance of collaborative goal from both men and women in oil palm production, suggesting that this particular crop plays a unifying role, allowing for the active and balanced participation of both men and women at the household level. This form of division of labour aligns with Olutumise et al. (2023) who noted that gender division of labour compliments labour force within the family. Again, the division of labour among these farmers, reflect the influence on economic contributions of household members (Rowland et al., 2022). Instead of money being used to employ other people, the assigned tasks within the household reduces labour costs.

It can therefore be concluded that the existence of division of labour among indigenous rural farmers provides insight into the socio-economic dynamics within households and highlights opportunities for promoting gender equality, redistributing tasks more equitably, and enhancing the overall well-being of household members. It fosters how farmers have a collective goal within the households as they engage in oil palm production.

Gender equality in decision making

From table 1, data revealed that collective decision-making regarding this agricultural activity is evenly distributed between men and women at the household level. A cohort of 95.4 percent of the surveyed population, revealed that both men and women participate actively in decision making regarding oil palm production. This is a positive sign for gender equality, as it indicates that women have a voice and agency in this important agricultural activity (Mehraban et al., 2022; Zakaria, 2017).

Nevertheless, gender equality goes beyond collective decision making. Sharing of the proceeds (income) among family members at the household level is vital in ensuring the sustainability and continuity of oil palm production. In the course of interviews, Nyamwezi one of the female key informants said that in our community both men and women are involved in decision making at the household level. But you know, men are always head of their families. There are times when we have sold cooking oil, men tend to take the money and use it to drink beer or doing things of their interests. Nyamwezi's narration, though acknowledges the existence of collective decision making at the household level, offers another perspective where power dynamics exist. That is, while both men and women perceive being involved in decision-making at the household level, there is a clear indication of traditional gender roles, with men being viewed as the head of the family. With men taking control of the proceeds, highlights how women are excluded in decision making processes at household level (Basnett et al., 2016; Enete and Amusa, 2010).

Inquiring further on why men tend to control income generated for their interests, Namasina one of the female discussants from Kawese village said that this normally happens as men are heads of the family. Women are supposed to listen to their husbands based on our culture and tradition. As men take control of the proceeds, it clearly depicts how masculinity is inculcated within households among indigenous rural farmers. Arguably, as men are considered breadwinners for the family, they tend to women in decision making (Brandth and Haugen, 2016).

It can therefore be concluded that when both men and women are involved in decision-making, it fosters greater social cohesion and cooperation within households. However, though there is perceived women's participation in decision-making, their empowerment is limited as they do not have control over the economic resources generated from oil palm production.

Gendered Differences in Land Inheritance

From table 1, it was revealed that 77.6 percent of the surveyed population, perceive that they have the right to inherit land, suggesting that inheritance rights are accessible to them without gender-based restrictions.

Augmenting on the understanding that men and women can inherit land, Gonthi, one of male key informants said that in our villages, one is able to inherit land from parents. However, most of the times, this normally happens in favour of boys as compared to girls. When a young man marries, parents take a portion of land and give it to him to cultivate such that the proceeds from farming can help him to take care of his family. Furthermore, Namala one of the female discussants from Nyasa village said that in our communities, land is handed over to young men, though at times young women can inherit land from their parents. We consider that men should take care of their wives, and since when a young woman is married has to go and stay with her husband, the husband's side has to make sure that there is land to cultivate. In this way, young men have an upper hand to inherit land than young women.

The given accounts, though acknowledging the presence of land inheritance for both men and women in the communities, another perspective comes to light, whereby men are advantaged, reflecting a deeply ingrained gender bias. By prioritizing young men in inheriting land, young women are often marginalised and face greater challenges in accessing land for cultivation or economic activities. This limits women's ability to generate income, accumulate assets, and achieve economic independence, perpetuating their economic vulnerability.

Also, the expectation that men should take care of their wives reinforces traditional gender roles that prescribe women's dependency on men for their well-being and livelihood. This dependency can limit women's autonomy and agency, particularly in decision-making processes related to land use and resource management. Arguably, unequal access to land inheritance can contribute to tensions and conflicts within families and communities, particularly between male and female relatives. This can undermine social cohesion and solidarity, leading to divisions and disputes over land ownership and inheritance rights. Euler et al. (2016) revealed that one of the factors that disadvantages women in oil palm production is land inheritance issues as it favours men than women.

Therefore, it can be established that, land inheritance favouring men reflects a gender bias in land inheritance practices, where young men are favoured over young women. This perpetuates unequal access to resources and economic opportunities based on gender, reinforcing existing power dynamics that privilege men over women.

Women and Land Rights

The rights-based access, characterised by informal recognition (as entrained within the community), may, paradoxically, act as a potential impediment to equitable resource benefits, particularly among rural farmers (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). This anomaly arises from the intricate interplay between cultural and traditional norms, which often underpin and perpetuate the existing gender-based disparities in resource utilisation. As these customs and conventions evolve within a socio-cultural context, they can inadvertently disadvantage one gender over the other, impeding the full realisation of resource-related advantages.

The question whether women have cultural land rights as compared to men in patriarchal system as property owners is worth exploring. That is, in most patriarchal system where men have upper hand in inheriting land as a property mostly hinders women to tap from the resource for the benefit of their welfare. Commenting on the land rights issues in relation to women, Natembo one of the female discussants from Nyasa village said that most of the times women have no control over land, especially when the husband dies. In the event that the husband has died and that the woman wants to marry again, she is supposed to leave the land which she was cultivating with the deceased husband. Similarly, Dodoma one of the female discussants from Kasewe village said that, land belongs to the husband's side. This is the case as when the woman gets married, she has to move to the husband's side. In case the husband has died, and woman wants to marry, the woman loses tittle-hood of the land she was cultivating with the husband before he died.

From the given accounts, it can be argued that traditionally, land rights favours men as compared to women. The accounts entail that women's rights to land are contingent upon their marital status and are subject to

the decisions of male family members. This places women in a vulnerable position, as they risk losing access to land if their husband dies or if they choose to remarry. Such conditions contribute to the disempowerment of women and restrict their agency in decision-making processes related to land and livelihoods. The loss of land rights due to widowhood or remarriage can have profound implications for women's livelihoods and economic security. Without access to land, women may struggle to support themselves and their families, leading to increased vulnerability to poverty and dependency on others for survival.

Cultural land rights advantaging men, perpetuate gender inequality and restrict women's autonomy, reinforcing patterns of discrimination and marginalisation within society (Murugani et al., 2014). As a result women are traditionally excluded from inheriting land in their own right. Women have less control over land as compared to men.

It can therefore be concluded that women's rights to land are contingent upon their marital status and are subject to the decisions of male family members. Upon marriage, women are expected to move to their husband's side and have limited autonomy over land ownership and management. Again, it can be argued that with men having land rights suggests rite of passage where men are the heirs to land property.

Chi-Square Analysis of Gender and Land Inheritance

The researcher proposed that among indigenous rural farmers engaged in oil palm production, there is an association between gender and land inheritance practices. The anticipation was that there are observable differences in the inheritance of land based on gender, with distinct social expectations and practices guiding the transmission of land assets among male and female members of the community.

		I am able to inherit land				
		Yes	No	Total	Chi-Square	Sig Value
		n(%)	n(%)			
Gender	Males	247(79.7)	63(20.3)	310(100)	2.264	0.131
	Females	123(73.7)	44(26.3)	167(100)		
Total		370(77.6)	107(22.4)	477(100)		

From table 2, crosstabulation and Chi-square analysis were analysed to test if there are observed differences between men and women in land inheritance. In the crosstabulation, 79.7 percent out of 310 men surveyed indicated that both men and women are able to inherit land within the surveyed communities. Again 73.7 percent of women out of 167 surveyed, indicated that both men and women are able to inherit land. Further, an observation of Chi-square value of 2.264 and Sig value of 0.131, reveals that there are no statistical differences in land inheritance between men and women. Similarly, in the course of interviews Dambuyo, one of male key informants said that in our communities, a man or woman is able to inherit land from parents, revealing land inheritance as a property easily handed over to women and men within the communities. The ability to inherit land between men and women among rural farmers fosters equal sharing of resource (Singirankabo, Ertsen & Van de Giesen, 2022; Thindwa, 2019).

Mann-Whitney U test

The researcher hypothesised that there are differences in acres of land based on gender, with an expectation that number of acres of land held by men differ from those held by women. Therefore, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted with the aim of providing insights into the relationships between acres of land, farm ownership, and gender among

indigenous rural farmers engaged in oil palm production.

		N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	p-value	Z
Gender	Male	310	259.14	19641.5	0.001	-4.781
	Female	167	201.61			

From table 19, the summary from the Mann-Whitney U test has been presented about independent variables acres of land and gender. In the analysis of acres of land and gender, the mean rank was observed. The mean rank of 259.14 for males was higher as compared to females who had mean rank of 201.61. This signifies that men are able to have more acres of land as compared to women. This was also confirmed by the test statistics which revealed that indeed men are likely to have more acres of land compared to women as Mann-Whitney U value of 19641.500 and Sig value of 0.001 with the Z score of -4.781 showing statistically significant. Also in the course of interviews, Dambuyo, one of the key informants narrated that when a young man marries, parents take a portion of land and give it to him to cultivate such that the proceeds from farming can help him to take care of his family. It can therefore be argued that among indigenous rural farmers, men are likely to have more acres of land compared to women. This can be attributed to patriarchal system playing pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of land inheritance and resource access within the communities (Islam & Ullah, 2021), as one of the defining characteristics of this system is the transmission of land rights from fathers to their male offspring, typically sons.

It can therefore be argued that despite land inheritance patterns revealing both men and women being able to inherit land, men are likely to have more acres of land than women. This is the case as men are poised to take care of their families, and that women tend to move to husband's side when they are married.

CONCLUSION

From this study, the findings revealed striking incongruity between the perceived division of labour and decision-making authority among indigenous rural farmers involved in oil palm production. While there is a perception of equal participation in decision-making processes, the reality is far more nuanced, with women consistently marginalised in their control over income and access to land inheritance. The unequal land inheritance not only undermines women's socio-economic status but also perpetuate cycles of dependency and vulnerability among women. These findings have profound implications for policy and practice aimed at promoting gender equality and inclusive development in the oil palm. Addressing the root causes of gender disparities requires multifaceted strategies that challenge discriminatory norms, promote women's rights, and create enabling environments for women's empowerment. Interventions must go beyond superficial representations of equality to tackle structural barriers that impede women's access to resources, decision-making power, and opportunities for economic advancement.

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