etp

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Gender Equality in Malawi

Factsheet

Overview

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with the majority of the population living in rural communities and under the national poverty line. It has a fast-growing population of around 18.6 million, which is expected to double by 2038.[1] 80% are employed in agriculture, which accounts for one-third of the Gross Domestic Product.[2] The tea sector is Malawi's largest employer.[3]

Women and children are most likely to suffer from poverty and its impacts, such as violence, poor nutrition, and a lack of access to education and employment. While women have an enormous impact on the wellbeing of their families and societies, their potential is sometimes not realised due to discriminatory social norms and legal institutions. Although their status has improved in recent decades, gender inequalities in Malawi persist.[4] In tea communities, this is reflected in the low percentage of women in leadership positions (on estates and in smallholder associations), as well as in teenage pregnancies and the burden of unpaid care work falling on women.

This factsheet is a resource that highlights the extent of some of these issues, using references and key data points from third party sources.

Tea

The tea plantation sector employs more than 50,000 people in the peak season, making it Malawi's biggest private-sector employer.[5] In addition, it provides a livelihood to 16,500 smallholder tea farmers, at least 65% of which are women.[6]

There are more women farmers than men due to the matrilineal inheritance system in Southern Malawi. This tradition is not necessarily empowering to women. It generates a whole series of negative consequences for women, including male family members not feeling valued and not being vested in the stewardship of the land. Rates of physical violence against women are high, and men also



often end up leaving their wife and children and moving away.[7]

On tea estates, male workers make up about 65% of the workforce.[8]

Women's economic status

Malawian women tend to be the household financial managers and savers, often prioritising how earned money is spent.[9] However, female-headed households are 50% more likely to be poor, and on average earn only 60% of the annual income of male-headed households.[10]

It is unlikely for Malawian women to either stand for leadership roles or support others to do so. This trend persists in tea. Though women make up 35% of the sector's total workforce, it is rare to see them occupying managerial positions.[11] Just 16% of those employed in management are women.[12]

In Malawi, there is a 28% gender gap in agricultural productivity.[13] Women farmers have less access to inputs, credit, and extension than men.[14] Women are significantly less likely to have bank accounts than men.[15] Male farmers are more likely to receive and make use of fertiliser subsidy coupons than women.[16] Such inequalities undermine the socio-economic empowerment of women and reduce their competitiveness in the rural economy. Closing this productivity gap would mean 238,000 people being lifted out of poverty each year, for a ten-year period.[17]



Access to education

Improving access to education is crucial to combatting gender issues. Studies have shown that the more years girls spend in school, the better their health outcomes are likely to be. Each additional year a girl is in school is associated with a 10% increase in wages and increased life expectancy.[18]

Girls often do not continue their schooling once married and child marriage rates are high in Malawi.[19] Dropouts for girls are common with just 5% of girls finishing their final secondary school examinations.[20]

Only 15% of rural girls attend secondary school compared with 60% in urban areas.[21] Many girls are unable to make the long distance journeys between school and home.[22]

Given the levels of poverty, school fees can be a barrier for poorer families who, generally speaking, are more likely to invest in male education.[23]

Child marriage

While the Constitution was amended in 2017 to raise the legal age of marriage to 18, child marriage remains a major challenge.

Malawi has the 12th highest child marriage rate in the world; 42% are married before the age of 18, and almost one in 10 are married before their 15th birthday.[24] Poverty, limited awareness, and traditional customs are among its key drivers. Daughters are often married off to reduce the

financial burden, resulting in increased rates of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies, and school dropouts.[25] For example, in 2017 13% of girls aged 15-19 years old gave birth.[26]

Gender based violence

Malawi is characterised by a high prevalence of Gender Based Violence (GBV) against women and girls nationally. Over a third of women aged 15-49 years old report having experienced physical violence,[27] and nearly a quarter of children aged 9-18 years old experience forced sex.[28]

Information on the dangers of GBV, helplines and support mechanisms are not widely accessible for women and girls.[29]

Higher educational attainment has been shown to positively change perceptions of GBV and gender roles among both men and women.[30]

Land, property rights and inheritance

The majority of land is inherited, owned, and operated by men across the north of Malawi. In 2010, 48% of agricultural land was solely or jointly owned by women and just 23% was solely owned by women.[31]

In Southern Malawi (where most of the tea is grown and produced), a matrilineal inheritance system means that most land is in the hands of women. However, they are still dominated by over-bearing male family members ('uncles'), and therefore do not have real decision-making power over their land.[32]

ETP's programmes

Supporting women farmers and workers is a priority for our work in Malawi. It is a cross-cutting issue, and therefore carefully considered across all our programme activity. We consistently have a high participation of women in all our programmes, and time our engagement to ensure it does not clash with family responsibilities. We encourage women to take leadership positions across the groups we form (such as community tea nurseries and savings schemes) and prioritise women in 'training of trainers' initiatives. By actively seeking out their voices in our community needs assessments and evaluations, we ensure that women are at the centre of our work.

A core aim of all our programmes is to increase tea communities' economic empowerment. Given the high representation of women in these programmes, we have witnessed increased confidence and improved social status of women, within the wider community as well as within their households. As these women become champions, we see a ripple effect across tea communities; women apply newly gained skills in other areas of life and also become role-models for other women and girls.

Click here to learn about some of the key initiatives we run in Malawi.

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