



# AgriFoSe2030

Agriculture for Food Security 2030  
- Translating science into policy and practice



## Closing gender gaps in agriculture – a catalyst for poverty reduction in Malawi

*This policy brief is based on an AgriFoSe2030 report from theme 1, “Social and economic dimensions of smallholder based agriculture and food security”, titled “Gender segmented markets and production systems in Malawi”. Agriculture continues to be the most important economic sector in the country, contributing about 30% of to the total gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016. Furthermore, nearly all exports in Malawi come from agriculture; in 2016, non-agricultural exports only made up about 20% of the total export.*

The findings from the study are drawn from an in-depth literature review with an aim to synthesize existing scientific evidence to support policy and strengthen the role of women in Malawi’s agricultural sector.

### Gender gaps in Malawi

This study found that women, contributing about 52% of agricultural labour force, face challenges during both production and marketing of their agricultural products. It focuses on the production side; providing a summary of the nature and types of the existing gender gaps in Malawi and the factors explaining the identified gaps. Production-related challenges are many and include access to and control of land, access to farm labour, access to agricultural inputs (e.g. seed and fertiliser) and ownership of agricultural assets (e.g. farm implements) among others.

### Key findings

- Women make up the majority of agricultural work force in Malawi; by enhancing their participation in agriculture, Malawi has a better chance to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2.
- Provided with resources, female farmers are just as productive as male farmers.
- There is a positive trend of gender reforms in the country.
- However, only 32% of total agricultural landholders in Malawi are women
- Women also have less secure land ownership rights than men.
- Land reform policies and enforcement of laws are required to eliminate gender inequalities connected to land tenure.
- Policies to overcome gender imbalances exist but enforcement is weak and implementation inconsistent. Notwithstanding, the gender reforms implemented in the country over the years have had positive effects on the empowerment of women in agriculture.



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Malawi women preparing a meal with neighbours gathered.

Female farmers and female-headed households struggle to meet their household needs by their own production and are prevented from engaging in the cultivation of cash crops. Gender inequalities negatively affect the agricultural productivity in Malawi, since productivity of female farmers are hindered by their limited access to resources, thereby making it difficult for the agricultural sector to realise its full potential. Furthermore, gender inequalities exist in almost all sectors of the economy, not just in agriculture, and some of them relate to individual characteristics such as age, experience and education. While the labour force participation rates in Malawi are high, estimated to be 91% for men compared to 88% for women in 2014, these statistics are deceptive considering that on average men nearly earn three times as much as women even after adjusting for the number of hours worked.

### Factors explaining gender gaps

There are several factors explaining gender gaps in Malawi's agriculture. More generally, and this holds across many countries, male farmers control more land and livestock, have better access to farm implements, use more of improved seed varieties

and purchased inputs such as fertilisers, are more likely to use credit or insurance, have higher education levels and are more likely to have access to extension services.

Land is the most important resource for agricultural households. Access to land can take many forms such as ownership and renting. According to recent statistics, not only do fewer women own land in Malawi but they also own smaller plots compared to men. Specifically, the reviewed data indicates that only 32% of women in Malawi has access to and control of land. Furthermore, the research shows that men tend to own land of greater value in terms of quality and location compared to women.

In addition to being less likely to hold land titles, the literature reveals that women are also disadvantaged when it comes to access to agricultural implements and machinery. Differences in access to farm implements and machinery between men and women explain about 18% of the gender gap in Malawi's agriculture.

Another important factor explaining and sustaining the gender gap is crop choice. Specifically, research shows that male farmers are more likely to grow cash or export crops that fetch higher incomes on

the markets than female farmers. For example, according to a recent study done in Malawi, about 10% of men's plots is devoted to tobacco, the country's main cash crop, compared to 3% of women's plots.

The final gender binding constraint discussed in this section is access to credit. Nationally representative data from a 2016/17 survey indicate that more male-headed households in Malawi had access to credit (14%) compared to households headed by females (10%). Amongst those that borrowed, the top three reasons for obtaining loans were to finance start-up businesses (53%), purchase agricultural inputs for food crops and cash crops (34%) and purchase non-farm inputs (6%). This implies that more women than men missed the opportunity to start up businesses or purchase inputs for agricultural production.

## Gender and development policy in Malawi

Although the prominence of gender issues has differed across policies, the Government has



Eliyeta Muyeye from Kanyera, Dedza Malawi, and her family are heavily reliant on the maize crop for their family's survival.

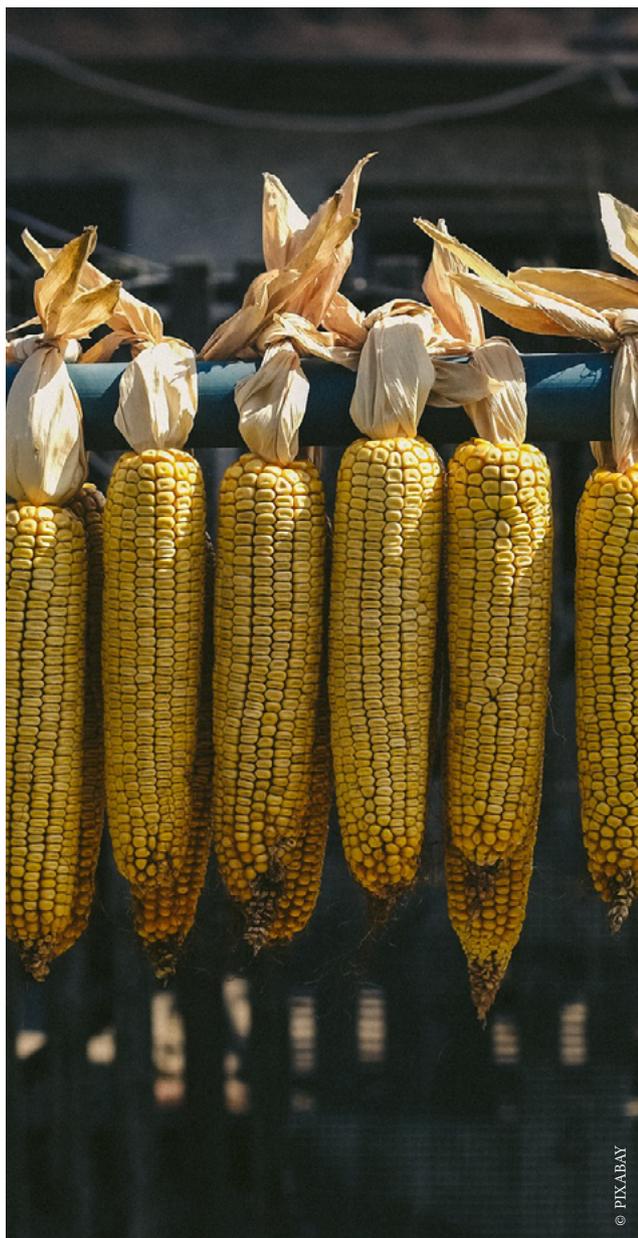


Groundnut farmer in the Khulungira village in Malawi.

consistently sought to address gender imbalances in the country and this is reflected in most of the national policy documents. This is, in part, because Malawi developed its policy on gender in consultation with international priorities reflected in several international and regional treaties and conventions promoting human rights and gender equity. The country is a signatory of these, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on a review of development policy in Malawi, we can conclude that the gender imbalances, still observed in the country, are due to weak enforcement efforts and inconsistent implementation of policies, as opposed to lack of relevant policy instruments for eliminating gender gaps.

Nonetheless, a trend analysis of gender indicators shows a reduction in gender inequality in the country. For example, we looked at the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index (GII) for Malawi between 2005 and 2013. The GII considers three dimensions of gender-based inequalities together, namely reproductive health (measured by maternal mortality and adolescent birth rates), empowerment (measured by the share of parliamentary seats held by women and attainment in secondary and higher education by each gender), and economic activity (measured by the labour market participation rate for women and

men). Values of the GII range between 0 and 1, with 0 being 0% inequality and 1 being 100% inequality. The GII score decreased from 65% in 2010 to 59% in 2013, indicating an improvement over the years. Given that women provide about half of the agricultural labour, and stand for more than half of the population economically active in agriculture, we can conclude that policies, programmes and strategies targeting gender equality have benefited women in agriculture.



By closing the gender gaps faced by women in production, nearly 3% of the poor population could be lifted out of poverty in Malawi every year.

## Conclusions

The study sought to conduct a literature review on gender gaps in Malawi's agriculture with the aim of supporting policy and improving practices within the agricultural sector. The key finding from the review is that although progress has been made in closing the gaps over the years, gender disparities still exist in the country and make it difficult for the agricultural sector to reach its full potential. The main form of gender gaps in agriculture relate to access to and control of land, access to credit and access to agricultural tools, including machinery. Individual characteristics such as age, experience and education are also important sources of gender inequality. Malawi does not lack relevant policy instruments on gender but suffers from weak enforcement efforts and inconsistent implementation of policies. Smallholder farming in Malawi can be improved by addressing challenges faced both during the production of products in the farm and supply of agricultural produce in output markets. Closing gender gaps in agriculture is a catalyst for poverty reduction in Malawi.

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[This brief is based on the report "Gender segmented markets and production systems in Malawi"](#)

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