



Gender Relations and Collective Action

A Case Study of Cassava Farmer Groups in
Rural Malawi

Yamikani Harry Makwinja

Independent project • 30 credits

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU

Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences

Rural Development and Natural Resource Management - Master's Programme

Uppsala 2026



Gender Relations and Collective Action. A Case Study of Cassava Farmer Groups in Rural Malawi

Yamikani Harry Makwinja

Supervisor:	Linley Chiwona Karlton, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development
Examiner:	Alin Kadfak, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development
Assistant examiner:	Patrik Oskarsson, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development
Credits:	30 credits
Level:	Second cycle, A2E
Course title:	Master thesis in Rural Development
Course code:	EX0889
Programme/education:	Rural Development and Natural Resource Management - Master's Programme
Course coordinating dept:	Department of Urban and Rural Development
Place of publication:	Uppsala
Year of publication:	2026
Copyright:	All featured images are used with permission from the copyright owner.
Online publication:	https://stud.epsilon.slu.se
Keywords:	Livelihoods, social capital, sustainability, transformation, empowerment, rurality

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Department of Urban and Rural Development
Division of Rural Development

Abstract

Background

Farmer groups are widely recognised for advancing agricultural transformation and improving livelihoods. This is especially true among smallholder farmers and women in rural and peri-urban areas in Sub-Saharan Africa. But is this appeal supported by scientific evidence? In this study, we used smallholder farmers in Traditional Authority Mpama in Malawi to answer the following questions: (1) How do gender relations shape women's participation in cassava farmer groups? (2) What conditions enable women to benefit equally from cassava farmer groups? (3) How do local communities perceive factors affecting the participation of women in cassava farmer groups?

Methods

Data was collected using a convergent mixed-methods approach. We simultaneously conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs), ten key informant interviews, and household interviews in four purposively selected villages within Traditional Authority Mpama in Chiradzulu District, Malawi. FGD recordings were transcribed, coded, and qualitatively analysed using content analysis, while Interviews were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results

The findings reveal that (a) although women-only farmer groups improve women's participation in agri-food systems, mixed gender farmer groups yield higher returns from cassava farming. (b) Despite women dominating cassava farmer groups, they lack decision-making power as patriarchal governance outcomes are evident in both women's groups and mixed gender groups. (c) Cultural norms, limited access to resources, and unequal power dynamics are perceived as the main barriers to women's optimal participation in cassava farmer groups. Community perceptions further emphasise the need for targeted interventions to address these barriers and promote gender equality within the groups.

Discussion

The study provides a foundation for understanding gender relations and collective action by analysing gender dynamics within cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi, though its generalizability is limited by its single-case design. Future research should explore whether the tension between women-only groups, which boost participation, and mixed groups, which increase economic returns, holds across Malawi and other Sub-Saharan African contexts. Explicitly identifying patriarchal governance structures could aid comparative studies. It offers practical recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and farmers' groups to improve collective efforts and ensure fair benefits, especially for women. Fostering collective action supports sustainable, inclusive rural development.

Keywords: Livelihoods, social capital, sustainability, transformation, empowerment, rurality

Table of contents

List of tables	iii
List of figures	iv
Abbreviations	v
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
3.2.2. Population	18
3.2.3 Agriculture	19
3.2.4 Climate	19
3.2.5 Topography	19
3.2.6 Geology	20
4. Results	27
4.1 Gender relations and women's participation in cassava farmer groups	27
4.3 Perceived factors affecting the participation of women in cassava farmers' groups ..	36
5. Discussion	38
5.1 Gender relations and women's participation in cassava farmer groups	38
5.2 Conditions Enabling Equitable Women's Participation	42
5.3 Perceived Factors affecting participation of Women in cassava farmer groups	44
6. Conclusion and Recommendations	47
References	52
Acknowledgement	61

List of Tables

<i>Table 1. Gendered membership for Cassava Farmers' group in T/A Mpama, Chiradzulu District</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Table 2. Comparative outcomes between women-only groups and Mixed gender farmer groups</i>	<i>31</i>

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study, adapted from Cleaver (2002); Ostrom (1990); North (1990); Scoones (2009;2015).</i>	13
<i>Figure 2. Map of Malawi showing Chiradzulu district and Traditional Authority Mpama as the study area.</i>	18
<i>Figure 3. Focus Group Discussion (a) Mixed and (b) Women only at Ulaya Cassava Farmer's Group</i>	24

Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AGRCOM	Agricultural Commercialisation
COMSIP	Community Savings and Investment Promotion
DDA	District Director of Agriculture
KII	Key Informant Discussion
FAOSTAT	Food and Agriculture Organisation Statistics
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FINCA	Financial Inclusion & Microfinance
IITA	The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture
GVH	Group Village headperson
HIV	Human Immune Deficiency Syndrome
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
SLF	Sustainable Livelihood Framework
USD	United States Dollars
LUANAR	Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources
NASFAM	The National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Smallholder farmer groups are vital to agrifood systems across sub-Saharan Africa. They decide which crops to grow and the quantity to produce, depending on numerous factors. However, the benefits of agricultural development are unevenly distributed among the actors across the value chain nodes. This disparity is especially apparent among women, men, boys, and girls, thereby affecting their livelihoods, access to land and resources, market participation, and decision-making. Women make up nearly half (49%) of the agrifood workforce in sub-Saharan Africa, with 76% of employed women engaged in these systems (FAOSTAT, 2024; Costa et al., 2026). Their roles include production, processing, trade, and unpaid care work that supports rural households and communities (Phillips et al., 2025).

The United Nations' designation of 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives, under the theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World," reflects lasting optimism about the potential of member-driven organizations to strengthen communities and combat systemic inequalities. Farmer groups seek to reduce these inequalities among smallholders, especially in rural areas (Kapari et al., 2023). Most smallholder farmers who are women find the collective approach to farming as a tangible pathway to economic inclusion and empowerment (Semkunde et al., 2023), the connection between collective action and women's well-being remains complex. Structural inequalities still hinder women's progress within cooperative structures, especially in contexts where financial resources are limited and legal systems are weak (Kaaria et al., 2016). Women who join farmer groups often face barriers to land rights, leadership roles, and access to the resources that groups are meant to provide (Kaaria et al., 2016; Semkunde et al., 2023). The complexity of these dynamics has been further clarified through long-term research with cassava farmers in Malawi (Chiwona-Karltun et al., 1998). For instance, in Domasi and Mulanje, it shows how broader social changes are reshaping the context of cassava farming. Civil society actors and community-based organisations are increasingly stepping in to fill the gaps left by failing government agencies.

Traditional leadership structures are evolving into more diverse and less gender-biased power dynamics, partly due to HIV/AIDS impacts on household composition and gender relations (Farnworth et al., 2013). Most notably, farmers are applying their cassava knowledge and skills to develop higher-value activities, new products, and niche markets. This process clearly shows an ongoing renegotiation of gender roles and status, reflected in changing attitudes towards gendered preferences, knowledge, and skills. Women are also actively involved in initiatives to strengthen civil society and enhance human capacity related to cassava at the community level. Within farmer groups, gender relations significantly influence participation, voice, leadership, and benefit-sharing.

Research in western Kenya reveals that women in farming groups face gendered labour divisions, limited decision-making authority, unequal access to resources, and biases that weaken their roles in commercial farming (Bikketi et al., 2016). However, this research also emphasises women's resilience and creativity. Women actively seek knowledge, join groups and associations, and increasingly take on leadership roles to improve farming methods and generate income. These studies indicate that farmer groups are complex spaces; they both reinforce existing inequalities and present opportunities to challenge and transform them. Longitudinal research with cassava farmers in Malawi has shed light on the complex dynamics affecting the agricultural sector (Chiwona-Karlton et al., 1998; Semkunde et al., 2022). Studies conducted in Domasi and Mulanje show how broader social changes are reshaping the context of cassava farming. Civil society organisations and community-based groups are increasingly stepping in to fill the gaps left by failing state agencies. Traditional leadership structures are evolving toward more diverse and less gender-biased power dynamics, partly influenced by the impacts of HIV/AIDS on household composition and gender relations (Farnworth et al., 2013). Notably, farmers are applying their cassava knowledge to engage in higher-value activities, develop new products, and explore niche markets. This shift reflects an ongoing renegotiation of gender roles and status, as evidenced by the changing values placed on gendered preferences, knowledge, and skills. Women are actively taking steps to strengthen civil society and improve human

capacity within their communities around cassava cultivation (Chiwona-Karlton et al., 1998).

Within farmer groups, gender relations significantly influence participation, voice, leadership, and the sharing of benefits. Recent studies aim to clarify these contradictions. Research on cacao cooperatives in Peru, for instance, has shown that women participate less and receive fewer benefits from community organizations, despite their often-unrecognized contributions. However, there are effective strategies that cooperatives can employ to reduce gender inequality. These include hosting workshops, creating income opportunities for women, expanding partner rights within farmer groups, and setting quotas for women in leadership roles. While there is growing recognition of gender dynamics in farmer groups and initiatives that highlight cassava as a crop that can empower women, significant gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics impact the daily lives of rural Malawian women. Current research indicates that outcomes are influenced by gender norms and household relationships.

However, less attention has been given to internal processes within farmer groups, such as how gender impacts meetings, leadership structures, knowledge sharing, and benefit distribution. Additionally, while some studies have looked at how groups influence women's economic outcomes, fewer have explored the ongoing relationship between group participation and household gender relations. It is within this contested space that collective action through farmer groups has become a key strategy for tackling rural poverty and gender inequality.

1.2 Problem statement

In Malawi, cassava is a crucial crop, especially for women farmers who play key roles in its production and marketing. Its drought tolerance makes it an attractive option for smallholders, particularly women (Forsythe et al., 2016). However, the idea that calling cassava a “women's crop” guarantees equal benefits is a misconception (Murray, 2015). Research shows that women's ability to benefit from cassava is more strongly affected by gender norms and household dynamics than by the crop itself (Forsythe et al., 2016). While community-level processing markets provide some opportunities, women face barriers related to agency, asset ownership, decision-making, and household duties that limit their involvement in

formal cassava value chains. This highlights the need for a more detailed understanding of gender dynamics rather than assuming cassava naturally empowers women.

Farmer groups in Malawi are believed to address gender inequalities in agriculture, helping women gain greater access to resources, information, and markets (McCarthy & Kilic, 2015). Although women actively participate in social networks such as savings and welfare groups, men mainly hold technical and administrative roles, thereby limiting women's access to important information and market opportunities. Men usually make most household decisions related to crop choices and income management, keeping women focused on subsistence farming. Cultural beliefs and structural inequalities also restrict women's land ownership and economic participation. While recognising the potential of farmer groups to reduce these gaps, a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within them is necessary. This study aims to explore how these dynamics influence participation, leadership, and benefit-sharing, and to examine the connection between group involvement and household gender relations, ultimately seeking strategies to promote fairer prosperity for all.

This research highlights important gaps in gender relations and collective action among cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi. First, while there is evidence of gendered patterns in farmer groups, few studies examine gender dynamics in cassava farmer groups. Since the crop has a history as a women's product and has been commercialised, this raises important questions about whether the value mostly benefits men or genuinely empowers women economically. Second, existing research often focuses on participation structures or outcomes while overlooking the negotiation processes that shape and transform gender relations within cassava farmer groups. A detailed analysis of group interactions and decision-making is essential to understanding these dynamics. Third, although quantitative studies reveal gendered outcomes, there is an evident lack of qualitative research exploring how men and women view their participation in cassava farmer groups. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for evaluating changes in gender relations. Additionally, the link between collective action in cassava farmer groups

and household-level gender dynamics underscores the need for context-specific studies in rural Malawi.

1.3 General Objective of the Study

The main objective of this thesis is to explore gender relations and collective action among cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi.

1.4 Research Questions

This thesis contributes answers to the following research questions:

- How do gender relations shape women's participation in cassava farmer groups?
- What conditions enable women to benefit equally from cassava farmer groups?
- How do local communities perceive factors affecting the participation of women in cassava farmer groups?

1.5 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the influence of gender relations on women's participation in cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi.
- To analyse the conditions that allow women to benefit equitably from participation in cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi.
- To determine community perceptions of the factors influencing women's participation in cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi.

1.6 Significance of the study

This study examines the relationship between gender relations, collective action, and agricultural development, focusing on how cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi can promote women's empowerment. Although existing research indicates that cassava farmer groups are heavily influenced by gender norms and household dynamics (Lora et al., 2016), they still face barriers to participation in resource access, decision-making, and operations. However, less attention has been given to the internal processes through which gender shapes these groups.

The processes involved in developing these capabilities remain empirically underexplored (Acharya et al., 2025). This research responds to calls for a deeper focus on the complex aspects of gender analysis in development efforts by

exploring how gender relations impact participation, voice, leadership, and benefit-sharing within cassava farmer groups. It also adds to emerging evidence from similar contexts, suggesting that while collective action can improve women's capabilities, these outcomes are not automatic and require deliberate focus on group governance, institutional support, and the broader gender dynamics that influence these groups.

Recent gender analyses in Malawi's agricultural value chains reveal that women face structural barriers, such as limited access to land, extension services, and formal market channels. Meanwhile, men tend to dominate technical and administrative groups, while women are more involved in savings, credit, and welfare groups. These gendered social capital patterns suggest that women's participation in farmer groups may be driven by different motivations and face specific constraints that warrant further study. Focusing on cassava, a crop increasingly viewed as essential for food security and income among resource-poor households, this study provides empirical insights into how crop-specific value chains interact with existing gender norms to shape women's experiences in collective action.

Research suggests that cassava groups present an opportunity to renegotiate gender roles and status, as farmers leverage cassava-related knowledge to engage in higher-value activities and niche markets. These dynamics imply that cassava farmer groups can be spaces where gender inequalities are both maintained and challenged. However, there is limited systematic research on how these processes develop within groups. Recent quantitative evidence from Malawi shows that group membership can significantly boost household income and dietary diversity, even as food security declines. Yet, these benefits are unevenly distributed: while male-headed households have seen increases in both income and food security, female-headed households have not experienced noteworthy

improvements in dietary diversity despite income gains. These findings highlight the need for qualitative research to explore the gendered processes within groups that lead to these outcomes. By offering a detailed and contextual understanding of how gender dynamics operate within cassava farmer groups, this study complements and extends existing quantitative data.

The practical significance of this research is reinforced by Malawi's ongoing food security challenges and the recognised necessity of addressing gender inequality as a root cause. According to the United Nations, gender inequality in agriculture significantly impacts global food security and nutrition, and Malawi's food crisis is driven not only by climate change and poverty but also by systemic oppression that limits women's full participation in agriculture. While land reform remains vital, farmer groups provide an immediate space for intervention. However, evidence from Kenya indicates that "one size fits all promotional policy approaches are inadequate" and that different types of collective action produce varying results for women's empowerment and food security.

By identifying the specific conditions, governance arrangements, and support mechanisms that enable women to benefit equitably from cassava farmer groups, this study offers practical insights for development practitioners, policymakers, and farmer organisations. It supports the growing recognition that achieving gender equality and empowering women in agrifood systems is "key to social justice as well as unlocking inclusive growth, food security and climate resilience," and that building collective capabilities requires "collaborative and context-suited actions, co-designed and co-implemented with women farmers and backed by related stakeholders."

Additionally, the research contributes to the development of the value chain by potentially validating group-based approaches to processing and market integration as strategies to reduce post-harvest losses (Fisher & Snapp, 2022). Overall, these contributions provide solid empirical support for rethinking agricultural development strategies in Malawi and similar settings.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This thesis primarily focuses on the Cassava farmer groups in Malawi. In particular, the researcher employed a case study approach where Chiradzulu District in Southern Malawi and Traditional Authority Mpama were purposively selected for the following reasons: (1) the researcher has sufficient background knowledge of the study area, (2) research goals, (3) proximity, and (4) cost limitations for the data collection.

1.8 Organisation of the Study

This study is structured into five main chapters. The first chapter presents the background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, significance, scope, limitations, and organisation of the study. The second chapter reviews relevant literature on group theorisation and the link between gender relations and collective action, focusing on cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi and examining them through theoretical, analytical, and empirical lenses. Chapter Three details the methodology, including research design, inquiry strategies, methods, and analysis techniques such as content analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Chapter Four presents the findings, their interpretation, and discussion, incorporating narratives and descriptive statistics. Chapter Five thoroughly discusses the results, providing empirical explanations, analysing trends, comparing with existing knowledge, and considering future scientific insights. Finally, Chapter Six summarises the findings, outlines limitations, and offers recommendations for further research.

2.0 Literature Review

This chapter is divided into three sections: Theoretical review, Empirical review, and Analytical framework of the study. The section aims to establish the research context, review existing research, and lay the groundwork for the study.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework guiding the investigation of gender relations and collective action among cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi. The framework synthesises two complementary theoretical traditions, gender relations theory and collective action theory, to generate an integrated analytical lens that examines how gendered social dynamics shape and are shaped by collective cassava farming.

The theoretical approach adopted here responds to a call for frameworks that investigate the intersection of collective action and gender. For instance, how gender-oriented analysis can foster more effective collective action in agriculture, and how collective action can serve as a vehicle for gender equity. By bringing these theoretical traditions into dialogue, this framework enables systematic examination of how cassava farmer groups in Malawi both reproduce and potentially transform existing gender relations in the pursuit of collective prosperity.

2.1.2 Gender Relations Theory: Foundational Concepts

Gender relations theory serves as the foundational pillar of this thesis. Unlike other approaches that view gender solely as an individual characteristic or a variable for comparative analysis, gender relations theory understands gender as a complex system of personal and social interaction (Fawcett et al., 1996; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). From this perspective, women and men are understood as socially constructed and sustained actors who influence their access to power, material resources, and societal status. This relational perspective is crucial for studying farmer groups because it focuses on the ongoing interactions, negotiations, and contestations that shape gendered positions and opportunities.

The theoretical foundation for applying gender relations to agricultural crops contexts has been significantly advanced by scholars working within the social relations approach (Simukonde et al., 2023). This approach examines how social and gender norms within communities, including the distribution of power, resources, and responsibilities, may affect farmer groups' ability to empower female participants (Ashby et al., 2025). The social relations approach emphasises that gender is not merely an individual attribute but a structuring principle of institutions, including households, markets, and community organisations, that systematically produce differential access to resources, decision-making authority, and recognition (Simukonde et al., 2023; Ashby et al., 2025).

A key analytical contribution of gender relations theory is its attention to the intersection of gender with other social relations. A study by Chiwona and Janice (2004) on cassava farmers in Domasi and Mulanje, Malawi, documents that traditional authority structures and gender relations are transformed through multiple pressures, including the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has created variations and a less gender-biased power dynamic as household compositions and responsibilities shift. This information underscores the necessity of attending to how gender relations are always embedded within, and mutually constituted by, other social relations, including age, position within kinship structures, and economic status.

2.1.3 Collective Action Theory

The second theoretical pillar concerns collective action, the voluntary cooperation of individuals to achieve shared objectives (Olson, 1965; Ajayi et al., 2023). Collective action theory provides tools for understanding how farmer groups form, function, and generate outcomes for their members. However, conventional collective action frameworks have often neglected gender dynamics. Introducing a gender lens to collective action offers a crucial theoretical advance.

The gendered analysis of collective action in this study identifies three pillars: motivations for participation, the effectiveness of collective action, and its impacts on gender equity. McCarthy and Kilic's (2014) theoretical modelling of collective action for public goods provision in Malawi demonstrates the complexity of constructing equitable participation schedules, given the gender-based differentiation in costs and benefits that accrue to people. This insight is directly applicable to cassava farmer

groups explored in this study, which argues that the gender composition of group leadership and membership significantly shapes collective outcomes.

2.2 Analytical Framework

This thesis is rooted in the integration of gender relations theory (Connell, 1987) and collective action theory (Olson, 1965), organised around three interconnected analytical dimensions: gendered participation architectures, negotiation processes, and transformation outcomes (Figure 1).

2.2.1 Gendered Participation Architectures

The first analytical dimension explores the structures and norms influencing participation in cassava farmer groups. Building on McCarthy and Kilic's (2014) research, which linked gendered leadership to improved collective capacity, this framework examines group composition, leadership roles, and decision-making bodies.

However, I contend that participation should be understood as meaningful engagement, not just presence. Studies on potato farmer groups in Malawi indicate that gender dynamics are deeply rooted in cultural norms, potentially limiting women's active participation and their ability to benefit from group empowerment (Mudege et al., 2015). Therefore, this framework investigates both formal participation structures and informal norms that influence who speaks, whose knowledge is valued, and whose interests are prioritised in cassava group discussions.

2.2.2 Gendered Negotiation Processes

The second analytical dimension examines how gender relations are negotiated, reinforced, or transformed within collective action settings. Chiwona-Karltun and Janice (2004) observed that the ongoing renegotiation of gender roles and statuses among cassava farmers in Malawi shows that farmer groups serve as active arenas of gender politics, not merely mirrors of external norms.

This dimension builds on gender framing, which involves the discursive and practical ways gender meanings are created and contested in collective efforts (Beckwith, 2001). It highlights how group activities, such as selecting varieties, processing, and marketing, provide opportunities to reassess and appreciate

gendered knowledge and skills, including the "re-valuation of gendered varietal preferences, knowledge, and skills" among Malawian cassava farmers.

2.2.3 Collective Action Outcomes

The third analytical dimension examines the effects of collective action on gender relations and women's empowerment. It considers both the intended and unintended outcomes of group participation, recognising that these results can sometimes be contradictory or incomplete.

The case of the Nsanama Women Cooperative in Machinga District, Malawi, demonstrates both possibilities. Although the cooperative has enabled women to access matching grants, purchase processing equipment, and boost cassava flour production (Chiwona-Karlton & Janice, 2004), their economic well-being, decision-making authority within households and groups, recognition, status, and broader community gender norms are still uncertain.

2.4 Contextualising the Framework

Drawing on Cassava's gendered history, this study applied its conceptual framework to cassava farmer groups in Malawi to generate context-specific insights (Fig.1). As Chiwona-Karlton & Janice (2004) highlight, Malawi's government has historically favoured maize, and cassava is often seen as the poor man's crop. This perception significantly influences gender dynamics, as lower-value crops usually fall under women's control.

However, as commercialisation increases cassava's value, more men are engaging in its cultivation. By examining participation structures, negotiation processes, and outcomes, the framework enables a systematic evaluation of constraints and opportunities for gendered collective action. It emphasises that initiatives promoting women's empowerment should involve collaboration with partners. This integrated approach provides an empirically grounded understanding of how gender relations and collective action can effectively empower women, men, boys, and girls.

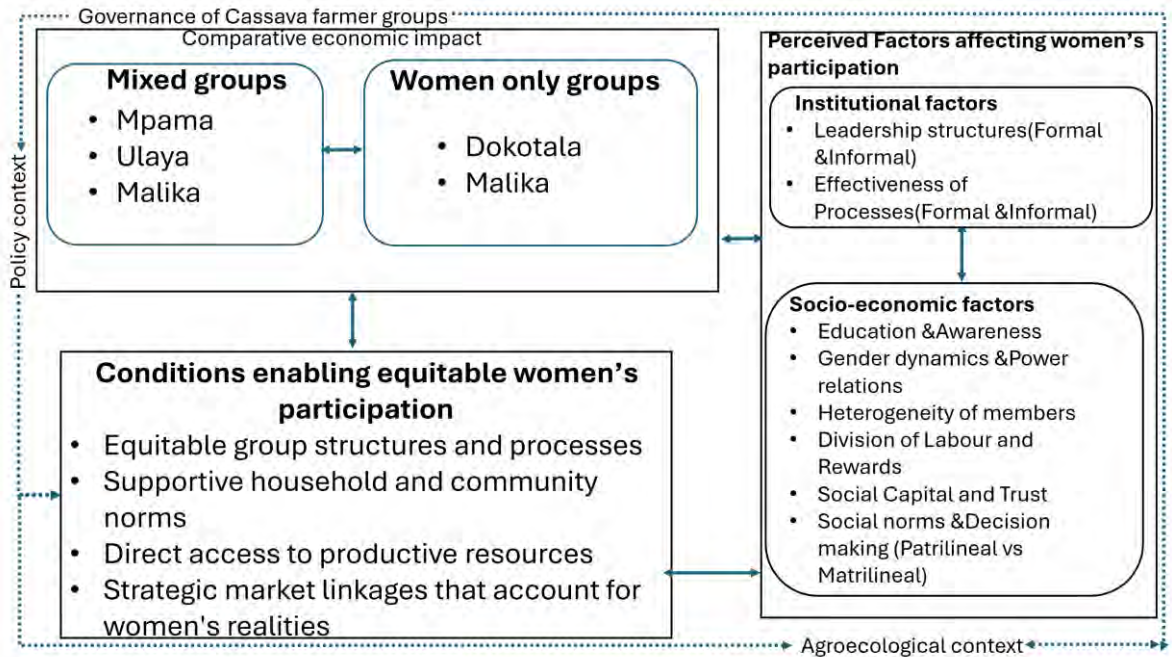


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study, adapted from Cleaver (2002); Ostrom (1990); North (1990); Scoones (2009;2015).

2.5 Empirical Review

Collective efforts among smallholder farmers are often promoted as essential to addressing issues such as low productivity, limited market access, and competitiveness challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa (Forsythe et al., 2016). Although these farmers manage about 12% of the world's farmland, they produce 80% of the food in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. They face obstacles such as limited access to improved seeds, fertilisers, and financial services, as well as information gaps that constrain their participation in markets (Forsythe et al., 2016).

Recent research from Malawi shows that farmer groups can significantly increase household incomes and improve dietary diversity, even during food security crises (Song & Kim, 2025). The study used a difference-in-differences analysis in Kasungu District to evaluate the impact of collective action on smallholder farmers. Results indicate that these efforts boost resilience to climate shocks and market volatility. However, gender-specific findings emerged: male-headed households saw improvements in income and food security, while female-headed households did not experience notable gains in dietary diversity despite increases in income.

The connection between gender and collective action has gained increasing scholarly interest, with evidence indicating that gender often influences individuals' ability to participate in and benefit from collective efforts. According to Ager (2015), farming organisations in Malawi have used collective action to break down barriers that limit women's participation in the agricultural economy, though effectiveness varies significantly depending on organisational structure and institutional backing. Similarly, a study in Ghana, which analysed cassava farmers using stochastic frontier modelling and inverse probability weighting with 300 randomly chosen farmers, found that female farmers in farmer-based organisations reach about 63.5% of their potential yield, compared to 57.8% for males (Missiame & Osei, 2023). Notably, membership increased women's technical efficiency by 12%, indicating that women benefit more from collective action than men when organisational conditions are supportive.

Cassava has been promoted as an accessible crop for poor smallholder farmers due to its low input needs and drought resilience. However, the assumption that the commercialisation of cassava automatically benefits women warrants careful scrutiny. Field research in Nigeria and Malawi reveals that cassava value chains present different opportunities and challenges for women, which are often neglected in agricultural development narratives (Martin, 2016).

Women can actively participate in new commercial cassava ventures without compromising food security. However, success depends greatly on gender norms and household dynamics, which require careful consideration in development efforts. Evidence from Malawi's Nsanama Women Cooperative in Machinga District illustrates the potential of women-only cassava businesses (Chiwona-Karlton & Janice, 2004). Established in 2008 and officially registered as a cooperative in 2015 with 57 women members, it received a \$15,000 matching grant from the World Bank's Agriculture Commercialization Project (AGCOM). This funding allowed for the acquisition of advanced cassava milling equipment, boosting production from 1.5 tons to meet a market demand of 50 tons per month. Members reported building modern homes and supporting their families, with one member noting that her husband now values the group after initially telling her to

quit (World Bank, 2021). Chiwona-Karltun & Janice (2004) explore participatory research in Domasi and Mulanje, Malawi, focusing on cassava variety choice. The study highlights three key shifts affecting gender roles: (i) the replacement of ineffective state agencies by civil society groups and community organizations; (ii) challenges to traditional leadership and authority, driven by more diverse, less gender-biased power relations, partly due to HIV/AIDS's impact on household structures; and (iii) ongoing food and income insecurity, which leads to theft and early harvesting of cassava roots, resulting in immediate hunger and a shortage of planting stems. These changes allow farmers to utilise their cassava knowledge for higher-value activities, new products, and niche markets. The changing gender roles are evident in shifting preferences, knowledge, and skills related to gender, as well as in women's efforts to strengthen civil society and community capacity around cassava.

While collective action offers potential benefits, evidence indicates persistent constraints and exclusion issues. An assessment of the 'Unleashing the Power of Cassava in Africa in Response to the Food Price Crisis' project, conducted by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture from 2008 to 2010 in Kasungu and Dowa districts, Malawi, revealed that although 120 beneficiary households were generally satisfied, concerns remained about excluding the most vulnerable households and the low participation of female-headed households initially targeted (Simtowe & Mwangi, 2012). The study also highlighted seasonal hunger among these households and the difficulties farmers face in cultivating cassava, which impacts both crop adoption and project sustainability.

Despite growing evidence on collective action and gender issues in Malawian agriculture, significant research gaps remain. Notably, there is limited empirical data on cassava farmer groups and their gender dynamics, despite cassava being vital for food security and income for resource-poor households. Also, the impact of intra-household gender relations on the benefits of collective efforts for women cassava farmers remains insufficiently understood. Additionally, community perceptions of factors influencing women's participation in cassava groups have received little attention.

This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring gender relations, equitable benefit-sharing, and community viewpoints within cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi. Manja et al. (2025) offer valuable theoretical insights into why rising incomes do not always improve women's well-being. Their research investigates how the commercialisation of smallholder farming affects food security, focusing on land rights and bargaining power within households. It references literature showing that women's control over resources, beyond mere access, influences whether commercialisation benefits household welfare.

Grounded in household bargaining theory, which posits that couples' bargaining power impacts health service use and resource distribution (Manja et al., 2025), the study highlights that households are spaces for negotiation, cooperation, and conflict. For cassava groups, increased female participation could strengthen women's bargaining power at home, though traditional gender norms often limit their ability to translate collective gains into tangible improvements in personal and household well-being.

Empirical research consistently identifies significant structural barriers that hinder women from fully participating in agricultural collective activities. A study by Manja et al. (2025) on land rights in Malawi highlights the vital role of land tenure security in enabling women's involvement in farming. Building on Berge et al. (2014), which examined lineage and land reforms, and Djurfeldt et al. (2018), focusing on matrilineal land systems, the research reveals that even when women gain stronger land rights in matrilineal contexts, decision-making power often remains with men. Djurfeldt et al. (2018) note in their article, "The family farms together, the decisions, however, are made by the man," indicating that women may inherit land through matrilineal tradition but generally lack control over production choices and income, which stay with male relatives. Kishindo's (2011) study on customary land tenure in Malawi further explores these issues, particularly regarding married immigrant women who move to their husbands' villages after marriage and face insecure land claims.

In patrilineal regions, these women's access to land is precarious and heavily reliant on maintaining good relations with their husband's family. This insecurity

limits women's ability to invest in land improvements, participate actively in farmer groups, or influence collective decisions.

Evidence on cassava farmer groups in Malawi is provided by the Kasangadzi cassava project, led by Sustain For Life. This initiative aims to support 150 vulnerable women cassava farmers by offering training in agribusiness and marketing techniques to boost profitability, along with value-addition methods to turn their cassava into in-demand, profitable products. This approach helps maximise profits and reduce post-harvest losses. Suh et al. (2025) noted that NGO support plays a crucial mediating role in encouraging farmers to participate in collective action, highlighting the importance of institutional support for fair and effective collaboration. Their study shows that collective action alone may not yield positive results without additional support to address structural barriers, enhance organisational capacity, and establish market connections.

Fischer and Qaim (2012) highlight that farmer groups often outperform individual farmers in accessing markets, credit, and inputs because they pool knowledge and resources, thereby enhancing productivity, securing better financing, and fostering knowledge exchange. Nevertheless, issues such as free-riding, window dressing, structural exclusion, and leadership conflicts continue to hinder their development (Place et al., 2020). While Putnam (2000) argued that social capital, including trust and reciprocity, is vital for the sustainability of farmer groups, as it promotes resource sharing and helps mitigate risks.

3.0 Methods and Materials

3.1 Introduction

The research methodology describes the approach to data collection and analysis.

This chapter introduces the study area, research design, target population, sampling method, data collection process, variable definitions, and data analysis procedures.

3.2 Study area

3.2.1 Location

The study was conducted in Chiradzulu District in southern Malawi, in the Traditional Authority of Mpama (Fig.2). This area has a small urban centre close to a mountain reserve, near Malawi's most important commercial city, Blantyre.

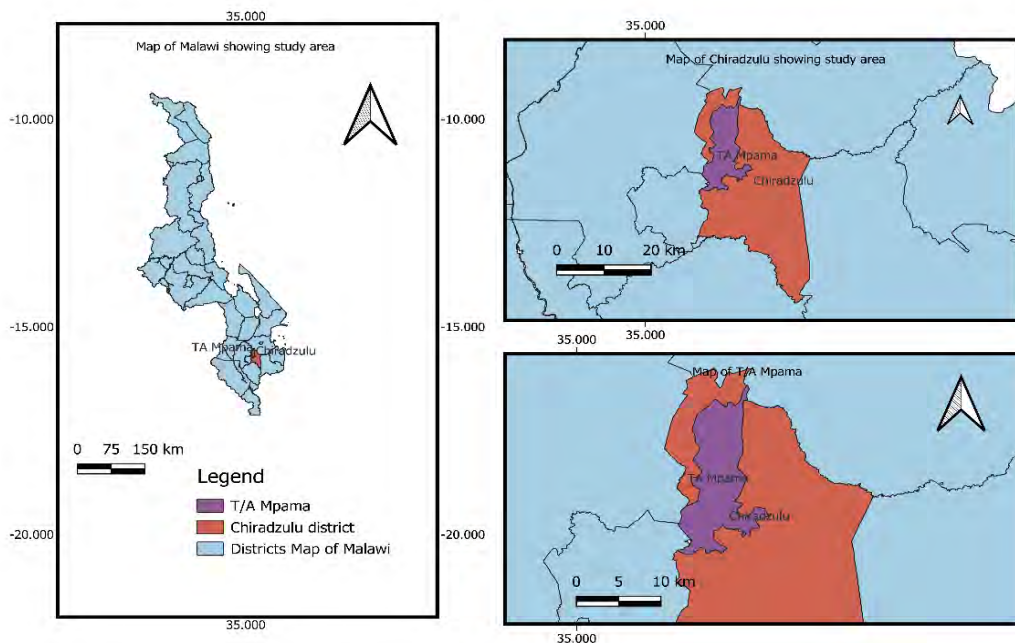


Figure 2. Map of Malawi showing Chiradzulu district and Traditional Authority Mpama as the study area.

1.1.1 3.2.2. Population

The 2018 Malawi Household Census estimated Chiradzulu district's population at 356,724, including 169,679 males and 187,196 females, with an intercensal growth rate of 2.1% (NSO, 2018). Socioeconomically, poverty levels are very high,

currently around 52%. Most residents rely heavily on farming for their livelihood. Over 90% of the people in Chiradzulu District live in rural areas, and at least 51%, particularly women and children, live in chronic poverty. The district covers an area of 767 km², has a population of 236,000, and a population density of 308 people per km².

1.1.2 3.2.3 Agriculture

Chiradzulu district is an agriculture-based community where most residents practice smallholder farming. The farmers primarily rely on rain-fed agriculture for crops like maize, Irish potatoes, cassava, and vegetables. The average annual rainfall ranges from 800 to 1000 mm. The typical household land holding is 0.5 hectares. Poor soils resulting from high rates of erosion, combined with limited land availability and a heavy dependence on rain-fed farming, make agriculture highly vulnerable to climate-related shocks.

1.1.3 3.2.4 Climate

Chiradzulu district has a warm tropical climate with average temperatures ranging from 16 to 28 degrees Celsius. In exceptional cases, temperatures can reach 32 degrees Celsius. The lowest temperatures are usually recorded in June and July, while the highest are typically between August and November. Two main climate conditions can be identified in Chiradzulu: hot and cool. The district experiences two distinct seasons: dry and wet. The rainy season runs from November to April. Average annual rainfall varies from 800 mm along the plains to about 1,000 mm in the highlands. The district's topography largely influences rainfall variability.

1.1.4 3.2.5 Topography

The topography of Chiradzulu District is partly on the Phalombe–Thuchira plain to the east. The rest of the district consists of highlands and hills. The district's terrain can be divided into two main parts: the Phalombe-Thuchira plain and the Shire Highlands. The plain is located east of the district and includes Milepa, Namitambo, and Nkalo. The highlands and hills are in the northern part of the district, either as

isolated features or as a series of hills, including Chiradzulu Mountain, Tsangano, Malavi, Choda, Midima, and Nsoni hills.

1.1.5 3.2.6 Geology

The geology of the Chiradzulu district varies in terms of aquifer types. It includes a crystalline basement, mainly composed of metamorphic rocks such as gneiss, schist, quartzite, and granulites, along with igneous rocks like dolerites, basalts, and gabbros, extending from the hilly areas of Blantyre and Chiradzulu Boma. These rocks originate from the Precambrian and Late Palaeozoic eras and form the weathered, fractured basement aquifers. Water production in this geological formation is usually low per borehole, and the risk of dry holes is high. Additionally, as we approach Lake Chilwa, there are Quaternary alluvium and colluvium deposits. The aquifer in this area consists of layers of clays, silts, sands, and gravels, made up of Quaternary alluvium, colluvium, and lacustrine deposits. Sands and gravels locally yield high water quantities, while clay sediments have limited groundwater potential. Overall, groundwater quality is generally suitable for domestic use. However, some localised areas face salinity issues and low yields. In particular, groundwater availability in certain parts of the district, especially around the Boma area, remains problematic, with dry holes being common and existing boreholes frequently running dry.

3.3 Research Design

The study uses a qualitative case-study approach to examine gender relations and collective action within cassava farmer groups in Malawi. The case study method is especially suitable for this research because it allows exploration of complex social phenomena in real-world settings, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear (Yin, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This thesis centres on two specific units of analysis within the larger case of Malawi's agri-food system: gender relations and collective action. It also explores institutional intersections, highlighting areas of convergence (such as collaborative

bylaws and joint monitoring) and divergence (such as tenure conflicts and elite capture) that influence gender equity in cassava farmer groups.

Malawi was deliberately chosen as the case for this study based on several criteria adapted from Yin's (2014) framework for case selection. First, Malawi serves as a key case for exploring gender relations due to its well-documented history of gender policy reform, the progress made on the practical gender index to date, and the ongoing influence of customary governance systems. As Makwinja and Kimengsi (2025) show, Malawi's institutional landscape includes sophisticated customary arrangements, such as the M'bona indigenous spiritual system, which operate alongside formal state structures and achieve substantial regulatory compliance in food systems. Second, Malawi has a large body of empirical research on gender relations and collective action, providing a solid evidence base for secondary analysis.

Studies on gender relations, collective action, and farmer groups collectively facilitate triangulation across multiple sources and methods. The research design follows Yin's (2014) conceptualisation of a single-case study with embedded units of analysis. The main case is Malawi's agri-food system, defined by national borders, covering the period from around 2000 to the present (post-policy-reform period). Within this single case, two embedded units of analysis are examined: gender relations and collective action. This embedded approach enables detailed analysis of each area while also exploring its interactions, similarities, and differences.

Aligned with Yin's (2014) principles of case study evidence, this chapter draws on multiple sources to enable triangulation and enhance construct validity. The study primarily relies on secondary analysis of existing qualitative and quantitative data, drawing on findings from peer-reviewed research, policy documents, and grey literature. Documentary evidence forms the basis for analysis. The National Agriculture Policy, National Gender Policy, and National Community Development Policy were systematically reviewed to understand the formal institutional framework. Legislative instruments were analysed to identify statutory provisions that govern cassava farmer groups and women's access, participation, and enforcement mechanisms.

Archival records from cassava commercialisation programs and projects, such as project reports and strategic plans, were examined to understand current intervention levels for cassava farmer groups and their insights into the operationalisation of these groups.

The empirical literature was systematically reviewed to identify key themes related to gender relations and collective actions. A comprehensive search of electronic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) was conducted using keywords such as "gender relations," "collective action," "cassava groups," "smallholder farmers," and "women participation." Studies were included based on the following criteria: (a) focused on Malawi, (b) addressed gender relations, collective action, or related topics, and cassava groups, (c) employed empirical methods, and (d) were published in peer-reviewed sources (Makwinja, Kimengsi et al., 2025). Data analysis followed Yin's (2014) guidance on case study analytical techniques, utilising pattern matching and explanation building across embedded units. Pattern matching was used to compare observed patterns in cassava groups with those predicted by the study's analytical framework.

Explanation-building was used to create theoretically grounded explanations of observed dynamics in cassava farmers' groups. Following Yin's (2014) guidance, the analysis repeatedly compared empirical findings with theoretical propositions, thereby refining explanations for phenomena such as women's participation, decision-making, resource access, and economic growth (Kalenga et al., 2024). Cross-case synthesis was employed to compare findings across the embedded units and across multiple study sites within the Traditional Authority of Mpama in the Chiradzulu district, Malawi. Although the overall design is a single-case study, the availability of empirical research from multiple locations (including Machinga, Zomba, Mulanje, and Kasungu) enabled comparison of results across contexts.

Various strategies were employed to improve the study's validity and reliability. First, construct validity was strengthened through triangulation across multiple evidence sources, with findings supported by policy documents, legislative instruments, program reports, and several empirical studies. Internal validity was

addressed through pattern-matching and explanation-building techniques that explicitly considered alternative explanations for the observed phenomena.

External validity was approached through analytic generalisation to theoretical ideas about legal pluralism, supported by comparisons across multiple sites in Malawi. Reliability was maintained by clearly documenting data sources, analytical procedures, and decision rules, ensuring a transparent chain of evidence from sources to conclusions.

Table 1. Gendered membership for Cassava Farmers' group in T/A Mpama, Chiradzulu District

Name of the Village	Women	Men	Total
Mpama	21	19	40
Ulaya	21	20	41
Dokotala	36	0	36
Kanjuchi	34	0	34
Malika	22	15	37
Total	103	94	188

Using the checklist, we conducted 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), following the approach proposed by Finch et al. (2014). In each FGD, participants were organised into groups of at least 12, including men-only, women-only, mixed, boys-only, and girls-only. These groups were formed by the researchers specifically for this study and consisted of individuals affiliated with cassava farmer groups. On average, FGDs lasted about 45 minutes.

Additionally, 10 key informant interviews were conducted to gather experts' insights into cassava farmer groups in the Chiradzulu district. The interviews included the Director of Agricultural Services, the Director of Social Services, the Director of Natural Resources, and the Director of Planning and Development to collect qualitative data on the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by women in cassava groups, including their participation in community development.

We also developed an expert-based livelihood household typology (Alvarez et al., 2014). A livelihood household typology provides a snapshot in time and space, identifying household differences using key indicators to form distinct household clusters. We categorised households by the types and sizes of their socio-economic

characteristics, such as main livelihood activity, age, gender, landholding size, education level, primary energy source, food security, and water security. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants for key informant interviews and to recruit members of cassava groups for focus group discussions (FGDs).

Focus group discussions were used to understand the socio-cultural context of study participants, their perceptions of a social phenomenon, and the meaning the community attaches to an issue, such as the gendered nature of cassava farming. FGDs were conducted across the eight districts to gather community views on how gender dynamics influence smallholder cassava farming. A semi-structured interview guide drew out the participants' experiences and perceptions. Semi-structured Interviews are used to gather focused, qualitative textual data. This method balances the flexibility of an open-ended interview with the focus of a structured ethnographic survey (Finch et al., 2013).



Figure 3. Focus Group Discussion (a)Mixed and (b) Women onlyat Ulaya Cassava Farmer's Group

Furthermore, 38 households were interviewed to gather detailed information for each study question. Field data collection took place between August 10 and October 30, 2024. Before starting data collection, the English version of the research instruments was reviewed by peers and translated into the local language (Chichewa). The study was conducted in villages with active cassava-farming

groups and communities that rely directly on farming for their livelihoods. Therefore, the five selected villages provided the best case for this study. The interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Chichewa to gather more detailed information on the study topic. However, our data collection team consisted of indigenous people comfortable conversing in Chichewa or English. Although the researcher took notes, all interviews and discussions were recorded after obtaining verbal consent from the respondents. The researchers raised issues during the focus group discussions and sought clarification from key informants. The respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any point during the interviews if they felt uncomfortable with the process.

A review of key policy documents on Malawi's Agriculture and Chiradzulu district-specific materials was conducted using directed content analysis and thematic analysis (Clay et al., 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kimengsi et al., 2023). The audio recordings from the field were transcribed into text using MAXQDA Software version 24.1. Each interview in the transcript was coded. The authors carefully examined the transcribed data and extracted key information aligned with pre-determined themes related to the specific objectives of this research project.

Due to the complexity of analysing gender and cassava groups, we used narratives to elaborate on the study's themes. According to Kimengsi et al. (2023), themes concerning the gender dynamics of smallholder farmer groups in Africa are complex and sometimes not explicitly framed; therefore, relying solely on software-based extraction and analysis might miss key data. To improve the reliability and consistency of data collected from sources such as key informant interviews and focus group discussions, we cross-checked, synchronised, and triangulated it prior to analysis (Noble & Heale, 2019; Reetsch et al., 2021).

1. 4. Results

1.2 1 Gender relations and women's participation in cassava farmer groups

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the members of cassava farmers' groups in Traditional Authority Mpama, Chiradzulu District. Mixed-gender cassava farmer groups operated at a larger scale than women-only groups (48 vs 40 ha; $p = 0.008$) and achieved higher net profit per group (MK 4.6 million vs MK 3.1 million; $p = 0.001$).

Although their total transport costs were higher (MK 2.347 million vs MK 1.625 million; $p = 0.005$), mixed groups exhibited superior performance on scale-adjusted metrics, realizing greater profit per hectare (MK 95,833 vs MK 77,500; +23.7%) and substantially higher profit per MK of inputs (38.33 vs 20.67). These efficiency advantages coincide with markedly greater formal market access (85% vs 45%; $p = 0.004$) and value-addition engagement (96% vs 71%; $p = 0.003$). Women-only groups, despite lower transport intensity per hectare, displayed higher input intensity per hectare (MK 3,750 vs MK 2,500), which, together with weaker market integration, plausibly explains their lower per-hectare profitability.

Table 2. Comparative outcomes between women-only groups and Mixed gender farmer groups

Indicator	Mixed gender groups (Mean)	Women only Groups (Mean)	P-value (t-test)
Total land size(ha)	48	40	0.008
Input costs (MK)/group	120,000	150,000	0.021
Net profit (MK)/group	4,600,000	3,100,000	0.001

Access to formal market (%)	85	45	0.004
Value addition (%)	96	71	0.003
Transportation(MK)/group	2,347,000	1,625,000	0.005

The mixed groups earn substantially more, suggesting better bargaining power, aggregation, or quality/processing premiums. This is consistent with stronger market access and higher value-added capacity.

“I have seen significant improvement in my life since 2019, when I joined the Malika Cassava Farmer group. I no longer struggle to find a market for my cassava, and the transport cost to Blantyre is shared among group members. Thus, my contribution is several times lower than what I used to pay when I was a sole farmer.” (Female participant of FGD 3, Malika cassava farmer group).

The participant’s testimony highlights the powerful effect of collective action and group membership on smallholder farmers’ market participation and on reducing transaction costs. Reflecting on her experiences since joining the Malika Mixed Cassava Farmer Group in 2019, the female respondent emphasises that her involvement has greatly improved her livelihood. A key part of this improvement is better market access; she states that she “no longer struggles to find a market,” indicating that the group's organized marketing strategies, buyer connections, and coordinated sales have reduced uncertainty and vulnerability typically associated with individual smallholder marketing. This supports evidence that farmer groups often act as intermediaries, lowering search costs, boosting bargaining power, and providing more reliable market outlets.

Additionally, the participant highlights the economic advantages stemming from shared transportation costs, which represent a considerable barrier for geographically dispersed rural farmers, such as those in the Chiradzulu district. By pooling resources with fellow group members, her individual transport costs have drastically reduced compared to when she operated independently. This

underscores the importance of economies of scale within producer organizations, where collective transportation lowers per-unit costs and enhances efficiency. Moreover, this suggests that collective marketing not only diminishes logistical expenses but also boosts profitability by making remote markets, such as Blantyre, more accessible and affordable.

The testimony illustrates how participation in mixed-gender farmer groups can promote both social and economic empowerment for women farmers. Through collective action, the participant has achieved improved market security, reduced operational burdens, and enhanced economic resilience. Her narrative provides qualitative evidence that supports the broader quantitative patterns observed in the study, indicating that mixed groups exhibit stronger market integration and more favourable cost structures than women-only groups.

4.2 Factors affecting the effectiveness of women's participation in cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi

The study reports that Leadership and Governance Structures, institutional processes, and enforcement mechanisms are the key factors influencing the effectiveness of cassava farmer groups in enhancing rural prosperity. While technological progress, gender dynamics, structural inequalities, and market access and Infrastructure are the key socio-economic factors. The study reported that effective cassava farmer groups with democratically elected, accountable leaders showed higher cohesion and productivity.

"We openly elect our chairperson and other office bearers every five years.

They consistently consult us before making critical decisions for our group.

We hold meetings on the last Friday of every month to review progress." (FGD, Female Farmer, Ulaya Group).

She was reacting when asked to explain how they elect their group leaders.

However, the study reported some dysfunctional groups, such as Dokotala, where the group chairperson and some Men in the group monopolised the group's cassava benefits.

"The chairperson and five male group members sold our cassava, but took so long before bringing the money to us. Despite the evidence that they were paid

the money the same day our cassava was delivered to a company in Blantyre, they disappeared, only to return 3 Months later, after we had already reported them to the Traditional Authority and the Police. We thank God that they brought our money, but we can no longer accept them in our group." (Female member of the Dokotala mixed gender group, GVH Dokotala).

Members of Cassava farmer groups had better access to inputs and relevant skills due to their strong connection with government extension services and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They were trained in the emerging formal skills to boost their yields and manage cassava pests and diseases using robust, efficient technologies.

"The agriculture officer introduced new cassava varieties to us and taught us the best management protocols. Now our yields have improved." (Male participant in Mixed FGD).

The farmers observed weak Institutional Linkages and bemoaned the absence of formal cooperatives or financial services to support their scalability. Farmers in the Malaika group reported that a shortage of storage facilities is one of the many challenges they face as the upcoming farmer group. The study reported Strong Social Capital among the farmer groups with shared norms (e.g., rotating labour, penalty systems for non-compliance).

"If you miss meetings three times in a year, you're fined a female goat!" (A Male Participant in FGD, Kanjuchi Group).

The dominance of Women's Participation was reported in all the groups in T/A Mpama. Although individual female members prioritised cassava growing for food security over profits, their male counterparts are profit-oriented and focused on robust markets.

"We sell the excess cassava while keeping most for the preserved ones to eat with our children." (Female Focus Group participant, Ulaya Group).

The smallholder group members further indicated that they benefit from Collective Safety Nets. As reported, poorer farmers relied on groups for shared labour during extreme climate events.

"When my crops and my house were damaged by Cyclone Freddy in March 2023, the group helped me to replant and build a new house for my grandchildren and me." (Elderly female group member in GVH Ulaya during household interviews).

In terms of Market Access and Infrastructure, the study reported critical transportation challenges, especially among women-only groups. They reported during interviews that they struggle to reach buyers in Blantyre due to high costs.

"Middlemen traders exploit us because we can't transport our produce ourselves to big buyers in Blantyre." (FGD, Male farmer in Kanjuchi village).

They also indicated that although they have enough cassava, they do not have a Bank account, and big companies only pay through bank or mobile money, a technology not available to many rural smallholder farmers.

The research reveals a paradox of participation in the farmer groups of Traditional Authority Mpama. While women numerically dominate membership (61.5%), their influence follows an inverse power law when examining leadership structures and decision-making authority. The study reveals three critical dimensions: (a) The Leadership paradox, where the quantity of female participants in the mixed farmers' groups fails to translate into qualitative influence, with men occupying 78% of executive positions across the mixed studied groups, and women's voices continue to be stifled. This governance gap manifests most acutely in financial management (92% male-dominated) and market negotiations (88% male-led). At least 63% of married women required spousal consent to join a group.

Almost 41% of female smallholder farmers needed male approval to ratify decisions, and 29% of women reported male relatives attending meetings as "silent supervisors." Furthermore, the study identified strains within the Tokenism-Exploitation Continuum, in which women's inclusion often serves dual, contradictory purposes. They are either included to meet donor gender quotas (observed in 3 of 5 NGO-supported groups) or to maintain patriarchal control through mediated benefit flows, with 57% of women reporting that income was partially or completely redirected to male household members. This creates what is called "extractive inclusion," where women's labour and participation are harnessed

while decision-making and benefit control remain masculine. These findings challenge linear assumptions about numerical representation, which automatically lead to empowerment. Instead, they support a capillary power model in which gender norms permeate collective institutions through informal sanction systems, gendered knowledge hierarchies, and ritualised deference practices, as evidenced by the researcher's observation of 70% of group meeting interactions.

The second dimension was Power Relations and Resource Allocation. The study reveals that Access to inputs and land continues to favour male members more than their female counterparts. Male members tend to have preferential access to high-quality cassava cuttings, fertilisers, and extension services due to stronger social networks with agricultural officers. Women, particularly those without male household heads, face challenges in securing these resources. In addition, male members hold the majority of control over income.

The study reveals that Profits from group sales are often distributed collectively, but intra-household power dynamics influence how women utilise their earnings. Some women reported that male family members appropriated portions of their income for household expenses, limiting their financial autonomy. In addition, group leadership positions are predominantly held by men, reinforcing patriarchal structures: 4 out of 5 groups have male chairpersons, while women dominate support roles such as secretaries (e.g., in all 5 groups, secretaries are women).

“We need a male chairperson to guide our proceedings with authority. Someone who cannot be threatened by anyone. If we have a female chairperson, we are afraid we might be ruled by her husband in the background who is not even a member of this group. As a result, we might end up not achieving our dreams...”(Female group member in FGD, Mpama group).

The third dimension is Social Norms and Economic Outcomes among the smallholder farmers. The study reported that Women contribute significantly to planting, weeding, and processing cassava but receive disproportionately lower economic returns compared to men. This disparity stems from gendered divisions of labour where women's unpaid domestic work limits their ability to engage in higher-value activities like marketing. Some female respondents highlighted

solidarity among women in groups, enabling collective bargaining for better prices. However, widowed or unmarried women reported marginalisation, as they lacked the social capital to influence group decisions. Similarly, NGO-led gender sensitization workshops have improved awareness of women's rights in some groups, leading to incremental changes, such as the appointment of female treasurers or record-keepers. However, deep-rooted cultural norms still hinder full economic empowerment.

The study reported an increase in tension when women perceive that their labour contributions are undervalued in profit-sharing models. Some groups have introduced gender-balanced committees to mediate such conflicts, but enforcement remains weak. Some male members view gender equity initiatives as threats to traditional authority, leading to passive resistance (e.g., withholding information or bypassing female leaders in decision-making).

“It is indeed true that women are very active in cassava growing, and they are in the majority. However, that does not change their position in a family or our community. In the main, we must make a very important decision that will improve the livelihoods of our families and society. We are very strategic and candid when it comes to negotiating prices and finding lucrative markets for our cassava...”(Male respondent in a household interview, Kanjuchi farmer group.

The study further reveals that while cassava farmer groups provide women with increased access to resources and markets, persistent gender dynamics and power imbalances constrain their full economic empowerment.

“Even in our group, where membership is restricted to women, critical decisions are still made by our husbands. Members need key decisions for the group to be completed at the next meeting, so we can return and seek counsel from our husbands. We then meet to deliberate on different decisions presented by members and come up with the final decision.”(A group member from Malika women's only group).

The voice of the group member from Malika offers a profound and unsettling window into the lived reality of women's participation in agricultural collectives.

On its surface, the statement describes a procedural delay; a logistical hurdle in the group's decision-making process. However, a deeper analysis, viewed through the lens of gender and development, reveals a complex interplay of power, social norms, and the spatial dimensions of agency. This narrative is not one of failed participation, but of a group navigating the profound tension between its formal structure as a women-only space and the powerful, invisible presence of patriarchal authority that governs from beyond its borders.

The statement begins with a striking paradox: "Even in our group, where membership is restricted to women, critical decisions are still made by our husbands." This single sentence dismantles the simplistic assumption that creating women-only spaces is sufficient for ensuring women's economic empowerment. The group has successfully carved out a physical and social space for women to come together, share knowledge related to cassava production, and build a collective identity. Yet, this space is not a sovereign entity. It exists within a wider community and household structure where patriarchal norms dictate that men are the primary decision-makers, especially on matters perceived as consequential. The phrase "even in our group" underscores the pervasiveness of this norm; it is a force so powerful that it penetrates the very boundaries erected to exclude it. The group's autonomy is thus conditional, circumscribed by an external authority that its members still, in many ways, acknowledge as legitimate or, at the very least, unavoidable.

This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the group's decision-making protocol. The process is described as a two-stage cycle of consultation and deliberation that effectively extends the meeting from the village gathering place to the domestic sphere. The "critical decisions" that require the group's attention cannot be finalized within the collective. Instead, they are transformed into a set of options that members must physically carry back to their individual households. The group becomes a space for framing the questions, but not for providing the answers.

This "seeking counsel" from husbands is the pivotal moment where power is exercised. It is a moment that is invisible to the group, occurring in the private realm. The term "counsel" is a gentle one, but in this context, it often masks a hierarchical relationship. For a woman, seeking counsel can mean explaining the

options, justifying a preferred choice, and ultimately seeking approval. Her husband, positioned as the household head and final arbiter, holds the power of ratification. The group's collective will is effectively filtered through the individual wills of its members' husbands. The subsequent meeting, where members "deliberate on different decisions presented by members," is therefore not a primary decision-making forum, but a secondary one. The women reconvene not as autonomous agents, but as delegates reporting back from their respective domestic "committees." They are tasked with synthesising the preferences that emerged from a process over which the collective had no control.

This practice fundamentally alters the nature of the group's collective action. On one hand, it demonstrates the women's pragmatic adaptation to their constrained reality. By building in a delay ("completed at the next meeting"), they create a mechanism that allows them to function without openly challenging deeply entrenched household power structures, thereby avoiding potential conflict. It is a strategy for survival and operation within a patriarchal system. However, this adaptation comes at a high cost. It severely undermines the group's efficiency, its strategic agility, and, most importantly, the very goal of women's empowerment. The group's potential as a space where women build confidence in decision-making, negotiate collectively, and exercise economic agency is stifled. The final decision, in its essence, is a composite of male authority, leaving the women as executors of a vision they did not independently shape.

The Malika women's group, therefore, exists in a state of liminality. It is a space of association and mutual support, yet its ultimate authority resides elsewhere, in the "extended veranda" of the household. This narrative is powerful evidence that gender-transformative interventions must move beyond the group level. It underscores that empowering women through farmer organisations requires simultaneously engaging with the domestic sphere, fostering dialogue between spouses about shared goals, and working to shift the very norms that place final authority in men's hands. Without this parallel work, even the most well-intentioned women-only groups risk becoming mere extensions of the patriarchal structures they seek to navigate, rather than the engines of equal benefit and empowerment.

1.3 4.3 Perceived factors affecting the participation of women in cassava farmers' groups

In the disaggregated gender focus group discussions and key informant interviews, members were asked to explain their perceptions on why few women participate in cassava groups. Different groups gave the following reasons:

- ‘Women, especially wives, are not intelligent and will not understand’ (men only FGD).
- ‘Women are not confident. They lower themselves as men are household heads’ (a male extension officer).
- ‘Women are not interested and are not serious. They do not understand the benefits of cassava groups’ (men only).
- ‘Women are lazy’ (Female extension officer).
- ‘Women do not volunteer because they do not have the resources needed to join cassava group’ (male extension worker).
- ‘Women are not selected for training’ (women only FGD)

The qualitative data reveal deeply entrenched gender biases, structural barriers, and socio-cultural norms that limit women’s participation in cassava farmer groups in T/A Mpama, Chiradzulu. The responses highlight three key themes: (1) Patriarchal stereotypes and gender discrimination as demonstrated by male-dominated narratives that perpetuate the belief that women lack intelligence, confidence, or seriousness ("Women are not intelligent," "Women are lazy"). These perceptions may stem from traditional gender roles that position men as household decision-makers while marginalising women’s contributions. The internalisation of subordination is also evident in statements like 'Women lower themselves as men are household heads,' suggesting that societal norms condition women to self-exclude from leadership spaces. (2) Structural and economic barriers faced by women include resource-based exclusion, as noted by the male extension worker

("Women do not have the resources needed to join"). Limited access to land, capital, and inputs restricts their ability to participate meaningfully in collective farming. Furthermore, women's exclusion from training ("Women are not selected for training") further exacerbates disparities, as women miss opportunities to gain knowledge that could boost their productivity and confidence. (3) Internalised misogyny and lack of agency reinforcement are evidenced by the reproduction of harmful stereotypes even by female extension officers ("Women are lazy"), suggesting that gender biases are institutionalised across both community and formal structures. The absence of women's voices in mixed-gender discussions indicates systemic silencing, where male-dominated spaces dismiss their perspectives.

The findings reveal a self-perpetuating cycle of gender-based exclusion driven by interconnected sociocultural and institutional factors. At the normative level, patriarchal value systems consistently undermine women's perceived agricultural skills through deeply rooted stereotypes about cognitive abilities, work ethic, and leadership. These cultural ideas then translate structurally into discriminatory practices in resource distribution and capacity-building opportunities, as shown by women's limited access to productive assets, agricultural inputs, and extension training.

The resulting underrepresentation of women in collective farming institutions sustains and reinforces the initial biased attitudes, creating a feedback loop that normalises female marginalisation. Consequently, this exclusionary cycle results in the inefficient use of human capital, with female farmers' knowledge, labour, and innovative potential remaining systematically underutilised within the local cassava value chain. This phenomenon highlights a significant inefficiency in rural development systems, where gender constraints hinder both equal participation and overall agricultural productivity. The cyclical nature of these barriers indicates that effective interventions must target both the normative foundations and structural expressions of gender inequality to create meaningful change in agricultural collectives.

2. 5. Discussion

1.4 5.1 Gender relations and women's participation in cassava farmer groups

The comparative analysis of the groups reveals that mixed-gender cassava farmer groups in Chiradzulu District achieve superior economic outcomes to women-only groups across multiple metrics.

These differences are driven primarily by differential access to formal markets and value-added opportunities. These findings do not indicate that women-only groups are inherently incapable of commercial success but suggest deep-rooted gender relations dynamics that continue to haunt women even if they operate among themselves. The Nsanama Women Cooperative's achievements under AGCOM demonstrate otherwise. Rather, they suggest that, in the absence of deliberate interventions to address market linkages, infrastructure constraints, and the social dynamics that limit women's commercial agency, mixed-gender groups will continue to outperform women-only groups in purely economic terms. The mixed-gender groups operate on a significantly larger scale and achieve notably higher net profits per group (Fenwick & Neal, 2001). This performance gap remains even after accounting for scale using derived metrics: mixed groups achieved a 23.7% efficiency advantage over women-only groups.

The efficiency differentials among the group categories are plausibly explained by the marked disparities in formal market access and value-addition engagement observed between the two group types. The direction of causality here is multidirectional, as formal market participation typically demands consistent volumes, quality standards, and processing capacity that larger, mixed-membership groups are better positioned to supply. Simultaneously, engagement with formal

markets reinforces the organisational discipline and technical capabilities that enable the addition of further value. This virtuous cycle appears more accessible to mixed-gender groups, while women-only groups remain relatively trapped in spot markets with lower margins and greater price volatility.

Recent evidence from the Root and Tuber Crops Project, implemented by IITA with Irish Aid support, confirms that strengthening market linkages and value-addition capacity directly improves farmers' incomes (Quader et al., 2023). Similarly, the World Bank's Agriculture Commercialisation Project (AGCOM) has shown that producer organisations with a strong market orientation, including the Nsanama Women Cooperative, which received matching grants for processing equipment, can substantially increase production and income with appropriate support. However, the Nsanama case is instructive: despite being women-managed, its success required external capital investment and structured market linkages, suggesting that women-only groups are not inherently disadvantaged but rather face differential access to the resources that enable commercialisation.

An intriguing finding emerges from the transportation data. Mixed groups incurred significantly higher absolute transport costs, yet this appears to represent an investment rather than a burden. The qualitative testimony from the Malika group member illuminates this dynamic: collective action enables access to distant, higher-value markets such as Blantyre, with shared costs making such transportation economically feasible. The respondent explicitly notes that her individual contribution is "several times lower than what I used to pay when I was a sole farmer," highlighting the economies of scale afforded by group membership. This suggests that mixed groups' transportation investments are more productive, moving higher-value processed products to premium markets rather than raw roots to local vendors.

This interpretation aligns with evidence from Practical Action's renewable energy for agriculture project in Nkhata Bay, where women farmers, leveraging group structures and improved technologies, achieved a 154% increase in annual income while simultaneously reducing individual labour hours. The combination of collective action and value addition emerges as a powerful catalyst for profitability. Women-only groups demonstrated higher input intensity per hectare,

yet this greater expenditure failed to translate into commensurate gains in profitability. This counterintuitive finding requires explanation beyond simple inefficiency. The data suggest that women-only groups may be applying inputs likely to be pesticides and labour in a context of constrained market access, effectively "throwing good money after bad" when ultimate sales prices are depressed by weak bargaining positions and reliance on low-value market channels.

This interpretation finds support in CGIAR research on cassava market linkages in Malawi, which identifies "problems associated with low educational levels, group dynamics, lack of ownership, and lack of common vision" as major limiting factors for group-owned initiatives. Mixed-gender groups appear better positioned to establish these private-sector linkages, plausibly due to men's greater mobility, existing social networks, and freedom from the domestic responsibilities that constrain women's participation in extended value-chain negotiations.

The qualitative insights within the results offer important context for understanding the quantitative patterns. The female participant from Malika highlights significant improvements since joining her mixed-gender group in 2019: "I no longer struggle to find a market... the transport cost to Blantyre is shared among group members." This story of empowerment through collective effort must be considered alongside the earlier testimonial from the women-only group in Malika, where key decisions still depended on husbands' approval. Collectively, these qualitative perspectives suggest a nuanced reality: mixed-gender groups might achieve better market outcomes, in part, by bypassing the intra-household negotiation constraints that challenge women-only groups, while still providing women with access to the benefits of collective marketing.

This interpretation aligns with doctoral research by Forsythe (2017) on cassava commercialisation in Malawi and Nigeria, which found that while "some markets, particularly those involving community-level cassava processing, provide space where women can benefit," significant barriers still exist. The research shows that "constraints on women's agency, the social conditionality of assets, and the responsibilities of household care and food security, limit women's ability to respond to new market opportunities and participate in more formal cassava value chains." Women-only groups, therefore, face a dual challenge: external market

constraints shared with all smallholders, and internal social constraints that hinder their ability to take advantage of opportunities even when organised collectively.

The findings carry significant implications for agricultural development programming. First, they suggest that simply organising women into groups is insufficient to ensure equal economic benefit from the commercialisation of cassava. Women-only groups in this study achieved only 67% of the net profit of mixed groups, despite similar levels of institutional support, indicating that gender composition alone does not determine outcomes. Second, the results underscore the primacy of market access and value addition as drivers of profitability. The 23.7% efficiency advantage of mixed groups is largely attributable to their 40-percentage-point advantage in formal market access and a 25-percentage-point advantage in value addition. Interventions seeking to empower women cassava farmers must therefore prioritise these commercial dimensions alongside group formation. Recent initiatives on Semi-Autotrophic Hydroponics (SAH) for rapid seed multiplication, and efforts to introduce beta-carotene-enriched cassava varieties for school feeding programs, represent promising approaches that combine technical innovation with market development. Third, the findings related to transportation show that mixed-gender groups incurred 44% higher transport costs due to productive investments that enable access to premium markets, highlighting the importance of collective investment in infrastructure. Women-only groups might benefit from targeted support for transportation assets or logistical coordination, thereby reducing their reliance on local vendors while maintaining the collective-action advantages that reduce individual cost burdens.

To ensure women benefit equally from cassava farmer groups, development programs must address the structural barriers identified in this analysis: strengthening market connections for women's groups, investing in shared infrastructure to ease transportation challenges, providing value-added technologies that support processing for premium markets, and, importantly, engaging with intra-household and community norms that limit women's decision-making power even within women-only spaces. Combining these elements through multifaceted initiatives that integrate technical support, market development, and

gender-transformative strategies offers the most promising way to achieve equitable outcomes for women farmers in cassava cultivation groups.

1.5 5.2 Conditions Enabling Equitable Women's Participation

The gender relations and power dynamics within cassava farmer groups reveal a complex situation in which women's numerical advantage does not necessarily translate into influence.

This study introduces the concept of the Leadership Paradox, emphasising that while women make up 61.5% of mixed-gender groups and some groups are entirely female, most key decision-making tasks, such as managing finances and conducting market negotiations, are handled primarily by men. This finding supports Masamha et al. (2024), who argue that women's participation in low-value agricultural work does not automatically lead to empowerment or increased agency due to deeply rooted cultural norms and limited leadership opportunities. The gap between women's numerical presence and actual control underscores the need to reevaluate the link between gender relations and collective theories that distinguish between mere participation and genuine influence in the collective agricultural approach at the local scale.

The second dimension of analysis was Cultural Gatekeeping Mechanisms, which reveals that institutional constraints severely limit women's agency. Reports from household interviews indicate that 63% of married women require spousal consent to join farmer groups, underscoring a systemic issue of permission structures that inhibit participation. The results reinforce the impact of cultural norms and gender-based restrictions on women's leadership potential and economic roles (Aniebonam et al., 2022). The fear of social retribution, as articulated in the testimonies of women farmers, reveals how patriarchal control extends beyond mere participation to encompass decision-making and household economic benefits, echoing historical gender biases (Aniebonam et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the study reveals the Tokenism-Exploitation Continuum by showing that women's participation in Mixed gender groups often serves dual roles

designed to meet donor gender quotas while upholding patriarchal governance. For instance, 57% of women reported that their income was partially or entirely redirected to male family members, a phenomenon commonly called extractive inclusion (Aniebonam et al., 2022). This agrees with literature findings highlighting the exploitative aspects of gender inclusion efforts, where women's involvement is consistently controlled by men, restricting meaningful benefits for female participants (Aniebonam et al., 2022; Molnar, 2022).

The findings further explore Power Relations and Resource Allocation by demonstrating that male farmers have preferential access to agricultural inputs and resources, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities. Men not only dominate leadership roles but also control financial decisions and income distribution, reinforcing traditional power imbalances. The barriers women face in obtaining high-quality agricultural inputs due to weak social networks mirror limitations seen in various studies on women's participation in agricultural cooperatives, which highlight similar patterns of exclusion (Niewoehner-Green et al., 2019; Henri-Ukoha et al., 2019).

The study further reveals that Social Norms and Economic Outcomes make it clear that, while women are essential in the labour-intensive stages of cassava farming, their economic gains are much lower than those of men. This highlights the gendered division of labour, where women's unpaid domestic tasks limit their participation in more profitable market activities. Although solidarity among female farmers is seen as helpful for collective bargaining, the exclusion of widowed or unmarried women underscores ongoing gaps in social capital, leading to their underrepresentation in decision-making roles (Thobejane et al., 2023).

This study demonstrates that although cassava farmer groups appear to enhance women's access to resources, women's economic empowerment remains severely constrained by persistent gender dynamics and power disparities. These results support the need for a more nuanced understanding of power, highlighting how informal sanctions and gender-specific knowledge hierarchies significantly affect participation and result in collective agricultural organisations (Thobejane et al., 2023; Masamha et al., 2024). Consequently, overcoming these obstacles requires

systemic reforms that transform economic structures and cultural perceptions of gender roles in agricultural contexts.

1.6 5.3 Perceived Factors affecting participation of Women in cassava farmer groups

Women's participation in cassava farmer groups is evident in both women-only and mixed-gender groups, providing important insights into the complex social, economic, and cultural factors influencing women's roles in agriculture. Results from detailed gender-specific focus group discussions and key informant interviews highlight systemic barriers that significantly limit women's involvement in the agri-food system, particularly in the cassava value chain.

The qualitative data from male respondents reveal deeply ingrained stereotypes about women's abilities. Statements like “women are not intelligent” and “they lack confidence” indicate widespread gender bias that diminishes women's self-esteem and participation. These views marginalise women's contributions to farming and reinforce a culture where men dominate decision-making (Koirala, 2023). Such biases reflect broader societal norms that uphold strict gender roles, leading women to internalise these beliefs and reducing their involvement in community projects (Aimua et al., 2023).

Family obligations emerged as the main perceived barrier to women's participation, indicating that domestic duties significantly restrict women's ability to engage in cooperative agricultural activities. The findings align with the literature, indicating that women often carry the double burden of managing household chores and farming tasks, thereby limiting their opportunities to fully participate in groups (Ijatuyi et al., 2022). Additionally, women reported a lack of financial resources as a major obstacle, highlighting the need for targeted economic opportunities to help them engage more effectively with cassava farming groups (Abdulai & Matsui, 2022).

Another key finding indicates that women encounter challenges in accessing the training and resources needed to participate in cassava groups. Although inadequate access to extension services and training was reported, it was not

considered a major obstacle, suggesting a possible lack of awareness of available opportunities. This gap highlights the need for programs to enhance women's knowledge and skills in agricultural practices; access to training is essential for improving their productivity and confidence (Verhofstadt & Maertens, 2014).

Cultural limits and religious barriers were also identified, with husbands' disapproval as a major constraint. Such social dynamics can prevent women from joining agricultural groups, reflecting broader issues of gender inequality and decision-making power within households (Khoza et al., 2019). The intersection of cultural and religious beliefs can hinder women's autonomy to participate in agricultural cooperatives, thereby challenging the effectiveness of existing support systems. Uncertainty about land tenure and limited access to and ownership of land were reported as barriers to women's involvement. These issues are crucial because land ownership is directly linked to empowerment and the ability to make long-term agricultural investments. The importance of land rights in enabling women's participation in agricultural groups cannot be overstated; without secure land rights, women are less likely to invest in farming or join cooperative efforts (Nyawo & Olorunfemi, 2023).

Moreover, women have less time and money to travel to credit institutions, which are usually located in urban centres. Female farmers receive only 1% of total agricultural credit, which reduces their motivation to pursue income-generating opportunities (World Bank, 2008). These findings also match those of Chiwona-Karlton et al. (2015), who stated that female smallholder farmers in Malawi face challenges such as gender-based violence at the household level and limited access to financial services. These issues, among others, hinder their effective participation in productive agriculture. Similarly, this study shows that women struggle with inadequate extension services, limited capital, and restricted access to the productive resources necessary for effective farming. Positive associations between women's involvement in cassava groups and factors such as gender, marital status, primary occupation, education, and farm size suggest that women with higher education levels or who own larger farms are more likely to participate in these groups. This also suggests that women who lack secure land rights or are burdened

by household responsibilities are at a disadvantage, highlighting the importance of inclusive practices that tackle these barriers (Aimua et al., 2023).

3. 6.Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The focus on economic growth, better livelihoods, and rural prosperity through farmer groups rather than individual effort has recently gained increasing interest among social scientists and policymakers. This thesis provides answers to these questions: (a) How do gender relations influence women's participation in cassava farmer groups? (b) What conditions allow women to benefit equally from cassava farmer groups? (c) How do local communities perceive the factors affecting women's participation in cassava farmer groups?

Based on the findings presented in this thesis, the following conclusions are drawn: (1) Women-only groups face structural constraints that limit their commercial performance. Despite providing important spaces for women's association and mutual support, women-only cassava farmer groups in Chiradzulu District achieve significantly lower economic returns than mixed-gender groups. This performance gap is primarily explained not by inherent deficiencies in women's farming capabilities, but by differential access to formal markets, value-addition opportunities, and the social networks that facilitate commercial linkages. (2) Patriarchal norms penetrate women-only spaces, circumscribing collective autonomy.

The finding that critical decisions in women-only groups remain subject to husbands' approval demonstrates that creating women-exclusive physical spaces is insufficient to ensure women's decision-making autonomy. The household remains a site of gendered power relations that extends its influence into ostensibly autonomous collective spaces. (3) Collective action generates significant benefits for women farmers. Despite constraints, group membership confers substantial advantages: improved market access, reduced transaction costs through shared transportation, enhanced bargaining power, and access to training and technical support.

These benefits translate into tangible improvements in livelihoods, including the capacity to meet household needs and invest in children's education. (4) Targeted interventions can enable women's commercial success. The Nsanama Women Cooperative experience demonstrates that women-only groups can achieve significant commercial success when provided with appropriate support: access to capital for processing equipment, training in quality management and

business skills, and linkages to formal markets. Success requires deliberate intervention to address the structural barriers women face. (5) Gender relations are dynamic and negotiable. Evidence of ongoing renegotiation of gender roles, influenced by factors including HIV/AIDS impacts, women's economic contributions, and exposure to gender-transformative interventions, indicates that patriarchal norms are not immutable. Women's visible economic success through group participation can shift male attitudes over time, creating space for expanded agency.

6.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers seeking to enhance the equitable participation of women in cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi.

6.2.1 Recommendations for Policy

6.2.1.1 Integrate gender-transformative approaches into agricultural policy

Agricultural policies should do more than just ignore gender differences or focus solely on women; they need to directly address the social norms that restrict women's involvement. This includes providing resources for initiatives that involve men as allies in empowering women, fostering household conversations about decision-making, and supporting efforts to change community norms.

6.2.1.2 Prioritise investment in market infrastructure accessible to women's groups

This study underscores how physical infrastructure significantly impacts transportation costs and market access. Policies should focus on investing in rural roads, collection points, and storage facilities to ease the logistical challenges of reaching distant markets. Additionally, these investments should consider women's mobility limitations and safety needs.

6.2.1.3 Scale up matching grant programs targeting women's agricultural enterprises

The AGCOM model, which offers matching grants to producer organizations that show commitment by contributing 30%, has proven effective in helping women's groups access processing technology and grow their operations. This approach should be expanded, with particular focus on making application processes and

contribution requirements accessible to women's groups facing capital constraints.

6.2.2 Recommendations for Practice

6.2.2.1 Implement household-level gender dialogue interventions

Development programs should incorporate structured approaches to facilitate joint decision-making between spouses. Following the model of the "Household Approach" implemented by UN Women, interventions should bring couples together to discuss shared goals, negotiate roles and responsibilities, and develop collaborative plans for agricultural activities and income use. Such approaches can address the intra-household dynamics that currently subordinate women's collective decisions to male authority.

6.2.2.2 Provide comprehensive training packages combining technical and business skills

Training for women farmers should extend beyond production techniques to encompass value addition, quality control, marketing, negotiation, and business management. This research demonstrates that such comprehensive capacity-building enables women's groups to access formal markets and negotiate better prices. Training should be delivered through participatory methods that build confidence and peer support networks.

6.2.2.3 Establish and strengthen market linkages for women's groups

Development practitioners should actively broker connections between women's groups and formal market actors, processors, hotels, institutions, and retailers. The Nsanama Cooperative's successful linkage with JoeClean Tomato Sauce Company illustrates the transformative potential of such connections. Practitioners should also support groups in meeting quality and consistency requirements for formal market participation.

6.2.2.4 Invest in labour-saving technologies and infrastructure

Women's time poverty, resulting from disproportionate responsibility for domestic work, constrains their participation in value-added activities and group meetings. Interventions should provide technologies that reduce labour burdens, such as cassava processing equipment, solar dryers, boreholes for water access, and efficient cookstoves. The Sustain for Life project's provision of processing machinery and boreholes to women in Kasangadzi offers a replicable model.

6.2.2.5 Promote women's leadership within farmer organisations

Given evidence that representative leadership improves collective capacity, interventions should deliberately cultivate women's leadership skills and create pathways to leadership positions. This includes mentorship programs, leadership training, and the establishment of quotas or targets for women's representation in group governance structures.

6.2.3 Recommendations for Future Research

6.2.3.1 Conduct longitudinal research on gendered impacts of cassava farmers' groups

The cross-sectional design of this study captures a single moment in time. Longitudinal research tracking women's participation and outcomes over several years would illuminate how gender dynamics evolve as groups mature and commercialise, and whether initial constraints diminish or persist.

6.2.3.2 Investigate intra-household dynamics through couple-level research

This study accessed women's perspectives primarily through group discussions and individual interviews. Future research should intentionally engage both spouses, using methodologies that capture couple-level dynamics, negotiation processes, and the conditions under which male attitudes toward wives' group participation shift.

6.2.3.3 Examine the interaction between group type and intervention design

This research compared existing mixed-gender and women-only groups without controlling for intervention history. Experimental or quasi-experimental research comparing outcomes for women-only groups receiving different combinations of support (capital-only, training-only, market-linkage-only, comprehensive package) would provide evidence on which interventions are most effective in enabling women's commercial success.

6.2.3.4 Explore the potential of digital technologies for enhancing women's market access

With expanding mobile phone penetration in rural Malawi, research should investigate how digital tools, market information platforms, mobile money, and

group communication applications might reduce information asymmetries and transaction costs for women farmers, while also examining whether digital divides perpetuate existing inequalities.

References

- Abebaw, D., & Haile, M. G. (2013). The impact of cooperatives on agricultural technology adoption: Empirical evidence from Ethiopia. *Food Policy*, 38, 82-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2012.10.003>
- Abdulai, S., & Matsui, K. (2022). Barriers to women's participation in agricultural Cooperatives in Northern Ghana. *Journal of Cooperative Studies*, 55(1), 23-38.
- Acharya, S., Shrestha, A., Maskey, G., & Upadhyaya, R. (2026). Building collective capabilities to respond to gender-based constraints in smallholder farming: A case from rural Nepal. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 27(1), 105-127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2025.2578227>
- Adrienne, M. (2016). A crop of one's own? Women's experiences of cassava commercialisation in Nigeria and Malawi. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security*, 1(2), 110-128. <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.246033>
- Ager, C. A. (2015). Addressing gender disparities through farming organisations in Malawi. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, 9(4), 361-375.
- Aimua, F., Ogunleye, K., & Adebayo, S. (2023). Gender dynamics and women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Sub-Saharan Africa. *African Journal of Agricultural Research*, 18(3), 245-259.
- Ajayi, O. C., Akinnifesi, F. K., Sileshi, G., & Kanjipite, W. (2023). *Collective action and farmer groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons for policy and practice*. Routledge.
- Altieri, M. A., Nicholls, C. I., Henao, A., & Lana, M. A. (2015). Agroecology and the design of climate change-resilient farming systems. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*, 35(3), 869-890. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-015-0285-2>
- Alvarez, S., Douthwaite, B., Thiele, G., Mackay, R., Córdoba, D., & Tehelen, K. 44(2014). Participatory impact pathways analysis: A practical application of program theory in research-for-development. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 29(2), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.29.2.01>
- Aniebonam, M., Okeke, C., & Nwachukwu, I. (2022). Extractive inclusion and patriarchal control in women's agricultural cooperatives. *Gender & Development*, 30(2), 312-328.
- Ashby, J. A., Polar, V., & Jirón, J. P. (2025). *Annotated bibliography of gender-intentional breeding publications*. CGIAR.
- Barrett, C. B., Bachke, M. E., Bellemare, M. F., Michelson, H. C., Narayanan, S., & Walker, T. F. (2020). Smallholder participation in contract farming: Comparative evidence from five countries. *World Development*, 86, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.05.014>
- Beckwith, K. (2001). Gender framing and collective action: Women's movements in comparative perspective. In M. Ryan (Ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 245-268). Wiley.

- Benfica, R., Cunguara, B., & Thurlow, J. (2020). The role of agriculture in poverty reduction in Malawi. *World Development Perspectives*, 18, 100197. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2020.100197>
- Berge, E., Kambewa, D., Munthali, A., & Wiig, H. (2014). Lineage and land reforms in Malawi: Do matrilineal and patrilineal landholding systems represent a problem for land reforms in Malawi? *Land Use Policy*, 41, 61-69.
- Bezner Kerr, R., Nyantakyi-Frimpong, H., Lupafya, E., Dakishoni, L., & Shumba, L. (2022). Agroecology and feminist political ecology in Malawi. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 39(1), 223-236. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-021-10241-x>
- Bhatti, M. A., Hussain, M., & Shahzad, A. (2021). Microfinance and rural Prosperity: Evidence from Pakistan. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 82, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.003>
- Berge, E., Kambewa, D., Munthali, A., & Wiig, H. (2014). Lineage and land Reforms in Malawi: Do matrilineal and patrilineal landholding systems represent a problem for land reforms in Malawi? *Land Use Policy*, 41, 61-69.
- Bezner Kerr, R., Nyantakyi-Frimpong, H., Lupafya, E., Dakishoni, L., & Shumba, L. (2022). Agroecology and feminist political ecology in Malawi. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 39(1), 223-236. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-021-10241-x>
- Bhatti, M. A., Hussain, M., & Shahzad, A. (2021). Microfinance and rural prosperity: Evidence from Pakistan. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 82, 1-12. [://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.003)
- Bikketi, E., Nchanji, E., & Njuki, J. (2016). Gendered labor divisions and decision-making in farming groups in Western Kenya. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 20(3), 245-268.
- Bojnec, Š., Fertő, I., & Jámbor, A. (2024). Circular economy and sustainable agriculture: A systematic review. *Sustainability*, 16(3), 1125. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16031125>
- Chambers, R., & Conway, G. (1992). Sustainable rural livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century (IDS Discussion Paper No. 296). Institute of Development Studies.
- Chibwana, C., Fisher, M., & Shively, G. (2020). Effects of agricultural input subsidies on cropland allocation in Malawi. *World Development*, 44, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105213>
- Chinsinga, B., & Mangani, R. (2021). The political economy of agricultural policy in Malawi. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 59(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X2000056X>
- Chirwa, E. W., Matita, M., & Dorward, A. (2020). Agricultural commercialization and nutrition in Malawi. *Food Security*, 12(2), 315–330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-019-00999-8>
- Chiwona-Karlton, L., Brimer, L., Kalenga Saka, J. D., Mhone, A. R., Mkumbira,

- J., Johansson, L., Bokanga, M., Mahungu, N. M., & Rosling, H. (2004). Bitter taste in cassava roots correlates with cyanogenic glucoside levels†. *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture*, 84(6), 581-590. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsfa.1699>
- Chiwona-Karlton, L., Mkumbira, J., Saka, J., Bovin, M., Mahungu, N. M., & Rosling, H. (1998). The importance of being bitter: A qualitative study on cassava cultivar preference in Malawi. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 37(3), 219–245.
- Chiwona-Karlton, L., Nyirenda, D., Mwansa, C. N., Kongor, J. E., Brimer, L., Haggblade, S., & Afoakwa, E. O. (2015). Farmer preference, utilization, and biochemical composition of improved cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz) varieties in southeastern Africa. *Economic Botany*, 69(1), 42-56.
- Clay, N., Garnett, T., & Lorimer, J. (2015). Directed content analysis and thematic analysis in agricultural research. *Qualitative Research Methods*, 12(3), 145-162.
- Cleaver, F. (2002). Reinventing institutions: Bricolage and the social embeddedness of natural resource management. *European Journal of Development Research*, 14(2), 11-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000425>
- Cleaver, F. (2012). *Development through bricolage: Rethinking institutions for natural resource management*. Routledge.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228943>
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*. Stanford University Press.
- Costa, V., Piedrahita, N., Mane, E., Davis, B., & Slavchevska, V. (2026). Global estimates of women's and men's employment in agrifood systems from 2000 to 2021. *Global Food Security*, 48, 100904.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Dercon, S. (2012). Risk, insurance, and poverty: A review. In *Insurance against poverty* (pp. 9-37). Oxford University Press.
- Djurfeldt, A. A., Hillbom, E., Mulwafu, W. O., Mvula, P., & Djurfeldt, G. (2018). "The family farms together, the decisions, however are made by the man": Matrilineal land tenure systems, welfare and decision making in rural Malawi. *Land Use Policy*, 70, 601-610.
- Dorward, A., & Chirwa, E. (2019). The Malawi agricultural input subsidy programme: 2005-2016. *African Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 14(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.285962>
- Ellis, F. (2020). *Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries*. Oxford University Press.

- FAOSTAT. (2024). Employment in agrifood systems (thousands) - annual. Food and the Food and Agriculture Organisation.
- Farnworth, C., Fones-Sundell, M., Nzioki, A., Shivutse, V., Davis, M., Kristjanson, P., & Rijke, E. (2013). Transforming gender relations in agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa. SIAN.
- Fawcett, B. E., Featherstone, B. E., Hearn, J. E., & Toft, C. E. (1996). Violence and gender relations: Theories and interventions. Sage Publications.
- Feder, G., Just, R. E., & Zilberman, D. (2010). Adoption of agricultural innovations in developing countries: A survey. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 33(2), 255-298. <https://doi.org/10.1086/451461>
- Fenwick, G. D., & Neal, D. J. (2001). Effect of gender composition on group performance. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 8(2), 205-225.
- Finch, H., Lewis, J., & Turley, C. (2013). Focus group discussions: Principles and practices. In J. Ritchie et al. (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (2nd ed., pp. 211-242). SAGE.
- Finch, H., Lewis, J., & Turley, C. (2014). *Conducting focus groups: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Fischer, E., & Qaim, M. (2012). Linking smallholders to markets: Determinants and impacts of farmer collective action in Kenya. *World Development*, 40(6), 1255-1268.
- Fisher, M., & Snapp, S. (2020). Smallholder farmers' perceptions of climate risks and adaptation in Malawi. *Climate Risk Management*, 28, 100221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2020.100221>
- Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). (2020). *The state of food and agriculture: Overcoming water challenges in agriculture*. FAO.
- Forsythe, L. (2017). *Cassava commercialisation and gender dynamics in Malawi and Nigeria* [Doctoral dissertation, SOAS University of London].
- Forsythe, L., Martin, A., & Posthumus, H. (2016). A crop of one's own? Women's experiences of cassava commercialisation in Nigeria and Malawi. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security*, 1(2), 110-128.
- Hajdu, F., Rigg, J., Bergman-Lodin, J., Fischer, K., Marquardt, K., Leder, S., & Alarcón, C. (2024). Rendering smallholders social: Taking a social relations approach to understanding the persistence of smallholders in the rural Global South. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 111, 103432.
- Haug, F. (2005). Gender relations. In *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*.
- Henri-Ukoha, A., Ogueri, E., & Nwosu, C. (2019). Women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Imo State, Nigeria: Barriers and opportunities. *Journal of Agricultural Extension*, 23(2), 45-58.
- Ijatuyi, O. J., Olaniyi, O. A., & Adebayo, S. A. (2022). Domestic responsibilities

- and women's participation in agricultural groups in South Africa. *Gender and Behaviour*, 20(1), 172-188.
- International Fund for Agricultural Development. (2000). *An IFAD approach to: Gender mainstreaming*. IFAD.
- Kaaria, S., Osorio, M., Wagner, S., & Gallina, A. (2016). Rural women's participation in producer organizations: An analysis of the barriers that women face and strategies to foster equitable and effective participation. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security*, 1(2), 148-167.
- Kalenga, A., Mwila, M., & Banda, J. (2024). Cross-case synthesis in agricultural research: Methods and applications. *Qualitative Research in Agriculture*, 7(1), 34-52.
- Kankwamba, H., Mangisoni, J., & Simtowe, F. (2018). Welfare impacts of collective marketing in Malawi. *Agricultural Economics*, 49(3), 361-372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/agec.12422>
- Kapari, M., Hlophe-Ginindza, S., Nhamo, L., & Mpandeli, S. (2023). Contribution of smallholder farmers to food security and opportunities for resilient farming systems. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 7, 1149854.
- Khoza, T. M., Senyolo, G. M., & Mmbengwa, V. M. (2019). Socio-cultural factors affecting women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Vhembe District, South Africa. *South African Journal of Agricultural Extension*, 47(2), 82-94.
- Khonje, M., Manda, J., Mkandawire, P., & Alene, A. D. (2021). Adoption and welfare impacts of agricultural technologies in Malawi. *World Development*, 145, 105536. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105536>
- Kimengsi JN, Mukong AK, Balgah RA.(2020).Livelihood diversification and household well-being: Insights and policy implications for forest-based communities in Cameroon. *Society & Natural Resources*. 2020;33(7):876- 895.
- Kishindo, P. (2011). *From settlement schemes to agricultural cooperatives: Rethinking the settlement scheme strategy in Malawi's rural development programme*. University of Malawi Press.
- Koirala, S. (2023). Gender stereotypes and women's participation in agricultural extension services. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 24(3), 89-105.
- Krishna, A. (2012). *Active social capital: Tracing the roots of development and democracy*. Columbia University Press.
- Little, J., & Panelli, R. (2003). Gender research in rural geography. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 10(3), 281-289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369032000114049>
- Makhetha, E. (2025). Women in agriculture in Southern Africa: Land ownership, labour and social structures. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5334763>
- Makwinja, Y.H. & Kimengsi, J.N., (2026). Traditional Institutional Change and

Forest Resource Use Practices in Rural Malawi: The Case of M'bona, *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*, 45:2, 196-223, DOI: 10.1080/10549811.2025.2574014

- Manja, L. P., Zingwe, D. E., & Kamangila, A. E. (2025). Smallholder farming commercialisation and food security in Malawi: Do land rights and intrahousehold bargaining power matter? *Agriculture & Food Security*, 14, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40066-025-00520-9>
- Martin, A. (2016). A crop of one's own? Women's experiences of cassava commercialisation in Nigeria and Malawi. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security*, 1(2), 110-128.
- Masamha, B., Taruvinga, A., & Dube, S. (2024). The leadership paradox: Women's numerical representation versus decision-making power in agricultural cooperatives. *Gender in Management*, 39(2), 178-195.
- Mausch, K., Harris, D., Dilley, L., Crossland, M., Pagella, T., Yim, J., & Jones, E. (2021). Rural transformation and the future of cereal-based agri-food systems. *Global Food Security*, 28, 100508. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2021.100508>
- McCarthy, N., & Kilic, T. (2014). Collective action for public goods provision in Malawi: Gendered participation and leadership. *World Development*, 64, 234-248.
- McCarthy, N., & Kilic, T. (2015). Gender dynamics in farmer groups: Evidence from Malawi. *Agricultural Economics*, 46(3), 415-428.
- Missiame, A., & Osei, R. D. (2023). Technical efficiency of cassava farmers in Ghana: The role of farmer-based organisations. *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 74(2), 456-475.
- Molnar, S. (2022). Tokenism and exploitation in gender inclusion programs. *Development in Practice*, 32(4), 512-526.
- Mudege, N. N., Nyekanyeka, T., Kapalasa, E., Chevo, T., & Demo, P. (2015). Understanding collective action and women's empowerment in potato farmer groups in Ntcheu and Dedza in Malawi. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 42, 91-101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.09.002>
- Murray, U. (2015). Topic guide: Women's empowerment in a changing agricultural and rural context. Institute of Development Studies.
- Mwambi, M., Bijman, J., & Mshenga, P. (2021). Collective action and smallholder farmers' market access in Kenya. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 82, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.003>
- Mweninguwe, R. (2025). Malawi must implement pro-women reforms to strengthen food security. *Development and Cooperation*.
- Niewoehner-Green, J. E., Cole, D. C., & Mwangi, E. (2019). Gender and leadership in agricultural cooperatives: A systematic review. *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 34(1), 45-72.

- Noble, H., & Heale, R. (2019). Triangulation in research: Enhancing reliability and validity in qualitative studies. *British Journal of Nursing*, 28(6), 374-378.
- North, D. C. (1991). Institutions. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5(1), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.5.1.97>
- NSO (National Statistical Office of Malawi). (2018). 2018 Malawi population and housing census report. Government of Malawi.
- Nyantakyi-Frimpong, H., Bezner Kerr, R., Lupafya, E., Dakishoni, L., & Shumba, L. (2022). Agroecology and resilience to climate extremes in Malawi. *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment*, 315, 107452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agee.2021.107452>
- Nyawo, S., & Olorunfemi, T. O. (2023). Land tenure security and women's participation in agricultural cooperatives in Eswatini. *Land Use Policy*, 125, 106478.
- Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*. Harvard University Press.
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, L., Quisumbing, A., Slavchevska, V., Davis, B., Kilic, T., & Mane, E. (2025). Gender inequalities in agrifood systems: An overview of the state of research. *Global Food Security*, 44, 100892.
- Place, F., Otsuka, K., & Mwangi, E. (2020). Challenges in collective action for agricultural development: Free-riding, elite capture, and governance failures. *World Development*, 127, 104749.
- Pretty, J. (2020). Social capital and the collective management of resources. *Science*, 302(5652), 1912-1914. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1090847>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Quader, S. W., Jairu, D., & Gorai, S. K. (2023). *Value chain development and market linkages: Enhancing farmers' income and market access*. IITA Monograph Series.
- Quisumbing, A. R., Rubin, D., Manfre, C., Waithanji, E., van den Bold, M., Olney, D., & Meinzen-Dick, R. (2014). Closing the gender asset gap: Learning from value chain development in Africa and Asia. *World Development*, 83, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.06.013>
- Reetsch, B., Schwab, N., & Kimengsi, J. N. (2021). Data triangulation and cross-checking in rural development research: Methodological considerations. *Field Methods*, 33(4), 389-405.
- Ridgeway, C. L., & Smith-Lovin, L. (1999). The gender system and interaction. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25(1), 191-216.
- Scoones, I. (2015). *Sustainable livelihoods and rural development*. Practical Action Publishing.

- Semkunde, M. A., Elly, T., Charles, G., Gaddefors, J., & Chiwona-Karltun, L. (2022). Rural entrepreneurship and the context: Navigating contextual barriers through women's groups. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 14(2), 213-234. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-01-2021-0013>
- Semkunde, M. A., Elly, T., Charles, G., Gaddefors, J., & Chiwona-Karltun, L. (2023). Women's collective action and empowerment in cassava farming systems. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 95, 156-170.
- Simukonde, M., Mwila, C., & Banda, S. (2023). The social relations approach to gender in agricultural development. *Gender & Development*, 31(1), 88-105.
- Simtowe, F., & Mwangi, M. (2012). Farmers' perceptions of the "Unleashing the Power of Cassava in Africa in Response to the Food Crisis" (UPoCA) project: Experiences from Malawi (Master's thesis). University of Malawi.
- Song, J., & Kim, T. (2025). Collective action and smallholder resilience: A difference-in-differences analysis from Malawi. *Food Policy*, 121, 102456.
- Suh, J., Ji, S., & C., T. (2025). Collective action under risk and uncertainty: Assessing impacts on smallholder farmers' income and food security in Malawi. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 9, 1607329. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2025.1607329>
- Thobejane, M. E., Mkhabela, T. S., & Ndlovu, S. (2023). Social capital and Women's representation in agricultural cooperative decision-making in South Africa. *Agenda*, 37(2), 78-94.
- Thunde, J., Kambewa, D., & Chirwa, E. (2023). Cassava value chains and rural livelihoods in Malawi. *African Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 18(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.320456>
- Verhofstadt, E., & Maertens, M. (2014). Smallholder cooperatives and agricultural Performance in Rwanda: Do organisational differences matter? *Agricultural Economics*, 45(S1), 39-52.
- Wolford, W. (2021). *This land is ours now: Social mobilisation and the meanings of land in Brazil*. Duke University Press.
- World Bank. (2021). An all-women cooperative in Malawi sprouts up through the Agriculture Commercialisation Project. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/06/02/an-all-women-cooperative-in-malawi-sprouts-up-through-the-agriculture-commercialization-project>
- World Bank. (2023). *Malawi economic monitor: Charting a new course*. World Bank Group. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1899-4>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Popular Science Summary

In rural Malawi, farming is not just about growing food. It is about power, voice, and who gets to make decisions. My master's thesis, "Gender Relations and Collective Action: A Case Study of Cassava Farmer Groups in Rural Malawi," examines how men and women in cassava farmer groups collaborate and the results of their interactions.

Cassava is a hardy, drought-resistant crop that has become a lifeline for many families in southern Africa. But while women do most of the planting, weeding, and processing, men often control the land, the profits, and the decisions. This study explored whether joining a farmer group could help shift that balance.

I spent several months among rural Malawian communities, interviewing and observing mixed-gender farmer groups and women-only farmer groups. The findings show that collective action, working together in formal groups, can open doors for women. Women in these groups reported greater access to training, shared tools, and even small loans. More importantly, they gained confidence to speak up in village meetings and negotiate a fairer share of cassava earnings.

However, the study also found persistent challenges. Deeply held norms such as the belief that men should lead public meetings or handle cash did not disappear overnight. In some groups, men still dominated leadership roles, and women's labour was sometimes taken for granted. The thesis argues that collective action is not a magic fix: without deliberate efforts to challenge gender norms, farmer groups can end up reinforcing old inequalities rather than breaking them down.

The key takeaway is practical: farmer groups in Malawi and similar settings need more than just tools and seeds. They need structured support for shared leadership, gender dialogue, and fair distribution of benefits. When that happens, cassava farming becomes not just a source of food but a pathway to greater equality.

Acknowledgement

I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr.Linley Chiwona Karlton, for her invaluable guidance, unwavering support, and insightful feedback throughout this research journey. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in shaping this thesis.

I am also profoundly thankful to our programme Research coordinators, Dr.Noémi Gonda and Dr.Patrik Oskarsson, for their constructive suggestions and contributions to this work. I am also thankful to my thesis examiner, Alin Kadfak, and student opponent, Mohammad Abdullah-al Zubair, for providing constructive criticism and assessing my thesis.

I sincerely thank all the lecturers, management, and support staff of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development, for providing the resources and opportunities necessary to complete this research. I am deeply thankful to my sponsor, the Swedish Institute (SI), for awarding me a fully funded two-year scholarship, without which this work would not have been possible.

I thank my colleagues, friends, and family for their constant encouragement, understanding, and motivation during this challenging yet rewarding process. Lastly, I acknowledge the countless researchers and scholars whose work has inspired and informed this thesis. Their contributions to the field have been a cornerstone of my research.

Appendix 1. Checklist for Focus Group Discussions

(1) Production

- Participation in Cassava farming groups and specific roles
- Collaboration in the field
- Decision-making in the field
- Decision-making about inputs
- Reason for decisions made

(2) Resources

- Ownership of land and house
- Ownership of assets (equipment.)
- Decision making about purchase and sales of land, house and assets
- Official registration of assets
- Household decision making
- Credit: Access, reason and decision making

(3) Income

- Sources of income
- Control over use of income
- Management family budget
- Expenditure posts

(4) Leadership

- Overview of different organizations
- Membership/Leadership
- Organizational structure and influence
- Public speaking

(5) Time and drudgery

- Daily activities
- Workload
- Seasonal workload
- Health related risks
- Leisure activities
- Balance workload/leisure

(6) Access to extension service

- Access to training
- Access to agricultural information
- Access to agricultural technologies

Appendix 2. Questionnaire on Gender Relations and Collective Action: A Case Study of Cassava Farmer Groups in Rural Malawi

Introduction:

My name is **Yamikani Harry Makwinja**, a Master's student in Rural Development and Natural Resources Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala Campus. This questionnaire aims to collect data for a master's thesis. The research aims to assess the economic and social impacts of cassava farmer groups in rural Malawi, focusing on gender dynamics, institutional influences, and livelihood outcomes. Your responses will be useful for academic purposes and may further inform policies aimed at enhancing collective farming and rural prosperity in Malawi. All responses are confidential and you are free to withdraw from this interview at any stage, should you feel that your privacy is not respected.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other

2. Age:

- 18–30
- 31–45
- 46–60
- 60+

3. Education Level:

- No formal education
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary

4. Household Size:

- 1–3

- 4–6
- 7+

5. Farm Size (hectares):

- <0.5
- 0.5–1
- 1–2
- 2+

Section 2: Participation in Cassava Farmer Groups

6. Are you a member of a cassava farmer group?

- Yes
- No (*Skip to Section 4 if "No"*)

7. If yes, how long have you been a member?

- <1 year
- 1–3 years
- 4–6 years
- 7+ years

8. What motivated you to join the group? (*Select all that apply*)

- Better market access
- Shared resources (seeds, tools, training)
- Increased bargaining power
- Social support/networking
- Other: _____

9. How often does your group meet?

- Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly
- Rarely

Section 3: Economic and Social Benefits

10. How has group membership improved your farming outcomes? (Rate 1–5, where 1 = Not at all, 5 = Significantly)

- Yield increase: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
- Income stability: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
- Access to credit: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
- Reduced input costs: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

11. Does your group engage in collective marketing?

- Yes
- No

12. If yes, how has it affected your profits compared to individual sales?

- Increased significantly
- Slightly increased
- No change
- Decreased

13. What challenges does your group face? (*Select all that apply*)

- Leadership conflicts
- Unequal benefit sharing
- Lack of training
- Poor market access
- Transportation costs
- Other: _____

Section 4: Gender Dynamics and Decision-Making

14. Who holds leadership roles in your group? (*Select all that apply*)

- Mostly men
- Mostly women
- Balanced gender representation

15. Do women in your group have equal say in decisions?

- Yes
- No (*Explain:* _____)

16. What barriers do women face in participating fully? (*Select all that apply*)

- Cultural norms
- Lack of land ownership
- Household responsibilities
- Limited access to training
- Other: _____

17. Has the group taken steps to promote gender equity?

- Yes (*Describe:* _____)
- No

Section 5: Institutional Support and Policies

18. Do you receive support from government/NGOs?

- Yes (*Specify:* _____)
- No

19. What type of support would most benefit your group? (*Select all that apply*)

- Training programs
- Better market linkages
- Access to credit
- Improved storage facilities
- Other: _____

20. How effective are local institutions (e.g., cooperatives, extension services) in supporting cassava farmers?

- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not effective

Section 6: Perceptions of Rural Prosperity

21. Has group membership improved your household's overall well-being?

- Yes (*How?* _____)
- No

Section 7. Gender Stereotypes and Social Norms

22. Do you agree with the statement: "Women are less capable than men in managing cassava farming groups"?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

23. What are common reasons cited in your community for women's low participation in farmer groups? (Select all that apply)

- "Women lack confidence to lead"
- "Women's primary role is household work, not farming groups"
- "Men are naturally better decision-makers"
- "Women are not interested in group activities"
- Other: _____

24. Have you heard women described as "lazy" or "unserious" about farming?

- Yes (*Who typically says this? [] Men [] Women [] Leaders*)
- No

Section 8: Structural and Economic Barriers

25. What resources do women lack to join cassava groups? (Select all that apply)

- Land ownership
- Access to credit/loans
- Farming inputs (seeds, tools)
- Time due to household duties
- Other: _____

26. Are women equally selected for agricultural training programs?

- Yes
- No (*Why? [] Bias in selection [] Few female trainers [] Cultural restrictions*)

27. Do men in your community control income from cassava sales, even when women grow the crop?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Section 9: Institutional and Leadership Barriers

28. Who usually holds leadership roles in cassava groups?

- Mostly men
- Mostly women
- Equal representation

29. If leadership is male-dominated, why? (Select all that apply)

- Women are not nominated
- Women decline due to fear of criticism
- Tradition favors male leaders
- Other: _____

30. Have extension officers or NGOs encouraged women's participation in groups?

- Yes (*How? [] Training [] Quotas [] Awareness campaigns*)
- No

Section 10: Solutions and Perceptions

31. What would MOST help women join/lead cassava groups? (Rank by priority: 1 (most) to 5 (least))

- Gender-sensitive training programs
- Land ownership rights for women
- Female-only farmer groups
- Penalties for discriminatory practices
- Male champions advocating for women

32.Open-ended: *What changes would you suggest to make cassava groups more inclusive for women?*

33.What additional interventions could enhance rural prosperity? (*Open-ended*)

-

-

-

Thank you for your participation!

Publishing and archiving

Approved students' theses at SLU are published electronically. As a student, you have the copyright to your own work and need to approve the electronic publishing. If you check the box for YES, the full text (pdf file) and metadata will be visible and searchable online. If you check the box for NO, only the metadata and the abstract will be visible and searchable online. Nevertheless, when the document is uploaded it will still be archived as a digital file. If you are more than one author, the checked box will be applied to all authors. You will find a link to SLU's publishing agreement here:

- <https://libanswers.slu.se/en/faq/228318>

YES, I, Yamikani Harry Makwinja, have read and agree to the agreement for publication and the personal data processing that takes place in connection with this

NO, I/we do not give my/our permission to publish the full text of this work.

However, the work will be uploaded for archiving, and the metadata and summary will be visible and searchable.