



# “The family farms together, the decisions, however are made by the man” —Matrilineal land tenure systems, welfare and decision making in rural Malawi

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## ABSTRACT

Improved female control over land is often put forth as a means of raising the productivity of smallholder agriculture, enhancing female bargaining power and raising women's incomes. The article uses some quantitative but primarily qualitative data on access to income and decision making, to analyse gender patterns related to welfare, incomes and control over resources in a context where women's rights to land are particularly strong, that is in a matrilineal and uxorial setting. Women's land rights are contextualized in relation to labour intensive, low productive smallholder systems and the paper assesses to what extent female control over land affects welfare outcomes, decision making and intra-household control over incomes and labour. While we find that female control over land does affect intra household relations it is clear that land reform is not enough to ensure gender equality. For any land use policy reform to have a profound affect it would have to also take into account control over other productive resources, e.g. labour, as well as the wider institutional and political context.

## 1. Introduction

Poor productivity within African smallholder agriculture is commonly attributed to factors that emanate from and reinforce poverty traps, lead to persistent food insecurity and constrain growth. Recently, attention has been devoted to women's access to agrarian resources generally and land specifically, as explanations for poor productivity and pervasive poverty in the smallholder sector as a whole (World Bank et al., 2009; IFAD, 2011). Indeed, in policy circles the claim has been made that closing the gender gaps in agriculture will in itself encourage growth and development (FAO 2010, 2011).

Investigating the effects of improved female control over land in sub-Saharan Africa is, however, complicated by the fact that land rights in the region generally favour men. Consequently, the empirical possibilities for studying the links between matrilineal tenure (land is inherited through the female line), welfare outcomes and female bargaining power are limited. Notwithstanding, data from Malawi's National Census of Agriculture and Livestock (NSO, 2010) notes that matrilineal tenure systems are predominant in the country, something

that suggests opportunities for relevant case studies. Land tenure systems in Malawi have been studied over many decades, both in the colonial (Radcliffe-Brown 1924; Mitchell 1956) and the post-colonial periods (Peters, 1997; Peters and Kambewa, 2007; Jul-Larsen and Mvula, 2009; Lunduka, 2009; Peters, 2010; Peters, 2013). Nevertheless, the country's matrilineal systems of land tenure are relatively understudied and consequently to some extent also misunderstood (Berge et al., 2013) and even denigrated in official discourse (Peters, 1997; Kaarhus, 2010).

In 2002 and 2008 we conducted two rounds of quantitative household data collection in eight villages in Malawi. Out of those, three villages in Dedza and Ntchisi Districts appeared to have experienced processes of broad based agricultural growth and in 2012/13 we followed up with both a qualitative study in search of explanations for this outcome and another round of quantitative data collection (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2013). The villages turned out to represent a mixed bag of tenure and settlement patterns: one being patrilineal (inheritance through the male line) and virilocal (post-marital settlement in the husband's family location); one patrilineal/matrilineal and

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virilocal; and one matrilineal and uxorilocal (the husband settling in the wife's village). This variation in tenure systems and post-marital residence patterns provided us with practical opportunities to investigate whether better female access to agrarian resources and markets influence patterns of agricultural growth dynamics. The quantitative data, hence is used as a backdrop to describe differences in welfare outcomes among the villages in question. As initial contacts suggested anomalous development in the village characterized by matrilineal land rights and uxorilocal settlement patterns we decided to use it as our focal point.

As we are aware that the contextual nature of land rights as well as gender relations suggest that any empirical analyses need to be embedded in particular local conditions, we include in our analysis a detailed investigation and presentation of matrilineal tenure systems in Malawi generally and our focus village specifically. Subsequently, two research questions guide our analysis: 1) To what extent does income and decision making at the household level relate to gender based differences in tenure rights? 2) Through what mechanisms do male authority systems and control over other resources than land interact with matrilineal land right systems?

We view our contribution as twofold: firstly, we show that intra-household decision making and division of labour are crucial to understanding the influence of matrilineal tenure on actual welfare outcomes within and among households. Secondly, we emphasize the broader institutional, practical and normative constraints to women's access to agricultural inputs, extension and commercial opportunities as explanations for the limited influence of matrilineal tenure in ensuring equitable welfare outcomes. As such, we question that enhancing female land rights in the context of sub-Saharan Africa will in itself lead to widespread improvements in smallholder productivity. For our concluding remarks we provide some generalizable conclusions relevant for theoretical approaches and strategies developed in other regional contexts.

## 2. Data from three Malawi villages

The present study builds on a broader project assessing the potential for smallholder based agrarian transformation in sub-Saharan Africa (Djurfeldt et al., 2005). Quantitative household data has been collected in three rounds in 2002, 2008 and 2013 respectively (Djurfeldt et al., 2005; Cirwa et al., 2011; Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2018).<sup>1</sup> The Malawi data originally included eight villages, three of which experienced what could be described as trends of broad based agricultural growth between the first two rounds of data collection, i.e. increased agricultural commercialization leading to widespread improvement in incomes.<sup>2</sup> These three villages – Khasu in Dedza District and Chikwanje and Nkhwangwa in Ntchisi District – were selected for further study and collection of qualitative data.<sup>3</sup>

The three villages represented different inheritance regimes and post marital settlement patterns. Chikwanje has patrilineal tenure and virilocal settlement, Nkhwangwa has a mixed tenure system combining elements of both patrilineal and matrilineal tenure and virilocal settlement, and Khasu is matrilineal and uxorilocal settlement. Under the assumption that the combination of matrilineal and uxorilocal post

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork, focusing on household transfers of food, had been undertaken in the villages also in 2007 (Cirwa et al., 2011; Djurfeldt et al., 2011). "Maize remittances, smallholder livelihoods and maize consumption in Malawi." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49(1): 1–25., but is not examined further here.

<sup>2</sup> Two indicators from the quantitative data set were used: an improvement in the household's ability to save (whether the household started to save) from 2002 to 2007 in combination with an increased participation in agricultural markets during the same period. Villages were purposively selected for further study, fulfilling two criteria: (a). 25% or more of the panel households had started to save while increasing their agricultural market participation. (b). the share of households in the village cross-sections that were able to save was higher in 2007 than in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> To protect the identity of the respondents and to tally with other publications, the villages have been given pseudonyms.

marital residence would offer the strongest possible land rights for women Khasu was selected as the main subject of the study. In particular the village was expected to constitute an interesting case for testing as well as problematizing some of the connections proposed by theories on land rights, female bargaining power and access to agrarian incomes.

For this study we use the 2013 round of the quantitative data. The sample is representative at the village level covering 49 households in Khasu, 50 households in Chikwanje and 50 households in Nkhwangwa. The survey respondent was the self-identified farm manager, who answered on behalf of the household.

Although it is common in the literature to distinguish households by sex of household head we choose to use the sex of farm manager throughout the broader project as this point of departure includes both *de facto* and *de jure* female headed households (see Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2018). In the case of this particular study, however the overlap between the sex of household head and the sex of farm manager is nearly universal: only in one case (out of the 149) was there a difference, with a farm being managed by a woman, but the household being headed by a man. The terms household head and farm manager are therefore used interchangeably in the article to denote female managed farms.

In Khasu, 14 households (29%) of the village sample had a female farm manager, in Nkhwangwa 12 households (24%) and in Chikwanje 7 households (14%).<sup>4</sup> Due to the limited sample size the results need to be interpreted cautiously. The quantitative analysis is based on comparing households with female and male farm managers respectively across the three villages. Four specific measures are used: 1) Cash income per adult equivalent (as such controlling for household size and demographic composition). 2) Whether the household was able to save or not. 3) Grains retained for own consumption per adult equivalent. 4) Number of meals eaten by the household in the lean season. Using the first two indicators aims to shed light on the monetary outcomes from agriculture and the second two on the food security outcomes.

While the quantitative data from 2013 is used to frame the study and assess some of the linkages proposed by the theoretical literature, the main source of information for the analysis is qualitative data collected during fieldwork carried out in November of 2012 (see Appendix A). Households were stratified by cash income per adult equivalent in each village and divided into three groups: below average, average and above average. As far as possible three households with male farm managers were selected randomly within each category in each village and both spouses were interviewed. In addition, the ambition was to collect data also from three households headed by female farm managers in each income segment, but due to changing conditions within the village a supplementary sample of women was needed to address the gap.

The bulk of the qualitative data consisted of individual interviews at the household level and was complemented with key informant interviews with the village heads (or in some cases the sub-village heads), members of the water association, lead farmers, members of credit groups and cooperatives. In addition, staff at the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, at the Dedza District Agricultural Office, as well as the local extension agent were interviewed. To triangulate further, focus group discussions were carried out with two gender separated groups, stratified by age. The respondents in the focus groups were not part of the individual interviews.

## 3. Women's land rights

Drawing on empirical data from India, Agarwal (1994, 1997, 2003a,

<sup>4</sup> There is some variation in household types, however, 78 households were nuclear, 40 extended and 8 polygamous. Controlling for household size enables comparison across categories.

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