



GENDER Impact
Platform

Advancing gender-responsive climate-smart agriculture in Machinga District, Malawi: policy opportunities

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Summary

This policy brief highlights the urgent need for gender-responsive policies in climate adaptation and agriculture within Machinga District, Malawi. It examines the unique challenges faced by women in the context of climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and identifies significant gaps in agricultural policies. The findings indicate a low level of gender integration in policies, underscoring the inadequacy of measures addressing barriers specific to women. To develop inclusive climate actions, the brief recommends promotion of women's participation in policy processes, creation of clear policy objectives with dedicated resource allocation, creation of integrated implementation strategies, and formulation of success indicators to assess progress. By prioritizing gender-responsive policies, Machinga District can empower women, enhance resilience to climate change, and achieve sustainable agricultural development, ultimately contributing to the broader goals of climate adaptation and food security.

Key highlights

- The low gender integration in policies is responsible for the inadequate measures to address barriers women encounter in adopting CSA.
- To overcome the gaps in CSA adoption, policies must include actionable measures for gender inclusion, clear policy objectives with dedicated resource allocation, integrated implementation strategies, and success indicators to assess progress and ensure continuous improvement.

Background

The agricultural sector is the backbone of Malawi's economy, contributing approximately 30% of GDP and providing livelihoods for 80% of the population, predominantly in rural areas (World Bank, 2021). Women constitute about 70% of the agricultural workforce (FAO, 2019), engaging in critical activities across the agricultural value chain from crop planting to marketing. Their significant role is often undermined by systemic barriers, including limited access to land, credit, agricultural inputs, and extension services (FAO, 2020). Social norms and cultural practices constrain women's participation in decision-making processes, impeding their adoption of innovative practices such as CSA (UN Women, 2021).

Climate change has intensified vulnerabilities within the agricultural sector, disproportionately affecting smallholder farmers, especially women. Declining crop yields, increasing food insecurity, and limited access to climate information and adaptive technologies exacerbate these challenges (Zhou et al., 2022). Addressing these disparities is critical not only for enhancing agricultural productivity but also for building resilience to climate shocks.

Malawi has made strides in addressing climate change and agricultural resilience through policies such as the National Climate Change Management Policy (2016) and the National Adaptation Plan Framework (2020). These frameworks aim to guide sustainable development, enhance resilience, and promote adaptation strategies across sectors, including agriculture (Government of Malawi, 2016; 2020). However, significant gender gaps exist within these policies. The National Climate Change Management Policy acknowledges women's roles in agriculture but lacks specific strategies to address the unique barriers they face in accessing CSA resources (Morris et al., 2020). The National Adaptation Plan Framework does not sufficiently incorporate gender-responsive approaches, failing to account for the differentiated impacts of climate change on men and women (Climate Justice Group, 2021). These shortcomings limit the effectiveness of the policies, restricting women's contributions to agricultural resilience and food security.

Methods

In this study, five climate change-related policies (Table 1) from Malawi were reviewed using the Gender in Agricultural Policies Analysis Tool (GAPo). GAPo is designed to assess how well gender considerations are integrated into agricultural policies. It helps to grade policies on their ability to address the specific challenges women face in agriculture such as accessing resources and participating in decision-making.

The Women's Empowerment in Agrifood Governance (WEAGov) framework served as a complementary tool for assessing women's empowerment across the policy cycle, specifically within agrifood systems (for the methodology, see <https://www.ifpri.org/project/womens-empowerment-agrifood-governance-weagov/>). A questionnaire was developed with sections corresponding to WEAGov's three central questions, which are (i) are women considered, that is, do the policies consider women's needs and priorities in CSA adoption? (ii) are women included, that is, are there meaningful opportunities for women to participate in policy design and feedback process? and (iii) are women influencing, that is, do women have agency to influence policy decision and implementation in CSA?

A qualitative approach was employed to gather rich, detailed insights. Focus group discussions were conducted with lead and smallholder farmers to explore gender-specific challenges in CSA adoption. To understand how policies were implemented and perceived at the community level, key informant interviews were held with stakeholders, including agricultural extension development coordinators, agricultural extension development officers, the director of agriculture services in Machinga District, the disaster risk management officer, and the assistant social welfare officer. We synthesized data from these exercises to identify recurring themes on policy gaps in addressing gender in CSA, barriers to women's participation in policy design and implementation, and role of sex-disaggregated data in policy monitoring and evaluation.

Key results

The assessment of systemic barriers to women's participation and empowerment in CSA reveals that:

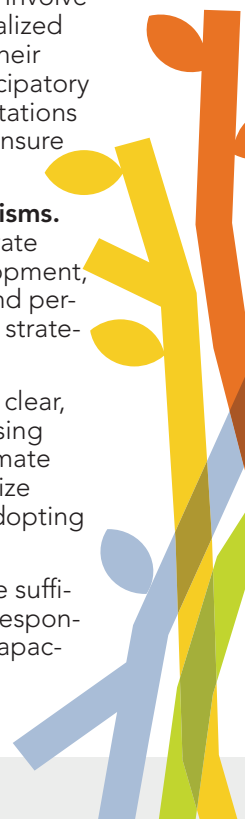
- **Women's roles and challenges are recognized but without provision of actionable measures.** The policies show awareness of women's roles and issues but lack specific, actionable steps to achieve gender equality.
- **Promotion of use of sex-disaggregated data is poor.** While utility of sex-disaggregated data

is mentioned in policies, little emphasis is put into its promotion for monitoring and evaluation. This hinders tracking of women's contributions and addressing of their specific needs in agricultural contexts.

- **Integration of gender specific climate change themes is inadequate.** Key themes of climate change adaptation critical to addressing women's unique challenges in CSA are insufficiently integrated into the policies.
- **Women lack awareness on and participation in policies.** There is limited awareness among women on policies and CSA initiatives tailored to support them. The government officials are better informed but do not communicate the policies effectively to local women.
- **Tailored support is inadequate.** The generalized training programs do not address women's unique needs, as they lack gender-specific targets and equity mechanisms.
- **Women smallholder farmers' voices are marginalized in decision-making.** Women feel undervalued in policy discussions and they often face ridicule or dismissal, which discourages them from sharing their perspectives.
- **Resource constraints hinder women's CSA adoption.** Women's limited access to financial resources, agricultural inputs, and CSA technologies restricts their ability to adopt CSA practices.
- **Women are underrepresented in leadership roles.** Social norms favouring male leadership limit women's participation in decision-making processes. Women remain excluded from key leadership roles in agricultural organizations.

Recommendations

- **Engage diverse stakeholders.** Actively involve women, local communities, and marginalized groups in policy formulation to ensure their perspectives are represented. Use participatory mechanisms, such as community consultations and focus groups, to gather input and ensure inclusive representation.
- **Facilitate participatory policy mechanisms.** Establish inclusive platforms to incorporate stakeholder feedback into policy development, ensuring that women's specific needs and perspectives are integrated into actionable strategies.
- **Define gender-specific objectives.** Set clear, measurable objectives aimed at addressing gender disparities in agriculture and climate policies. These objectives should prioritize removing barriers faced by women in adopting CSA practices.
- **Allocate adequate resources.** Dedicate sufficient funding and resources to gender-responsive initiatives, training programs, and capac-



ity-building efforts for women in agriculture, ensuring equitable access to necessary tools and support.

- **Develop comprehensive implementation plans.** Align gender-responsive actions with broader climate and agricultural policies to ensure cohesive cross-sector implementation. This will address policy gaps and ensure systemic change.
- **Determine the success indicators.** Define clear success indicators and monitoring frameworks to assess the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies. Regular evaluations should inform ongoing improvements and adaptations to better meet the needs of women in agriculture.
- **Tailor the support for women.** Improve communication channels and provide targeted support to bridge the awareness gap. Ensure that women have access to relevant information, resources, and opportunities to adopt CSA practices effectively.
- **Open up leadership opportunities.** Empower women by creating inclusive decision-making spaces and offering leadership training programs. This will enhance their participation, influence, and capacity to drive change in agricultural and climate policy development.

By implementing these integrated recommendations, policy-makers can ensure that gender-responsive approaches are effectively embedded in agricultural and climate policies, fostering resilience and sustainability in Malawi's agricultural sector.

Table 1. Climate change-related policies reviewed using GaPo

Policy	Year
National Climate Change Management Policy, Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining Environmental Affairs Department	2016
Malawi's Strategy on Climate Change Learning, Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change	2021
Malawi National Adaptation Plan Framework, Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change	2020
Malawi Implementation Plan 1 (MIP 1), National Planning Commission	2021
Updated Nationally Determined Contributions, Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change	2021

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