

Research Application Summary

**Farmers groups and extension impact: Exploring female farmer's roles, levels of participation and livelihood benefits within milk bulking groups of Dowa and Dedza districts in Malawi**

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**Abstract**

Women play a significant and crucial role in agriculture by providing labour in crop production, and livestock management that provide household food and income when small surpluses are sold. There is need therefore for equipping and empowering female farmers so that they can have diversified and sustainable livelihood support options. Empowerment entails farmers making their own decisions rather than adopting recommendations. The results of empowerment may lead to increased female representation in farmer groups such as milk bulking groups (MBGs) and increased levels of participation. The objective of this study was to assess the roles of female farmers and their participation in MBGs and how these have led to their empowerment and more sustainable livelihoods. The study was conducted in three MBGs that were purposively sampled from central Malawi districts. Data were collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions and analysed using NVivo 11 software. The findings show that female farmers had a number of roles within the MBGs and key among these was that of executive leadership, designation as lead armers and bare membership. These roles were related to the different levels of namely authorised, descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. This also led to their empowerment in that they were able to train their fellows in various aspects of agricultural production and acquisition of assets such as dairy animals, goats, pigs and chickens. This effort to increase access to sources of income is a critical step towards empowerment.

Keywords: Empowerment, female dairy Farmers, livelihoods and rural development enterprises

**Résumé**

Les femmes jouent un rôle important et crucial dans l'agriculture en fournissant de la main-d'œuvre dans la production végétale et dans la gestion du bétail qui constituent des sources d'aliments et de revenus du ménage lorsque les petits excédents sont vendus. Il est donc nécessaire d'équiper et d'autonomiser les femmes agricultrices afin qu'elles puissent avoir des options de subsistances diversifiées et durables. L'autonomisation nécessite que les agriculteurs prennent leurs propres décisions plutôt que d'adopter des recommandations.

Les résultats de l'autonomisation peuvent conduire à une représentation accrue des femmes et une augmentation des niveaux de participation au sein des groupements paysans tels que les groupements de production laitière (GPL). L'objectif de cette étude était d'évaluer les rôles des agricultrices et leur participation aux groupements de production laitière et comment ceux-ci ont contribué à leur autonomisation et à des moyens de subsistance plus durables. L'étude a été menée auprès de trois GPLs qui ont été échantillonnés à dessein dans les districts du centre du Malawi. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide d'entretien avec des informateurs clés et des discussions de groupes; et analysées à l'aide du logiciel NVivo 11. Les résultats montrent que les femmes agricultrices avaient un certain nombre de rôles au sein des GPLs. Les principaux rôles sont en autres ceux de la direction exécutif, des agriculteurs "chefs de file" et de la participation en tant que membre simple. Ces rôles étaient liés aux différents niveaux à savoir représentation autorisée, descriptive, substantielle et symbolique. Cela a également conduit à leur autonomisation dans le sens où elles ont été en mesure de former leurs pairs dans divers aspects de la production agricole et d'acquisition d'actifs tels que les animaux laitiers, les chèvres, les porcs et les poulets. Cet effort visant à accroître l'accès aux sources de revenus constitue une étape critique vers l'autonomisation.

Mots-clés: Autonomisation, production laitière des femmes agriculteurs, moyens de subsistance et entreprises de développement rural

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## **Background**

Women are described as a powerful force for economic growth and development as both skilled and unskilled workers as well as entrepreneurs throughout Africa (Ellis, 2007). Women play a significant and crucial role in agriculture as labourers for supporting crop production, livestock management for home consumption and selling small surpluses which has led to numerous development projects increasing their focus on women. It is argued that if women farmers had access to the same resources as men then they would be able to increase overall agricultural productivity at the household level by as much as 30% (FAO, 2011).

Female farmers possess a great potential for more diversified farming systems, value-added production and commitment to the environment, and they are more likely to be engaged in sustainable agriculture and organic production. This is why there is need for equipping and empowering female farmers so that they can have diversified and sustainable livelihoods. In agricultural production, empowerment is regarded as the next step in the trend away from technology transfer and towards increased participation, involving the diffusion not merely of information, but of expertise. As an advanced form of participation, empowerment entails farmers making their own decisions rather than adopting recommendations (Bartlett, 2008). Empowerment is defined as a process of creating awareness and capacity building, leading to greater participation, greater decision making power, control and transformation action (Suguna, 2001).

Women empowerment is a desired development outcome in its own right as well as a means to accelerate achievement of desired outcomes in social economic transformation agenda. It not only raises the status of women to be at par with men, but it contributes to the development of society as a whole (Garza *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, gender equality and empowerment of women are essential to the attainment of sustained rural development (Afzal *et al.*, 2009). Women's empowerment is described as the construction of a route to foster women's ability to be self-reliant and to improve internal power. One of the ways for encouraging independence and facilitating empowerment among female farmers is the promotion of income generating activities such as dairy farming (Shefner-Rogers *et al.*, 2009). The results of empowerment may lead to increased female representation in farmer groups such as Milk Bulking Groups (MBGs) which facilitate bulk handling and storage of milk prior to collection by the dairy processors as well as a means for accessing advisory services as pertains to dairy production as well as overall agricultural production.

Farmer groups have a significant female representation which necessitates the need for exploring the levels of female representation in farmer groups as these issues have mostly been explored in the political arena. The levels of participation have been categorised as authorised, descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Authorised representation is where a representative is legally empowered to act for another; descriptive representation is where the representative stands for a group by virtue of sharing similar characteristics; symbolic representation is where a leader stands for national ideas; while substantive representation focuses on advocacy for a group's policy preferences and interests (Pitkin, 1967; Celis *et al.*, 2008).

This paper is premised on the assumption that if women take up leadership roles in the farmer groups then the more women join these groups, assume various roles, become active participants, the faster the attainment of empowerment as well as improved diversified and sustained livelihoods. The objective of this study was to assess the roles of female farmers and their participation in MBGs and how these have led to their empowerment and attainment of more sustainable livelihoods.

### **Study description**

Malawi is a low income country in the sub-Saharan region with a population of 16.36 million people and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 3.705 billion. Agriculture contributes about 30% of Malawi's GDP . The sector is divided into estate and smallholder (MoAFS, 2000).

Two districts were randomly selected from 9 districts in the Central region of Malawi and 3 MBGs purposively sampled because of easy accessibility by road. These were Majjiga and Namwiri in Dowa district and Chitsanzo in Dedza district. In each MBG, a purposive sample of 15 female farmers were selected for part of the study as key informants or discussants within focus group discussions. These farmers had to be active

registered members of the MBG, active participants in the study circles within their communities. However it did not matter whether they owned a dairy animal or not. Data that was collected included: household characteristics of farmers, their roles, levels of participation and responsibilities within the MBGs and study circles, livelihood benefits resulting from membership within the MBGs and the challenges faced. All the interviews were conducted in Chichewa a local national language. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and later translated into English. Data were arranged in the sequence of codes, categories and concepts (Lichtman, 2013) using NVivo 11 software. These were collapsed into themes which were deemed important indicators for empowerment. These themes included; farmers' knowledge about the operations of the MBG, ability to train others in various aspects related to dairying as well as crop production and management of livelihood assets under their command. Additionally to explore levels of representation, the following indicators were used: position held in the MBG, how the farmers were appointed into those positions, and responsibilities associated with the positions held.

## Results and Discussion

### **Knowledge about the operations of the MBG, ability to train fellow members and management of livelihood assets under their command.**

Farmer's knowledge was assessed by their ability to recall information related to the establishment and operations of the MBG. For example Chitsanzo farmers were able to report the following: *Chitsanzo dairy cooperative was first established as an MBG in the year 1976 by 24 farmers who were members of the ruling political party at that time with the help of the extension worker for the area and that in 1997 the group reregistered as a cooperative with only 8 members. The farmers also indicated that the MBGs were divided into zones and further subdivided into study circles<sup>1</sup>. (Field report: 10/09/2015).*

This ability to recall information that relates to the history of the group points to the fact that these farmers were quite knowledgeable about the establishment of the MBG. Similarly, farmers were able to state the vision of the MBG. These facts demonstrate an in-depth understanding of what the MBG stands for and how they fit in it. The farmers also mentioned the various trainings that they had participated in and how they relayed this information to their colleagues which was mainly through the study circles by conducting demonstrations, field tours as well as trainings involving smaller groups of farmers. Peoples' knowledge and skills have been described as central to their ability to understand, interpret and act on technical production guidelines, requirements of buyers, public policies and regulations governing the sector (Challies and Murray, 2011). Human capital (skills, knowledge, capabilities) is central to a diversified portfolio of income generating activities at household level (Murray, 2001). This entails that the knowledge which these farmers had acquired did not only benefit their households but was for the good of every member of the MBG.

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Study Circles are farmer groups of 18 to 25 farmers whose aim is to share information on how they can improve agricultural production. This is where farmer to farmer exchange of knowledge and expertise takes place

### **Farmer roles, appointment into the roles and responsibilities**

The findings indicate that farmers had these main roles in the MBGs: Executive leadership of the MBG, Study Circle Leadership, and as lead farmers. Each MBG had a constitution that governed how the executive leaders and study circle leaders were to be elected. The process involved nominations of farmers who were active participants in the MBG followed by secret voting. Those elected were mandated to serve a term of three years after which there would be fresh elections. The lead farmers were simply nominated by their colleagues based on how they had demonstrated ability to grasp and articulate various activities within their communities related to dairying as well as other related projects. Most of the lead farmers had undergone some form of training on how various methods of innovation sharing and dairy production. For the other farmers who were ordinary members, they had to apply for membership through the study circles which were located close to their villages and pay an application fee which varied across the three MBGs studies. All the farmers were also required to pay an annual membership fee which was meant to assist in the operations of the MBG.

### **Levels of representation and farmer roles**

In all three MBGs, the executive management team included women. It was reported that these women were put in those positions so that the concerns of the women would be addressed in the activities of the MBGs which could be related to authorised representation. The farmers in all the three MBGs reported that they had undergone training on gender issues by different organisations so as to ensure that women were part of the leadership and as a safeguard for addressing issues that affect female such as access to extension and other advisory services, access to credit and ownership to assets such as land and dairy cattle.

Descriptive representation was observed through the common factor that kept the farmers together which was the prospect of owning a dairy animal for those who did not yet own a dairy animal. For those farmers that already had the dairy animals, active participation was due to the fact that they were able to get medical services for their animals as well as advisory services for overall agricultural production within their homesteads.

Substantive membership was distinctively expressed among farmers that were nominated as Lead farmers because they were able to train their colleagues in various aspects of agricultural production and that they had attended various training programs and then shared the acquired knowledge and skills with their fellows who included men.

It was also apparent that membership in an MBG had slightly elevated the levels of these women in their communities as such other women farmers looked up to them as role models and this was also stated as one of the reasons why other women joined the MBGs which was a form of Symbolic representation. For instance one lady farmer reported that: “ ... *I saw my friends prospering from dairying. And like I said since 1976 I had been growing tobacco but I had nothing to show for it so I decided to join the*

*dairying group. Initially our friends used to laugh at us. But now other women are coming to me to find out from the secrets to my success and how they can also join seeing that my household has totally transformed...*” (Field Notes: 25/03/2015)

These changes at the household may also be due to the different benefits accruing to members by virtue of their membership to the group. These benefits include ready market for the milk as well as ability to access credit for agricultural inputs without collateral and ready access to advisory services.

Some of the farmers also reported that they had acquired dairy animals which they would not have acquired otherwise. Owning this dairy animal was described as the starting point for diversifying their livelihood options because they were able to use manure from the animals in their crop production. Furthermore, the proceeds from the dairy sales were used to acquire numerous assets such as oxcarts, motorbikes, cars and contributed towards construction of iron-sheet roofed homes for their families. The farmers were able to acquire other pieces of land for growing crops such as maize, beans, groundnuts, or buying other livestock such as goats, pigs and chickens.

The empowerment process is regarded as involving analysis of activities on offer and actually deciding which actions to take. This process must emanate from a persuasion of the individual of the perceived benefits of an activity (Bartlett, 2008). In this study, it was observed that the women joined the MBGs after they had observed the success of fellow female farmers in terms of assets accrued and the elevation in status in the society.

It would be interesting if a study could be done in national farmer organisations and associations so as to assess the various roles that female farmers have and how these roles influence their levels of participation and empowerment.

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