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Gender Equality and Agricultural Development: Women and Agricultural Extension Programs in Malawi

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GENDER EQUALITY AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT:
WOMEN AND AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PROGRAMS
IN MALAWI

by

Amanda Bigelow

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Political Science

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan

April 2001

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with any thing in life, this paper would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many people. I would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Kenneth Dahlberg and Dr. Suhashni Datta-Sandhu for their advice and assistance, and the chair of the committee, Dr. Paul Clements for his patience and persistence in guiding me through my research.

Amanda Bigelow

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IN MALAWI

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Western Michigan University, 2001

Since it gained independence, Malawi has struggled to produce enough food to feed its quickly growing population. As the Ministry of Agriculture has tried to implement new policies regarding agricultural development, it has restructured key organizations within the government.

Initially, women were largely ignored in governmental and international aid agencies' development plans. However, after several unsuccessful projects, most implemented by the World Bank, a new project created by USAID revealed statistics that attributed part of the failures to gender-related biases in planning. Once these biases were identified, the government of Malawi requested assistance in reaching women farmers for purposes of development.

What was left out of the planning was any serious discussion of the rights of women not seen as directly linked to agricultural improvement. The goal of my research is to evaluate the changes that have already been made and recommend policy alternatives that seek long term solutions to food scarcity and that will support sustainable improvements in the quality of life of rural women.

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INTRODUCTION

The subjects of women and agriculture go hand in hand for many modern scholars of development. Because women's labor accounts for a large percentage of agricultural input, it is impossible to evaluate rural development without discussing the role that women play. Because women play such an active role in agriculture, any strategy for changing or improving agricultural production must not only take into consideration women's labor, but also their relevant positions in society and how those affect women's ability to be productive workers.

In Malawi, women's labor accounts for well over half of the inputs into subsistence agriculture (Spring, 1995). Women have played and continue to play an active role in the economy of the country. Still, only recently have their inputs been given serious consideration in development policies.

The government of Malawi has adopted poverty alleviation as the central policy for national development. It is a well-accepted fact that a great proportion of those affected by poverty are women. It is also generally accepted that women's poverty is exacerbated by their lack of access to resources like land, income, credit, appropriate technologies and information.

Previous studies on the situation of women in Malawi have shown that women are seriously disadvantaged in almost every sector of development. This is largely

attributed to social attitudes in the Malawi culture that discriminate based on sex. As a result, women have been forced to withstand conditions that make them shoulder a higher percentage of responsibilities and manage heavy workloads in the community (Spring, 1995).

The imbalance becomes even more noticeable at policy and decision-making levels where participation of women is negligible and the economic value of their contribution to agricultural production is under-appreciated in the national account.

“The Malawi Platform for Action,” established by the government of Malawi to alleviate poverty and improve the status of women, recognizes the importance of safeguarding the rights and freedoms of women granted in the new Constitution while identifying areas of focus in the process of promoting equality for women, and enhancing the effective participation of women in development (Food and Agricultural Organization, 1993). Currently, the political atmosphere is one that favors the integration of a gender perspective in development. However, gender equality still remains conceptual because gender sensitization, awareness and training, and the active training and hiring of women in agricultural extension programs have not come to fruition.

Only limited efforts have been undertaken to translate the concepts of equality into action. Add this to the existing negative attitudes regarding equality in community life and institutions, coupled with the privileges that men have become accustomed to, and these appear to contribute significantly to the status quo that perpetuates discrimination against and harassment of women.

Women in Malawi continue to be under-represented at political, policy, and decision-making levels. This is due in part to a culture that generally assigns leadership roles to men and in part to low levels of education among females. The slow progress in addressing the social issues in the country can be attributed to: (a) the difficulty of overcoming social biases against women that are pervasive in society as well as in the government; (b) an ongoing need for programs that not only sensitize government employees to the biases against women in society but that also seek to place women in positions of authority within agricultural extension programs, making them more visible, and challenging the stereotypes that assume that women are not farmers and are not interested in agricultural production; and (c) an ongoing need to justify agricultural policies only in terms of end results (immediate production increases) because of limited resources and pressure from international aid donors who have historically supported policies that overlooked the long-term benefits of programs that dually address gender needs along side of production increases.

Understanding these shortcomings and the need for change is one step toward understanding how best to make changes in Malawi that may positively affect women. Combining these with the needs of the country regarding agriculture bring us even closer to sound policy advice for Malawi. What has been left out of most plans for development in Malawi, however, is any serious consideration of instituting gender equity programs in the government that would focus on increasing the number of women in leadership positions in agricultural development. Because women

predominate as subsistence producers, any plan to increase production through extension programs must focus on making these services available to women.

While the best method for accomplishing this goal is debated throughout the international development community, the question of whether increasing women's role in providing agricultural extension services will lead to increases in agricultural production and, at the same time improve the status of women overall, is important to consider for any development plans where women play an active role in subsistence production. I will argue that the most effective plan would increase the number of women trained as agricultural extension workers in addition to currently prescribed programs aimed at assisting male farmers. This would enable women to receive services directly from women, thus increasing the likelihood of technology transfer. At the same time, this would also increase the visible numbers of women in positions of authority, breaking gender stereotypes that prescribe women's status as homemakers not primary producers of subsistence agriculture. Finally, women would be brought into the public sphere where they would have the ability to voice their desires and concerns regarding agriculture and to develop programs that would best suit their needs as producers of agriculture.

Before exploring the problems of agriculture and gender as they stand today in Malawi, however, it is important to understand the relevant history of the country and how agriculture has played an important role in the development of the country. This history will explore the policies under the colonial government of Great Britain, the

changes in agriculture policy under the first President Banda, and the priorities and goals of the current administration.

HISTORY

Precolonial History

The history of Malawi dates back more than 50,000 years through the findings of human cultural artifacts and fossil remains. Early humans known as San who are related to the Bushmen of southern Africa lived in the area between the 1st and 4th centuries A.D. By 1200 A.D. Bantu speaking peoples moved into the region bringing iron-working skills and slash-and-burn agriculture along with them. The recorded history of these Bantu-speaking peoples begins in the 13th and 15th centuries, A.D. and by 1500, Portuguese and English explorers and missionaries had begun to keep written records of the region (Pachai, 1973).

One of the most notable accomplishments of these early Bantu settlers was their creation of political states characterized by centralized systems of government. The Maravi Confederacy, established in 1840 was the most noted example of centralized government that encompassed local groups of peoples living in areas of what is today central and southern Malawi. In the north, the Ngonde peoples established a kingdom around 1600 A.D. These early forms of government would become an important tool for the establishment of colonial Malawi, under the rule of the British, who would use the centralized system of government to impose colonial rule through local leaders and traditional rulers (Williams, 1978 & Pachai, 1973).

In the 18th and 19th centuries improved agricultural practices were adopted, allowing for increased settlement and more local food production. Cultivation of indigenous crops like millet and sorghum shifted to production of crops such as corn, cassava and rice.

Slavery also played an important part in the development of Malawi. Slave traders from Swahili-speaking and Yao regions came to the Malawi region between 1830 and 1860. Many stayed in the area and became part of the dominant ruling class (Williams, 1978).

Colonial History

The colonial history of Malawi really begins with the introduction of Christianity by David Livingstone and other Scottish missionaries in the 1860s and 1870s. Dutch Reformed missionaries from South Africa and Roman Catholic missionaries also began to arrive in the late 19th century into the 20th century. British influence would become key in the area, however, as the British established colonial rule in the late part of the 19th century (Williams, 1978). In 1891 Great Britain set up the Nyasaland Districts Protectorate, and by 1907 the area now known as Malawi was set up as the British colony Nyasaland.

Under the colonial regime, roads and railways were built to establish the infrastructure, but most attention was paid to land and agricultural production. Land in Malawi today is divided into three categories: (1) customary land, (2) public land, and (3) freehold land. Customary land, which accounts for 86 percent of all land

holdings, is held in trust by the President of Malawi. Its use, however, is regulated by traditional customs, and it is frequently distributed based on inheritance (Pachai, 1973).

This has not always been the case, however. According to B. Pachai, “When Europeans entered Malawi from 1875 onwards to do mission work or to trade, the whole business of land guardianship and occupation was altered because of conflict of cultures” (Pachai, 1973, p. 97). In the early years of British rule, 15 percent of all land was set aside for Europeans to develop (or in many cases, do nothing with) as they saw fit. The intention of the British government regarding this policy was to have the Europeans establish agricultural crops for export that could then be taxed to pay for local administration (Pachai, 1973). This plan did not come to fruition, however, because the indigenous peoples resisted. Many refused to work on the land of Europeans, preferring to stay on communal lands. Traditional crops in the area included rice and corn for consumption, cassavas, and indigenous varieties of cotton, which were not intended for export. Europeans wanted to replace these traditional crops with coffee, tea, tobacco, and high yield cotton, all export oriented crops (Baker, 1993). To make this transition, large tracts of land and a lot of capital was required. The land would have to come at the expense of Africans and capital was readily available for Europeans. All that remained was to get the Africans to farm the land for the Europeans.

In 1928, the government responded with a law aimed at forcing Africans to aid in the development of European holdings. This law required every adult African

“to pay rent to the landlord unless he offered to work for wages. If he offered to work for wages, the landlord could give him work or a plot of land on which to grow economic crops which the landlord would then buy from him” (Pachai, 1973, p. 105). In effect, the indigenous peoples of Malawi were forced either to pay rent on land that belonged to them traditionally or to sharecrop for European settlers. Not until 1936 would African trust lands be set aside for African use and control.

Extreme dissatisfaction with the land policies of the colonial government led to opposition. In 1944 the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) was formed. Its original purpose was to record and register complaints about land and deliver them to the colonial government. However, in 1953, the colonial government of Great Britain, against the wishes of NAC, joined the colonies of Southern and Northern Rhodesia in forming the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Fearing colonial expansion and feeling invigorated under the new leadership of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the NAC began a period of civil disobedience and fighting in 1958 (Williams, 1978).

Banda was eventually imprisoned, but while there he formed a new organization called the Malawi Congress Party. From prison, Banda demanded independence for Nyasaland and directed his followers to use force against colonial rule. Facing armed insurrection, the colonial government released Banda from prison in 1960. In 1961 free elections were held and the Malawi Congress Party won, bringing independence for the people and the position of Prime Minister for Banda

(Williams, 1978). In 1963 full independence was granted and on July 6, 1964, Nyasaland became the independent state of Malawi.

The Banda Regime

Although Malawi had gained its independence from Britain, it was still not a free country. The rule of President Banda would prove to be as oppressive and exclusive as that of the colonial government. In 1971, he was declared president for life through a constitutional amendment (Pachai, 1973). Under his regime, no political opposition was tolerated and members of opposition groups were exiled or killed. His regime is most often described as “brutal” (Williams, 1978).

What the Malawian people lost in political freedom, however, was made up for in land holdings. Prior to independence, well over half of the land formerly held by Europeans had been reacquired by the government and held in communal trusts. During Banda’s regime, heavy emphasis was placed on economic development. Borrowing heavily from the international community, Banda set out to modernize the economy of Malawi by transforming its domestic crops into export-oriented cash crops, focusing particularly on the growth and export of tobacco. Banda extended earlier colonial policies of levying harsh punishments against those who abused or failed to utilize land for agricultural production (Williams, 1978). He saw the policies not as forcing people to farm but as persuading them to farm in the right way. Banda stated, “You cannot terrorize people into good farmers, you can only embitter them” (Williams, 1978, p. 199).

Under the Malawi Land Bill of 1965, Banda's control of communal lands increased. The Minister of Agriculture, who was under Banda's direct control, was given the authority to "lease the land, to assign the land, to anyone who applies for private ownership under lease . . . [and] in some cases, under sale . . . But once that land has been leased to anyone, it becomes private property and no one has any right to interfere with that land at all" (Williams, 1978, p. 242). The exception was the Minister, who could take the land back at any time and who had the authority to grant and repeal leases based on the type of crop being grown. In 1971, Banda also announced that he would take back any land held by Europeans who were not developing the land for agricultural purposes.

Throughout the 1970s, international assistance programs focused on increasing export crops. Traditional subsistence farming was frowned upon. In addition, because large amounts of foreign aid and foreign capital were being invested in Malawian agriculture, crop discretion was limited. The conventional wisdom of the day regarding development was that export crops should be the focus of any development plan. Real growth in agricultural exports was a reality under the Banda plan. But so too was real debt. Because so much was invested in single cash crops like tobacco, Malawi still found itself with an undiversified economy, vulnerable to international price. Additionally, land and capital was only given to an exclusive group of male farmers who agreed only to grow crops approved by the government. The vast majority of farmers in Malawi remained subsistence farmers, who received no land and no capital and who did not realize a growth in production.

In fact, many farmers, including women were punished for not complying with government regulations on crops and so lost land to larger cash crop farmers (Williams, 1978).

In the 1980s, changes in the development approaches of some in the international aid community brought the plight of subsistence farmers to light throughout the developing world. Projects operated by aid organizations like USAID began to push recipient governments to address the problems faced by subsistence farmers. In an attempt to increase donor assistance, the Ministry of Agriculture tried to implement new policies regarding agricultural development. Initially, subsistence farmers, many of whom were women were largely ignored in governmental and international aid agencies' development plans. However, after several unsuccessful projects, a new project created by USAID gathered statistics that led them to attribute part of the failures to gender-related biases in planning (Spring, 1995). Once these biases were identified, the government of Malawi requested the assistance of the United Nations, via the Women in Agricultural Development Plan, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the United Nations Development Programme, in reaching women farmers for purposes of development. Banda's administration acquiesced to the suggestions of the international organizations and began the implementation of programs aimed at subsistence farmers.

Despite the Banda government's limited success in economic development, he was criticized heavily by the international community for his human rights abuses. In May of 1992, anti-government protests within the country turned to riots and at least

40 civilians lost their lives. In response, international donors cut off all non-humanitarian aid to Malawi. Under growing internal and international pressure, Banda agreed in 1993 to have a secret referendum on multi-party elections. The referendum passed. One year later, Banda lost in a general election that included four official parties. Bakili Muluzi, leader of the United Democratic Front (UDF), was elected president.

The Muluzi Government

Despite Banda's attempts to improve the economy of Malawi, poverty and child malnutrition were on the rise. The main goal of the new government was to alleviate poverty and to ensure food security by increasing consumable agriculture. Reorganizing the government, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture, was a high priority. In the later years of the Banda administration, projects began to focus on agricultural extension, while increased production remained priorities for the administration.

ADDRESSING AGRICULTURAL PROBLEMS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN

Today, Malawi has a population of approximately 12 million, most of whom are indigenous. Since it gained independence, Malawi has struggled to produce enough food to feed its quickly growing population. As land has become scarce, men have begun to migrate away from home to work, leaving women as the major agricultural producers, especially in subsistence agriculture. As the Ministry of Agriculture has tried to implement new policies regarding agricultural development, it has restructured key organizations within the government. Initially, women were largely ignored in governmental and international aid agencies' development plans. However, after several unsuccessful projects, a new project created by USAID gathered statistics that led them to attribute part of the failures to gender-related biases in planning (Spring, 1995). Once these biases were identified, the government of Malawi requested the assistance of the United Nations, via the Women in Agricultural Development Plan, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the United Nations Development Programme, in reaching women farmers for purposes of development.

Much research has been done on the institutional and policy changes in Malawi prior to and since the implementation of these gender-conscious policies. Often that research has focused on specific programs aimed at increasing women's access to credit and agricultural technologies. What is missing from the literature on

Malawi, however, is a thorough discussion of the rights of women and the impact that female empowerment may have on agricultural productivity in general, and on the status of women in particular. In reviewing this research I will discuss the institutional changes made at the governmental level that are designed to increase women's access to agricultural extension services, examine the consequences of these changes for women, and suggest additional changes in the way in which agricultural extension services are made available to women farmers.

Background

It is a tragedy of our time that despite rapid advances in agricultural technology as much as a fifth of humankind—mostly in developing countries—still goes hungry (World Bank, 1989). A gap exists between agricultural knowledge and its effective application, such that hunger is unlikely to be eliminated soon. How much this gap can be traced to a failure of research and extension systems to help farmers improve their productivity is a very difficult question to answer, but in recent decades it has become evident that these failures have had a great impact on agricultural productivity in general and female farmers in particular.

In reviewing two projects in Kenya in the 1970s, Mary B. Anderson points out that extension services that provided direct contact with extension workers and farmers helped promote increased productivity among subsistence farmers in Kenya. However, she also notes that,

The same study indicates that, in general, more successful farmers are more apt to be visited by an agricultural extension agent than less

successful ones, but that farms managed by a male, or jointly managed by husband and wife, are more often visited than female-managed farms. Less successful farms that are male or jointly managed are visited more often than more successful female-managed farms (Anderson, p. 198).

Similarly, Robert Chambers argues that there exists a male bias in the distribution of services and technology and in the way in which needs are assessed:

Most local-level government staff, researchers and other rural visitors are men. Most rural people with whom they establish contact are men. Female farmers are neglected by male agricultural extension workers. In most societies women have inferior status and are subordinate to men. There are variations and exceptions, but quite often women are shy of speaking to male visitors (Chambers, 1983, p. 19).

Agricultural technology in the developing world has been designed and disseminated on the usually implicit assumption that farm managers and decision-makers are men. Throughout Africa, statistical data has historically reflected only the formal economy and the male agricultural labor working therein. Projects thus focused on the needs of male farmers. However, with increased research on the informal aspects of agricultural development, some international aid agencies and non-governmental organizations began to realize that, in fact, women performed over fifty percent of the agricultural work in developing countries and that their needs as farmers were not being met (Spring, 1987).

Part of this problem should be attributed to professional biases that offer more services to producers of cash crops rather than those who are primary producers of sustainable agriculture. Producers of cash crops are less likely to be extremely poor and more likely to represent a minority of farmers rather than a majority. In addition,

producers of cash crops are predominately male, and so services aimed at increasing access to technology and credit are likely to be more readily available to male producers of agriculture rather than to females (Chambers, 1983).

Agriculture has been important throughout Malawian history. Eighty-five percent of its population is directly involved in agricultural production and agriculture accounts for 43 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (Spring, 1995). Although exact information on the amount of agriculture produced at the subsistence level is not available, a primary goal of most countries, especially those that are still in the development phases is to grow enough food to feed its people. Malawi has been unable to meet this goal, causing the country to become a net importer of food. In 1978, the government created a 20-year National Rural Development Program to increase production by smallholder farmers in an attempt to reverse this trend. The goals were threefold: “to increase smallholder production, especially the production of export cash crops and food for urbanites; to conserve national resources through better crop husbandry, watershed areas and forests; and to provide inputs and services for smallholders” (Spring, 1995, p. 59). While part of the focus was clearly aimed at increasing export crop production, plans were also made to increase subsistence agriculture by increasing agricultural extension services available to smallholders. This required a restructuring of the Ministry of Agriculture and the agricultural and home economics programs that provided these services.

At the request of the government, several international organizations including the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank, the United Nations

Development Programme and USAID were invited to evaluate the 20-year plan and make suggestions for change. Investigators found that the Ministry of Agriculture had a division devoted to women called the Home Economics Section. This agency was intended to deal with rural women's needs, but its main focus was on teaching women to cook, raise children and manage the nutritional needs of the family (Spring, 1995). They also found that national agricultural statistics did not include women as agricultural workers.

In 1981, at the urging of these donors, the Ministry of Agriculture was reorganized, changing the name of the Home Economics Section to the Women's Program Section (FAO, 1993). In addition, a new Women's Program Officer was appointed at the Ministry Headquarters (Spring, 1995). This newly formed organization directed its efforts to improving the knowledge and skills of professional staff within the Ministry of Agriculture and of extension field staff about women farmers and development strategies (FAO, 1993).

By changing the structure of the Ministry of Agriculture, many new policies and guidelines were created to reach female farmers. With the advice of aid donors, the government set up seven objectives that were laid out as follows:

1. Women and men should have an equal chance for agricultural training
2. Women should be actively recruited for agricultural training.
3. The ministry should provide increased extension services on food production to women farmers.

4. The training provided to rural women should include at least 50 percent agricultural subjects.

5. Field staff should be provided with adequate materials to improve basic skills of rural women.

6. There should be an appropriate method of evaluating the effectiveness of women's programs.

7. There should be more staffing of the Women's Program Section to reach rural women. (Spring, 1995).

After these initial institutional changes and policy recommendations were made, the government of Malawi began a rural development project (the Malawi Agricultural Research and Extension (MARE) project) through the assistance of USAID (FAO, 1993). A few months after this project began, the government of Malawi invited the Women in Agricultural Development Project (WIADP), a USAID affiliated organization, to come and assist in implementing policies regarding women in development (Spring, 1995). When the staff of the WIADP arrived, they immediately began researching the problem of reaching rural women.

The first problem identified was the lack of adequate agricultural training of the WPS staff. Although many of these women had been to the same agricultural schools as their male counterparts in the Ministry of Agriculture, the WIADP discovered that women were segregated in higher education, so that the men attended classes about crops, agricultural technology and credit services while the women were taught nutrition, cooking and general home economics.

In response to this problem, the WIADP staff set up a two-day training workshop through the Ministry of Agriculture to train WPS and male extension staff on theories of women in development, labor studies of women in agriculture in Malawi, and approaches to reaching women farmers for agricultural training. Later, these policies were institutionalized, as the government of Malawi mandated that all new staff members receive this training. Women employed by the MOA were put on a fast track to supervisory positions in order that policy for the WPS could be made by women. As a result of these institutional changes, ongoing training programs, as well as visits to other developing countries to study rural women and strategies of development, were developed by the Ministry of Agriculture for WPS staff and for extensionists (Spring, 1995).

What was left out of the planning was any serious discussion of the rights of women in general not seen as directly linked to agricultural improvement. The plans were clear that women should have rights when it came to access to resources, technology and information. It was also clear that women should have some rights regarding access to and participation in government. The rights of women to control their own lives, make their own decisions, and empower themselves, however, were not included and still need to be addressed.

Theoretical Background

Some might say that what I am suggesting smacks of Western feminist theory, created by middle class women and imposed upon women in developing countries

under the mistaken notion of a common struggle among women everywhere—a common struggle that has not been arrived at through discussions with women in less developed regions of the world nor that addresses their needs and wants. Cultural imperialism is how many discussions of women’s rights have been portrayed by some in the international community.

In “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918” Temma Kaplan, citing Samuel Huntington, stated that, “. . . aspirations to wealth, equity, democracy, stability, and autonomy emerge from Western, particularly Nordic, experience, and that other cultures may prefer simplicity, austerity, hierarchy, authoritarianism, discipline, and militarism” (Kaplan, 1982, p. 25). The heart of Kaplan’s argument is not, however, that commonality cannot or does not exist among people of the world; rather defining their problems, indeed, in determining whether or not a problem exists and whether there are any potential solutions, is something that should be left to the people involved.

Although I agree strongly with the general principle of affected people controlling their own lives, a difference exists when those people are precluded from such control by culture or tradition. This is the case for most women in the world, although to varying degrees. In “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” Sherry B. Ortner (1974, p. 1) writes:

Much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between two sets of demands: that we explain human universals, and that we explain cultural particulars. By this canon, woman provides us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with. The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural

conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions.

Indeed, there are universal truths that can be generalized pan-culturally.

Poverty and a lack of political power go hand in hand; in today's world a lack of education means a lack of opportunities; women have less authority relative to men and so have less control over their lives. To argue that the poor are dissatisfied with being poor and are negatively affected by poverty does not suggest cultural imperialism; it is an observable fact. Arguing that the uneducated are less than satisfied with illiteracy and are denied opportunities is not cultural imperialism; it is also an observable fact.

In the same way, arguing that women have less authority relative to men and so are unable to control their own lives is not cultural imperialism, it too is an observable fact. Whether or not women want to control their own lives cannot be determined because they have seldom had the opportunity to do so. The idea of nonpolitical participation is normalized for women in society. If women have limited means through which to express their views as is the case in many developing countries, then we will never know what women would want. Discussing this point as it pertains to poor people in general, Amartya Sen (1999, p. 151) says, "It is not clear at all how this proposition can be checked when the ordinary citizens are given little political opportunity to express their views on this and even less to dispute the

claims made by the authorities in office.” Knowing what women need means finding a way to give them the opportunity to express their needs.

The choices women make do not only impact their personal lives. They have the potential to have a huge impact on the social and economic well being of society at large. For example, many poor countries deal with problems like high birth rates and low literacy levels that have a direct impact on poverty. In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen (1999, p. 193) says, “There is considerable evidence that women’s empowerment within the family can reduce child mortality significantly. Going well beyond that, women’s agency and voice, influenced by education and employment, can in turn influence the nature of the public discussion on a variety of social subjects, including acceptable fertility rates and environmental priorities.”

High birth rates compound poverty because there are more mouths to feed. Because access to family planning is limited in these regions and because women are often not the decision makers in a household when it comes to birth control, it is difficult to limit the number of births a woman will have in her lifetime. Lowering birth rates could have a direct impact on poverty levels by decreasing the number of children who need to be fed and clothed, especially in poorer households.

One way to accomplish this would be to improve women’s access to birth control. Improving access, however, means nothing if women are prevented by societal norms from making decisions about birth control. The solution to the problem of high birth rates, then, rests not only in improving women’s access to birth

control (which in and of itself helps increase women's empowerment), but also in empowering them to make the decision to use it.

Another cause of high birthrates in less developed countries is high infant mortality. More children are conceived because the likelihood of a child surviving to adulthood is diminished by problems associated with poverty. Women are the primary caretakers of children. If women are not educated about child nutrition and health, their children are more likely to be unhealthy and to die. Educating women about health and nutrition can significantly increase the likelihood that their children will be born healthy and stay healthy. Decreasing infant mortality by empowering and educating women is likely to have a direct impact on birthrates and so on poverty.

Finally, illiteracy and poor education are also directly linked to poverty. In many developing countries, access to education is limited for everyone, but especially for girls. Because men are seen primarily as workers and women as homemakers, educational opportunities are set aside for boys. However, the importance of educating women should not be overlooked for several reasons.

First, women are responsible for their children and a child's education begins in the home. If women are uneducated or undereducated, the likelihood is that their children will be also. Without an education, the opportunity for those born into poverty to raise themselves out of poverty is unlikely.

Second, women will have a greater access to and greater understanding of health, nutrition, birth control, subsistence farming, food storage and the like if they are educated. Knowledge of all of these subjects can be distributed to girls through

school, to women in the community through pamphlets, and to both through extension programs. First, women need to be empowered so that they can demand the educational services they need.

Third, educating women improves their employment opportunities outside of the home. This not only empowers women to become wage earners for themselves, it also allows them to contribute to the family income, increasing the likelihood of the entire family living better economically.

Empowering women means recognizing the barriers to that empowerment. Women are a part of a system that normalizes patriarchy and teaches them that their role is secondary to men's. In "Women in Struggle: A Case Study of the Chipko Movement," Kumud Sharma (1995, p. 56) says:

The differences between men's and women's participation in the political process is a symptom of a larger process and there seems to be a general apathy among political scientists to raise issues of gender relations and political power and/or explain that these differences are rooted, not in the socio-cultural norms, but in the political and economic systems which maintain these norms through an unequal distribution of power, authority and resources . . . The assertion that women are more apolitical than men and hence are under-represented in positions of authority and power seems to oversimplify not only the character of public politics but also the household dimension of power relationship between the sexes. Myths of women's non-participation and passivity are perpetuated by an inadequate examination of women's access to and control over resources, the products of their labour and the patriarchal nature of the family and the inadequacy of existing forms of political institutions to deal with women's issues in the formal arena of politics.

Women are unable to define themselves within many societies because who they are is predetermined by culture. While both men and women live in gendered societies that create expectations for each, the expectations for women are limited by

biology—women are expected to be mothers and homemakers because they bear children. Men on the other hand, are expected to achieve and to become individuals in their own right. Men become men through struggle and individual achievement; women are women because they reach biological maturity. Many cultures assume that female socialization is easy for girls because womanhood is marked by biological changes. Boys, on the other hand, prove their masculinity to others through rituals and achievements that often tear them away from the world of their mothers. Becoming a man means leaving behind the female realm. Sex roles and gender identification are ingrained at an early age in most cultures.

What women have in common is that they are oppressed, and it is their biology and the gendered expectations of women based on their biology that is the common oppressor. Because patriarchy is at the root of women's oppression, it cannot be assumed that solutions for women's economic, social and political problems can come from men or can come without changing the system itself. In Malawi agricultural extension services are provided by a predominately male staff. It is not enough to offer women services through men and expect women to get the maximum benefit. It is not enough for male politicians to address women's needs and set up programs to offer them services. It is not enough for men to be trained to assist women; women must be shown by other women how to help themselves and to be made visible in all aspects of society so that their presence is normalized.

The choices that women make clearly have a direct impact on the family and society. In Malawi, because women perform at least fifty percent of the agricultural

tasks in a household, the plan for improving agricultural services for women is one that must bring women into all aspects of agricultural services. It is not enough to have men transfer technology to women; women must be allowed the opportunity to learn agricultural technology at colleges and universities and become extension workers in their own right. The presence of these women will go a long way toward improving not only the status of a few, but in bringing change to a system that excludes women. In turn, the empowerment of women in this context is likely to improve overall agricultural production by creating a system that maximizes the likelihood of technology transfer to women and that allows women to define their agricultural needs.

PROBLEMS

Although exact information on the amount of agriculture produced at the subsistence level is not available, a primary goal of most countries, especially those that are still in the development phases is to grow enough food to feed its people. Malawi has been unable to meet this goal, causing the country to become a net importer of food. In 1978, at the urging of international aid donors the government created a 20-year National Rural Development Program to increase production by smallholder farmers in an attempt to reverse this trend.

At the request of the government, several international organizations including the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and USAID were invited to evaluate the 20-year plan and make suggestions for change (Spring, 1995). In 1981, at the urging of these donors, the Ministry of Agriculture was reorganized, changing the name of the Home Economics Section to the Women's Program Section (FAO, 1993). In addition, a new Women's Program Officer was appointed at the Ministry Headquarters (Spring, 1995). This newly formed organization directed its efforts to improving the knowledge and skills of professional staff within the Ministry of Agriculture and of extension field staff about women farmers and development strategies (FAO, 1993).

As previously stated, the plan set forward by the USAID program included training some women already active in the Ministry of Agriculture as home economists to also provide some agriculture extension services to female farmers. Several problems were encountered in training the extension workers of the WPS that made using this group of women for agricultural extension services difficult. First, the women had been trained as home economists. A 1988 workshop report from the WPS concluded that “many of the FHAs are not comfortable in teaching agricultural subjects because their training has been principally in home economics. Many have not been allowed or encouraged to teach agricultural subjects. The expectation from other agricultural personnel continue to view women’s programmes as primarily responsible for home economics” (Culler & Chikagwa, 1988, p. 48).

Additionally, many of the FHAs had little or no interest in agricultural topics. Spring reported that “when asked about which topics they preferred to learn, 68 percent expressed an interest in having both home economic and agricultural topics, as compared with 25 percent who were interested in home economics and only 8 percent who were interested in agriculture exclusively” (Spring, 1995, p. 271). Their views were then transferred in their own minds to all women in society. Spring notes that the FHAs also believed that “rural women preferred to learn about cooking and sewing first and foremost and that a few also were interested in child care, home improvement and nutrition. They said that women farmers disliked learning about ‘theoretical’ topics and appropriate technologies” (Spring, 1995, p. 221). This,

despite the fact that surveys of rural women show that they rank agricultural training high on their list of needed services.

Some of the women felt that farming and agricultural extension were men's jobs and that it was not their proper role to teach about agriculture. "Others remarked that the male extension workers taught the agricultural subjects, so they did not have to do so themselves" (Spring, 1995, p. 221). Many lacked the confidence to learn or felt they could not learn.

Like many societies, Malawi suffers from a social problem of patriarchal hierarchy—a system that (many believe) devalues women's labor and contributions to society and seeks to define women through narrow explanations of their potential roles in society. A 1984 study from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa reported that, when questioned about women's participation in education and the labor force, many people felt that these were areas for men and not for women.

One male respondent said:

Our custom is that women should be subordinate to men and support men. This is how it always has been and it won't change easily. We always have been a male-dominated society. Men were hunters but made most of the important decisions. Then they became migrant workers and brought home money. Ask any woman about decisions: they will talk but in the end they will say: you must ask the man. So this is a cultural thing." (UN Economic Commission for Africa, 1984, p. 6).

These perceptions of women's roles in society are accepted by society at large, including women. In fact, it often happens, as in Malawi, that women are the strongest enforcers of gender stereotypes.

This occurs for various reasons. One, women, like men, are socialized to believe that the position they hold in society is the right one—the natural one. Challenging these stereotypes means challenging the way in which one lives and possibly changing ideas and customs that have become very comfortable and natural. As noted by Anita Spring in a study of female extensionists, many felt that the job of teaching agricultural subjects was a male role (Spring, 1995). This is not surprising, given that the majority of agricultural extensionists were men. It makes sense from what is known about gender socialization to believe that, when certain roles in society are performed by one gender, those roles become associated with gender-specific characteristics, i.e., “agricultural training is a masculine job.”

These notions were also reinforced in educational institutions. In the same study, Spring reports that women were trained as home economists, focusing on sewing, nutritional planning, child care, cooking, etc., while men were trained to be agricultural extensionists and were taught farming techniques, husbandry, etc. This physical separation at the highest levels of education reinforces the notion that women are not meant to become agricultural extension workers. In fact, Spring notes that a majority of women studying at agricultural colleges felt that job opportunities for them upon graduation would be limited only to home economists rather than as agricultural extensionists (Spring, 1995).

The entire process of training women only as home economists, coupled with societal and cultural biases that view agricultural production and training as men’s work, compounded by a visible lack of women performing jobs as extensionists,

reinforces in the minds of not only the women farmers, but also the female extensionists that agricultural extension work is men's work. It is no surprise that Spring found a significant proportion of home economics extension workers uninterested in learning agricultural subjects (Spring, 1995).

In a study of the Women's League of the United National Independence Party in Zambia, Gisela Geisler discovered that despite constitutional guarantees of equality between men and women, women were still seen as the property of men and were "often pushed into a vague and flexible corner of 'custom' and 'tradition'" that prevented them from gaining any real autonomy (Geisler, 1992). The League, which is a part of the Central Committee and whose chair is appointed by the President, consists mostly of older urban women (as in Malawi) who do not act as advocates of the majority of poorer rural women. In fact, according to Geisler, when the League was first formed Betty Kaunda, Zambia's first lady, pledged that the authority of Zambian men would not be challenged by the women's organization. Instead, "She defined the 'new role of women' as 'custodians of happiness and security in the home, the watchdogs of morality in our society'" (Geisler, 1992, p. 45).

As in Malawi, the only organization in the country set aside to insure women's equality and offer them economic and political assistance is staffed by women who are supporters of the status quo. This situation has perpetuated notions that women are inferior to men, have certain roles in society, and should not seek to change the system for their own improvement. As Geisler notes, "The lack of support of other women, as well as the barriers of gender role identification and attitudes of

relatives, friends, and colleagues, are certainly a major obstacle for women's willingness to participate in politics" (Geisler, 1992, p. 57).

In Malawi, the home economists who were working for the Women's Programme Section of the Ministry of Agriculture transferred their own lack of interest to the female farmers. They reported that women in general would not be interested in learning about things like appropriate technologies, despite the fact that many female farmers had expressed interest in these subjects (Spring, 1995). Most came from better-off families and were out of touch with the wants and needs of poorer rural women.

In addition, the women extensionists from WPS had not only been trained to believe that their job was to teach home economics, they also were defending their livelihoods and positions within society. If extension services were to focus on agriculture rather than on home economics, their jobs could be lost as their skills were displaced by new skills—skills they see as gendered for men.

This type of displacement of women from traditional jobs that were once seen as female has precedent in other cultures—for example, the dairying industry in antebellum America. Once seen in some areas of the country as predominantly women's work, dairying, including cheese and butter production, was once a small-scale enterprise for home consumption and local sales. As the market for these products expanded and the value of the products in dollars increased, women manufacturers were replaced by men. For some women this displacement meant not only a loss of perceived value of their contributions to the farm, but also a loss of

autonomy that went along with the value of their inputs. Traditionally, women's work has been devalued in markets while men's work, often associated with marketable commodities and outputs, has been overvalued, allowing men to gain authority and autonomy in society as the only real contributors to household income. In the early days of dairying in antebellum America, women were often afforded some authority and autonomy based on their contributions measured in currency. Once the dairying industry began to rival men's contributions in terms of market value, it began to be viewed as masculine work unsuited for women. (Jensen, 1986; Osterud, 1991).

That the positions held by the home economists are associated with women's work is evidenced by the training given to the female extensionists. It is probable that a shift in extension services from home economics (women's work) to agricultural production (men's work) could displace women from their jobs. In fact, unless women are trained in agricultural subjects, this is a very likely scenario. If the recommendations of Spring and the WIADP (intended to benefit female farmers through increased extension services that focus on agricultural production) are carried out without specific policy changes that are designed to incorporate women as agricultural extensionists, men will not only continue to dominate as FAs, but their numbers will likely increase at the expense of the female home economists.

POLICY CHANGES

Once the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture had begun its new training, the next task of the government was to set up a system for disaggregating data by gender to determine where aid was most needed. Until then, women had either been considered wives of farmers or not considered at all—a fact that would cause problems in determining the needs of female farmers. These biases are very costly not only for women but for production in general. If female farmers' needs are not being addressed because they are not being considered, and since women perform at least 50 percent of the subsistence farming, ignoring women means that services for them are not being provided. Robert Chambers, in his discussion of the need to take into consideration the knowledge and needs of local peoples, exemplifies this point as it applies to women. He says,

Another pervasive bias is against the technology and needs of rural women. Until recently, little attention was paid to home gardens and backyard farming, often sources of small but vital incomes for women . . . The pro-male and anti-female bias applies in other spheres too. Ploughing, mainly carried out by men, has received more attention than weeding or transplanting, mainly carried out by women. Cash crops, from which male heads of household benefit disproportionately, have received more research attention than subsistence crops, which are more the concern of women. (Chambers, 1983, p. 80)

Once data on farmers in Malawi was disaggregated by gender, some startling facts were discovered. First, it was discovered that in 1981 approximately 30 percent of all rural households were headed by women. Second, over 50 percent of

agricultural activities were performed by women. Finally, the data also showed that women spent, on average, one to two more hours per day performing agricultural work than their male counterparts (Spring, 1995).

With this information in hand, the MOA set out to determine how agricultural extension services could be utilized to reach women farmers. Previously, projects such as the Lilongwe Rural Development Project, which sought to increase hybrid maize production, had been relatively unsuccessful. A review of the study noted that the extension staff had generally neglected female farmers, who constituted a significant number of household heads. The project sought to give credit to farmers to grow hybrid maize to increase the yield.

To qualify, recipients had to own a minimum of one hectare of land. Most women farmers, however, owned less than the required amount, and so were excluded from the project. As a result, very few women participated. For those who did participate (mostly male farmers whose wives did most of the actual agricultural production but were not included in the training) the project also proved a failure because the information on how to grow the new crop was not given to the person actually doing the growing (Spring, 1995).

To avoid similar mistakes in the future, the MOA created a policy that mandated that 30 percent of all places in agricultural training classes and projects for farmers be set aside for women (Spring, 1995). This proved problematic, because most of the training material produced at this time was printed in English, but only 5 percent of Malawian women could read English. The MOA later addressed this

problem by printing the materials in the native language of Chichewa. In addition, manuals that demonstrated rather than simply explaining the information were created (Spring, 1995).

To gain insight into the areas where policy change was most needed, the Secretary of the MOA again sought the advice of the WIADP. The WIADP was concerned that extension services were not reaching rural women. In a random survey, they asked women about the type and frequency of extension services provided to them. The survey concluded that only 15 percent of all female farmers had received any form of extension advice (31 percent for men), only 4 percent on a regular basis, and none of the women had actually been individually visited by an extension worker.

The major reason for this lack of services was determined to be women's lack of knowledge that extension services were available to them. They knew that the agents were around and held meetings, but believed the services were only for men. As a result of this survey, the newly organized MOA adopted a policy aimed at reaching female agriculturists. MOA extensionists were instructed to meet with male village leaders in individual communities in order that women from the community could be selected for training by the male extensionists as group leaders. These women were then utilized to bring groups of women farmers together and to disseminate information regarding rural agricultural development. They also held meetings to discuss the individual needs of the women regarding credit, land, and

crops, and to report these concerns back to the extensionists who could then devise solutions to the problems (Spring, 1995).

It was soon discovered that one of the most pressing problems for female farmers was a lack of available credit. Many women lacked the collateral necessary to receive loans from standard banks. Also, because many of their needs were based on the production of subsistence agriculture, most banks were unwilling to lend money to women because they lacked the resources to develop income-generating projects.

Through the assistance of the UNDP and the FAO, the MOA created a new policy aimed at addressing female specific needs for credit, including providing limited funding. The MOA policy mandated that women have equal access to credit through the formation of women's Farm Clubs. Through the assistance of extension workers, women were organized into clubs and taught group projects that would allow them to work together to receive assistance. Between 1983 and 1984 extensionists registered 27,035 women into clubs that received credit (up from 8,000 in 1983) (Spring, 1995). Through the MARE project, \$80,000 was allocated for female-specific income generating activities. This money was put into a revolving fund through the MOA as a national credit agency for women. Women in Farm Clubs developed group projects and were lent money without the need for collateral. Priority in lending was given to women who devised innovative projects that would benefit the community as a whole as well as provide income on an individual basis (FAO, 1993).

While the increase in female agricultural extensionists was underway in Malawi (10 percent in 1984, up from 4 percent in 1980), the fact remained that the majority of extensionists were still male. The WIADP did not focus on striving to equalize these numbers; instead, attention was focused on devising a strategy to get male extensionists to reach female farmers. Often, male extensionists held meetings at times or in locations that prevented women from attending. To alleviate this problem, the MOA instructed the male extension workers to take the following steps to reach women farmers:

1. Schedule meetings and demonstrations at times when women are most likely to be free.
2. Locate meetings and demonstrations where women can conveniently attend (i.e., close to homesteads, along frequently traveled paths, at the market where they work communally).
3. Provide mobile training centers or transportation to training centers.
4. Provide separate facilities and housing for women at training centers.
5. Provide child care facilities.
6. Make the meetings as brief as possible.
7. Hold training courses that have female-specific needs in mind. (Saito & Spurling, 1992, pp. 14-18).

IMPACTS

Some clear changes in the government of Malawi can be observed as a result of new extension policies for women in agricultural development, including the incorporation of women's income-generating concerns into the planning and research activities of the Ministry of Agriculture, the creation of a network of professional women in various departments and at various capacities within the Ministry of Agriculture, and greater attention paid to the problems involved in implementing development programs. Women benefited directly through training courses, increased access to credit and income generating activities.

For these changes to be made, however, it was imperative that the government make institutional adjustments at the departmental, ministerial and national levels that legitimized gender concerns and created a framework for policy implementation. After these changes were made, the disaggregation of data allowed the MOA to provide statistical facts to support the new policies. In the end, women benefited from increased services and the ability to play a role in the planning of projects that affect them.

Specifically, in 1991, 110,000 female farm club members received credit. Because these women repaid their loans at a rate of almost 100 percent, it is expected that the numbers of women receiving credit will continue to grow. (Spring, 1995). Changes in the attitudes of extension workers also helped to increase the number of

women involved in agricultural training projects—a direct result of gender sensitivity and awareness programs mandated by the government.

SUGGESTED CHANGES

While sensitizing male extensionists to the needs of female farmers may be a part of the solution for increasing agricultural services to women, it does not offer long-term solutions to the problem at hand. Malawi, like other societies, is gender stratified in a way that makes it difficult for men within the society to appreciate the needs of women; in turn, it is often difficult for women to feel comfortable working with men.

In a report from the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations titled *Advancement of Women: Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas*, the Secretary-General recommended that:

Microlevel policies directed as changes within the household, such as those intended to increase women's access to credit and to income-generating activities, should be based on macrolevel changes in the society as a whole. A recognition that gender inequalities within the household are linked to gender inequalities at the societal level has important policy implications. It suggests that, in order to bring about a sustainable improvement in the situation of rural women, institutionalized inequalities between women and men at the societal level must first be addressed. (United Nations, 1993, p. 13)

Although the apparent focus of the WIADP recommendations was institutional, the changes are not focused strongly enough on the macro-level. While the Ministry of Agriculture did undertake to change the name of the Home Economics Section to the Women's Programme Section and focus on offering extension services to women, it did not seek to address the root of the problem:

women are seen as inferior in society and are not actively encouraged, through educational training and job placement, to play an active role in offering extension services to other women. Changing society's views about women's role in agriculture cannot be done passively; the government needs to actively recruit and train women for extension positions. Doing so will go a long way toward eliminating stereotypes that women are not farmers, increasing the likelihood that women can gain access to the technology and capital necessary to increase productivity.

According to the report of the Economic and Social Council:

All individuals, women jointly with men, should have a voice in the social demands with regard to the allocation and use of resources. In order that women, particularly those living in rural areas, benefit from the process of development, it is necessary to ensure that they are given equal opportunities to participate in the process. In that respect, empowerment of women, through the elimination of gender-based social structures and relations that constrain women, becomes an important issue in the formulation of national and international development strategies. (United Nations, 1993, p. 4)

If the government of Malawi wants improvements in production at a macro-level, it must be willing to commit to policy changes on a macro-level; policy changes that are long lasting and that offer long term change for rural women and not a quick fix. It must design programs that will create long-term solutions like increased female participation in all aspects of society that will empower women to make better decisions as farmers and as citizens. Improving the status of women overall will improve the economic status of the country because women and their children represent the poorest of the poor in disproportionate numbers. Attaining to goal of increased participation of women in leadership positions is clearly possible

because Malawi's women have historically served in leadership positions in traditional society.

Indeed, the structure of a large part of Malawi's traditional societies is based on a matrilineal/matrilocal system that includes women in the important decision making processes of society. In a study titled "Women's Organizing Abilities: Two Case Studies of Kenya and Malawi," Mario Aguilar and Laurel Birch de Aguilar show how women participate in the selection of societal leaders in both the Waso Boorana society of Kenya and the Chewa society of Malawi.

In the Waso Boorana society, the culture and traditions are a mixture of Islamic and traditional Boorana customs. When a new leader is selected by the society, all heads-of-households must participate in the process. Men and women make up roughly equal numbers of heads-of-households, due primarily to war and drought that have either killed off husbands or forced them to migrate to look for work. Additionally, an increase in the number of polygamous relationships has left many women as heads of their individual households, despite being married. Women in the community participate by organizing themselves for community gatherings and for the election of elders to lead the community. A typical election meeting would be modeled this way:

The elders (3 or 4), plus those who are going to address the gathering of the Waso Boorana on a particular issue sit in front, on stools. The whole meeting looks like a circle, whereby at the head one can see the elders, and following the circle all the heads of households. On a second row in the circle (or a second circle), one can see all those who are not heads of households. Finally, children and outcasts sit at a distance from the meeting. (Aguilar & Aguilar, n.d., p. 5)

At the meeting, the chair asks for names of men to serve as elders. Women, who have organized themselves before the meeting, choose men they think would best serve the needs of the community. Their suggestions are then given by a female head-of-household. From this ceremony it is possible to see how women in this particular Kenyan society play an important role in the selection of leaders.

Similarly, in Malawian women also play a crucial role in determining the leadership of their societies. The Chewa are a very gender-stratified people. They perform all of their chores separately, sit in Christian churches on opposite sides, attend separate funerals, and are initiated into adulthood separately. However, the Chewa are a matrilineal/matrilocal people, governed by local and regional Chiefs who are male relatives of female elders in society. These leaders are responsible for uniting the people and overseeing local rituals.

The selection of a Chief is made by the senior women in a village who are considered “well matured, serious and wise, in short, capable of making the very best possible decision” (Aguilar & Aguilar, n.d., p. 10). These women then meet to discuss possible names, usually the nephews of the current Chief. Once they have chosen the new Chief, they are then asked to meet again to choose the female Namkungwi, “the teacher, protector and supporter of the chief” (Aguilar & Aguilar, n.d., p. 11). The Namkungwi becomes the closest advisor and confidante of the Chief. She is responsible for his success or failure and his successes and failures are seen as hers.

Women have traditionally played an important role in the leadership structure of Malawian society. Western custom and rule of law have directly affected the role of women in modern government and in leadership roles. The foundation exists in Malawi for women to be leaders; the government needs only to want to exploit the opportunities to use tradition as the building block for women's future participation in leadership roles.

Indeed, including women in the discourse of national and international development strategies could reveal important information about development needs that would otherwise be overlooked. In "Women in Struggle: A Case Study of the Chipko Movement," Kumud Sharma points out the differences in the needs and wants of women and men by examining women's reaction to deforestation spearheaded by the government and "cash-hungry men." She points out that, because women were not included in the discussion of the sale of local forest lands, men were not aware that women needed the trees for firewood for cooking, and that women saw the forest as a valuable resource that they were not willing to hand over. Sharma states, "Some very pertinent issues that were raised spontaneously by women have not been taken up either by the government or by any voluntary agencies who are leading this ecological conservation movement." (Sharma, 1995, p. 61).

Some have argued that the real key to empowering women in rural areas lies not in separating women from services provided by men, but by encouraging the transfer of technology from men to women. In a paper titled "Correcting the Underestimated Frequency of the Head-of-Household Experience for Women

Farmers,” Art Hansen (1988, pp. 408-409) argues that while it would be good to use women as agricultural extension workers, the focus should be on training men in gender-related sensitivities for extension services. Hansen believes that the lack of women currently trained as agricultural extension workers and the low level of seniority for those who are leaves governments with no choice but to use men (Hansen, 1988, pp. 410-411).

Hansen is not alone in his sentiments. Even Anita Spring, who has advocated training FHAs as agricultural extensionists, feels that the MOA is likely to be most successful in increasing agricultural production if focuses on gender-sensitizing male extension workers, instead of investing in women. Her reasons for this have already been discussed: the current generation of FHAs on average are not interested in learning about agricultural extension. Also, she argues that because large numbers of men are already trained and employed as agricultural extensionists and few women are, it would be more efficient, less costly and less time-consuming to use the men to teach female farmers.

Additionally, Hansen states that those who have suggested that female extensionists might better relate to female farmers and so increase the likelihood of successful technology transfer, overlook the negative implications of this approach. He argues that a model built on female-to-female contact for extension services would harm women more than it would help them because most of the current agricultural services can only be supplied by men.

It is important to examine Hansen's point here. It certainly is true that the numbers of trained women who are available to offer extension services to women is currently limited. If the MOA did not take this fact into consideration and set up a program that required only female-to-female technology transfer, it could be very damaging to female farmers. Since services are already limited, it would not help women to require them to receive agricultural training from women if there are not enough women to go around. Still, there will never be enough women trained as agricultural extension workers if the MOA does not begin to train and hire more women.

It is easy to see how this scenario could quickly become a "catch-22." There are not enough women trained as agricultural extension workers to provide all of the services to the female farmers in need, and since there are enough men, instead of training more women, efforts will be concentrated on training male extensionists to work with women. However, this means more women will never be trained, and so the cultural stereotypes of men as extension workers will never be broken because women will continue to be underrepresented as agricultural extension workers.

While I agree that requiring women to receive services only from women and men only from men could be detrimental to female farmers, I do not believe that theorizing about the benefits of female to female assistance leads one down the path to gender isolation rather, it helps us to recognize what may be social or cultural limitations on the ability of men and women to effectively communicate, empathize

with, or interact as equals. To not recognize these limitations could be to give advice that is at best limited when it may not be necessary to do so.

The question is not simply whether or not male extensionists can work with female farmers, but whether this approach is the most effective. Increasing the number of female extensionists in Malawi not only benefits subsistence farmers, but also seeks to improve the overall status of women in the country.

According to a report from the Economic and Social Council, “Rural women’s relation to their own labour tends to be conditioned by their relation to men. The structure of gender relations gives men the social power to set limits on the type of work that women may undertake” (United Nations, 1993, p. 5). If this is the case, then focusing on the use of male extensionists without seeking to increase the number of female extensionists perpetuates the problem that women are limited in their access to resources and technology by the very people who are being trained to provide them services. Women must not rely on men as their only source of assistance. To do so could condemn them to the same cycle of oppression that has prevented them from succeeding in the past. In her study of the Chipko movement, Kumud Sharma states, “Women’s participation in male-led movements does not automatically result in raising specific women’s issues, unless they have a distinct forum within or outside the larger organization to articulate their view point” (Sharma, 1995, p. 61).

In a study of a 1981 project, the Arusha Planning and Village Development Program sponsored by USAID and the government of Tanzania, Liz Wiley shows how when women are not specifically considered in a development project they will

likely end up excluded. Tanzania had a socialist government led by President Julius K. Nyerere. The economy of Tanzania is very similar to that of Malawi; it is based almost entirely on agriculture, most of which is subsistence. In addition, roughly 60 percent of the subsistence agricultural labor is performed by women, much the same as in Malawi. Additionally, the government wanted to undertake to institute 5-year development plans sponsored by the World Bank. These plans focused on increasing agricultural production, particularly subsistence agriculture-again, very similar to Malawi.

The president of Tanzania was well aware before the implementation of the project that women played a crucial role in agriculture. He said,

It is impossible to deny that women did, and still do more than their fair share of the work in the field and in the homes. This is certainly inconsistent with our socialist conception of the equality of all human beings and the right of all to live in . . . security and freedom . . . If we want our country to make full and quick progress now, it is essential that our women live in terms of full equality with their fellow citizens who are men. (Anderson, et al., 1985, p. 166).

In fact, women who performed paid labor did receive equal pay and benefits. But, despite the president's awareness of rural women's situations and their contributions to agriculture, the project was implemented without regard to gender. Nothing was done to insure that women were included in the program.

Early on in the project, it was clear that women were not participating in the village level meetings set up to discuss the needs of the people and to distribute information on projects. Officials reported the following reasons among those they felt explained the women's absence: (a) women are still too shy to attend public meetings; (b) women are too busy at home to come; (c) it is not the woman's job to

roam and survey the village and attend meetings, it is her job to watch the house; (d) women can't speak Kiswahili; (e) women are uneducated; (f) women don't understand the discussion; (g) women don't need to come because we ask the men to tell them what we have discussed; (h) women are not used to sitting together with men; and (i) there are still some men here who don't like to see women in meetings (Wiley, 1985).

The women, on the other hand, seemed to see the situation differently. They felt that attending meetings alongside men was meaningless because: (a) her husband can still beat her if she complains; (b) the money still belongs to the husband; (c) men still drink all of the money up; and (d) things are better when we are working together as women (Wiley, 1985, p. 171).

The Tanzanian women expressed not only that change was not possible without giving them their own autonomy, but that they preferred to work with each other, as opposed to working with men. In the end, very few women received any of the benefits offered by the project, mostly because they were unaware of what was taking place at the meetings and unable to attend them anyway.

Although the need to utilize male extension workers where necessary should be a consideration for agricultural extension policies, more attention should be paid to the benefits of increasing the number of female extensionists. The reasons for advocating this approach have been theorized about and, unfortunately, dismissed. It seems to me that female extensionists are in a better position to relate to female farmers simply because they are women. In a gender-stratified society, the

experiences of women in the same class are similar; training rural women to disseminate information to other rural women would increase the likelihood of contact and, therefore, the likelihood of increased production. Additionally, regardless of class, men in society are seen as performing certain tasks, holding certain positions of authority, and having power and authority. Women feel unable to relate to men and men unable to relate to women. Furthermore, women have constraints and needs that are very different from those of men.

In a report by Anita Spring, Berger states that women-specific programs are more likely to reach women because of their cultural acceptability and the comfort of women working with women. According to a survey of women in Nepal, women farmers reported that they would look for female extensionists when they were available because they felt more comfortable going to their homes for advice rather than seeking out a male extensionist. The problem, according to Berger, with offering women agricultural extension services taught by other women is that most of the female extensionists have not been trained in farming technologies (Spring, 1995). The solution seems simple—train more women as extensionists.

Spring and the staff of the WIADP were commissioned by the MOA to give policy advice on how to improve the extension services offered to rural women and their overall economic condition. Spring herself states on many occasions that the MOA was very responsive to and cooperative regarding implementation of recommended changes. Despite this level of receptivity, Spring and the WIADP failed to seize the opportunity to increase the agricultural education of women

interested in becoming extensionists or to advise the government to increase the number of women working as Farm Assistants. Instead, the focus of their attentions was centered on training male extensionists to work with female farmers. This, despite the government's implementation of a policy that required affirmative action-like policies and quotas for women farmers in extension classes and farm clubs and for extension contacts. If 30 percent of extension services can be set aside for female farmers, why cannot 30 percent of extension education programs and jobs be set aside for women, thereby insuring an increase in the number of qualified and available female extensionists?

Indeed, a dual approach to improving extension services that utilizes male extensionists while seeking to increase the number of trained female extensionists would likely be more beneficial in the long run for various reasons:

1. It would address the long-term concerns of gender inequality in extension programs rather than act as a short term solution that seeks to kill one bird with one stone.
2. It would increase the number of visible female role models in positions of authority.
3. It would increase effective communication between extensionists and farmers, thus increasing the likelihood of technology transfer.
4. It would help promote a sense of equality between the extensionists and the farmers which will also make communication more likely.

5. It would decrease the likelihood that husbands of female farmers will feel threatened by relationships between the extensionists and his wife, thus increasing the likelihood that married women will participate.

Concluding Remarks

The question of whether increasing women's role in providing agricultural extension services will lead to increases in agricultural production and at the same time improve the status of women overall is important for any development plans where women play an active role in subsistence production. The purposes of this paper have been two-fold: (1) to show that an increase in agricultural services to rural women in Malawi is necessary for the long-term improvement of agricultural production, and (2) to show that extending services to women without empowering women falls short of accomplishing the goals of overall sustainable human development. The first point is made largely through the work of Anita Spring and the WIADP, whose recommendations to the Ministry of Agriculture of Malawi regarding women and agricultural extension services have brought about change in the focus of the government regarding agricultural programs for women. The result has been a measurable increase in the number of women contacted by extension workers, which has in turn resulted in improvements in the quantity and quality of subsistence agriculture.

Still, there is more to be done. The World Health Organization reported in 1995 that 786 million people in the world were chronically underfed (Uvin, 1994, p.

11). Many of those who are hungry are located in sub-Saharan Africa and the situation in Malawi is among the worst. Improving agricultural production is still a priority for the Ministry of Agriculture. Improving production means providing extension services for farmers, particularly at the subsistence level. Because women perform a great deal of the subsistence farm labor in Malawi, the government must continue to find ways to improve women's access to extension services. This is best accomplished by empowering women so that their access to needed services is not limited by cultural expectations of and restraints based on gender.

Spring and the WIADP have assisted the government of Malawi in laying the groundwork for providing agricultural extension services for women. What is missing, however, is any serious consideration of the rights of women in general and how empowerment leads to improvement in the human condition that has value not only in measurable economic terms, but in social terms as well. Arguing that women should be offered training and educational opportunities because it will improve economic conditions lends credence to the notion that human welfare can only be measured in economic terms.

While economic productivity is certainly an important part of development, one can not overlook the fact that self-determination and individual rights have a value all their own, and while they may lead to economic self-sufficiency, their real worth lies in their ability to allow women as well as men to determine the course their own lives will take and to become autonomous individuals.

Note About AIDS

As in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the people of Malawi are facing daily challenges brought about by the spread of the HIV virus and the accompanying devastating loss of human life. While exact statistics are not available, the World Health Organization estimates that roughly sixteen percent of the adult population of Malawi is infected with the HIV virus. In Malawi, over half of those testing positive for the virus are women and children, unlike the United States where only one-quarter of the infected population is female (World Health Organization, n.d.).

It has been suggested that problems associated with AIDS in developing regions of the world, like increasing numbers of orphaned children, rising demands for medical treatment, and a shortage of healthy working adults, will soon begin (if it has not already) to tax the limited resources made available for development projects. A study conducted by the Malawi government and the World Bank says that up to 25 percent of the adult workforce could be eliminated by 2020 by the AIDS virus. The report also states that the hardest hit sectors will include education and health, where the annual personnel death rate is now three percent, six times the predicted 0.5 percent (Bollinger, Stover, & Palamuleni, 2000).

Malawi, with a population of 12 million people, reported its first AIDS case in 1985. By the end of 1997, nearly one million Malawians had tested positive for the Human Immune Deficiency Virus (HIV), which causes AIDS. According to the World Health Organization, two million Malawians will test HIV-positive by the year 2010 (WHO, 2000).

The estimated financial cost of caring for AIDS patients until they die is between \$200 and \$900 (U.S. \$) per person, almost four times the country's per capita income, and much higher than the per capita health budget. Some may argue that because resources are limited, and because issues pertaining to the AIDS epidemic seem so pressing, that the focus of development programs should be diverted from improvements in agricultural technology, access to credit, women's empowerment and the like (Bollinger, Stover & Palamuleni, 2000).

While the problems associated with the spread of AIDS in Malawi is not a focus of this paper, I would argue that, at least in part, the same philosophy used in this paper regarding the need for women's empowerment as it relates to agricultural extension services also applies to limiting the spread of the AIDS virus. AIDS in Africa is primarily spread through heterosexual sex and is associated with prostitution (WHO, 2000). In a 1996 survey, only six percent of men and three percent of women reported condom use for their most recent sexual encounter. During the same survey, only 22 percent of women aged 15–19 and 37 percent of those aged 30–34 who had heard of AIDS knew at least two ways of avoiding HIV transmission (WHO, 2000).

Until women are educated about the spread of the AIDS virus and empowered to make decisions about condom use and are given more economic opportunities so they do not have to rely on the sex industry as a source of income, it is difficult to imagine that the spread of HIV can be curbed in the near future. Although clearly not the only part of the solution to the AIDS epidemic, empowering women to make

better choices in their lives can not help but improve the situation faced by many in sub-Saharan Africa.

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