Women's involvement in local forest governance groups in Malawi

Scope for a randomized study on gender quota encouragement

22 December 2023

Introduction

Aim

It is important to understand the extent to which improved participation of women in local resource governance institutions can improve or otherwise change the functioning of these groups and, ultimately, environmental and socioeconomic outcomes. To this end, we conducted an exploratory study in rural Malawi to identify potential units for a future experimental intervention focused on randomly encouraging the enforcement of gender quotas to increase women's involvement in local-level forest management. This scoping report provides background information on the *de facto* and *de jour* ways in which women participate in and influence these institutions.

Background

The Malawi Gender Equality Act (2018) requires that neither men nor women should occupy less than 40 percent, or more than 60 percent, of positions in any department of the public service. This requirement includes local governance institutions such as land tribunals, customary land committees, and natural resource management committees. In theory, this affords ample opportunity for women to ensure that their voices are heard and their preferences incorporated into decision-making. For the case of local resource governance institutions in particular, women's participation is deemed crucial for change in resource utilization given that women are the primary gatherers and users of many natural resources (Mawaya and Kalindekafa, 2020).

However, at least for these local governance institutions, the requirement is rarely enforced, and women are reportedly often underrepresented (Department of Forestry, 2017). When they do participate in legally required numbers, women also face major barriers to accessing information that is relevant to their effective participation in decision-making, and are often unable to fully participate due to gender and family norms that discourage this (Mudege et al., 2017; Mawaya and Kalindekafe, 2010). This is concerning given that, when women lack power and influence in public spaces, policies and decisions are less likely to reflect women's distinct knowledge and preferences (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clayton and Zetterberg 2018; Clayton et al. 2023).

Despite some evidence of gender inequities in participation, however, there remain knowledge gaps in terms of how well represented women are in local forest governance in Malawi, and what the power both men and women exercise looks like. Such information is critical to understanding what are effective policy responses to a lack of representation of women, or how to address situations in which women who are represented have limited voice and influence.

Research questions

The study considers three related questions:

- What are the key local-level institutions governing forests in rural Malawi, and how are they organized? Specifically, what committees deal with deforestation issues, and what is their gender composition?
- What are the characteristics, strengths, and limitations of these committees, and is there evidence that more forcefully imposing gender quotas within them might empower women in forest management?

Methods

We take a qualitative approach to answering the research questions, relying on key informant interviews (KIIs) and participant observation during community-level forest management committee meetings conducted in mid-2023. Specifically, we conducted KIIs with local government officials and traditional leaders to understand the structure and functioning of local institutions that govern natural resources. The KIIs were conducted with the help of a facilitator with expertise in gender and natural resource management, and focused on the following areas:

- Management practices of forests at the community level
- The players/actors in the governance of these forests at the community level
- How many and what forest management committees are available
- Mandate, activeness, and vibrancy of the committees
- Gender composition of committees
- Enforcement of formally required gender quotas for such committees
- Attendance and activeness of women in such committees.

The KII guide was formulated in English and translated into Chichewa, the language predominantly spoken in the study areas. All KIIs were conducted in Chichewa and were facilitated by a facilitator while a second researcher took notes.

In addition to KIIs, the study team also observed full meetings of community-level forest management committees to understand their functioning, focusing on:

- Gender composition of the committees
- Committee activeness
- Quality of committee discussions, including the activeness of male and female members in discussion
- Differences between the attendance and participation of male and female committee members, and the dynamics between members of different genders

The committees were each visited on their usual meeting days. Upon obtaining committee members' consent, we recorded and later transcribed their discussions.

We used a multi-stage format content analysis to synthesize the data from the transcript. First, we read through the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the content. Then, we conducted a second read through to manually identify and code recurring themes, ideas, and patterns. These were then summarized and interpreted by highlighting the general results matched against the research questions and objectives.

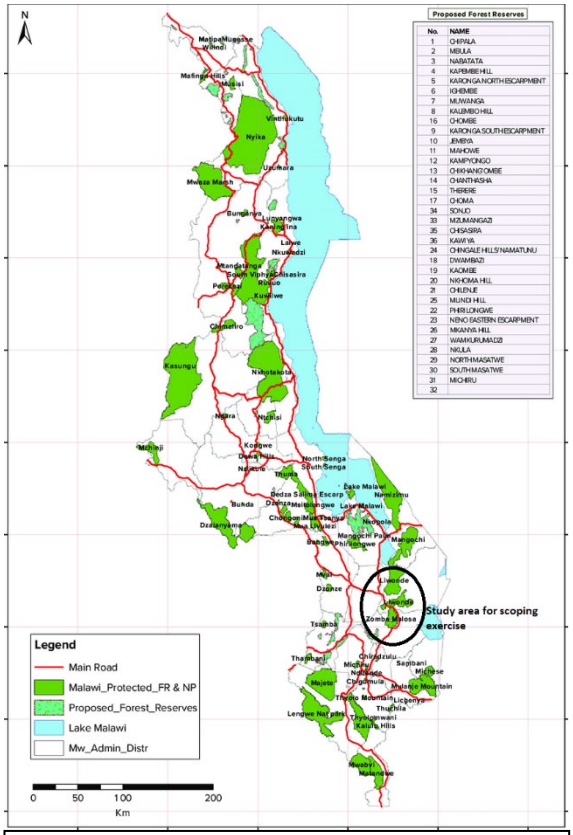
Study area and informants

Data collection took place between July and September 2023 in areas surrounding the Malosa and Liwonde forest reserves in Zomba and Machinga districts in southern Malawi. Figure 1 shows a map of Malawi, marking the study sites, while Box 1 provides an overview of Malawi's administrative system.

The study sites were selected for two reasons: First, we previously conducted a related study that examined the roles of local women in forestry-resource management and governance in the same sites. This made community entry relatively easy. Secondly, the scoping nature of this study supported a convenience sample selection design. As such, the two study sites were conveniently selected because of their proximity to the offices of one of the research partners, IPOR. Since this was not meant to be a representative study sample, the purposive sampling design was most appropriate.

Communities in this area all rely upon wood harvested from the reserve for their cooking fuel and heating, and many residents' livelihoods depend on harvesting and reselling wood and charcoal in local markets (Moyo, Chikuni, and Chiotha 2016). At the same time, communities near the reserves will also pay the short- and long-term costs of deforestation, including devastating mudslides and flash floods, unpredictable rain patterns, reduced water supply, and increased disease burdens. Past research demonstrates that most residents understand the negative implications of deforestation but face significant incentives to exploit the resource beyond sustainability (Moyo, Chikuni, and Chiotha 2016).

Figure 1. Forestry map of Malawi showing the study site



Source: World Bank Group (2019)

In each district, we interviewed the District Forestry Officer, who also helped us identify the group-village heads (GVHs) located in the closest proximity to the two forest reserves. The number approached was influenced by our budget constraint; we selected five in Zomba district (GVH Mtwiche, GVH Chitenjere, GVH Minama, GVH Mtogolo, and GVH Machinjiri, all in TA Malemia) and three in Machinga district (GVH Malajira, GVH Muhala, and GVH Liwundi, all in TA Nkula). We interviewed each of the identified GVHs and asked them to compile a list of natural resource management committees that are active in their area. From these, we randomly selected 10 committees for observation.

Select findings

Forest governance in Malawi

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change has overall responsibility over issues of forest governance in Malawi through its Department of Forestry. The Department of Forestry has four regional offices across the country.[1] Zomba and Machinga districts fall under the Eastern Region. The ministry headquarters are in Lilongwe and together with the Regional Forestry Offices, they form the central government level concerned with forest governance.

At the district level, forests are managed by the District Forestry Office. In total, there are 28 District Forestry Offices, one in each of Malawi's 28 districts. Each District Forestry Office is headed by a District Forestry Officer who reports principally to her Regional Forestry Office.[2] The District Forestry Officer is supported by a cadre of other junior officials which includes Assistant

[1] Malawi is formally divided into three regions: Northern, Central and Southern. A fourth region – the Eastern Region – was to be carved out of the Southern region under president Bakili Muluzi (1993-2004), but the formation of the new region was never officially gazetted, and hence, not officially formalized. Some institutions are organized along the three-region structure, while others, including the Department of Forestry, are organized along the ungazetted four-region structure.

[2] Under Malawi's semi-decentralized administrative structure, the District Forestry Officer also reports to the District Environmental Committee, which is headed by the Director of Agriculture and Naturals Resources, who in turn reports to the District Executive Committee at the partially elected District Council, which is chaired by the District Commissioner.

District Forestry Officers and Forestry Assistants. The Forestry Assistants provide on-the-ground leadership to voluntary committees that regulate forestry issues at the community level.

The committees copy the structure of Malawi's customary governance system: Catchment Management Committees (CMCs) operate at the TA level and collect reports from Block Management Committees (BMCs) and Area Natural Resource Management Committees (ANRMCs), which operate at the GVH level. BMCs regulate community activities in government-owned protected forests (which are divided into blocks, hence the name of the committee), while ANRMCs regulate the use of community-owned forests. ANRMCs also oversee the work of Village Natural Resource Management Committees (VNRMCs), which operate at the VH level. The place of forest management committees in Malawi's administrative structure is illustrated in Figure 2**Error! Reference source not found.**.

BMCs, ANRMCs and VNRMCs work closely with Village and Area Civil Protection Committees (VCPCs and ACPCs) as well as with Village and Area Development Committees (VDCs and ADCs), which operate in a similar fashion under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change and the Ministry of Local Government respectively.[3] Many local community leaders such as VDC chairpersons are members of BMCs and ANRMCs (often ex officio), as are forestry extension workers, both from the government and NGOs. While VDC chairpersons are typically not members of VNRMCs, they usually work closely with the committees and supervise them. The VNRMCs also work with Village Headmen.

Although multiple structures exist in the governance of forests at the local level, the most powerful actors remain traditional leaders. The chiefs derive their power not only from their exalted status at the community level, but also from their role as custodians of land and land-related resources, of which forests are one. As such, most local committees work very closely with, and are guided by, traditional leaders. Indeed, the evidence gathered from this and previous studies that IPOR and partners have conducted in the same areas show that local forest management committees oftentimes operate as if they have delegated power from traditional leaders. Even in the case of government-owned forests such as Zomba, Malosa, and Liwonde forest reserves, the ability of the Department of Forestry to enforce any forest management bylaws is very dependent on whether or not there is support from local traditional leaders.

Box 1. Malawi's administrative system

Malawi is divided into 28 administrative districts within 3 regions. Each district is headed by a District Commissioner, who coordinates the work of multiple District Officers. District Officers are employed by national line ministries, and they are each responsible for a specific area of local governance. Their ranks include the District Forestry officer.

Each district is further subdivided into several Traditional Authorities (TAs), headed by hereditary chiefs, who form one of the higher echelons of a customary governance structure of indirect rule which is intertwined with the direct-rule democratic structures embodied in the districts. The chiefly governance system is based on hereditary Village Headmen (VH), whose approval is needed by their subjects to access many government services such as business registration, registration of land transactions or issuance of formal identification documents. VHs are subordinate to a Group Village Headman (GVH), whom they elect from among themselves. GVHs are in turn subordinate to a hereditary Traditional Authority (TA). TAs report both to their centrally appointed District Commissioner and to one of Malawi's 7 Paramount Chiefs, 3 of whom are hereditary and 4 appointed by the President of the Republic. At the same time, TAs are non-voting members of District Councils, who formally oversee the work of District Commissioners (Duchoslav et al., 2023). See Eggen (2011) for a history of the co-evolution of the two governance systems and CLGF (2018) for an overview of the present local governance structure.

Most traditional leaders in the study area – and in the rest of Malawi – are male, which largely skews the power over the management of forest in favor of men. This power imbalance is likely to importantly characterize the ability of women to exercise true voice and agency in forest governance, notwithstanding the gender composition of various forest management committees.

Membership of local forest governance committees

Members of CMCs, BMCs, ANRMCs, and VNRMCs are recruited in a consultative manner. When Forestry Assistants want to establish a committee or recruit new members, they approach the chief at the relevant level (TA, GVH or VH). The chief then organizes a meeting with the Forestry Assistants and all interested villagers, who nominate committee members from among

[3] Analogously to NRMCs, VCPCs operate at the VH level while ACPCs operate at the GVH level. Confusingly, VDCs and ADCs operate one level higher than their names would suggest, i.e., at the GVH and TA levels respectively.

themselves. In theory, these nomination processes should respect the gender quotas (between 40 and 60 percent of each gender being represented by the members).

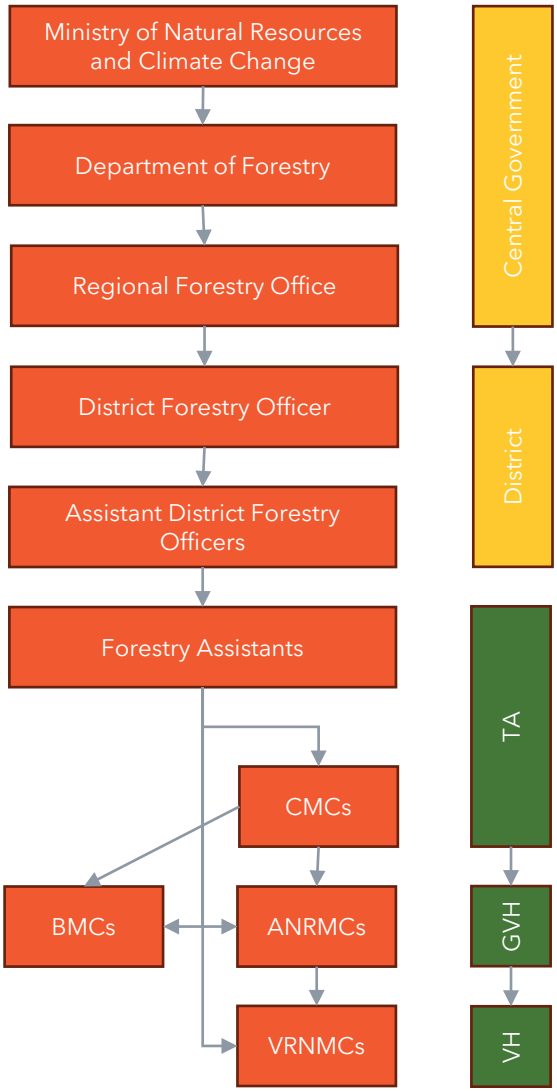
Service on local forestry committees is voluntary and the committees rely on members' passion and interest to be involved in natural resource governance. Such people are not always easy to find, so the composition of the committees tends to be static. Women's mobility restrictions, or social norms that prescribe certain behaviors or time commitments by women (which are potentially more restrictive for younger women who are expected to shoulder large amounts of unpaid domestic care work), will clearly determine which type of women select in to such committees.

BMCs typically have around 20 members, ANRMCs around 15 members, and VNRMCs around 10 members. Committee members usually range from 20 to 60 years of age. In stark contrast to what we expected to find, women outnumber men in most committees. We were given multiple reasons for this:

- The selection of the members of committees is done in community meetings, which women usually attend in larger numbers than men
- Women are perceived in their communities as being more dedicated to developmental or environmental work than are men, with this stereotype making them more popular candidates for membership
- Women are more likely than men to indicate a willingness to do unpaid voluntary work than men—perhaps as they are used to taking on unpaid roles, or less subjected to perceptions that they are wasting their time or being under-appreciated if what they take on unpaid work
- Communities have more women than men—possibly due to male-dominated out-migration

However, even in committees where they are in the minority, male members tend to be more vocal and active than women members.

Figure 2. Forest governance committees within Malawi's administrative structure



Source: Compiled by authors.

Mandates and activities of local forest governance committees

The mandates of the ANRMCs, VNRMCs, and BMCs are similar in that they all set bylaws for people in their community to follow. Although the committees should in theory develop the bylaws on their own, in practice, Forestry Assistants play a central role in the process to ensure that the bylaws are consistent with prevailing government policies. The bylaws tend to focus on regulating the use of the forest and on setting penalties for regulation breaches such as unauthorized tree cutting. The penalties can be financial, or – especially in the case of BMCs – they can take the form of confiscation of charcoal, wood, and tools that people use to destroy forest resources.

The funds that are generated from the penalties are used to run the activities of the committees such as maintenance of tree nurseries, beekeeping, or authorized use of forest resources. The expenditures of the committees are determined in collaboration with local traditional leaders, with larger expenditures requiring the input of senior traditional leaders in the leadership hierarchy chain.

Committees also turn to chiefs for help in resolving conflicts about forest use, especially about land rights and encroachment on designated forests. Unlike forest management committees, chiefs have the right to distribute community owned land, so their decisions in this regard tend to be respected. To ensure continuity and consistency of land demarcation decisions, a formal agreement that stipulates the status of community forests is signed by representatives of villagers, VHs, GVHs, TAs, the

District Forestry Department, and the District Commissioner. This document helps secure the forest so that when the GVH dies, their successors cannot take the land away from the community.

Activeness of local forest governance committees

Our observations of committees revealed that some committees are more active than others, defined by how often they meet. Depending on their constitutions, most committees should meet once or twice a month. While some meet with this periodicity, others meet only when the need arises or when called upon by their Forestry Assistant, and still others have become completely inactive. BMCs tend to be better organized than ANRMC and VNRMCs.

Committees tend to become less active during parts of the agricultural season when labor demand is high (land preparation, weeding and harvest). On the other hand, support from NGOs such as Zam-Zam Foundation, Bena Trust, Save the Children, and One Acre Fund has helped improve the activeness of committees—although improvements may be temporary.

Local forest governance committee activities

Local forest governance committees in rural Malawi play a crucial role in managing and protecting forest resources at the community level. Committees are often heavily involved in forest conservation and protection; community engagement and awareness; cultivating and planting seedlings to expand forest lands; building capacity; and engaging conflict resolution. The committees we observed described various activities in which they were currently engaging in each of these roles, describing also how they often received support from a Village Head or Forest Assistant in doing so. The committees acknowledged benefiting also from formal rules, such as fines for cutting trees, that helped them in their work. It was also common that if a member did not attend a meeting, they would have to pay a "ransom" payment to the committee to make amends for their absence. It is possible that women may have less access to family finances to be able to make such payments – possibly being more likely to attend meetings that are held due to this financial cost, though this was not discussed explicitly.

Committee members frequently stated having a goal of environmental sustainability; e.g., a woman in GVH Muhala noted:

> *"The main thing that pushed us to have a forest was when we saw that trees were depleting. This meant that as a community, we would suffer with bad air because oxygen comes from trees. This is why we sat down and agreed to plant trees to have good oxygen, good rains; rains also depend on trees. Houses are also protected from strong winds by trees."*

The committees also often create spaces for women to exercise voice and agency—and advocate for their environmental goals. One woman in GVH Chitenjere noted:

> *"When I say that I do not get discouraged doing this work, I'm not lying. I was selected by the group village head…They were choosing two people that time to water the seedlings, but sometimes my friends were choosing not to go there, I was always there. I was going to Domasi [another location within TA Malemia] to get the water for the nursery. So, I've been doing this work for a long time—up to the point that people made me the Chairperson because I have persisted. I told my friends that trees are important, trees are important in a community so we need to sow and plant in our lands and compounds, the winds that are coming will be blocked by the trees and our houses will be protected from these winds."*

Members are also motivated by the economic value of trees—beyond environmental preservation. One woman from GVH Chitenjere explained:

> *"For us women, cooking is becoming hard because we are using grass as firewood, let us plant more trees, even to build a house you need trees."*

Unfortunately, members of these committees often complain about inadequate supplies and other resources, as well as inadequate knowledge in order to carry out these activities. Nearly all of the meetings we observed involved discussions, many led by women, about the need for additional resources. For example, a woman from GVH Muhala noted:

> *"We don't have enough tubes, we were complaining this other day. We asked where we were going to find the other tubes. Our vision is to have a lot of tubes, we want to have 8000 or 9000 tubes in the nursery, we can be very happy if we can have that because this is a very big village…people ask for trees from us, and the seeds that we sow, we share among a lot of people."*

The problem of lack of resources surfaced substantially; a woman from GVH Liwundi noted:

> *"If one tree dries up, plant another one. The only problem we have is that our group does not have the materials to effectively take care of the trees, we don't have hoes."*

Focusing on skills, a woman from GVH Minama lamented that opportunities to learn about how to better perform her job did not come to women like her:

> *"This work is voluntary and free, but there are times when opportunities come for some people to attend a seminar so that when they are back they should teach everyone else. People go to the seminars but they do not teach us what they learned there."*

In a similar vein, a man from GVH Muhala said:

> *"I still don't know what else we need to do to keep our trees alive, Chairperson what is the procedure?"*

Others, including a man from GVH Liwundi that noted the following, lamented a lack of enforcement power of the committees, limiting their ability to preserve forests:

> *"We have the desire to take care of our forest but the only thing limiting us is the power to enforce some rules. It appears as though people who are busy cutting down the trees have more power than we do, they keep burning our forest, cutting down trees for charcoal. What I am asking for right now is the power and the mandate to be able to stop these people without fear."*

These concerns about lack of resources, skills, and authority were common, and not associated with any one gender. They gave an overall impression that the committees in some sense lack what is needed to make women's participation in them translate into real power and influence for these women.

Conclusions

Our field research revealed substantial valuable information about local institutions that influence deforestation policy in rural Malawi. We also unearthed the role women play in these local institutions. Members of the forest governance committees are selected by villagers who participate in community meetings that are convened by local leaders on the advice of Forestry Assistants (district-level employees of the Forestry Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change) and with the help of the forest extension workers. BMCs typically have around 20 members, ANRMCs 20 members and VNRMCs 10 members.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, most committee members are women. However, men are reportedly more vocal and active than women during committee meetings. Furthermore, forest governance committees derive much of their authority from endorsement by traditional leaders, who are the custodians of land, including community forests. Chiefs, who are predominantly male, are thus key to forest governance and can influence the extent to which men versus women are given voice.

There is therefore a need to study ways in which women's participation in community forest governance can be enhanced. However, considering that women are already in the majority on most local forest governance committees, this context is unsuitable to a study based on an intervention that would stress or enforce gender quotas. Other study designs should instead be explored—possibly experimenting with the effectiveness of various ways to alleviate resource, skill, and authority constraints to broadly capacitate these groups.

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Boniface Dulani, Director of Research, Institute for Public Opinion and Research,
bdulani@ipormw.org

Funny Muthema, Research Associate, Institute for Public Opinion and Research,
fmuthema@ipormw.org

Flossy Kambuku, Intern, Institute for Public Opinion and Research,
flossykambuku@gmail.com

Katrina Kosec, Senior Research Fellow, International Food Policy Research Institute,
k.kosec@cgiar.org

Jan Duchoslav, Research Fellow, International Food Policy Research Institute,
j.duchoslav@cgiar.org

We would like to thank all funders who support this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund: www.cgiar.org/funders.

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