



LESSONS LEARNED

INTEGRATING GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION INTO CUSTOMARY LAND DOCUMENTATION IN MALAWI

As land is a critical asset for rural men and women, securing land tenure through documentation can reduce conflict and vulnerability to property grabbing, while creating incentives for households to make long-term investments in their land. In Malawi, 70 percent of the population lives on customary land that is held by communities and administered by traditional leaders. Less than 10 percent of people have any form of land documentation, and these rates are worse for women and other marginalized groups.

The Government of Malawi enacted a series of land laws in 2016, including the Customary Land Act that allows customary land holders to formalize ownership by registering their parcels. Building on this new legal framework, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG) program partnered with the Government of Malawi to register all customary land within a traditional land management area (TLMA). The program applied a strong gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) lens to ensure that women, youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups were included throughout the process. This initiative provides lessons for scaling the government-led customary land registration process across the country in the coming years.

This brief shares the following ten lessons from this two-year partnership, highlighting the main activities undertaken to integrate GESI into the customary land documentation process, initial results, and challenges:

1. Allow sufficient time for planning and preparation to select intervention areas, align expectations, and resolve broader land boundary issues.

2. Carry out a robust gender analysis to inform GESI-specific activities and GESI integration in the land registration process.
3. Invest in enumerators/data collectors, as they are the frontline for GESI integration.
4. Implement GESI capacity strengthening for all stakeholders involved in the land registration process to increase understanding and buy-in.
5. Ensure GESI content is part of initial community outreach on land rights, with continued sensitization throughout the documentation process.
6. Gender quotas are important, but women need additional support to meaningfully participate in land governance.
7. Invest in traditional leaders as key agents of change to promote GESI in customary land registration and governance.
8. Focus on shifting harmful gender norms at the household and community levels.
9. Build support and resources for gender-responsive land dispute resolution.
10. Create space for long-term change; though GESI integration generates positive results, there is persistent resistance to registering land in the name of women in patrilineal marriage systems.

Data and insights on challenges and lessons learned come from two local learning events (midline and endline), as well as interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders. A survey with community members provided quantitative data that was compared to baseline data from the initial gender assessment.

Lesson 1 Allow sufficient time for planning and preparation to select intervention areas, align expectations, and resolve broader land boundary issues

During an initial one-year preparation period, which was prolonged in part due to COVID-19 restrictions, ILRG liaised with the Land Reform Implementation Unit (LRIU) at the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD) to define overall goals, carry out initial assessments, select the relevant TLMA, and recruit and train staff. This was followed by field-level land documentation activities over the following 13 months. Through technical support, capacity strengthening, funding, equipment, and staffing, the partnership aimed to:

- Systematically document customary land in one TLMA in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner, producing certificates for approximately 10,000 land parcels; and
- Influence the government of Malawi, other funders, and stakeholders to build momentum for GESI-responsive customary land registration.

Traditional Authority (TA) Mwansambo in Nkhosakota district and the associated TLMA was selected as the jurisdiction according to a set of criteria agreed upon with the LRIU.¹ The TA has an estimated population of 45,000 people organized under 23 group village headpersons (GVHs) across 23,000 hectares in the central region of the country. The LRIU had previously carried out a land registration pilot in one of the 23 GVHs in TA Mwansambo with World Bank support, so there was some initial awareness and political will from local stakeholders. In addition, the social and cultural setup of TA Mwansambo provided an interesting background to apply a GESI lens. The TA is a predominantly Chewa

¹ Criteria included: political will/buy-in from local authorities, appetite for gender-responsive process, logistical ease of access, initial successes from previous donor pilots, and alignment with USAID and government priorities.

matrilineal area where a matrilineal (*chikamwini*) marriage system had been historically practiced. However, due to social and economic changes, the predominant form of marriage has shifted to *chitengwa*, a patrilineal system in which a woman moves to her husband's village after marriage. Under *chitengwa*, land is considered to belong to men and women are perceived as outsiders with limited to no right to own or make decisions about land. Thus, though the Chewa culture of southern and central Malawi is well known for having a matrilineal and matrilineal inheritance structure, the reality of many TAs is more mixed and dynamic, underscoring the importance of a robust gender assessment that informs the GESI strategy.

An initial challenge was getting buy-in from all stakeholders about the importance of applying a gender-responsive approach to land registration. One area of pushback was the idea that GESI investment was not needed because the legal framework is inclusive, with the Customary Land Act 2016 and other legislation providing for equal rights in land ownership and gender quotas within formal customary land committees. This was addressed by emphasizing that even when legal frameworks are non-discriminatory, women and other marginalized groups still face social barriers to exercise their land rights. There were also concerns that a potential focus on women's land rights might alienate stakeholders and create resentment or conflict within communities about redistributing land away from established (patriarchal) systems. Strategies to overcome this challenge included continued sensitization of key partners and an expanded focus on social inclusion more broadly beyond gender equality. At the end of the intervention, key government partners who were initially hesitant acknowledged that their GESI knowledge increased, and mindsets shifted. An officer claimed, "I have become a gender advocate. The focus on GESI is essential. Most women are vulnerable and discriminated against when it comes to land ownership. With the empowerment training, women were able to stand for their rights during the adjudication and demarcation exercise."

A second challenge, which extends beyond GESI-related impacts, was a focus on rushing towards household documentation within the TA before fully addressing long-standing conflicts and land use planning challenges. Despite having a long preparation period for the work and an assessment that documented the key boundary conflicts between TAs and issues of historic leaseholds, these issues were not resolved before household documentation commenced, which slowed progress. At the end of the project all stakeholders - government officers, land tribunals, customary land committee members, and traditional leaders - agreed that clarifying TA boundaries and other disputes should happen before household documentation starts - a key learning for future customary land documentation efforts.

Lesson 2 Carry out a robust gender assessment to inform GESI specific activities and GESI integration in the land registration process

ILRG engaged local experts at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) to conduct a [gender assessment](#) in TA Mwansambo. Using quantitative and qualitative data, the assessment identified barriers and opportunities to support gender equality in land registration and governance. Although in principle the normative legal framework supports gender equality in land ownership, customary land governance leaves considerable potential for ambiguity that can be detrimental to women and other marginalized groups, and even reinforce existing inequalities. While most women in TA Mwansambo have access to land, the *chitengwa* patrilineal marriage system hinders their ability to own land and make decisions about land disposal and land-derived income. Harmful social



TA Mwansambo in red

and gender norms also constrain women’s land rights, as men are considered heads of households and responsible for economic activities, decision-making, and leadership in public spaces, even in matrilineal systems. Women are expected to be subservient and have limited physical and social mobility, impacting their ability to participate in community meetings and receive information. Men and women who attempt to break such norms are at risk of sanctions like social ostracism, ridicule, gossip, and physical violence. Certain sub-groups of women are particularly vulnerable, including women and girls who experienced early marriage, young women, women in polygamous marriages, widows, and women and girls with disabilities.

In addition to providing baseline monitoring and evaluation data, the assessment identified key stakeholders to engage as agents of change. The findings informed approaches to integrate GESI considerations into all steps of the land registration process and the design of GESI-specific activities that were implemented in parallel with the land registration work to ensure the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups. These included the development of practical guidance notes to promote gender-responsiveness and inclusion at every stage of the registration process, GESI sensitization materials, and training programs tailored for different stakeholders.² ILRG also identified the need to develop interventions to shift harmful gender norms at household and community levels and to engage champions – particularly men in leadership positions – to drive sensitization and behavior change.



Women in GVH Denje participate in a focus group discussion during the gender assessment in TA Mwanambo
LUANAR

Despite the wealth of information produced by the gender assessment, it is important to bear in mind that promoting gender equality and social inclusion is a long, complex, and resource-intensive journey. A main challenge was balancing the resources and time available between GESI-specific activities and the regular tasks required in the land registration process. In that sense, it is important to manage expectations around changes that are achievable in a short timeframe. In addition, ILRG initially planned to work in 18 out of the 23 GVHs due to budget limitations, but as activities progressed, decided to support documentation in the entire TA. However, some of the GESI-specific activities could not be implemented in the additional five GVHs due to time and resource constraints. These timeline considerations are particularly important as influencing gender norms requires conversations over time, and therefore gender sensitization work should ideally start in the months *before* active registration. Ideally, national-level advocacy campaigns could be coupled with site-specific outreach as the Government of Malawi plans its national roll-out.

Lesson 3 Invest in enumerators/data collectors, as they are the frontline for GESI integration

Enumerators or data collectors are responsible for land adjudication and demarcation, i.e., collecting landholder and geospatial data for every parcel. Importantly, they are the frontline for GESI integration in the registration process as they interact directly with community members. In early 2022, ILRG hired and trained 16 data collectors and eight data processors and established a data processing office in Nkhosokota District. ILRG had an intentional goal of recruiting a gender-balanced team of data collectors and processors (13 women, 11 men). During orientation, they were trained in the customary land registration process, GESI concepts and integration, gender-based violence (GBV), and conflict resolution. Beyond the initial orientation, ILRG continued to engage data collectors and processors by

² All resources are available on the USAID ILRG [LandLinks](#) page.

providing refresher trainings on GESI concepts, developing written guidance to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs), facilitating regular feedback loops to listen to successes and concerns, and providing monetary incentives for them to capture GESI impact stories during land registration.

Most data collectors and processors recruited were from outside Nkhotakota and relocated to TA Mwanambo for the duration of the project, with the potential of being engaged by the government for future customary land documentation activities. This was largely because government partners wanted enumerators to have university degrees in land management, which restricted the local pool of potential applicants. A key learning is that bringing enumerators from outside target communities poses both challenges and creates benefits. Enumerators from outside the community often come from larger cities and are less familiar with the cultural traditions of rural communities. For instance, before work begins in an area, it is customary for project staff to pay a courtesy visit to traditional leaders like the TA and GVHs as both a sign of respect and to gain support for project objectives. Government supervisors recounted instances in other pilot projects when this was not done, and the traditional leaders ordered work to stop. There are also different dress standards and behavioral expectations in rural versus urban areas, particularly for women. Registration processes must strike a delicate balance between working within existing social norms to gain community acceptance and challenging gender norms that hinder women's leadership and empowerment. To bridge these gaps teams can look to hire enumerators from the target communities when viable and include cultural sensitization as part of enumerator training. However, when hiring from within target communities, programs should also consider constraints and risks that individuals may face in challenging their own community members. Enumerators from outside the community may be seen as a neutral third party in land documentation efforts who do not have a vested interest in inter-community power dynamics and conflicts.

Regardless of the approach, hiring should be carried out in a way that ensures that staff are open to engaging on gender norms change. Under this activity, data collectors worked directly with customary land committee (CLC) members, made up of community members of the local GVH, who helped navigate cultural differences and local conflicts. The program created a gender-focused monitoring and evaluation platform, so that data collectors could track the extent to which land was registered in the name of women. This helped managers to keep a focus on representation and helped to spur discussion among data collectors during weekly progress meetings. While some team members felt that this monitoring platform did not fully represent their effort, given that daily parcel count does account for parcel size, it allowed for national government, donors, and field supervisors to work with the same information and provide consistent feedback.

As the front line in land registration, it is important to invest in a strong enumerators team that act as GESI champions. This includes actively seeking gender-balanced teams, recruiting enumerators from the community as feasible, providing initial and ongoing GESI capacity strengthening, and providing incentives for continued attention to registering the land rights of women and other marginalized groups.

Lesson 4 Implement GESI capacity strengthening for all stakeholders involved in the land registration process to increase understanding and buy in

A gender-responsive and inclusive customary land documentation process requires buy-in and support from many stakeholders at the national, regional, and local levels. Technical training on the land laws and documentation steps is important, but additional knowledge on GESI allows stakeholders involved in the registration process to reinforce community sensitization messages and ensure that women, orphans, the elderly, people with disabilities, and other marginalized individuals are not excluded.

Before registration started, ILRG provided tailored GESI training to 324 people (156 women, 168 men), including government officers (LRIU and ministry staff, the district land clerk, and sensitization teams), data collectors and processors, CLC members, members of customary land tribunals (CLTs) and district land tribunals (DLTs), and traditional leaders. Training covered core GESI concepts, gender norms,

barriers to, and benefits of, inclusive land registration, key steps for community sensitization and registration, and GBV. Training was delivered in Chichewa by local ILRG staff using case studies and participatory exercises. This allowed stakeholders to develop a shared vocabulary and awareness that GESI was a critical tenet of the project. At endline, stakeholders highlighted the importance of GESI training to increase their knowledge and awareness about the importance of including marginalized groups in the registration process.

“After learning about gender, I feel that change should start with me as a CLC in the community. Though I did not come to this training with my spouse, I have taken all the lessons and will share with my spouse and others in my community.”

Male CLC member, GVH Mtawa I

Training helped increase awareness among key stakeholders about GESI concepts and increase buy-in for an inclusive land documentation process that benefits the community broadly. Before the training, 71 percent of data collectors and processors said they understood how to apply a gender equality lens to their work and 62 percent said they felt equipped to facilitate gender-responsive community discussions. After the training, these shares jumped to 100 percent for both questions. Post-training

dialogues with traditional leaders showed that all agreed that cultural norms and traditions favor men and need to be changed so that women can have access, control, and ownership of land. After the training CLC members were able to identify key gender norms prevalent in their communities and explain how they negatively impact women and men at both the household and community level. Many noted that the training helped them feel prepared to carry out their responsibilities in the land documentation process. This encouraging increase in awareness of GESI issues was seen across TA-level stakeholders, though there was perhaps less change among individuals who participated only in the initial GESI training, such as national government staff.

The main issue in strengthening the capacity of local stakeholders stemmed from the initial skepticism of the need for and importance of applying a GESI lens to customary land registration. GESI training mostly took place as part of broader training on land documentation and oftentimes the time allocated for the GESI portion was insufficient. At learning sessions at the end of the project, several stakeholder groups raised that additional GESI training would have been beneficial. Finding time and resources for continued capacity development once registration began and as stakeholders were busy carrying out the work was also challenging. Generating buy-in across national, district, and local officials is key for program success, but does come with time and resource implications. In total, GESI related interventions represented about 7 percent of the total cost of the field documentation process.

Lesson 5 Ensure GESI content is part of initial community outreach on land rights, with continued sensitization throughout the documentation process

Initial community sensitization was carried out by government teams in each GVH to raise awareness about the Customary Land Act 2016, the land registration process, the benefits of registering customary land, the importance of promoting social inclusion and women’s land rights, and the upcoming CLC elections. Sensitization included use of a public announcement (PA) system, community meetings, and distribution of leaflets, including a GESI leaflet with FAQs. Although competing social events like soccer matches, traditional dances, and funerals impacted attendance, a total of 3,794 community members participated in initial sensitization meetings in the first 18 GVHs (38 percent adult men, 34 percent adult women, 15 percent young men, and 13 percent young women). Women demonstrated active interest and participation during meetings, asking questions and approaching the team for clarifications. According to an endline survey with 474 people (64 percent women and 36 percent men), 96 percent of those who attended community sensitization meetings found them very helpful. On content recall, the majority of people remembered discussing reasons for registering land and the importance of women’s land rights and social inclusion in the land documentation process.

Although sensitization meetings were organized in central community venues agreed upon with traditional leaders and at times convenient to men and women, some elderly people and people with disabilities could not attend. The PA system was effective to spread messages, but the vehicles could not reach certain remote areas. Future sensitization efforts should combine use of PA systems and door-to-door approaches to ensure that individuals with physical and social mobility constraints are reached. An important learning was that the time allocated for community mobilization was insufficient to saturate messages in communities. Sensitization meetings happened only a few days before registration started, which was not enough time for people to process the information and make decisions about who should be in the land certificate and/or settle disputes. GESI sensitization should take place well ahead of registration, so community members have time to process the information, reflect on existing gender beliefs and norms, and renegotiate power dynamics within households and the community.

Community sensitization should be a continuous process throughout the land registration process. ILRG adopted different approaches to maintain and expand sensitization on land rights more broadly and on GESI specifically. In October 2022, ILRG supported a series of four programs on Umunthu Community Radio. A popular local artist was engaged to develop a theme song and jingles promoting women's land rights and social inclusion in land documentation. The radio programs included pre-recorded segments and live shows with opportunities for community members to call or text in with questions and concerns. As registration was well underway in the original 18 GVHs by the time the radio programs aired, one of the programs highlighted the importance of ensuring that women and other marginalized individuals participate in the public display of records to verify the data collected during the adjudication phase was accurate and request any necessary corrections. Umunthu Community Radio covers all of Nkhotakota District and the neighboring districts of Ntchisi, Dowa, and Kasungu, so the effort also helped disseminate information on land rights to areas that might benefit from future land registration activities.

Despite these efforts to adapt and promote continued sensitization efforts, at endline government officers, CLC members, traditional leaders, and community members all noted that there was insufficient initial sensitization about project activities broadly, and GESI work specifically. They recommended that future land registration efforts have more robust sensitization about both land rights and GESI well ahead of land documentation.

Lesson 6 Gender quotas are important, but women need additional support to meaningfully participate in land governance

By law, communities in Malawi must elect CLCs to support land registration and administration at the GVH level. These six-person committees must be made up of at least three women and are chaired by the Group Village Headperson. CLC elections should take place after initial sensitization and include a set period for candidate nomination and campaigning. ILRG found that individual motivations for running for CLCs varied. In some cases, candidates were proposed by or associated with local leaders, whereas others were motivated by their desire to serve their communities. Overall, sensitization was successful in encouraging women to nominate themselves. During campaigns, women candidates talked to people about their ideas for community development. Most women reported that they did not encounter harassment or violence during the campaign, but some did face some resistance from people who felt



A woman asks a question about land registration for those in polygamous unions during a community sensitization session in TA Mwanambo
VINCENT MOSES/ILRG

they were being boastful by talking about their accomplishments and ideas. Some women felt pressured to campaign using handouts (spending MWK30,000 [US\$30] – MWK36,000 [US\$36] on soap) because male candidates were doing the same. After winning the election, the women who gave handouts felt it was a good return on their investment, though this does act as a barrier to participation for poorer candidates who are unable to afford handouts.



The gender balanced CLC in GVH Mwansambo, with the three women members sitting at the front
NICO PARKINSON/ILRG

Despite the 50/50 gender quota, women faced challenges to meaningfully participate in community governance structures due to gender norms that associate leadership and decision-making with men, push women to be deferential to men in public spaces and assign a disproportionate share of unpaid household and caring responsibilities to women, limiting their time availability. To help overcome these barriers, ILRG delivered a four-day empowerment and leadership training program for 70 women elected to CLCs in the original 18 GVHs. The training focused on developing self-awareness, as well as core competencies like leadership, public speaking, assertiveness, negotiation, problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict management skills.

At the end of the project, most women reported increased self-confidence as a result of project training and carrying out their role as CLC members. Their presence during the land documentation process helped encourage women's participation, serving as role models for other women in their communities, and supporting shifts in harmful gender norms about acceptable roles and behaviors for women. Women CLC members reported that they now feel confident to stand before men, including traditional leaders, and share their opinions, which goes against traditional gender norms. This confidence spilled over into other areas of their lives, and the empowerment skills gained provided an increased ability to envision, plan, and pursue life and financial goals. Many women reported that they are now pursuing educational opportunities and have started or expanded income generating activities. Women CLC members, even marginalized women like single mothers, reported experiencing greater respect in their communities. Most women reported that their husbands and families have been supportive of their role on the CLC and are taking on more household and childcare responsibilities. However, most agreed that this is because they are given a daily allowance for their work that contributes to household income. Without this allowance, most say it would have been hard to receive the same level of household support. As such, investing in such economic support can be a critical initial step for empowering women elected to local land governance and prevent pushback from their household members.

Some sub-groups of women faced challenges participating in elections and exercising their duties as CLC members. All stakeholders agreed that especially in the beginning women were less vocal than men in CLCs. Some women still struggle to navigate gender norms around women speaking up in front of traditional leaders. Young women reported challenges with community members telling them they were too young and inexperienced to serve on the CLC. Even after being elected, some people still doubted their abilities, but they have seen some shifts with community sensitization and as people saw them successfully supporting the registration process over time. CLC members who are single women also reported that sometimes people would start rumors about them flirting when talking to men during registration. The additional training provided for women CLC members also led to some resentment from men on the committees who questioned why they did not receive the same training. This tension was resolved by providing additional training to both men and women CLC members together, focusing on their role in helping to shift gender norms. At endline, men raised that the initial and subsequent

GESI trainings were eye opening, influencing not only how they performed their tasks as CLC members, but also their personal lives, shifting how they shared work and decision-making with their spouses.

Lesson 7 Invest in traditional leaders as key agents of change to promote GESI in

Traditional leaders are important stakeholders in the customary land registration process. As holders of customary authority and cultural gatekeepers, they have great influence over community members. To leverage this role, ILRG facilitated three dialogue sessions over a period of five months with 26 traditional leaders (22 men and four women), including Senior TA Mwansambo, Sub TA, the Senior TA's advisor, and Group Village Headpersons. The dialogue sessions aimed to engage traditional leaders as agents of change to begin shifting gender norms that prevent women and marginalized groups from having ownership, access, and control over land. The dialogues offered traditional leaders the space and tools to identify existing harmful gender norms that constrain land rights for certain groups and commit to changes they can influence. Each session lasted three days and the three sessions built upon each other: the first session focused on reflections about gender and social inequalities in the area and identifying harmful norms, followed by a session on visioning change and action planning. The final session was held three months later to allow time for traditional leaders to implement planned actions so they could report back on initial results.



A participant posting her responsibilities as a traditional leader during a dialogue session
WONGANI KANYENDA

Participants identified a series of harmful norms affecting equal and inclusive land rights, particularly around gender roles, decision-making over land, dispute resolution, and land ownership and inheritance for women, orphans, youth, and widows. To receive buy-in from the Senior TA, an advocacy brief was developed based on the norms identified. The traditional leaders selected key areas for action: increased community sensitization, development of by-laws around land and gender, gender-responsive dispute resolution mechanisms, and monitoring of progress. They developed concrete milestones and were committed to quantifying their progress; leaders with lower literacy skills even identified young people in their communities to help them write up results. Over the three months of action between the second and third sessions, the traditional leaders did a tremendous job conducting community awareness meetings, reaching 12,926 people (7,040 men and 5,886 women) across TA Mwansambo. They also elected a committee to work on by-laws to address gender inequalities in land governance, although additional technical support is needed to help develop workable by-laws.

“I was motivated to give some of my customary land to women. The training acted as an eye opener for me to see the struggle of women to own, access, and control land. I want to set an example to all traditional leaders under my jurisdiction to follow what I have done.”

Lamesi Sandram, group village headperson in GVH Liwera

Since traditional leaders identified harmful norms and actions for change by themselves, the process was locally led instead of externally imposed, allowing for greater ownership, accountability, and sustainability. From observations during training, a post-training test, monitoring reports shared by participants, and follow-up conversations, traditional leaders' commitment to change seems genuine. Some leaders highlighted that the dialogue process was transformational on a personal level, saying that in the

past, chiefs have often abused their power and made top-down decisions without consulting community members. Some leaders reported adopting a more amicable approach to conflict resolution and engaging

in dialogue with community members, especially young people. Traditional leaders have led by example during land registration. They allocated land to older widows and solved pending land disputes affecting women and orphans. Some registered their own land jointly with their wives, and others gave part of their land for their wives to register alone. Especially in areas under the *chitengwa* marriage system, their actions carried a lot of weight and have the potential to influence other men.

Traditional leaders participating in the dialogues were open about their commitment to lead change but were also quick to express concern about the opposition they would likely face from the communities, since they are targeting deep-seated norms about sensitive topics. Traditional leaders' engagement happened in parallel to land registration, and in some cases their efforts to sensitize people occurred too late; people had already decided who would be included (or excluded) on land certificates. In the future, this engagement with traditional leaders should ideally take place before registration starts.

Another challenge was deciding the appropriate level of leader to target. Gaining the buy-in of Group Village Headpersons and the Senior TA was important to maintain momentum after registration and encourage equality and inclusion during future land allocation and administration. However, time and resource constraints limit engagement with "lower level" leaders who interact with community members more frequently and perhaps have a more direct influence on shifting harmful gender norms.

Although traditional leaders can be an important ally for program success, they can also impede progress. CLC and community members reported that before the project, many traditional leaders were involved in land grabbing within the community. During the project, there were still some instances of traditional leaders meddling in land conflicts and interrupting land registration due to their interests over specific pieces of land. Since some CLC members were appointed by the local leader, sometimes community members felt that CLCs favored the leader's interests over their own. There were also some instances of traditional leaders looking for bribes to help register land, even though the land documentation process was free. These local power dynamics are typically known at the community level but can be hard to discern from the outside during the assessment and planning period.

Traditional leaders are custodians of customary land and influence the upholding or challenging of prevailing social and gender norms. As such, systematic land registration efforts should prioritize investment in traditional leaders as agents of change and GESI champions. This includes engaging them early and continuously, providing the space and tools for them to reflect on their role and devise their own strategies to promote inclusive and equitable land management.

"Traditional leaders were grabbing land and abusing power before. Through sensitization, they are now the ones encouraging no land grabbing they are no longer a threat. Before, widows and orphans had no land. Now we have given them a chance to register."

Antony Chiusiwa, CLC member, GVH Denje

Lesson 8 Focus on shifting harmful gender norms at the household and community levels

The initial gender assessment noted that harmful gender norms related to roles and responsibilities, distribution of work, decision-making, and GBV were key barriers for women to own and control land. To foster shifts in these norms, ILRG facilitated a household dialogue program with 198 people (99 men and 99 women) from 10 GVHs. Most participants were couples, while a few were siblings or parents with adult children. A couple with physical disabilities openly expressed their excitement in participating, noting they felt included in the community for the first time.

The dialogues provided a space and tools for men and women to discuss inequalities within households and communities, identify key harmful norms influencing land rights, and devise individual and joint actions to change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The program was delivered over five sessions using fully participatory, hands-on exercises that allowed people of all literacy levels to engage. The sessions

focused on gendered roles and responsibilities, power dynamics, GBV, and division of household responsibilities and decision-making, highlighting throughout that gender norms can and do change.

“I was one of the men that were abusing their wives because I felt I was the one providing everything, so I had all the power to decide anything. I now understand that I can change, and I really want to change. If you come anytime in the future and ask my wife, she will testify to the change.”

Man in household gender norms dialogue session

As previously mentioned, after men in CLCs expressed discontent over receiving less training than women, ILRG organized gender norms dialogues for men and women in CLCs to discuss harmful norms and how they could promote behavior change during land registration. Feedback and continued follow up showed that the dialogues with both community and CLC members were a big eye opener. Several men expressed deep regret about how women had been treated in their

community, and most participants expressed a strong desire to change negative behaviors and share knowledge with others.

After the dialogues, ILRG devised strategies to spread messages of change across the TA. ILRG identified a group of 41 highly engaged household dialogue participants (21 men and 20 women) to act as community gender champions. They received an orientation on how to facilitate productive discussions on harmful gender norms and the benefits of inclusive/joint land ownership and decision-making. ILRG also developed materials to support the champions' work, including four posters, a comic booklet, a discussion guide, and a FAQ document, all in Chichewa. Champions received a small stipend to work in pairs to reach community members and used a simple form to report back on progress. Over three months, the community gender champions reached 4,500 people (about 60 percent women) with messages about how gender and social norms affect women and men, the impact of household power dynamics on decision making over land, and advantages of collaboration within the household. They reported that the use of communications materials, clear guidance/monitoring tools, frequent follow up, and identifying t-shirts helped them carry out their work successfully.

Traditional leaders helped mobilize community meetings, and champions also took advantage of existing community gatherings (like church functions and sports events) and went door-to-door. Champions reported being mostly well received by community members and noted that outreach efforts were productive, as gender conversations helped answer outstanding questions about the land registration process that community members did not have a chance to ask during previous sensitization efforts.

Champions shared that the work helped them gain confidence and they felt proud to serve their communities and be respected/recognized as a resource person. Many reported that the gender norms training and their role as champions changed their mindsets and behaviors. For instance, some reflected on their new belief that women are intelligent and capable, reporting that they no longer look down on women and people who married into the community as outsiders. They also reported feeling fearless to model different gender behaviors in their own interpersonal and household relationships.



Community champions show comic booklet and posters they use to discuss the importance of GESI in land registration with communities

THAIS BESSA/ILRG

Household dialogues and organized diffusion through gender champions had impacts at the community and household levels. Endline discussions with community members revealed reduced land disputes, reduced discrimination against people with disabilities, greater respect for women's land rights, and enhanced acceptance that men or women who move to a village because of marriage have a right to own land irrespective of local marriage traditions. Discussions also revealed greater intra-household collaboration on farming and financial decision-making, initial changes in gender distribution of household work, and reduced incidents of land and gender related violence.

However, there have been challenges in both the gender norms dialogues and the organized diffusion efforts. While most men and women expressed an openness to change behaviors, they were also concerned about resistance and pressure from family members and neighbors. Men in *chitengwa* marriages had persistent reservations about registering land with their wives for fear of the clan losing the land in case of death or divorce. Men also expressed concerns about losing power to women more broadly. More women than men engaged with the community champions, which is discouraging since men are still the main decision-makers on land. Another challenge was linked to the timing of the activity. Many people complained that the conversations with champions came late in the land registration process, saying these conversations would have been more beneficial before the registration process began. This could have helped more people, especially women, be included on land certificates during the initial documentation phase. As previously explained, an initial challenge was to get buy-in from key stakeholders about the importance of GESI integration, which affected the implementation of in-depth GESI sensitization and use of social and behavior change communication strategies from the beginning of the project.

Measuring shifts in gender norms is a challenge in and of itself. As norms influence and are influenced by individual attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors, ILRG used a baseline and endline survey to compare agreement with statements about gender equality. The data shows encouraging shifts in a very short period of time (Figure 1). This is further supported by qualitative data gathered by ILRG gender consultants, who reported that both men and women said that husbands are beginning to share in household work and women are increasingly involved in decisions about land and household income. Likewise, agreement with statements asking whether GBV is justified also declined, as shown in Figure 2.

Despite these positive initial results, it is important to bear in mind that changing gender norms takes time, as it is a generational process that extends well beyond the timeframe of any single project. It requires continued effort on multiple fronts, which has resource implications. Moreover, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors change when there is a critical mass, so norm shifting interventions are ideally done well in advance of (instead in parallel with) land registration. The ILRG experience shows encouraging results from adopting a community-led process to identify harmful norms, followed by providing space and tools for dialogues, engaging different stakeholders, supporting organized diffusion, and encouraging positive role modeling. Addressing gender norms simultaneously on multiple fronts seems to yield positive results, with different stakeholders pushing change within their own sphere of influence. ILRG organized local level learning sessions to share successes and challenges across different stakeholders, but better coordination between stakeholder groups is still required.

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE WITH STATEMENT ABOUT GENDER NORMS

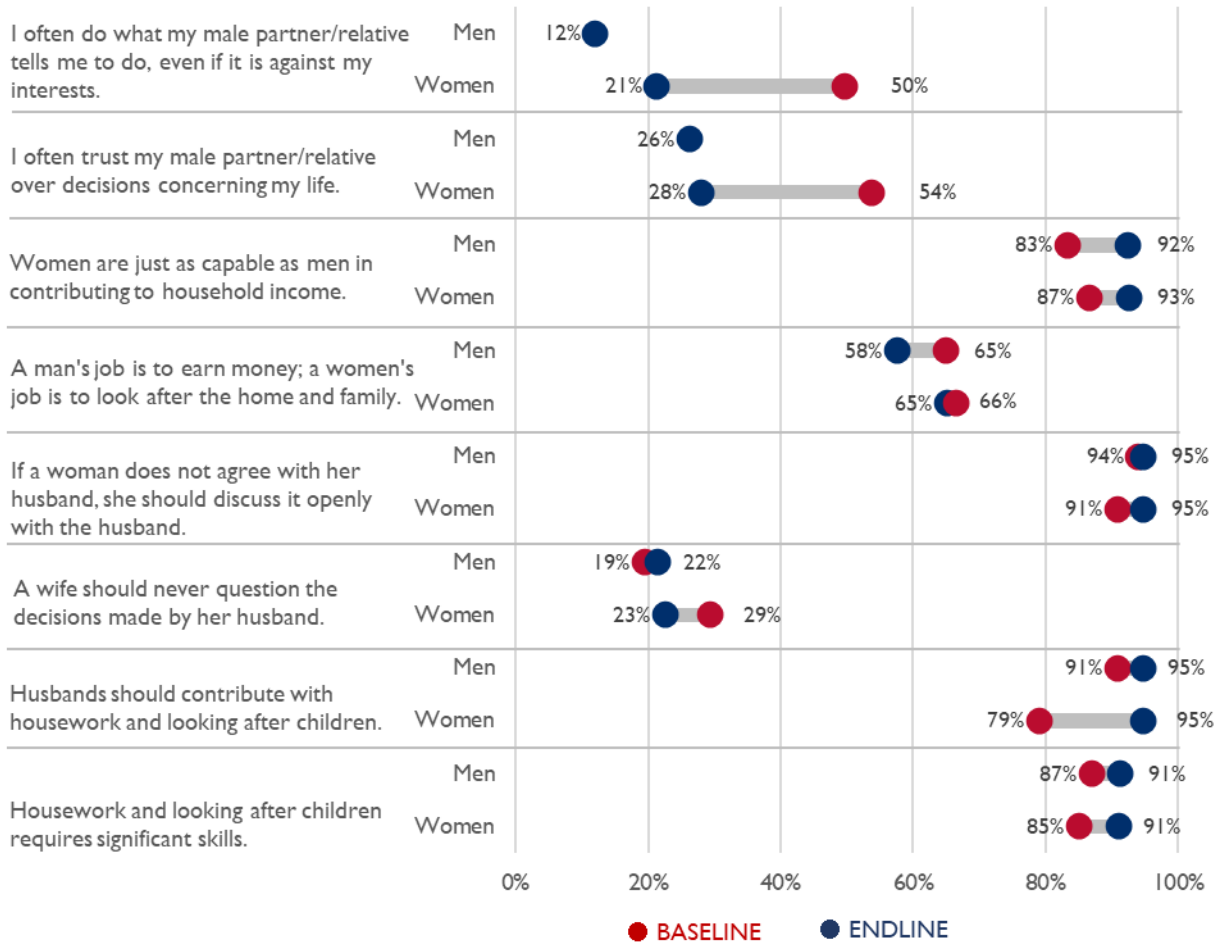
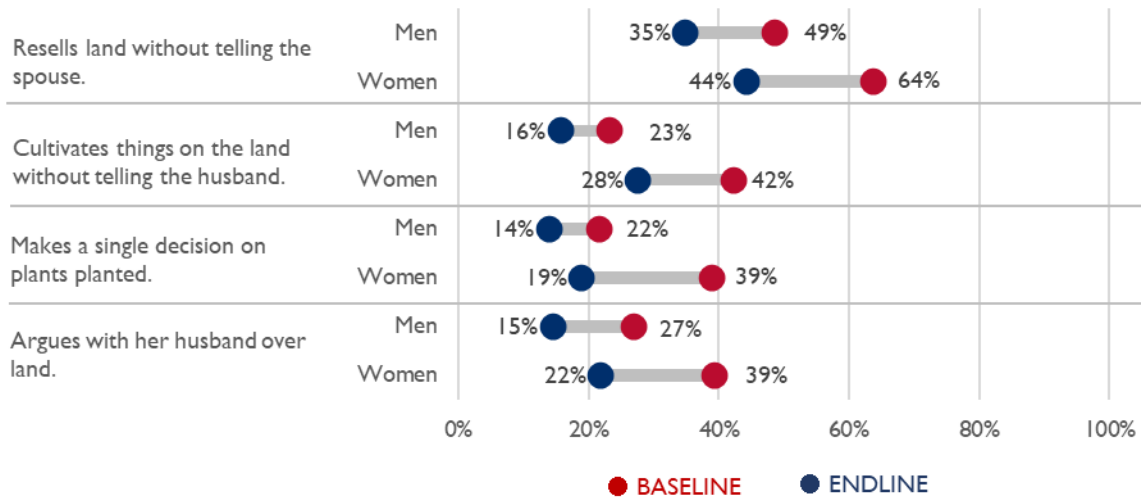


FIGURE 2. SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE THAT GBV IS JUSTIFIED IF A WOMAN



Lesson 9 Build support and resources for gender responsive land dispute resolution

Male-dominated dispute resolution mechanisms, long distances, associated fees, lack of knowledge, and gender norms that prevent women from speaking to authorities hinder women's access to land-related conflict resolution mechanisms. Under the law in Malawi, CLTs are tasked with resolving land disputes that arise during customary land registration. On a daily basis, traditional leaders and CLC members who support data collectors during registration can resolve smaller conflicts before they are elevated to the CLT. For people who attended initial community sensitization, awareness of dispute resolution was the least remembered topic. In both the baseline and endline survey only 40 percent of people (49 percent of men and 33 percent of women) said they knew of dispute resolution mechanisms in their area. Of those that knew about a dispute resolution mechanism, the majority identified the CLCs (67 percent of men and 59 percent of women) and traditional leaders (33 percent of men and 42 percent of women) as the main source of conflict resolution, with just 13 percent indicating the CLTs or DLTs (14 percent of men and 11 percent of women). These results indicate that more sensitization on dispute resolution was needed. CLT members raised that initial coordination with local structures like CLCs was insufficient, recommending deeper engagement in future land registration processes.

ILRG reported 68 disputes to the CLT during the land documentation process; 60 have been resolved. Most cases dealt with inter-familial disputes, boundary disputes between neighbors, and disputes over whether a parcel was private land or customary land. There were a small number of disputes related to polygamous families, underscoring the vulnerability of women's land rights in these types of marriage. The low number of land disputes could indicate that people understood the land registration process well and resolved any disagreements with neighbors or family members before work began or during demarcation. However, it could also reflect gaps in recording gender-based land disputes, especially those resolved informally by CLCs and traditional leaders before they reached the CLTs, despite the provision of GESI training to all actors involved in land registration and dispute resolution. Interviews with traditional leaders revealed that they used to receive many informal disputes related to land, as people did not have their boundaries well demarcated. The land registration process reduced these disputes and traditional leaders expressed their satisfaction that land conflicts will likely be minimized in the future.

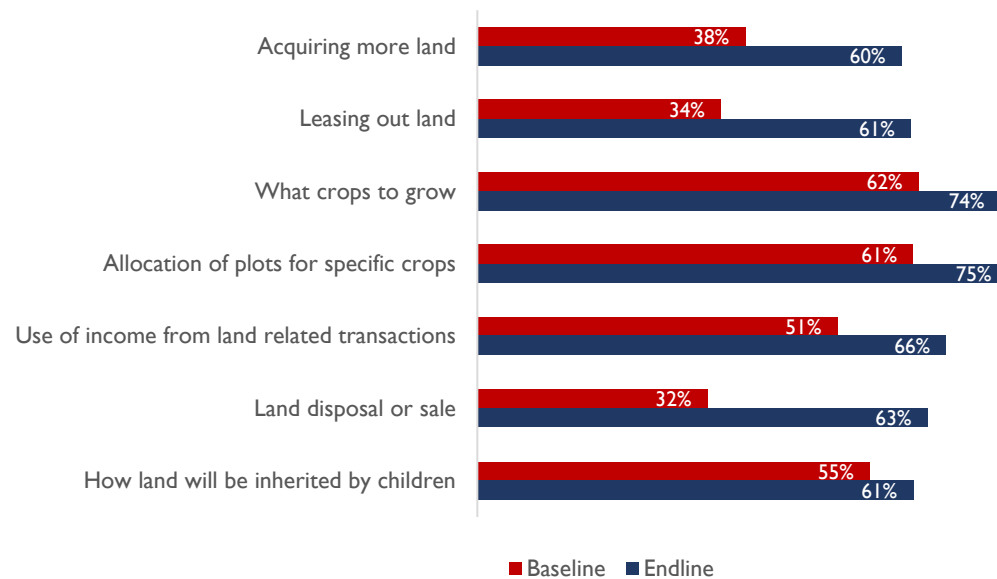
In the endline reflection, some CLT members felt well-equipped to perform their duties, while others felt they lacked more in-depth knowledge about the laws that govern land disputes and how to write case reports after resolving a dispute. CLT members emphasized that the GESI training received changed their mindsets and influenced not only how they exercised their roles in the courts, but also their personal relationships and decisions on how to register their own land. A woman CLT member said, "I am an example of a beneficiary of gender equality and social inclusion in my community because I was given full authority to register land in my name. My brothers are registered under my name, and I feel I have authority over land so they cannot do anything to the land without my approval."

ILRG has actively promoted greater awareness of GBV related to land registration, including that restriction of land rights is a form of economic GBV and that the land registration process itself can inadvertently lead to physical, psychological, and sexual GBV. GBV content was included in every training, sensitization, and gender norms change intervention, strengthening the capacity of all stakeholders to identify, prevent, and mitigate GBV risks. However, GBV response was outside the expertise of relevant actors like data collectors, CLC members, and CLT members. ILRG carried out a mapping exercise and found that the availability of government and civil society structures supporting GBV survivors was extremely low in Nkhotakota District, let alone in TA Mwansambo, hindering the establishment of effective referral pathways. To help remedy this, ILRG provided GBV training to government and non-governmental organizations working on gender-related issues, emphasizing the linkages between GBV and land, although additional and continued support beyond the lifetime of the project is needed.

Lesson 10 Create space for long term change; although GESI integration generates positive results, there is persistent resistance to register land in the name of women in patrilocal marriage systems

ILRG achieved notable successes in gender equality of parcel registration. The project registered 8,392 household parcels across 21 GVHs³; 44 percent jointly registered, 32 percent registered to men only, and 24 percent registered to women only (i.e., 68 percent of parcels have women named). In comparison, an earlier World Bank pilot in GVH Denje in TA Mwansambo, had 62 percent of parcels registered to men, 28 percent to women, and 10 percent jointly, i.e., 38 percent of parcels had women named. Perceptions on women’s land rights also shifted. The share of those who agreed that women and men should have the same rights to own land grew from 88 percent at baseline to 96 percent at endline (86 to 95 percent for men and 90 to 96 percent for women). Similarly, agreement that women and men should be able to inherit land in the same way grew from 87 to 96 percent (88 to 94 percent for men and 85 to 97 percent for women). Encouragingly, the share of those who agreed that in the case of divorce or death of the husband a woman should return to her natal village fell from 57 to 47 percent (45 to 36 percent for men and 66 to 53 percent for women). Results around decision-making over land were also encouraging (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. SHARE OF WOMEN WHO MAKE SOLE OR JOINT DECISIONS REGARDING LAND



Data collectors reported that while women participated in conversations about who to register land to during the adjudication phase, they usually did not join men for the boundary walk due to time and social mobility constraints. Boundary walks were likewise less accessible for the elderly and people with disabilities. These barriers to inclusion can leave individuals vulnerable, as additional discussions about ownership and potential land conflicts may occur during boundary walks without their knowledge. CLC members are seen as community insiders and have an important role to play in gaining community buy-in for the inclusive land documentation process and helping data collectors navigate intra-community conflicts. Women’s presence in CLCs promoted inclusion as they were seen as trustworthy and looking out for the best interests of the community. CLC members noted they were particularly keen to ensure that widows, orphans, and people with disabilities were included in the land registration process, a key

³ Ongoing boundary disputes between two GVHs prevented documentation work from progressing in the area. The LRIU has committed to resolve this dispute and complete work in the remaining areas.

emphasis of the GESI training. Many of these individuals had lost their land access or ownership for various reasons but were able to claim their property under this activity.

The land registration process included a public display period when parcel maps and lists of landholders were posted in a public space in each GVH. With support from data collectors and CLCs, community members had 60 days to verify whether the information was correct and make any objections or corrections. As previously mentioned, most GESI sensitization and gender norms change activities happened in parallel with the land registration process, in many cases reaching people after they had already provided names to be included in the land certificate.

“The skills I learned are helping me reason with men who do not want to include their wives. I explain that back in the wife’s home the land has already been taken by her siblings; if she gets land in the husband’s village there is more security for her.”

Eliza Deus, CLC member, GVH Malanda

Some people expressed their willingness to update their land registration to add their wives and daughters during the public display phase. About 9 percent of parcels had some kind of correction made during the public display period, either adding people (77 percent), deleting people (5 percent), both adding and deleting people (11 percent), or changing parcel ownership altogether (7 percent). However, despite hearing anecdotes that people planned to add women to parcels, the gender balance of names added during public display was 50/50. GESI considerations are particularly important during public display and objections and corrections. Time and mobility constraints may make it hard for some individuals to come and verify their information. Maps should be posted in public places that women are likely to frequent, such as clinics, schools, markets, and religious centers. Selected locations should have places for private one-on-one conversations for individuals who may want to talk with data collectors or CLC members away from others. Communities should be instructed that all landholders, both women and men, should come review the map. CLC members can play a crucial role here, bringing additional copies of maps and records to the homes of the elderly, people with disabilities, and others with severe mobility restrictions.

Continued sensitization and norms change interventions certainly contributed to women’s participation in the process, but greater equality will take time and broad community support - something that may be unlikely in the near future. Although the percentage of women included in land certificates was higher than in other pilots, there was persistent resistance to register land in the name of women, particularly women who moved to their husband’s land upon marriage. There was more acceptance for registering land to women in areas with matrilineal marriage traditions, as the land is seen as belonging to the women’s clan.

However, overall, people were satisfied with the land registration process, with 81 percent (82 percent of men and 81 percent of women) having a positive perception of the program and 98 percent (98 percent of men and 97 percent of women) saying they would recommend the program to other people. People’s satisfaction with their interactions with data collectors, CLC members, and traditional leaders was very high, between 92 and 98 percent for both women and men. Community members’ perceptions of tenure security also increased after the land registration process. People were asked during a baseline and endline survey how worried they were that they might lose their right to use their land in the five years. The share that responded they were “not worried” grew from 71 to 85 percent from baseline to endline (69 to 84 percent for men and 72 to 86 percent for women).

Conclusions and Recommendations

ILRG implemented an intentional and comprehensive approach to integrate GESI into the customary land registration process in Malawi. Key activities included a locally led initial gender analysis to inform project design and provide baseline data; advocacy with the government about the importance of a GESI-responsive approach; GESI and GBV training for all actors involved in land registration; adaptive

sensitization about land rights and GESI with target communities using community meetings, megaphones, awareness materials, radio, and organized diffusion; dialogues on gender norms at the household level and with traditional leaders; and empowerment and leadership training for women in community governance positions. ILRG used varied strategies to collect quantitative and qualitative data and held local learning meetings to gather information on challenges and lessons to course correct as feasible.

The approach resulted in women being named in 68 percent of land certificates, compared to 38 percent in a “gender-neutral” pilot in the same area. ILRG also observed shifts in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are an initial step towards broader changes in harmful gender norms. Government officers, traditional leaders, CLC members, and community members expressed improved GESI awareness and a more favorable attitude towards women, orphans, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups being included in land registration. There were also shifts in acceptance that women and men who move into a village should be entitled to land despite their marriage set up, which defies very ingrained social norms. Traditional leaders took concrete steps to act as gender champions, modeling positive behavior change like registering their own land with their spouses and independently sensitizing over 12,000 people on GESI and land issues.

Changes observed went beyond land ownership though, with men and women in land governance roles (CLCs, traditional leaders, and land tribunals) reporting greater awareness of GESI issues as part of their roles. Women leaders and community gender champions gained confidence and respect within their communities and households. Some CLC members, gender champions, traditional leaders, and men and women community members started to model positive behaviors related to division of unpaid household work and joint decision-making.

The main challenges the project faced included initial resistance to integrating GESI into customary land registration work, with key stakeholders believing that the equality provided by the legal framework was sufficient, and that a focus on women’s land rights might be divisive. Continued advocacy, emphasis that social inclusion goes beyond gender, and constant feedback on GESI-related impacts and learnings helped overcome this resistance, although not fully. Another challenge was the need for further preparatory work, especially resolving community boundary disputes and investing in stronger sensitization on land rights and GESI well before actual documentation started. Coordination between local and district stakeholders was also weak, especially at the beginning and in relation to dispute resolution and GBV mitigation. Finally, most GESI-focused activities happened in parallel with documentation, with many participants raising that the information came in too late, despite ILRG adapting/expanding outreach strategies to reach more people. During organized diffusion by community gender champions, many people said that they planned to use the public display stage to make corrections to the records and add their spouses or other family members. Nonetheless, very few corrections were made. This could be for a variety of reasons, including the fact that only one member from each household has to sign off on the parcel during public display, pressure to keep the process moving and not over complicate things for fear of never receiving your certificate, the belief that it is not a big deal whose name is on the certificate as long as it is someone from the household, etc. These same constraints are common in land documentation exercises in other countries.

In addition to the 10 learnings detailed above, stakeholders involved in and benefiting from the land registration process in TA Mwanambo recommended the following actions to improve GESI integration in future projects:

- Whenever possible, land rights and GESI sensitization with community members should be done months before initiating the registration to address negative gender norms and help people make informed decisions about who to include in land certificates.

- GESI training for those involved in the land registration process should include other actors at local and district levels (for instance, the police) and include periodic refresher sessions.
- Further support GESI champions like traditional leaders and community champions with continued capacity strengthening to increase their collaboration with authorities to reinforce sensitization and use community champions as GBV reporting points.
- Project initiated structures (like gender champions and CLC members) should better understand the terms of their engagement, especially that allowances are intended to show appreciation for one's time and effort but should not be seen as a condition for engagement. This should be communicated early and often to manage expectations.
- Support for the development of GESI-responsive by-laws that protect land rights of women and marginalized groups is required to ensure that GESI continues to be prioritized after land registration, when communities enter the land administration phase. The cadre of people trained can serve as resource persons in the long term.

Throughout the course of this activity, ILRG produced a number of tools and resources on implementing gender-responsive and socially inclusive customary land registration, including the Practical Implementation Guide on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Customary Land Registration in Malawi; leaflets, posters, and comic booklets; radio messages and jingles; training programs and handouts for government officers, CLCs, CLTs/DLTs, and data collectors/processors; training manuals to conduct gender norms dialogues with CLC members, traditional leaders, and community members; and training manual on women's empowerment and leadership.⁴ ILRG has shared these materials and learnings and best practices with the government, funders, and civil society organizations at national level events to ensure these approaches inform the roll-out of land registration throughout Malawi. Future implementers can use these resources to expand and deepen work on gender-responsive land registration in Malawi.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Bessa, T., Dooley, M., Makhuva, S., & Sommerville, M., & (2023). *Lessons learned: Integrating gender equality and social inclusion into customary land documentation in Malawi*. Washington, DC: USAID Integrated Land and Resource Governance Task Order under the Strengthening Tenure and Resource Rights II (STARR II) IDIQ.

All individuals featured in photographs in this document have given their consent for their image to be used in ILRG publications.

⁴ All resources are available on the USAID ILRG [LandLinks](#) page.