

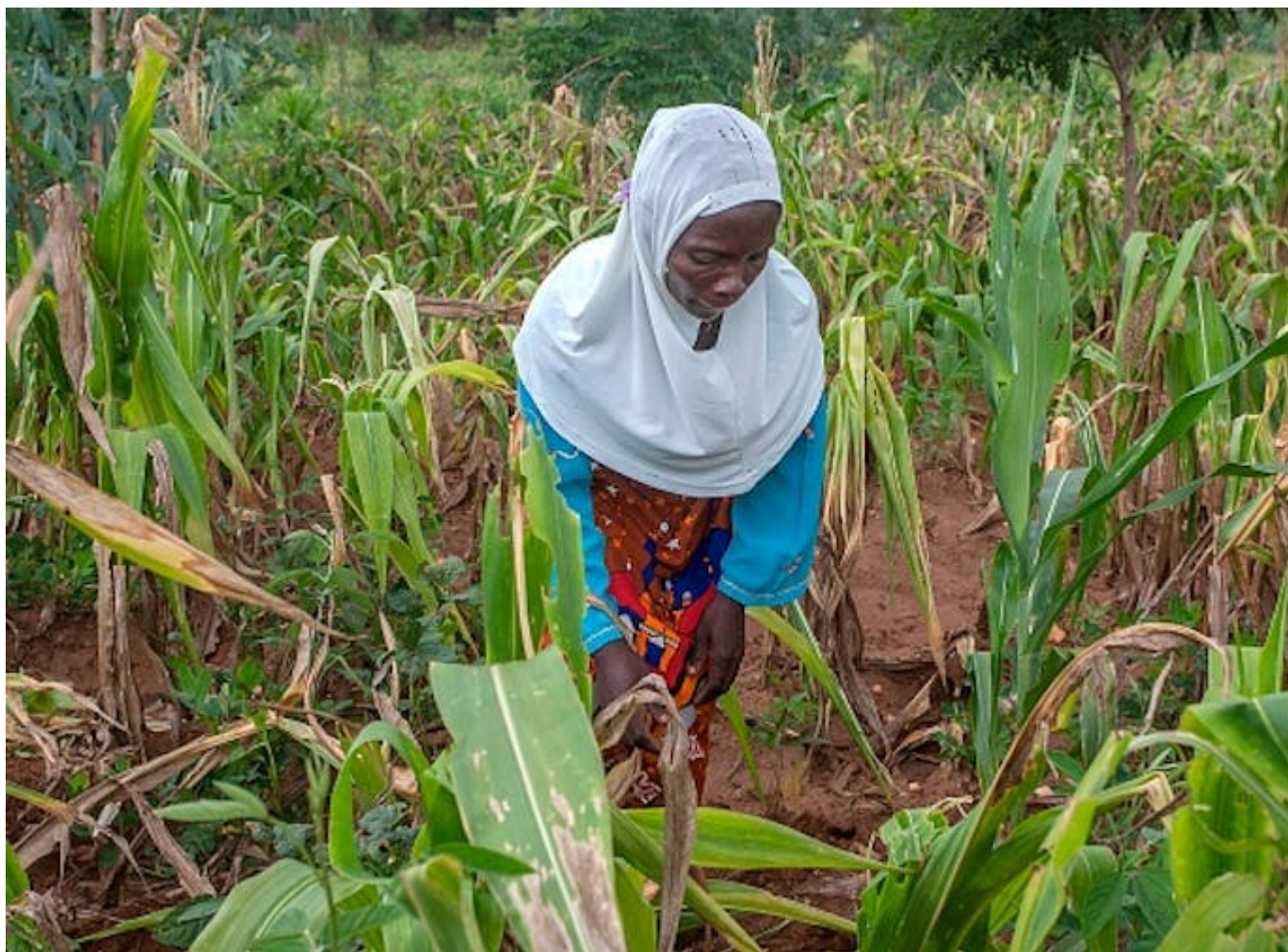
Malawi's farm subsidies aren't helping women: but there are solutions

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Input subsidies aren't helping women like Malawian farmer Grace Stenala. Amos Gumulira/AFP via Getty Images

Smallholder agriculture is the backbone of food security in many sub-Saharan African households. And women, in particular, play a central role in putting food on the table.

However, there is an imbalance between what women put in and what they get out.

Women contribute many hours to produce crops for food and for sale. But when it comes to selling crops for income they don't reap the same benefits as men.

This comes out clearly in the results of [our new study](https://portal.pep-net.org/public/project/20428) into the Farm Input Subsidy Programme that distributed fertiliser vouchers to poor agricultural households in Malawi until 2019.

Using rich agricultural household survey data, we showed that these agricultural subsidies increased households' incomes from selling crops. But we were more interested in what happened to women. Did they gain more than men, in relation to their central role in agricultural work? We looked at the low proportion of women who made decisions about incomes from selling crops, and whether agricultural input subsidies improved this situation.

Malawi has been at the forefront of implementing policies to improve access to inputs. In the early 2000s, [farm input subsidies re-emerged](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919217308618) as a way to improve smallholder productivity and food security. Initially, subsidies helped to move Malawi from having [food shortages to having more than enough maize](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919217308618). The programme also [reduced poverty](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919217302695/), as smallholder farmers could sell some of their extra crops for cash.

But the country ramped up its efforts in 2020 by introducing the Affordable Inputs Programme. All smallholder farmers were targeted as beneficiaries. The [budget for input subsidies almost doubled](https://massp.ifpri.info/2020/10/09/insuring-the-aip-the-devil-is-in-the-details/), with the aim of supporting widespread food security.

While there is optimism that many households can be reached by this large policy intervention, it remains uncertain who will get most of the benefit *inside* households. Because many women provide their labour to agriculture, one would expect subsidies targeted at these activities to firstly benefit them.

Our research shows that this is not the case.

IMPACT

We found that the subsidy put women in an even weaker position relative to men in households. This is because the subsidy funded fertiliser and seeds, giving even more power to men who controlled decisions over these inputs. Most importantly, these gender inequalities emerged in parts of the country where women were supposed to have land rights, but where these were often not respected.

A big issue is who makes decisions over agricultural inputs – the seed that grows into food, and fertilisers that help to grow *more, nutritious* food. Men have greater access to inputs and capital that are needed to produce crops. They therefore have more power to decide how income that comes from selling those crops is spent. And this starts a vicious cycle of exclusion.

Our study investigated these dynamics. We studied the Farm Input Subsidy Programme, a precursor to the Affordable Inputs Programme.

Viewed as a whole, households were better off after receiving input subsidies. They were more likely to take their crops to market, and income from these sales received a significant boost. These benefits are well-known.

MATRILOCAL VERSUS PATRILOCAL COMMUNITIES

We looked at the impact of the subsidy in both matrilineal communities – when the husband goes to live with the wife's community – and patrilineal communities, in which couples settle in the husband's home or community.

Considering matrilineal and patrilineal communities raises the problem of uncertain land rights. In matrilineal societies, land rights are passed on to women. Women's land rights are formally recognised by Malawi's [2016 Land Act](https://www.nyasatimes.com/new-land-law-promote-welfare-dignity-malawi-women-landnet/) (<https://www.nyasatimes.com/new-land-law-promote-welfare-dignity-malawi-women-landnet/>). Women should be able to make decisions about how land is cultivated and how profits are shared. In reality, [men in extended families make decisions about land rights on behalf of women](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malawi-landrights-women-idUSKCN1M51GQ) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malawi-landrights-women-idUSKCN1M51GQ>) – and after that, their husbands make remaining decisions.

Women therefore often continue to work the land rather than playing more strategic roles.

Looking *within* households paints a concerning picture. Women's agency and decision-making power is [very low across the country](https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/345993/1/cs-wogives-malawi-060315-en.pdf) (<https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/345993/1/cs-wogives-malawi-060315-en.pdf>). In patrilineal communities – where couples live close to men's extended families – only 5% of women can decide what to do with income from selling crops.

The situation is only somewhat better in matrilineal communities, where couples live close to the women's family – 9.6% of women have this kind of bargaining power. Moving to women's communities does not remove the large imbalance between men and women.

Our research showed that agricultural input subsidies made things worse. After receiving subsidies, husbands in matrilineal communities *gained* even more power to decide how incomes from crops were spent. In fact, the patterns started to resemble the highly unequal practices in patrilineal regions more closely, where subsidies had no effect on women's decision-making power.

Women in matrilocal areas lost some of their bargaining power, but didn't spend less time in agricultural work.

Context matters. Our study supports the idea that input subsidies allow [husbands to win](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24487327?seq=1)(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24487327?seq=1>) back some of the bargaining power that sits with women's extended families. Power moves between men in the broader community and men inside households. But the benefits of subsidies bypass women.

ALTERNATIVES

A low-cost policy solution is to improve the targeting of subsidies *inside* households. The Farm Input Subsidy Programme emphasised *female headship* as one criterion for identifying *which* households should benefit. But this criterion alone does not address the inequalities that women face inside *male-headed* households. Directing subsidies to the person in the household who cultivates the land seems to be a good starting point.

Policy makers should therefore spend more effort developing frameworks for identifying the right beneficiary inside a household.

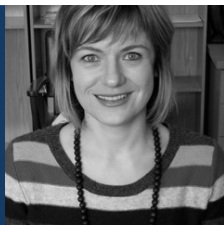
Ensuring that women gain control over inputs may not go the full length, though. If women's existing land rights are not taken seriously, they will also have little say over income that comes from the land. While laws can be written and policies formulated, gender equality ultimately depends on the commitment of communities to uphold and promote them. They should be supported in doing so.

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Recent publications

[Improving gender equity in Malawi's input subsidies](https://portal.pep-net.org/document/download/36174)(<https://portal.pep-net.org/document/download/36174>)

, PEP Policy Brief, April 2021

[The Unintended Consequences of the Malawi Farm Input Subsidy Program on Women's Employment and Decision Making Power](https://portal.pep-net.org/document/download/35815)(<https://portal.pep-net.org/document/download/35815>), Final report,

December 2020

<https://cerdi.uca.fr/english-version/news/malawis-farm-subsidies-arent-helping-women-but-there-are-solutions>(<https://cerdi.uca.fr/english-version/news/malawis-farm-subsidies-arent-helping-women-but-there-are-solutions>)