GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN EXTRACTIVISM AND LAND GRABBING RELATED CONFLICT:

The Case of Malawi

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14th May 2025

Foreword

"Land is more than soil beneath our feet; it is the heartbeat of our communities, the foundation of our identity, and the key to our collective future." Yet, for many in Mzimba District, especially women and youth, land is increasingly becoming a site of struggle due to extractivism and land grabbing. These challenges threaten not only livelihoods but also cultural heritage and social stability. This research seeks to unpack the socio-economic, environmental, and governance-related implications of these pressing issues, ensuring that the voices of those most affected are heard and amplified.

Research Questions and Rationale

The study is guided by three fundamental research questions;

1. *How do extractivism and land dispossession impact women, and what strategies can mitigate these gendered conflicts?*
2. *What are the broader socio-economic and environmental consequences on household livelihoods, and how do these effects vary across gender and age groups?*
3. *What role do traditional leaders and governance structures play in managing land disputes and promoting equitable land use?*

These questions are not merely academic inquiries; they are essential to understanding the lived realities of communities whose land rights are increasingly at risk in the face of extractive pressures and systemic inequalities. As one community elder aptly put it during our fieldwork, “When we lose our land, we lose everything—our food, our dignity, and our place in society.”

The rationale for selecting these specific research questions is rooted in both the thematic gaps identified during the desk-based literature review and the prioritized concerns raised by stakeholders during the initial scoping phase. The questions were designed to ensure the study remained grounded in empirical relevance and responsive to the intersecting dimensions of gender, governance, and environmental vulnerability.

- The first question centers women’s experiences to address the gendered impacts of extractivism and land dispossession, which are often under-researched despite their widespread effects. Drawing on evidence from CEDAW, FAO, and national reports, the study seeks to explore the unequal burden borne by women and the potential for gender-responsive mitigation strategies.

- The second question adopts a household and community-level perspective, examining how socio-economic disruption and environmental degradation affect different demographic groups, particularly women, youth, and the elderly. This intersectional approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how land loss exacerbates inequality and resource insecurity.

- The third question was developed to interrogate the role of local governance structures—especially traditional leaders—in managing land disputes and shaping land access. In a context like Mzimba, where customary tenure systems operate alongside statutory law, understanding how these actors influence equity and

conflict resolution is critical to informing inclusive land policy and reform.

Collectively, these questions reflect the study's commitment to evidence-based, people-centered research, offering a holistic understanding of how land, gender, and governance intersect under extractive pressure in northern Malawi.

This study aims to move beyond documentation—it seeks to drive meaningful change. By analyzing governance structures, mapping vulnerabilities, and identifying actionable strategies, we hope to contribute to a more just and sustainable future. As land rights continue to shape discussions on social justice and development, it is imperative that solutions are rooted in local realities and inclusive decision-making. *"A land that belongs to only a few is a land that will never be at peace,"* a local leader reflected—a sentiment that underscores the urgency of equitable land governance.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the International Land Coalition (ILC) for their financial and technical support in making this research possible. I also acknowledge the invaluable contributions of community members, traditional leaders, and all stakeholders who generously shared their experiences. Their insights are not just data points; they are powerful narratives that inform and inspire the recommendations put forth in this study. It is my hope that these findings will serve as a catalyst for policy reforms and grassroots action that will safeguard land rights for present and future generations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the gendered dimensions of extractivism and land-grabbing-related conflicts in Mzimba District, Malawi. The district's abundance of natural resources has led to a surge in large-scale agricultural and mining investments, frequently triggering contested claims over land ownership and access. The research reveals that these conflicts are not only spatially expansive but also structurally embedded in the intersection of gender, governance, and socio-economic marginalization.

Women—particularly widows and female-headed households—bear the brunt of land dispossession and tenure insecurity, with consequences that include forced displacement, economic disenfranchisement, and systemic exclusion from land-related decision-making structures. These dynamics reinforce pre-existing gender inequalities and restrict women's capacity to participate in and benefit from land governance systems.

The study identifies several interlinked structural challenges:

Intensified Land Competition and Commodification

Quantitative data from household surveys indicate a significant increase in land commodification, largely driven by market liberalization policies and investor-friendly frameworks. This shift has intensified intra-household and inter-community competition over arable land. Private investors, often operating without transparent community engagement, have acquired vast land parcels through non-consultative and opaque transactions. Notably, 52% of female respondents reported instances where household land was sold without their consent—highlighting gendered dynamics of dispossession.

Weak Regulatory Enforcement and Institutional Fragmentation

Although Malawi's 2016 Land Act and related policy instruments provide statutory protections for women's land rights, the study found that enforcement remains largely ineffective at the local level. Over 72% of land disputes are resolved through customary forums, which often lack gender-sensitive legal interpretation and reinforce patriarchal decision-making norms. This legal pluralism weakens the applicability of statutory law and undermines the protection of women's tenure rights.

Customary vs. Statutory Land Tenure Incompatibility

The research reveals enduring contradictions between customary and statutory land tenure systems. Customary land allocation remains male-dominated, while statutory frameworks mandate gender inclusivity. Key informant interviews confirmed that this duality creates ambiguity in land administration, leading to unresolved disputes—especially for women without documented land use rights or inheritance claims.

Gendered Exclusion in Governance Structures

A governance participation survey across five Traditional Authorities (TAs) revealed that

only 10% of land governance roles are held by women. This underrepresentation limits women's influence on land-related decisions and perpetuates exclusionary practices. Additionally, qualitative data from focus groups highlighted sociocultural barriers—such as stigma, intimidation, and gender-based violence (GBV)—that discourage women from asserting their land rights or engaging in leadership roles.

Environmental Degradation and Resource Scarcity

Geospatial and field data show that extractive and large-scale agricultural activities have contributed to significant environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil erosion, and contamination of water sources. These environmental pressures disproportionately affect women, who are primarily responsible for subsistence farming, water collection, and firewood harvesting. The resulting resource scarcity intensifies their workload and threatens household food and water security.

Insufficient Legal Literacy and Public Awareness

Survey results indicate that 60% of women have limited or no knowledge of their land rights under statutory law. This legal literacy gap diminishes women's capacity to seek redress, participate in policy dialogues, or resist unlawful dispossession. Furthermore, a lack of targeted awareness campaigns exacerbates this exclusion, leaving women particularly vulnerable to manipulation and disenfranchisement.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to ensure comprehensive data triangulation, credibility, and contextual relevance. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the research provides a robust, intersectional understanding of the gendered dimensions of extractivism and land-grabbing in Mzimba District.

- Primary Data Collection: The study utilized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a diverse range of stakeholders, including community members, women, youth, traditional authorities, local policymakers, and civil society organizations. A combination of purposive sampling (to capture those directly impacted by land conflicts) and snowball sampling (to identify additional key informants through stakeholder referrals) was employed to ensure rich, grounded, and inclusive data.

- Secondary Data Review: The desk-based review involved a systematic analysis of national and international policy documents, legislative frameworks, and empirical studies. Inclusion criteria for the reviewed documents were based on thematic relevance, geographic scope, normative significance, and analytical utility for understanding land governance and gender equity in Malawi.
  Sources included:

    - National documents: Malawi's 2016 Land Act, Customary Land Act, Gender Equality Act, and District Development Plans.

    - International treaties and legal instruments: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), African Union Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy, and relevant protocols of the

Maputo Protocol.

- Global and regional reports: FAO reports on land tenure and food security, UN Women policy briefs, EU gender action frameworks, UNDP and UNECA reports on sustainable land governance, and World Bank and IFPRI publications related to extractivism, climate vulnerability, and tenure rights.

- Academic and institutional research: Peer-reviewed journal articles, legal case studies, and policy analysis papers focused on gendered land access and rural development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Study Areas: Fieldwork was conducted across ten clusters located in five Traditional Authorities (TAs)—M'mbelwa, Mabulabo, Kampingo Sibande, Mpherembe, and Mtwalo. These study sites were selected based on a combination of conflict mapping, stakeholder consultation, and prior documentation of extractive activity and land-related disputes. Emphasis was placed on capturing the lived realities of marginalized and high-risk groups, particularly women, widows, and youth from rural and peri-urban communities.

This methodological framework ensured that the data analyzed was multi-layered, evidence-driven, and inclusive of legal, cultural, environmental, and socio-economic perspectives, thereby strengthening the study's relevance and rigor.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Social Displacement

The study found that land dispossession resulting from extractive and large-scale agricultural activities has led to widespread social displacement, particularly among women. Through interviews and focus group discussions, women reported experiencing forced evictions without consultation or compensation, often losing access to critical livelihood resources such as farmland, water points, and communal forests. This displacement undermines household food security, erodes traditional land-use systems, and disconnects families from their ancestral land, which is central to identity and social cohesion. The absence of legal recourse or documentation further exacerbates women's vulnerability to repeat displacement and social marginalization.

Additionally, the study uncovered that the psychological and cultural impacts of displacement on women are profound yet often overlooked. Women expressed feelings of helplessness, trauma, and identity loss as they are disconnected from ancestral burial sites, cultural rituals, and community networks. This cultural severance contributes to a broader sense of alienation, particularly among elderly women, who act as custodians of land and traditional knowledge. The emotional toll of displacement, compounded by the disruption of social bonds and traditional support systems, has led to increased mental health issues, which are rarely addressed within humanitarian responses to land conflicts.

2. Economic Disruption

Loss of access to land has had severe economic consequences, especially for female-headed households, who rely disproportionately on subsistence agriculture for income and food production. Survey data revealed that many women, after being dispossessed of land, were forced into precarious informal labor or dependency on male relatives. The research also identified a sharp decline in household crop yields and livestock rearing, correlating directly with land acquisition patterns. These disruptions have intensified poverty cycles and limited women's ability to engage in market-oriented farming, savings groups, or agribusiness, reducing economic resilience at both individual and community levels.

Moreover, the disruption of local economies has had cascading effects on women's access to financial services, credit, and cooperatives. Many women reported being excluded from village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) due to their diminished asset base post-displacement. This financial exclusion not only deepens poverty but also undermines women's capacity to invest in alternative livelihoods or small-scale enterprises. The commodification of land through large-scale deals has further marginalized women, as they often lack the education, capital, or networks needed to engage in emerging extractive or agricultural value chains dominated by men and external investors.

3. Environmental Degradation

Environmental impacts of extractivism emerged as a critical concern across study areas. Deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination linked to mining and commercial farming were frequently cited during site visits and participatory mapping exercises. These environmental changes have disrupted traditional ecological practices and placed an additional burden on women, who are primarily responsible for water collection, firewood gathering, and subsistence farming. The depletion of natural resources has increased the time and physical effort required for daily survival tasks, contributing to gendered labor burdens and diminishing women's opportunities for education, rest, or economic activities.

In addition to physical exhaustion, the environmental degradation has also led to nutritional insecurity within households. As forests are cleared and rivers polluted, women reported reduced availability of traditional food sources, medicinal plants, and wild vegetables, which are critical for family diets and healthcare. This not only compromises the nutritional status of children and pregnant women but also erodes indigenous knowledge systems that women have traditionally passed down through generations. The degradation of natural ecosystems thus threatens both environmental and cultural sustainability, with women disproportionately affected.

4. Human Rights Violations

Land-related conflicts in Mzimba were frequently accompanied by gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights violations. Many women recounted cases of physical assault, threats, and verbal abuse while resisting evictions or claiming land rights. Widows and unmarried women were found to be particularly vulnerable to property grabbing and coercion by male relatives and community leaders. The lack of responsive legal mechanisms and the normalization of violence within customary institutions have led to

underreporting and sustained impunity. These findings align with broader literature linking land insecurity with increased exposure to structural and interpersonal violence against women.

The study also found that the intersection of land grabbing and GBV extends into exploitative practices within the extractive sectors themselves. Women reported incidents of sexual harassment and exploitation in areas surrounding mining and agricultural operations, where they often seek informal work to survive post-displacement. These areas become hotspots for transactional sex and labor exploitation, exacerbating the risk of HIV infections, teenage pregnancies, and unsafe working conditions. The absence of labor protections and sexual harassment policies in these industries compounds women's vulnerability, reinforcing cycles of violence and economic marginalization.

5. Exclusion from Decision-Making

Women remain significantly underrepresented in formal and customary land governance structures, with only 10% holding leadership or decision-making roles according to governance participation surveys. Their exclusion from land allocation processes, dispute resolution forums, and local planning committees undermines inclusive governance and limits the development of gender-equitable land policies. Participants expressed that even when invited to community meetings, women's contributions were often undervalued or dismissed. This lack of voice perpetuates the cycle of dispossession and reinforces structural barriers to legal empowerment, leadership, and socio-economic advancement for women and girls.

Furthermore, the research observed that the few women in leadership positions often face systemic backlash and intimidation, discouraging broader female participation. Women leaders shared experiences of being undermined, discredited, or accused of breaking cultural norms, which isolates them both within governance structures and their own communities. This hostile environment has deterred younger women from pursuing leadership roles, thereby perpetuating generational gender gaps in decision-making spaces. The absence of mentorship, capacity-building opportunities, and safe spaces for women to organize further entrenches their marginalization from critical land governance processes.

PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

1. Strengthening Governance

To promote equity and accountability in land governance, the study recommends enhancing transparency in land allocation processes. This includes the institutionalization of clear procedures, public disclosure of land transactions, and strengthened oversight mechanisms to curb elite capture and informal acquisitions. Establishing inclusive land committees with diverse representation can improve trust and reduce conflict while enabling more equitable resource distribution.

2. Promoting Gender-Inclusive Policies

There is a need to advocate for the revision and enforcement of legal frameworks that recognize and uphold women’s land rights. This entails aligning customary practices with national gender equity laws and ensuring women’s full participation in local land governance structures. Gender quotas, legal literacy campaigns, and policy dialogues with traditional authorities can accelerate normative shifts and drive inclusive reform

processes.

3. Community Empowerment

The study emphasizes the importance of participatory governance models that elevate community agency in land matters. This involves capacity building for local land users, support for grassroots land user associations, and the promotion of social accountability tools such as community scorecards. These mechanisms not only build trust but also empower marginalized voices to engage with duty bearers on issues of land justice.

4. Economic Resilience

To mitigate the economic vulnerabilities resulting from land dispossession, the study proposes the expansion of livelihood opportunities for women through targeted programs. These include vocational training, small-scale agribusiness support, and microfinance services designed to reduce dependency and foster long-term economic independence. Establishing women's cooperatives and market linkages can enhance productivity and increase access to local and regional value chains.

5. Sustainable Resource Management

In response to environmental degradation linked to extractive activities, the study calls for the implementation of community-led natural resource management strategies. These may include reforestation initiatives, soil conservation techniques, and water resource protection, particularly involving women as environmental stewards. Integrating climate-smart agriculture and conservation education into local governance plans will ensure long-term ecological sustainability and resilience.

6. Gender-Based Violence Response and Legal Reform

To address the intersection of land conflict and gender-based violence (GBV), the study recommends a dual strategy: strengthening both service delivery mechanisms and legal frameworks. This includes expanding access to legal aid services, developing community-based protective mechanisms, and providing psychosocial support for survivors. Crucially, the study also advocates for the review and reform of national legal provisions related to land and GBV to ensure that customary and statutory systems consistently recognize and penalize property-grabbing, evictions, and violence against women. Legislative amendments must be accompanied by institutional training for law enforcement and judiciary actors to improve GBV case handling and land rights enforcement.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Addressing gendered land conflicts in resource-rich regions is imperative for fostering resilient communities, advancing social equity, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strengthening inclusive governance structures, enhancing women's land rights, and promoting sustainable land-use practices will contribute to long term socio-economic stability and environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Context for Land Conflict in Mzimba District

Mzimba District, located in northern Malawi, spans an area of 10,380 square kilometers with geographic coordinates of approximately 11.8982° S latitude and 33.6073° E longitude. Home to an estimated 1.2 million people as of 2023 (National Statistics Office), the district is predominantly rural, with livelihoods heavily reliant on agriculture, fishing, and small-scale trade. Over 80% of the population is engaged in rain-fed smallholder farming, cultivating both subsistence and cash crops such as maize, tobacco, groundnuts, and beans. However, despite the district's agricultural potential, limited irrigation infrastructure makes it highly vulnerable to climate variability, prolonged droughts, and erratic rainfall patterns. Fishing, particularly in Lake Kazuni and seasonal rivers, supplements household incomes, alongside casual labor (ganyu), small businesses, and wage employment.

Mzimba plays a significant role in national food security, contributing a substantial share of Malawi's maize and tobacco production. However, land tenure insecurity has emerged as a major challenge due to land grabbing, rapid population growth, extractive activities, and weak governance mechanisms. The discovery of mineral deposits, including gold and rare earth elements, has attracted both foreign and domestic investors, often leading to forced displacement and exclusion of indigenous landowners. The lack of clear land ownership policies further exacerbates land disputes, particularly between local communities, private investors, and the government.

Historical and Geographical Context

Mzimba District has historically been inhabited by the Ngoni people, who maintain a system of communal land ownership governed under customary law. Within this system, traditional leaders—including chiefs and village heads—have historically played a central role in land allocation and dispute resolution, ensuring equitable access to land for subsistence farming, communal use, and intergenerational inheritance (Ngwira & Kayuni, 2020; Roth & Chinsinga, 2018).

However, these indigenous land governance structures were disrupted during the colonial era, when the British administration implemented policies that formalized land appropriation and converted vast areas into crown land. These reforms prioritized European settler agriculture, government-controlled estates, and commercial land interests, often without consultation or compensation for local communities (Chirwa, 2019; Peters, 2004). The 1952 Land Ordinance and subsequent colonial laws laid the foundation for state-centric land control, weakening the authority of traditional institutions and undermining customary tenure systems (Roth, 2018).

Following independence in 1964, successive Malawian governments continued the pattern of allocating large tracts of land for economic investment purposes, frequently through leasehold arrangements or investment schemes that bypassed customary governance structures (Government of Malawi, 2016; Land Governance Assessment Framework—World Bank, 2021). This shift marginalized rural communities—particularly women and youth—who remained largely invisible in formal land registration systems and continued to operate under tenure insecurity (Legal Resources Centre Malawi, 2021; ILC, 2022).

Geographically, Mzimba is characterized by fertile agricultural land, mineral-rich zones, and forested areas, making it a strategic area for agricultural expansion, mining operations, and timber harvesting. However, the lack of harmonization between customary and statutory land laws has led to overlapping claims, land-use conflicts, and weakened environmental governance (FAO, 2019; IIED, 2021).

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The district's geographical features are diverse, comprising:

Fertile agricultural lands in Mzimba North, benefiting from higher rainfall and favorable soil conditions for farming. Expansive grazing lands in Mzimba South, suitable for livestock farming despite lower rainfall levels. Forest reserves such as Perekezi and Nkhatabay Highlands, critical for biodiversity conservati-/on but increasingly threatened by deforestation and illegal encroachment. Mineral-rich zones, which have become hotspots for legal and illegal mining activities, often resulting in land conflicts and environmental degradation.

Gender Disparities in Land Ownership

Women in Mzimba face systemic exclusion from land ownership and decision-making processes, despite their vital role in agriculture and household food security. Cultural norms, customary practices, and weak legal protections prevent women from inheriting land, often leaving them dependent on male relatives for access. According to national statistics, women own less than 15% of land in Malawi, a figure that mirrors the disparities in Mzimba.

The increasing prevalence of land grabbing and extractive industries has significantly deepened existing gender inequalities in Mzimba District. According to the study's survey data, 74% of women respondents reported being excluded from decisions related to land allocation, while over 61% of female-headed households had experienced some form of land loss or displacement due to extractive or commercial agricultural activities. These findings illustrate how women are not only more likely to be displaced, but also less likely to be compensated or relocated with dignity and security.

Furthermore, 68% of women interviewed reported limited or no access to agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, certified seed, and irrigation tools—compared to 39% of men. Similarly, only 22% of women surveyed had ever accessed a formal credit facility, versus 54% of men, and less than 15% had received any form of agricultural or entrepreneurial training. These disparities in access to productive resources and services inhibit women's ability to effectively utilize land, diminishing their income potential and reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty and economic dependency.

Addressing gender inequities in land tenure and resource access is not only a matter of justice, but a precondition for inclusive rural development and economic resilience. Ensuring equitable land access for women, coupled with expanded access to credit, inputs, and training, would significantly improve their capacity to contribute to household food security, local economies, and environmental stewardship.

Public Services and Infrastructure

Despite its economic potential and natural resource endowment, Mzimba District continues to grapple with underdeveloped and unevenly distributed public services and

infrastructure across multiple sectors critical to social and economic development.

Key sectors such as education, healthcare, water and sanitation, transport, and communications face significant deficits in service delivery. For example, the education sector is constrained by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher-to-student ratios, and a shortage of permanent teacher housing. Similarly, healthcare services remain overburdened, with a doctor-to-patient ratio of approximately 1:88,000, far below the World Health Organization's recommendation of 1:1,000. Access to clean and safe water remains inconsistent, with only 67% of households reporting access to potable water, and many relying on seasonal streams and unprotected wells.

In addition to these challenges, the study highlights three other critical sectors affecting development outcomes in the district:

- Energy Access: Only a small fraction of households in Mzimba are connected to the national electricity grid, and less than 12% of rural communities have access to reliable energy sources. Most households depend on firewood and charcoal for cooking and lighting, contributing to deforestation and health risks from indoor air pollution.

- Housing and Shelter: There is a persistent shortage of adequate, disaster-resilient housing, particularly for vulnerable groups such as female-headed households, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Most rural homes are built using traditional materials, with minimal structural reinforcement, making them highly susceptible to weather shocks.

- Digital Connectivity and ICT Access: Access to digital infrastructure remains limited, with only 18% of youth respondents reporting consistent access to internet services, primarily through mobile phones. This digital divide limits opportunities for e-learning, access to market information, civic participation, and employment, especially among rural youth and women.

These cumulative service delivery gaps not only undermine quality of life and human development indicators, but also exacerbate gender and spatial inequalities, especially in communities affected by land dispossession and extractivism. The study recommends cross-sectoral investment and inclusive planning approaches to bridge these gaps and support sustainable, community-centered development in Mzimba.

Education Sector Challenges

1. The district has 619 primary schools (292 in Mzimba North and 327 in Mzimba South).
2. Teacher shortages and inadequate accommodation remain major concerns. Out of 5,080 qualified teachers (2,884 males and 2,196 females), many lack permanent housing, affecting teacher retention and education quality.
3. Only 2,625 teachers' houses exist, with a majority being temporary structures.

Health Sector Constraints

- Mzimba has 46 health facilities, including 3 district hospitals, but faces critical shortages of medical personnel and equipment.

- The doctor-to-patient ratio stands at 1:88,000, far below the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended standard of 1:1,000.
- Limited access to clean water and sanitation facilities worsens public health outcomes, with only 67% of households having access to safe drinking water.

Geographical Features and Environmental Concerns

Mzimba's natural environment is both a resource and a vulnerability. The district's forests, rivers, and mineral reserves are increasingly at risk due to unregulated resource extraction, deforestation, and unsustainable farming practices. The rapid expansion of mining and logging industries has led to; Soil erosion and land degradation, reducing agricultural productivity, Water pollution from mining activities, endangering local ecosystems and public health. And Deforestation, threatening biodiversity and accelerating climate change impacts.

Compounded by weak land tenure systems and overlapping claims on land ownership, these environmental challenges fuel conflicts between communities, private investors, and government entities. Addressing sustainable land use practices is critical for long-term economic and ecological stability.

Economic Activities and Challenges

Mzimba's economy is primarily agriculture-driven, but small-scale commercial activities and entrepreneurship are increasingly contributing to household incomes and community development. However, these microeconomic ventures—particularly micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)—face systemic constraints that limit their growth and sustainability.

The study identified several core challenges facing MSMEs in the district:

- Limited access to financial services: Over 80% of MSMEs rely on personal savings, family support, or informal lending circles such as Village Savings and Loan (VSL) groups, with only a small percentage accessing formal credit from banks or microfinance institutions. This challenge is especially acute for women, who comprise a significant proportion of informal traders and small-scale entrepreneurs. Survey data revealed that only 26% of women-owned MSMEs had ever accessed a formal loan, compared to 45% of their male counterparts—underscoring the need for gender-responsive financial inclusion mechanisms.

- Inadequate infrastructure: Poor road networks, limited electricity coverage, and the lack of functional market facilities constrain business growth, increase operational costs, and reduce market accessibility for rural entrepreneurs. These infrastructure gaps disproportionately affect women, many of whom operate from home-based enterprises or rely on local agricultural value chains that require access to cold storage and transport services.

- Climate-related economic risks: Mzimba's continued reliance on rain-fed agriculture exposes MSMEs—particularly those linked to agro-processing and food production—to high vulnerability from droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall patterns. For women entrepreneurs, who often lack the resources to invest in

irrigation or climate-smart technologies, these shocks significantly disrupt productivity and cash flow, heightening economic precarity.

Despite these constraints, Mzimba holds significant economic potential in sectors such as agro-processing, sustainable tourism, and mining, provided that land governance, environmental sustainability, and gender equity are prioritized. Unlocking this potential requires targeted support for women-owned MSMEs, including access to capital, business development services, and market linkages tailored to their specific needs and constraints.

Broader Implications

The intricate web of land conflicts, gender inequalities, environmental challenges, and economic limitations in Mzimba District highlights the urgent need for holistic policy interventions. Addressing these challenges requires:

1. Strengthened land governance frameworks to protect customary landowners from displacement.
2. Gender-inclusive policies to empower women in land tenure and economic participation.
3. Sustainable resource management to balance development with environmental conservation.
4. Improved public services and infrastructure to enhance education, healthcare, and business opportunities.

By tackling the root causes of land disputes and socio-economic disparities, stakeholders—including government agencies, traditional leaders, civil society organizations, the private sector, women-led advocacy groups, and women's rights practitioners—can work collaboratively toward building a more equitable, gender-responsive, resilient, and prosperous Mzimba District. The active involvement of women’s movements and grassroots gender justice champions is essential to ensuring that interventions are not only inclusive but transformative, addressing both the structural and cultural dimensions of land inequality.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL

This research is part of a broader study examining the intersections of gender, land governance, and resource extraction in Mzimba District, Northern Malawi. It specifically investigates the gendered impacts of extractivism—referring to the large-scale exploitation of natural resources such as minerals (notably gold, rare earth elements, and bauxite)—and land grabbing, which encompasses the appropriation of communal and customary land for commercial agriculture, mining, and investor-driven development projects.

Available data from district-level land monitoring bodies and interviews with local leaders suggest that over 2,000 hectares of customary land have been leased or acquired by private investors over the past decade, often without full consultation with affected communities. These land acquisitions have disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, especially women, youth, and the elderly, who lack formal land documentation or political influence.

Research Questions and Justification

The study is structured around three interrelated research questions. These questions were developed in response to gaps identified in both national policy discourse and community consultations and were intended to generate evidence that is actionable, gender-responsive, and contextually grounded:

1. How do extractivism and land grabbing impact women in Mzimba District, and what strategies can mitigate these gendered conflicts?

This question seeks to analyze the direct and indirect effects of extractive projects and land dispossession on women. It focuses on disruptions to livelihoods, inheritance rights, and socio-cultural roles. The question also guides the study in identifying both formal and informal mitigation strategies, including community resilience mechanisms, advocacy efforts, and evolving governance practices. For example, the research shows that 62% of widows surveyed had been displaced without compensation due to mining-related land acquisitions.

2. What are the socio-economic and environmental consequences of extractivism and land grabbing on household livelihoods, and how do these impacts vary across gender and age groups?

This question broadens the scope to include household-level dynamics and intergenerational effects. Data revealed that women and youth are often the first to experience food insecurity, economic displacement, and environmental burden following land loss. For instance, women reported traveling longer distances for firewood and water due to deforestation linked to mining and commercial agriculture, while youth expressed increasing landlessness and unemployment. Gender-disaggregated data from focus groups indicated that female-headed households were 47% more likely to fall below the minimum food consumption threshold after losing access to land.

3. What role do traditional leaders and local governance structures play in managing land disputes and promoting equitable land use in the context of extractivism?

This question examines both formal and customary mechanisms of land dispute

resolution. It evaluates the effectiveness, inclusivity, and adaptability of traditional leadership structures, especially in high-conflict zones where land grabbing is prevalent. While traditional leaders are seen as mediators, their limited understanding of statutory gender equality provisions and frequent alignment with investor interests were cited as barriers to justice. The study also explores innovative governance practices, such as community land committees that include women and youth, which have emerged as more participatory alternatives.

Methodology

This study employed a multi-method research design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure triangulation and analytical depth. It also utilized gender-disaggregated tools and participatory methods to center the experiences of those most affected.

Desk-Based Research

- Legislative and Policy Analysis: Reviewed the 2016 Land Act, Customary Land Act, and Gender Equality Act to evaluate the extent of legal protection for women's land rights.
- Historical Land Tenure Trends: Analyzed colonial and post-colonial land allocation patterns to trace marginalization of customary landowners.
- Comparative Case Studies: Assessed regional models from Zambia zimbabwe and Tanzania to draw lessons on managing extractivism and gender justice.
- International Instruments: Integrated analyses of CEDAW, AU Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy, FAO's Voluntary Guidelines, and UNDP/ILC reports to benchmark Malawi's practices.

Field Research

Primary data collection was conducted in ten conflict-affected communities across five Traditional Authorities (TAs): M'mbelwa, Mabulabo, Kampingo Sibande, Mpherembe, and Mtwalo.

- Site Selection: Based on levels of extractive activity, history of land-related disputes, and diversity of demographic composition (age, gender, household structure).
- Observations: Captured visual and behavioral data on environmental degradation, land-use changes, and community displacement.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

- Conducted with 50 participants (30 women and 20 men) selected through purposive sampling.
- Discussion themes:
    - Gendered exclusion from land governance
    - Psychosocial trauma of land dispossession
    - Perceptions of traditional leaders
    - Adaptive strategies to conflict and environmental degradation

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

- 15 interviews with traditional leaders, district planners, women's rights advocates, and civil society organizations.
- Elicited perspectives on ; Legal and customary tensions, Responsiveness of local

authorities to gender-based land claims and Emerging alternatives to patriarchal governance models

Data Analysis

1. Qualitative coding identified key themes such as “covert displacement,” “customary entrenchment,” and “rights awareness gaps.”
2. Triangulation ensured consistency across FGDs, KIIs, desk review, and field notes.
3. Gender analysis applied an intersectional lens to explore compounded effects based on gender, age, marital status, and socio-economic position.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were upheld throughout the research process to ensure participant protection and cultural sensitivity:

- ❖ Informed Consent – All participants received a comprehensive briefing on the study’s objectives, risks, and confidentiality measures before providing voluntary consent.
- ❖ Confidentiality – Personal identifiers were removed to safeguard participant identities, particularly given the sensitive nature of land conflicts.
- ❖ Participatory Approach – A community-centered methodology was employed to amplify local voices and enhance knowledge co-production. ❖ Cultural Sensitivity – Research protocols were aligned with local traditions and governance structures, fostering trust and collaboration among stakeholders.

This study integrated diverse and rigorous methodological components to provide a comprehensive, intersectional, and gender-sensitive analysis of the socio-economic and environmental implications of extractivism and land grabbing in Mzimba District. The findings yield an empirically grounded understanding of how these processes disrupt livelihoods, displace communities, and disproportionately impact marginalized groups, particularly women and youth. The research systematically examines the intersections between land conflicts, cultural norms, economic structures, and governance frameworks, offering insights into the lived realities of affected communities.

This study makes an important contribution by highlighting the roles and limitations of both formal institutions and traditional authorities in addressing land disputes, ensuring fair land use, and balancing power in local land governance systems. By systematically analyzing the efficacy and limitations of traditional leadership, local government mechanisms, and legal frameworks, the study identifies policy implementation gaps and enforcement challenges while also highlighting opportunities for strengthening community-led and gender-responsive land governance frameworks.

Moreover, the research adopts a solution-oriented approach, formulating evidence-based, context-specific strategies to mitigate gendered land conflicts. The proposed interventions are directly informed by qualitative and quantitative findings, ensuring alignment with the lived experiences of affected populations. These strategies emphasize:

1. Inclusive decision-making processes, ensuring women's and youth's participation in land governance.
2. Legal empowerment initiatives, equipping communities with knowledge of their land rights.
3. Capacity-building programs, enhancing traditional and local governance structures' ability to mediate land disputes.
4. Advocacy and policy engagement, strengthening the enforcement of gender sensitive land laws and tenure security mechanisms.

By centering the perspectives of those most affected by extractivism and land dispossession, the study not only amplifies marginalized voices but also positions them as primary stakeholders in shaping sustainable and just land governance solutions.

RESULTS: PRESENTATION OF THE CASE STUDY

The research, employing a mixed-methods approach including household surveys, structured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs), identified systemic challenges influencing land ownership, gender dynamics, and socio-economic security in Mzimba District. The study revealed deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and structural inequalities that perpetuate gender-based exclusion in land tenure systems.

Gendered Patterns of Land Ownership and Legal Awareness

Quantitative survey data revealed that 85% of respondents perceive land ownership as a male prerogative, reinforcing women's exclusion from land tenure systems both within customary and statutory frameworks. This perception is exacerbated by cultural and traditional practices that favor male inheritance and land allocation, sidelining women, particularly widows, single women, and those from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds.

Qualitative narratives gathered from FGDs and KIIs further illustrated that these women encounter significant structural, legal, and socio-cultural barriers in their efforts to access, control, or own land. Despite the existence of statutory protections, such as the 2016 Land Act and the Gender Equality Act, enforcement remains weak at the grassroots level, where customary tenure dominates. Analysis of legal awareness levels among respondents indicated that over 60% of women surveyed lack knowledge of their land rights, significantly impeding their ability to challenge land dispossession, gender-based exclusion, and related injustices. This lack of awareness extends beyond women themselves, with 62% of male respondents also unfamiliar with the protective legal frameworks, illustrating a community-wide knowledge gap that entrenches harmful practices.

Economic and Environmental Pressures on Land Tenure Security

Findings from the survey and economic vulnerability assessments indicate that land remains the cornerstone of rural livelihoods, with over 78% of respondents relying on subsistence agriculture. However, the encroachment of extractive industries, land grabbing by powerful actors, and the expansion of commercial agriculture have triggered widespread displacement, disproportionately impacting women. The study found that displaced women experience an estimated 45% reduction in household income, forcing many into precarious informal labor markets or dependency on male relatives for survival.

Further, participatory mapping and environmental degradation analysis from remote sensing data underscored the cumulative effects of deforestation, mining, and unsustainable land-use practices. These environmental stressors have aggravated existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, particularly for women who depend heavily on land and natural resources for farming, water, and firewood collection. The depletion of

these resources has increased women's labor burden, undermined household food security, and heightened the risks of poverty, malnutrition, and social dislocation.

Exclusion from Land Governance and Decision-Making

A governance structure assessment revealed that women remain significantly underrepresented in both formal and customary land governance bodies, with only 10% of leadership roles in land allocation and dispute resolution mechanisms held by women. The survey on governance participation, combined with qualitative interviews with traditional leaders and government officials, reinforced the finding that decision-making spaces remain male-dominated. Even in spaces where women are nominally included, their contributions are often dismissed, ignored, or undervalued, reflecting deeply ingrained patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes.

These dynamics also intersect with broader legal and knowledge gaps. The research identified a pervasive lack of understanding of gender-equitable land policies among both men and women. With 62% of male respondents and 75% of female respondents reporting little or no awareness of national legal instruments, women's land claims continue to be undermined by both institutional weaknesses and cultural biases. The term "knowledge gap" in this context refers not only to limited awareness of existing laws but also to a lack of accessible platforms where women can learn, claim, and defend their rights without fear of intimidation or violence.

Implications for Policy and Multi-Sectoral Interventions

These findings necessitate an integrated, multi-sectoral response that addresses the legal, socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of women's land rights and tenure security. Policy reforms alone will be insufficient without accompanying investments in legal literacy programs, community awareness initiatives, gender-sensitive environmental management strategies, and economic empowerment interventions targeting women.

The research underscores the urgent need for collaborative efforts between government agencies, traditional leadership, civil society organizations, and local communities to strengthen women's land tenure security and enhance inclusive governance structures. Interventions should not only focus on legal reforms but also dismantle the patriarchal norms that marginalize women from decision-making spaces, land governance processes, and economic opportunities. Creating enabling environments where women can meaningfully participate in land governance, access justice systems, and benefit from sustainable land use practices is critical for advancing gender equity, social justice, and resilience in Mzimba District.

ROOT CAUSES OF LAND AND GENDER INEQUITIES

Cultural Entrenchment of Male Dominance in Land Ownership Survey data (n=500) indicates that 85% of respondents perceive land ownership as exclusively male-controlled, a reflection of deeply embedded patriarchal norms. Thematic analysis of FGDs revealed that marriage expectations influence inheritance practices, where daughters are excluded from family land

allocations. Findings align with LANDac (2018), which highlights how Malawi's patrilineal system structurally disadvantages women. USAID (2017) further emphasizes that cultural resistance to statutory reforms undermines women's land rights enforcement.

Economic Pressures on Land Resources

Economic stressors are increasingly driving land-related conflicts in Mzimba District. Survey data revealed that 52% of female respondents experienced situations where male family members sold household land without consulting spouses or other dependents. This trend highlights both the erosion of traditional communal land decision-making practices and the persistence of patriarchal control over land assets.

The findings also demonstrate that land commercialization—characterized by the rising market value of customary land—has deepened socio-economic inequalities. Smallholder farmers and land-dependent rural households are particularly disadvantaged, as escalating land prices favor wealthier elites, urban investors, and large-scale agribusiness actors, effectively displacing poorer households from both ownership and use rights.

These observations are consistent with wider regional and international evidence. The World Bank (2020) reports that land commodification in emerging economies is a major driver of widening wealth gaps, as traditional safety nets such as communal grazing or subsistence farming plots are lost. Oxfam International (2011) highlights that women are disproportionately affected in land markets, where formalized, monetized land transactions systematically exclude individuals who lack independent capital, credit access, or formal land titles.
Similarly, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED, 2021) emphasizes that land market liberalization often marginalizes rural women by prioritizing private landholding systems that ignore traditional communal access rights.
Additionally, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2019) reports that in most Sub-Saharan African contexts, the formalization of land rights without gender-sensitive safeguards leads to the further erosion of women's customary claims.
Finally, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2019) warns that large-scale land acquisitions disproportionately disempower rural women and increase their vulnerability to economic shocks and food insecurity.

In Mzimba, these dynamics not only fuel localized land disputes but also undermine women's economic security and exacerbate intergenerational poverty cycles, reinforcing structural vulnerabilities across rural communities.

Conflict Between Customary and Statutory Laws

A legal pluralism analysis revealed that, despite the 2016 Land Act providing a legal basis for gender-inclusive land ownership, weak enforcement mechanisms at the community level limit its practical realization. The customary dispute resolution survey conducted for this study found that 72% of land-related conflicts are addressed through traditional dispute resolution systems rather than formal courts.

In this context, traditional mechanisms refer to informal community-based structures, typically led by village heads, chiefs, and customary land tribunals, which are deeply rooted in customary practices. These bodies operate outside the formal judiciary and

resolve conflicts based on local norms, traditions, and consensus-building processes, rather than strictly applying national statutory laws.

While these mechanisms often provide accessible and culturally legitimate forums for conflict resolution, they tend to uphold patriarchal norms, particularly in matters of land ownership and inheritance. Male relatives and traditional authorities frequently retain decision-making power, sidelining women's land claims or subjecting them to stigmatization, intimidation, or unequal treatment.

External research supports these findings. FAO (2018) highlights that contradictions between statutory and customary legal frameworks create significant challenges for the enforcement of women's land rights. Similarly, IDRC (2019) documents how customary adjudication processes can override statutory protections, reinforcing gender biases and limiting women's access to land justice.

Although traditional systems are not necessarily "kangaroo courts"—as they retain important cultural legitimacy within local governance—their lack of formal procedural safeguards, limited accountability mechanisms, and gender biases often result in unequal outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, widows, and youth.

Institutionalized Gender Bias in Land Governance Structures

A land governance representation survey indicated that only 10% of women hold leadership positions in local land administration structures. IIED (2021) underscores persistent gender disparities in Malawi's land governance institutions, while UNDP (2020) emphasizes the need for women's increased representation in decision-making processes.

Educational Disparities and Lack of Legal Awareness

Survey findings show that over 60% of women respondents lack formal education, significantly limiting their awareness of legal rights. Conversely, legal literacy assessments revealed that women with secondary education or higher are twice as likely to challenge discriminatory land practices. The World Bank (2019) links higher education levels to increased legal empowerment, while USAID (2018) highlights literacy as a key factor in women's ability to navigate legal systems.

Impact of Climate Change on Land Availability

An environmental vulnerability survey found that climate change-induced land scarcity is disproportionately affecting women. Spatial analysis of land degradation trends showed declining soil fertility and increased desertification in 78% of surveyed areas. IPCC (2019) correlates climate chanViolence and Intimidation Against Women Claiming Land Rights

Survey results indicate that 30% of women who attempted to assert land rights experienced various forms of intimidation, threats, or physical violence. This trend was particularly pronounced among widows and divorced women, who emerged as the most vulnerable groups. Community-based case studies documented multiple instances where

male relatives forcibly evicted women from family land, often using threats, coercion, or social ostracization to reinforce gendered hierarchies of control.

These findings are consistent with broader regional patterns. UN Women (2019) reports that gender-based violence (GBV) is widespread in the context of land disputes, especially where legal protections for women's property rights are weak or inconsistently enforced. Furthermore, The World Bank (2021) emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to protect women from land-related violence and ensure their safe participation in land governance processes.

The persistence of intimidation and violence not only deters women from claiming their rightful access to land but also undermines broader efforts toward gender equity, social justice, and sustainable rural development. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach, combining legal empowerment, community sensitization, and expanded access to protective services, to create an environment where women's land rights are both respected and defended.

Violence and Intimidation Against Women Claiming Land Rights

The findings of this study reveal that the path to securing land rights remains fraught with significant risks for women in Mzimba District. Survey results indicate that 30% of women who sought to claim or defend land rights experienced intimidation, threats, or physical violence. Vulnerability was particularly acute among widows and divorced women, whose precarious social standing often left them without strong family support networks.

Community case study data further illuminated these dynamics, documenting several instances where male relatives forcibly evicted women from their rightful land, sometimes with the tacit approval of customary authorities.

These localized patterns mirror broader global trends. For instance, UN Women (2019) reports that gender-based violence (GBV) is a prevalent tactic used to reinforce women's exclusion from land and property rights. Moreover, The World Bank (2021) emphasizes the pressing need to strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to shield women from violence linked to land disputes.

Addressing land-related GBV is therefore not only a legal imperative but also a critical foundation for building gender-responsive land governance. Initiatives that combine legal aid services, awareness campaigns, and community sensitization can significantly enhance the safety and agency of women seeking to exercise their land rights. Promoting safe, inclusive spaces for dispute resolution, with deliberate safeguards for women claimants, is essential to making land governance systems more equitable and just.

Economic Barriers to Land Ownership

In parallel with physical insecurity, economic exclusion presents another major obstacle for women’s access to and control over land in Mzimba District. According to survey data, 80% of female respondents reported lacking access to credit or financial services, severely limiting their ability to purchase, secure, or develop land assets. Without independent financial means, women face systemic barriers to land ownership, reinforcing cycles of dependency and economic marginalization.

These findings align with regional and international studies. The African Development Bank (2020) identifies financial exclusion as a core impediment to women's economic autonomy across Sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, UNDP (2021) highlights that enhancing women's access to land and financial services yields broad socio-economic benefits, contributing to poverty reduction, food security, and more inclusive economic growth.

To foster genuine economic empowerment, targeted interventions are essential. Expanding women-friendly credit facilities, supporting micro-enterprise initiatives, and ensuring access to affordable land titling services can enable women not only to own land but also to leverage it for sustainable livelihood development. Unlocking women's full economic potential through secure land ownership is thus a pivotal step toward building more resilient, inclusive communities.

The study's findings underscore the systemic, multi-dimensional nature of gendered land inequities in Mzimba District. Through a robust combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study provides empirical evidence on the structural barriers to women's land ownership and the urgent need for targeted interventions. Addressing these challenges requires legal, economic, and socio-cultural strategies that strengthen women's land tenure security, enhance legal enforcement

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Food Insecurity and Agricultural Productivity

The study's findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between women's exclusion from land ownership and household food insecurity. Quantitative data from surveys suggest that women play a pivotal role in agricultural production, yet their restricted land tenure security limits their capacity to adopt long-term, climate-smart agricultural practices. Qualitative responses from focus group discussions highlighted that communities where women had secure land access exhibited higher agricultural yields, improved household dietary diversity, and enhanced resilience to food shortages. These findings align with prior research (FAO, 2021), which underscores the role of women's land tenure security in boosting agricultural productivity and reducing food insecurity.

Moreover, the exclusion of women from land ownership creates a structural bottleneck that suppresses local food systems, exacerbates hunger, and perpetuates economic dependency. The research underscores that when women's land rights are recognized and enforced, their ability to invest in sustainable farming methods, access financial services, and engage in decision-making processes that shape food production systems dramatically improves. This not only enhances food security at the household level but also contributes to broader community resilience to climate shocks and market fluctuations. Failing to secure women's tenure rights, therefore, has far-reaching implications for rural livelihoods, food sovereignty, and the realization of the right to adequate food.

Gender-Based Violence as a Consequence of Land Disputes

The study establishes a strong correlation between land tenure insecurity and gender-based violence (GBV), particularly against widows and unmarried women.

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed that land disputes frequently escalate into physical, psychological, and economic violence, with affected women reporting threats, coercion, and forced evictions. Triangulation of data from case studies and legal aid organizations suggests that GBV linked to land conflicts remains underreported due to socio-cultural stigma and inadequate legal enforcement. These findings align with UN Women (2020), which documents the intersectionality of land rights, gender discrimination, and violence against women in rural contexts.

This intersectional analysis reveals that land tenure insecurity not only undermines women's socio-economic standing but also places them at heightened risk of violence and exploitation. The normalization of violence in land conflicts reflects broader patriarchal power dynamics where women's bodies and land are treated as commodities to be controlled. The absence of gender-responsive justice mechanisms, combined with the social silencing of survivors, contributes to a culture of impunity that further emboldens perpetrators. Addressing land-related GBV, therefore, requires systemic interventions that integrate land rights with GBV prevention, survivor-centered justice pathways, and accountability mechanisms that challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal norms.

Intergenerational Poverty and the Erosion of Communal Land Systems

Findings from the study indicate a causal link between land commercialization and intergenerational poverty. Descriptive statistical analysis reveals that 68% of respondents perceive land privatization as a driver of youth displacement from rural communities. The study further identifies qualitative themes suggesting that the erosion of communal land governance systems is weakening traditional mechanisms for wealth redistribution, thereby exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. This aligns with Oxfam (2019), which argues that land commodification disproportionately disadvantages youth and marginalized groups, limiting their long-term economic prospects.

The commodification of land has transformed it from a communal livelihood asset into an exclusionary economic commodity, undermining indigenous systems of wealth sharing, mutual aid, and community cohesion. This shift not only displaces youth but also dismantles pathways for intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural preservation, and social resilience. The alienation of communal lands to commercial and extractive interests strips future generations of their social safety nets and entrenches poverty cycles. Urgent action is required to protect communal land governance systems, promote youth land access schemes, and prevent exploitative land markets from eroding the socio-economic fabrics of rural communities.

Environmental Degradation Due to Unsustainable Land Management

The research highlights a significant association between land mismanagement and environmental degradation. Spatial analysis and observational data indicate that deforestation, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss are more prevalent in male-controlled land parcels compared to those managed by women. Key informant interviews suggest that short-term profit-driven land exploitation, including timber harvesting and monocropping, is prioritized over sustainable land stewardship. Women's exclusion from land governance structures further marginalizes their role in conservation and resource management, compounding ecological vulnerabilities. These findings corroborate CGIAR (2020), which emphasizes the need for gender-responsive environmental governance to

mitigate climate-induced land degradation.

The study further reveals that excluding women from land governance not only denies them agency but also deprives ecosystems of their traditional knowledge in sustainable land management and biodiversity conservation. Women's land stewardship practices—often rooted in holistic, intergenerational, and resource-conserving approaches—are critical for reversing environmental degradation and building climate resilience. Ignoring these practices in favor of exploitative land use patterns accelerates ecological collapse, food insecurity, and socio-economic displacement. Embedding gender equity into environmental governance frameworks is, therefore, essential for restoring degraded ecosystems, safeguarding biodiversity, and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for present and future generations.

IMPACT ON WOMEN AND COMMUNITIES

Food Insecurity and Agricultural Productivity

The study's findings indicate that land dispossession is a key driver of food insecurity among women in Mzimba District, given their predominant role as primary food producers at the household level. Data from structured interviews and focus group discussions revealed that women engage extensively in smallholder farming, yet tenure insecurity significantly constrains their ability to adopt sustainable agricultural practices. The absence of secure land tenure discourages long-term investments in soil fertility management, irrigation systems, and climate-smart farming techniques—practices essential for sustained agricultural productivity and resilience to climate variability.

Survey responses further highlight that land alienation by agribusiness investors and elite landholders has led to the displacement of small-scale farming communities, thereby reducing women's access to arable land for subsistence agriculture. Many respondents indicated that women are compelled to lease land from male relatives or local landlords under precarious and informal arrangements, rendering them susceptible to arbitrary evictions and seasonal fluctuations in land access. This instability manifests in lower crop yields, increased reliance on food aid, and engagement in precarious labor markets, deepening women's economic marginalization.

Furthermore, the study identifies climate change-related stressors—including erratic rainfall patterns, worsening soil degradation, and deforestation—as disproportionately affecting women and land-dependent communities affecting women due to their dependence on land-based livelihoods. As agricultural land diminishes in fertility and productivity, women face heightened vulnerability to malnutrition, economic distress, and an intensified burden of unpaid household labor, particularly in female-headed households.

Gender-Based Violence Linked to Land Disputes

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis uncovered a statistically significant correlation between land disputes and gender-based violence (GBV), particularly affecting widows, single mothers, and women attempting to assert land rights. Respondents recounted experiences of intimidation, coercion, and physical and sexual violence in contexts where women challenged land ownership claims. Triangulated findings from key informant interviews and participatory rural appraisals further revealed that local dispute

resolution mechanisms are largely male-dominated and structurally biased against women, reinforcing patriarchal norms that perpetuate land-related injustices.

Widows emerged as a particularly vulnerable demographic, with case study data showing a high prevalence of property grabbing by in-laws following the death of a spouse. Many widows reported facing forced evictions, legal intimidation, and systematic social ostracization. The risk of GBV discourages women from seeking legal recourse, thereby perpetuating cycles of dispossession and economic disenfranchisement.

Additionally, economic dependency on landowning men exacerbates women's exposure to coercion and exploitative transactional relationships. Women without access to land or financial resources reported instances of being compelled into unequal power dynamics in exchange for land tenure security, reinforcing patterns of gender-based economic disempowerment and heightened vulnerability to abuse.

Intergenerational Poverty and Erosion of Traditional Land Governance Systems
Empirical data from household surveys and in-depth interviews underscored that the exclusion of women from land inheritance contributes to intergenerational poverty by curtailing economic opportunities for future generations. Traditionally, land inheritance follows a patrilineal model, effectively disinheriting daughters and reinforcing systemic economic dependence on male relatives or marital arrangements. The resultant economic precarity limits women's access to capital, productive assets, and entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby sustaining cycles of poverty.

Further analysis revealed that the commercialization of land and the encroachment of extractive industries are disrupting traditional communal land governance structures, which historically ensured equitable resource distribution. Respondents expressed concern that land commodification is displacing indigenous land stewardship norms, thereby marginalizing women and youth from accessing customary land tenure security. The shift from communal landholding to private land transactions has dismantled traditional safety nets, exacerbating socio-economic vulnerabilities for women and the wider community.

The research further identified cultural disintegration as an emerging consequence of shifting land governance paradigms. Oral histories and ethnographic fieldwork suggest that land was traditionally central to social cohesion and intergenerational wealth transfer. However, modernization and policy shifts prioritizing individual land ownership over communal resource management have fragmented extended family support systems, resulting in increased economic precarity among marginalized groups.

Environmental Degradation and Land Mismanagement

The study's environmental impact assessment, based on field observations, focus group discussions, and a desk review of the Mzimba District Environmental Action Plan (2019-2024), revealed that land mismanagement—particularly by private investors, local elites, and agribusiness stakeholders—is a critical driver of environmental degradation. Respondents cited deforestation, soil erosion, and groundwater contamination as major consequences of unregulated land acquisitions.

Survey data indicates that women, as primary household resource managers,

disproportionately bear the burdens of ecosystem depletion. Field observations confirmed that women must now travel longer distances to collect potable water and firewood, thereby increasing their exposure to health risks, fatigue, and gender-based violence (GBV).

Community-based organizations, such as the Centre for Environmental Policy and Advocacy (CEPA) and Civil Society Network on Climate Change (CISONECC), have similarly reported that resource depletion exacerbates women's vulnerability to violence during resource collection (CEPA, 2021; CISONECC, 2022).

Gender-based violence in this context manifests as physical assault, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and intimidation, particularly along isolated water collection routes and depleted forest areas.

In addition, land degradation caused by unsustainable agricultural practices and extractive activities has dramatically reduced soil fertility, leading to declining agricultural yields. Women increasingly engage in informal labor, including casual farm work (ganyu), petty trading, and seasonal migration for labor, often under precarious, low-paying conditions (Ministry of Gender, Malawi, 2022).

Despite their frontline role in managing natural resources, women remain largely excluded from environmental policy forums and local conservation planning committees. As highlighted by the National Climate Change Response Strategy (Malawi Government, 2021), women's minimal participation in climate adaptation strategies hinders the development of gender-sensitive and community-led responses to resource degradation.

Limited Economic Opportunities for Women

The study further established that systemic exclusion from land ownership severely limits women's economic agency and access to productive resources. Land tenure security is widely recognized as a prerequisite for obtaining agricultural loans, credit facilities, and entrepreneurship training programs (National Agriculture Investment Plan, Malawi, 2018).

Survey data revealed that 80% of female respondents lacked access to formal credit, land title deeds, or agricultural extension services.

Macro-economic assessments, including the 2019 Malawi National Household Survey (NSO), confirm that landless women are disproportionately excluded from economic empowerment initiatives. Many government and donor-funded programs, such as the Agricultural Commercialization Project (AGCOM), primarily target individuals with formalized land tenure, thus marginalizing women without legal documentation.

Consequently, women without land are excluded from cooperatives, microfinance groups, and agricultural value chain initiatives, reinforcing economic dependency on male relatives or informal lenders (WOLREC, 2022).

Clarifying further, "gendered power imbalances" refers specifically to the consolidation of decision-making authority among male leaders within community structures and land governance institutions. Women's limited land rights result in weaker bargaining power, fewer leadership roles, and exclusion from critical resource allocation decisions.

Moreover, this exclusion is not solely due to landlessness but is compounded by rising rural poverty among poor and marginalized groups, particularly female-headed

households (Government of Malawi, 2022: Gender Equality Monitoring Report). This intersection of poverty, gender, and land tenure insecurity creates entrenched barriers to women's economic independence.

Health and Social Consequences

The study identified severe health and psychosocial impacts associated with land dispossession. Respondents—especially widows and single mothers—reported high rates of chronic anxiety, depression, and trauma symptoms, particularly when facing prolonged legal struggles or social isolation after evictions.

Data from the Mzimba District Health Office Annual Report (2022) confirmed higher incidences of mental health complaints, maternal malnutrition, and child stunting in households affected by land conflicts.

Land tenure insecurity was also closely linked to increased food insecurity, leading to poor maternal health outcomes and reduced child growth rates, echoing findings from the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) 2022 report.

Socially, women challenging patriarchal land norms often faced stigmatization, public shaming, and exclusion from traditional savings groups (village banks) and community-based organizations. This marginalization not only weakens their social support systems but also limits opportunities for collective advocacy and rights-based mobilization (Women Lawyers Association Malawi, 2021).

Socially, the research revealed that women who challenge patriarchal land ownership norms frequently experience stigmatization, exclusion from community networks, and limitations in their participation in local governance processes. This social marginalization further restricts women's ability to mobilize for collective advocacy or secure policy reforms that would address gendered land injustices.

CONCLUSION ON THE FINDINGS: PATHWAYS TOWARD GENDER-RESPONSIVE LAND GOVERNANCE

The study's findings illustrate that land tenure insecurity in Mzimba District is a multi-dimensional issue deeply rooted in historical injustices, patriarchal norms, weak governance structures, and systemic gender discrimination. The exclusion of women from land ownership, governance, and decision-making spaces is not merely a cultural or traditional matter but reflects embedded power imbalances that reinforce socio-economic marginalization, food insecurity, and environmental vulnerabilities. The evidence shows that women—particularly widows, divorced women, and female-headed households—experience the harshest impacts, including forced displacement, economic disenfranchisement, and exclusion from leadership roles within land governance institutions.

Compounding these challenges are intensifying economic and environmental pressures, including extractivism, land commodification, and climate-induced resource degradation, which have escalated land conflicts and undermined the livelihoods of vulnerable populations. The research revealed that these phenomena are not isolated economic

developments but processes deeply intertwined with gendered power relations and governance failures that further entrench women's vulnerability. Case studies and participatory mapping confirmed that women's exclusion from sustainable land management practices exacerbates environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and the erosion of communal land systems, deepening intergenerational poverty and social fragmentation.

Yet, amidst these complex challenges, the study also identified entry points for transformative change. Through participatory research methods, community dialogues, and stakeholder interviews, the study surfaced local innovations and women-led initiatives that are challenging patriarchal land practices, promoting food sovereignty, and advocating for environmental stewardship. The findings underscore that addressing these structural barriers demands a holistic and intersectional approach, combining legal and policy reforms, inclusive and gender-responsive land governance, and economic empowerment strategies.

Strengthening statutory enforcement of gender-equitable land rights, integrating women into both formal and customary land governance bodies, and ensuring their participation in decision-making spaces are critical for dismantling patriarchal monopolies over land. Moreover, recognizing women's land rights is not only a gender justice imperative but also a cornerstone for achieving broader sustainable development goals, enhancing climate resilience, and fostering peaceful, inclusive communities. By investing in targeted interventions, capacity building, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, Mzimba District can forge pathways toward a just and inclusive land governance system—transforming land from a site of conflict and dispossession into a foundation for equity, prosperity, and resilience.

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