

Gendering Malawi's National Nutrition Policy using the integrated framework for gender analysis in nutrition policy

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrate the importance of integrating a gender equality perspective into all areas of development work. With the exception of goal five, which specifically focuses on gender, eight of the SDGs include gender and gender equality.

For over two decades' gender discourse has been dominated by a focus on women, overlooking opportunities to engage men as partners in achieving gender equity. Achieving gender equity requires acknowledging dynamics in the relationships between men and women that lead to the differentiated allocation of resources, programmes and decisions based on gender. Equality cannot be achieved by excluding men from development programmes and focusing solely on women. Nutrition policies offer opportunities to progress towards long-term equality development goals.

Policies provide an overarching framework for comprehensive and aligned strategies and programme implementation. As part of the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy (FSP), the University of Pretoria, in collaboration with the Civil Society Organisation Nutrition Alliance (CSONA) and the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare conducted an assessment of the extent to which Malawi's forthcoming National Nutrition Policy (2016 – 2020) incorporates gender. This assessment reflected on the policy's application of gender and identified possible areas of gender bias, focusing on the extent to which men and women's interests were considered.

Embedded gender biases hinder access to nutritious food for mothers and children

In the past, nutrition policies have focused narrowly on women. As a result, structural inequalities (or inherent biases) that limit women's ability to access nutritious food are perpetuated. In many developing countries, men are the key decision-makers, making critical decisions related to women's sexual and reproductive health, resource allocation and food consumption. Men's role as decision-makers is reinforced through socio-cultural prohibitions and taboos. Nutrition policies typically target women as beneficiaries. Evidence suggests that improving women's nutritional status before, during and after childbirth can reduce child under-nutrition. While women often allocate more resources to children's nutrition and education, women in developing countries face constraints regarding accessing this essential income.

Terms and definitions

- **Gender equality** is when men and women enjoy the same rights across all aspects of society including decision-making and economic participation and when the different aspirations, behaviours and needs are equally favoured.
- **Gender equity** refers to the allocation of resources, programmes and decisions based on the needs and requirements of specific gender groups.
- **Structural inequalities** are biases that are embedded in organisations, institutions, governments or social networks that present obstacles to progressing equality.



Although men’s involvement in maternal and child health is important for achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes, policies need to be designed with caution. Men’s involvement in maternal and child health interventions are generally implemented to achieve positive maternal and child health outcomes. Gender equality is often forgotten, resulting in unintended outcomes.

For example, instead of enlisting men’s involvement to address issues of unequal decision-making dynamics in the household, many interventions only focus on involving men in maternal and child health so that men make better decisions on behalf of women as opposed to making better decisions with women. Involving men in maternal and child health can reinforce men’s decision-making power, perpetuating the status quo.

Therefore, policies that apply the men’s involvement in maternal and child health approach need to prioritise the objective of engaging men as partners in achieving gender equality in order to avoid unintended negative consequences.

Introducing the integrated framework for gender analysis in nutrition policy

To support the incorporation of gender in nutrition policy, an integrated framework for assessing the extent

to which a policy integrates gender was developed. This framework combines the WHO gender assessment tool and the FAO gender mainstreaming in nutrition guidelines. The new integrated framework for gender analysis in nutrition policy bridges insights from the agriculture and health sectors. The framework is a tool through which nutrition policies can be assessed with a gender lens.

There are three main benefits to using the integrated framework for gender analysis in nutrition policy. First, it helps policy-makers identify policy options for incorporating a gender perspective into nutrition policies. Second, it provides guidance on the determination of biases and ideologies that may be reflected in the policy. Third, the colour coding provides policy-makers with an indication of where efforts should be focused to more adequately incorporate gender.

Applying the integrated framework for gender analysis in nutrition policy

The framework was used to assess the extent to which Malawi’s National Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan 2007 -2012 incorporated essential gender components. The findings were presented at a policy dialogue in Lilongwe. The participants included 36 people from Civil Society Organisations, government, donors, NGOs and resea

Policy instruments	Do the vision, goals or principles have an explicit commitment to promoting or achieving gender equality?	Does the policy consider and include women’s practical and strategic needs?	Does the policy consider gender norms, roles and relations?	Does the policy avoid considering men and women as homogenous groups?	Does the policy clearly differentiate between sex and gender?
Agriculture extension and nutrition	✓		✓	✓	✓
Local food culture and gender					✓
Nutrition and the life cycle		✓			
Gender and obesity					
Spending income on nutrition					
Rights based approach to nutrition	✓	✓		✓	
Targeting in nutrition policy	✓				

rch institutions. Three community members and one Traditional Authority participated in the discussions, particularly with regard to involving men as partners in achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes as well as gender equality. Participants were afforded the opportunity to apply the framework to assess the forthcoming National Nutrition Policy.

Findings

Malawi's forthcoming National Nutrition Policy integrates a gender perspective more appropriately than its predecessor. The policy focuses significantly on involving men and improving women's control and access to resources for improved nutrition outcomes. However, the policy perpetuates the notion that nutrition and child care are women's responsibility. Although it includes men's involvement in child care and household duties, the condition is that men should be involved so that women have more time to provide optimal care for children. While the policy appears to promote gender equality, because it has a priority area specifically dedicated to gender, it is only promoting nutrition. In fact, it is perpetuating the notion that only women can be responsible for nutrition. It does not consider socio-cultural factors that prevent men from being involved in nutrition and children's lives. The policy also overlooks the practical needs of men and women and neglects to consider men's nutrition interests. The lack of ticks in the red section of the framework suggests that although the policy appears to make an explicit commitment to promoting gender equality, the policy does not challenge structural inequalities such as socially determined gender roles.

Recommendations for the Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS and the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare

Decisive action is required to involve men as partners in addressing structural inequalities in Malawi. Further deliberation regarding the specific context of men and women in Malawi is necessary to understand how best to involve men in maternal and child nutrition. The nutritional and social needs of men and women are different. Social factors may prevent both men and women from accessing nutritious food. People-centred policy development requires direct engagement with the beneficiaries of public policies. Involving communities in the design and validation of policies ensures coherence between the needs of the community and the policy.

From the consultative dialogue and assessment of the forthcoming National Nutrition Policy, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Broadening the beneficiaries of the policy

Nutrition policies generally tend to focus on women and children as targeted beneficiaries. Likewise, the forthcoming Malawi National Nutrition Policy targets women and children. However, as a signatory to international instruments such as the 1974 Universal Declaration on Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition and the UN General Assembly Resolution 67/174 on the Right to Food, Malawi has committed to addressing the neglect of the nutritional requirements of women and children, but also men, the elderly, people undergoing palliative care and other vulnerable groups. The National Nutrition Policy homogenises these groups by referring to 'vulnerable groups'. These groups should be defined to ensure that the nutritional requirements of all the varied vulnerable groups are specifically addressed.

2. Include gender in all priority areas

Although a separate priority area has been included for gender, all priority areas need to incorporate gender. Each priority area should be assessed using a gender lens and each priority area should consider gender norms, roles and relations that undermine men and women's ability to access nutritious food. For example, priority area eight on nutrition monitoring and evaluation, research and surveillance does not include an indicator on gender. The SDGs emphasise the need for indicators to monitor progress towards gender equity and equality. This data should also provide evidence of how these actions are improving maternal and child nutrition. Similarly, the priority area on non-communicable diseases does not consider men's specific needs. Men's nutritional requirements are neglected, yet evidence suggests that men are more predisposed to non-communicable diseases, many of which are related to nutrition. In this example, the policy is perpetuating the notion that men and women's needs are the same. Gender norms relating to the enactment of masculinity (such as excessive alcohol consumption) prevent men from fully realising their nutrition and health rights.

3. Inclusive nutrition messaging

As a signatory to the Beijing Platform for Action, Malawi is committed to ensuring that policies and

programmes at all levels not only integrate gender but that they also promote gender equality. Nutrition policies need to provide guidance on nutrition messaging that targets both men and women. The health sector in Malawi is particularly active in terms of promoting men's involvement in maternal and child health. Therefore, nutrition messages should be combined with messages on safe motherhood. Community leaders, such as traditional authorities and faith-based leaders should be involved in the dissemination of nutrition messages, particularly with regard to behaviour change and men's involvement in maternal and child health. Nutrition messages should also promote gender equality. Messages should be constructed with care to ensure that they do not perpetuate inequality. For example, posters and other paraphernalia should not only have images of women, but also include men.

4. Engagement of community leaders and communities in the development of policies and strategies

Community members need to be included in the development of policies and strategies. Implementation failure results because policies are not aligned with the needs of communities. Including Traditional Authorities and communities in the development of policies and strategies provides policy-makers with a true picture of what is feasible to implement based on the community's knowledge and experiences. Traditional Authorities - as the custodians of culture - are able to identify how to navigating socio-cultural barriers to men and women's access to nutritious food. With the right training, Traditional Authorities can be the bridge between policy makers and communities, facilitating implementation as well as providing input for policy evaluation and reform based on evidence of success.

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Conclusions

Men's involvement in maternal and child health is important for achieving positive nutrition outcomes. However, men's involvement in maternal and child health should be carefully designed to ensure that it does not perpetuate or reinforce gender inequalities. Men's gender equity too should not be overlooked as it is an essential component of gender equality. By involving men in nutrition it is possible to break the vicious cycle of under-nutrition that undermines development efforts.

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