

## GENDER EQUALITY IN CO-OPERATIVES: A CASE OF SELECTED AGRICULTURAL AND MARKETING CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN MALAWI

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### ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has been a shout in so many aspects in the World and much more intense in the developing economies due to cultures and scramble for resources. Agricultural and Marketing Co-operative Societies (AMCOS) exist worldwide and provide essential services which would otherwise be not affordable by small holder agriculturalists. As such they have managed to serve the poor people especially in rural areas who are less powerful to compete in the agricultural markets. It is well established that the performance and development of AMCOS depends on the quality of participation of its members. The fact that AMCOS are made up of ordinary members, board members and employees, all with varying skills and experiences, they hold the potential of being equally dominated and managed. Despite of AMCOS importance and potential for better social economic development, in most African countries, still they are experiencing low level of participation for women in the associations. This study therefore intended to examine gender equality in AMCOS using experiences of the selected AMCOS in Malawi. Due to traditions holding back women in business participation, lack of information as well support from their life partners has been found to be causes of non participation and hence equality in management of the AMCOS in Malawi. More advocacies on women empowerment and support in co-operatives are recommended.

**Keywords:** AMCOS, Gender Equality, Malawi.

### INTRODUCTION

Agricultural and Marketing Co-operative Societies (AMCOS) as a form of cooperatives are socio-economic systems having two most important implications. One is that, AMCOS are a movement and second they are an economic system. AMCOS as a movement is an association of persons who have voluntarily joined together to achieve a common end through the formation of a democratically controlled organization. For that matter, principally it has certain values & philosophy (Sonny and Saluja, 2013). It is managed with some universally accepted principles which make it a balancing factor between capitalistic and socialistic system of economy. Another element of cooperative philosophy is the sharing of profit in proportion to the use of services by the member. AMCOS as an economic system is a business enterprise aiming at the achievement of common economic interests of the members which competes in the market and is managed professionally.

Agricultural Marketing Co-operative Societies (AMCOS) in Malawi are among institutions which have the potential to contribute to the transformation of agriculture necessary for sustaining economic growth. They have played an important role in helping small-scale farmers to cope with competitive and fluctuating markets and high transaction costs and to achieve economies of scale, through bulk selling, in order to meet market demand (Clegg, 2006). AMCOS have also ensured that farmers are easily identified by traders and this has

helped to reduce the cost of market search, because it easily links them to the traders (Holloway, Nicholson, Delgado, Staal, & Ehui, 2000). Agricultural Marketing Co-operative Societies have the aptitude to market produce and services for small holder farmers and voicing concerns of the voiceless poor smallholder farmers in the policy making structures. Other potentials of AMCOS include: Innovations to improve member incomes and benefits, social welfare facilitation, employment creation, facilitation of financial services, facilitation of inputs supply, education and training as well as enhancing women participation (Sizya, 2001).

### **Gender Equality in AMCOS**

AMCOS are demonstrably powerful vehicles of economic, social and political empowerment for women. As group-based ventures, AMCOS bring to their members the benefits of joining forces with others. Apart from being able to access economies of scale as providers of services, producers or as consumers, participating in AMCOS as a member, elected leader or manager also brings with it enhanced status and voice in the community and society in general. Furthermore, due to the values, including equality and equity, solidarity, social responsibility, and caring for others, on which they are based and principles that they embody voluntary and open membership, democratic control, economic participation, education, and concern for the community their mandate places cooperatives in a unique position to not only further decent work overall, but also to ensure and promote gender equality (ILO, 2015). On the other hand, evidence points that there is under-representation of women in the movement, meaning opportunities for advancing women's empowerment are being minimal or missed in AMCOS.

Attaining equality of opportunity between men and women is a long process and cooperatives in all parts of the world still have a long way to go before they are able to claim that they are truly gender responsive. However, the very fact that cooperatives, as opposed to other types of enterprise, have to pay attention to the needs and interests of their members, gives them a special role to play. Members, clients and customers very often perceive cooperatives as having a high regard for business ethics, therein included equality issues, so in order to attract new members and loyal clients and customers, cooperatives should take advantage of this (The Cooperative Commission of the UK Report, 2001). Based on the above facts this study present how gender equality is applied in representation using selected AMCOS in Malawi.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted in Kasungu and Mchinji districts. Kasungu District lies approximately 100 km to the North- East of the capital Lilongwe. It is located between Latitude 13.02°S and Longitude 33.48°E. Mchinji District begins approximately 50 kilometers to the west of the capital Lilongwe and borders Zambia. The choice of the areas was because the districts have larger number of members who join the AMCOS compared to other districts in the country. Furthermore, the choice of the two districts enables researcher to compare gender equality of the AMCOS and no research has been done in the districts concerning gender equality. A descriptive research design was adopted. Descriptive or cross-sectional studies aim at providing a systematic description that is factual and as accurate as possible (Amin, 2005).

Kasungu district composed of Lisasadzi, Chipala, Chamama and Chulu AMCOS where as Mchinji district is composed of Chiosya, Msitu, Mikundi, Kalulu, Mlonyeni and Mkanda.

The sampling units for the study were the AMCOS. Thus, the study populations were the AMCOS offices in the two districts and the districts being purposively selected. In Kasungu district, three associations of Chamama, Lisasadzi and Kasungu were randomly selected. Likewise, in Mchinji Mkanda, Chiosya and Mchinji AMCOS were randomly selected. With these sampled AMCOS, it was possible to compare levels of equity in various representation organs in AMCOS. Further, women who are yet to become AMCOS members were also contacted so as to establish reasons for their non participation.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were obtained using semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. Four focus group discussions were conducted one from each study area in order to capture information that was not captured using survey tools. Data was analysed through descriptive statistics.

### Presentation of Findings

In order to assess the equality issues, it is important to know membership situation in the farmers' organizations. In this category, the researchers studied the status of members in terms of gender i.e. male and female. This was necessary because sustainability can be achieved if there is proper combination between male and female in the whole association, executive committees and other sub committees within the association.

### Membership in AMCOS

**Table 1: Membership in the Associations**

AMCOS	Number of Men	Number of Women	Total	Women Percentage
Kasungu	7875	3375	11250	30.00
Lisasadzi	2000	1600	3600	44.44
Chamama	2250	750	3000	25.00
Mchinji	897	496	1393	35.61
Mkanda	204	199	403	49.38
Chiosya	172	128	300	42.67

**Source: Computed from collected data**

Basing on Table 1 above, it was revealed that the number of women is relatively low compared to the number of men in all the six AMCOS. It was revealed that Women percentage for Kasungu head office, Lisasadzi, Chamama, Mchinji head office, Mkanda and Chiosya was 30%, 44%, 25%, 35%, 49% and 42% respectively. This result implies that percentage of women representation in the association was low below 50 % is all AMCOS.

### Membership in Executive Committees

**Table 2: Membership in the Executive Committees**

AMCOS	Number of Men	Number of Women	Total	Women Percentage
Kasungu	9	3	12	25
Lisasadzi	4	1	5	20
Chamama	3	2	5	40
Mchinji	10	2	12	16
Mkanda	2	3	5	60
Chiosya	7	3	10	30

**Source: Computed from collected data**

The results above (Table 2), shows that, the percentage of women in executive committees for Kasungu, Mchinji head offices, Lisasadzi, and Chiosya was less than 30%, except for Mkanda AMCOS which has 60%. This implies that women are less represented even in executive committees.

### Other committees

**Table 3: Membership in the other committees**

AMCOS	Name of committees	Number of men	Number of women	Total	Women percentage
Kasungu	Gender and HIV	5	7	12	58.33
	Finance	8	4	12	33.33
	Transport	12	4	16	25.00
	Marketing	8	4	12	33.33
	Farm shop	8	4	12	33.33

Source: Research data 2015

The findings revealed the following:

The number of women was found to be low even in other sub committees. However, the results showed that when it came to gender committees, the number of men and women was equal or, in rare cases, the number of women appeared to be more than the number of men. An example of such committees is found in Kasungu AMCOS for Gender and HIV.

**Table 4: Reasons for Low Women Representation in AMCOS**

Reason	Kasungu	Lisadzi	Chamama	Mchinji	Mkanda	Chiosya
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Traditional believes	47	52	53	65	50	50
lack of access to resources	25	25	20	11	21	18
Inadequate information and awareness	15	13	16	15	17	17
Lack of support from their male counterparts	13	10	11	9	12	15
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field data

The traditional role of women in society is the main cause of minimal women participation in AMCOS as it was reported by the majority of respondents in all studied association. The prevalent misconception that woman's reproductive and domestic responsibilities constitute is their main role. This minimises women participation in AMCOS business. It restricts their choice of economic occupations and opportunities and is the root cause of their heavy work burden and time constraint. This is in line with the findings of Nippierd (2014) who noted that carrying out house hold activities as mothers and home-makers often leaves little time or energy to attend meetings or carry out other additional tasks.

Limited access to resources is a second major cause of women on non participation in AMCOS. This is so because in many African countries women lack access to land, credit or production inputs. Women level of education is lower than men's and their business

experience and knowledge of cooperatives is very often limited. Because they are unable to participate in cooperatives, they are excluded from the benefits that cooperatives and their support structures often provide to their members such as credit, education and training, production inputs, technology and marketing outlets. For that case it is difficult for them to change their predicament as they do not have access to resources.

Inadequate information and awareness among women was also reported, it was shown in the studied AMCOS that women do not have access to information to enable them see the opportunities as well as the importance of being a member of particular AMCOS. Furthermore, the level of awareness among women was also noted to be very low as compared to men. There was misconception that AMCOS business is men oriented than women business.

## **CONCLUSION**

Generally women account for over 50% of the population and a high percentage of the active population, there is high costs for AMCOS to deprive itself of 50% of its target clientele. Women are good ambassadors not to their children but also to members of numerous groups that they influence positively. One of the constraints for fully participation of women in AMCOS is the traditional perspective of the African cultures which links women to family care-taking than other than business. The situation is even amplified and manifest in lack of access to resources, inadequate information and awareness about how to participate in AMCOS and in some cases support from their male counterparts is weak. As a result, women are always left behind. Since the agricultural sector employs more people in Malawi as it is in most parts of Africa, a holistic and sound management practices which equalizes gender is imperative for running the associations so that the end results in business terms benefits both men and women.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

AMCOS are widely spread and involve a lot of people in Malawi for which case; they should spell out in broad terms the gender policy in their by-laws. Furthermore, campaigns and advocacy on women empowerment is critical to first, opening a re-way for women to participate in the marketing of what they have participated in producing through their involvement in agricultural activities; but second, to have a better chance of owning and using what is earned out of sales for the produce.

It is difficult and a long process but very possible that cultures can be flexed and sometimes changed to fit and match times. Ownership and access to resources, counterparts' supports and women being given an equal chance to information requires positive intensions of the communities to support women participation in AMCOS.

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