



# Family Planning and Gender Equality: Paving the Road to Prosperity in Malawi



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## Introduction

With a strong foundation of government commitment and leadership, and guided by the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II (MGDS II), Malawi stands ready to achieve its Vision 2020 for growth. However, continued progress and a successful transition to the post-2015 development agenda will require the collective efforts of all ministries to put evidence into practise and make sound strategic investments.

Family planning is one such investment: one that is recognised as a “best buy” given its high ratio of benefits to costs. Likewise, evidence shows that gender equality and the empowerment of women are fundamental cornerstones of development.

Key family planning and gender equality indicators show that Malawi has made important strides over the past couple of decades. For example, contraceptive prevalence has increased dramatically, from 13 percent in 1992 to 46 percent in 2010, well above the overall rate of 26 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup> And in the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index, which highlights differences in access to resources between males and females, Malawi has risen from a rank of 87 in 2007 to 39 in 2013, putting it in the top one-third of included countries.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these successes, there is still room for improvement. Unmet need for family planning remains high: One in four married women ages 15 to 49 would like to space or limit births but is not using any method of family planning.<sup>3</sup> Gender inequities also pervade Malawi’s social fabric. Recent analyses show significant disparities between Malawian men and women, particularly regarding economic and political power.<sup>4</sup> In a more-pointed illustration, despite laudable progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Malawi is likely to miss three gender-related targets: MDG 2—universal primary education, MGD 3—gender equality and empowerment of women, and MDG 5—maternal health.

Strategic investments in family planning and gender equality are well aligned with Malawi’s Gender Equality Act and the mandate of the National Gender Machinery. They also play an important role in optimising other development investments and spurring national growth.

## The Road to Development and Prosperity

In this policy brief, four cross-cutting issues are used to illustrate how strategic investments in family planning and gender equality can accelerate Malawi’s progress on the road to development and prosperity:

- **Education and productivity.**
- **Health and nutrition.**
- **Agricultural productivity and food security.**
- **Environmental sustainability.**

## Education and Productivity

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Education, particularly secondary education, is key to achieving greater productivity, innovation, and earnings. In Malawi, only 65 percent of the population over age 15 is literate. And while 85 percent of primary school-aged children are enrolled in primary school, only 13 percent of those in the appropriate age group are enrolled in secondary school.<sup>5</sup> To reap the full rewards of education, more children must be given the opportunity to complete secondary and even tertiary school.

Lack of money is an important reason for never attending or dropping out of school in Malawi, perpetuating a cycle of poverty because children with minimal education will likely have lower earning potential as adults.<sup>6</sup>

Family planning can help break this cycle. When couples use family planning, they can achieve their desires for a well-spaced and smaller family. Not only will having smaller families afford women greater opportunities to participate in the labour force, but it will also allow limited household resources to stretch further, enabling parents to invest in their children's education and future.<sup>7</sup> Each additional year of schooling can increase individual earnings by 10 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Girls face particular challenges to completing education, such as early marriage and childbearing. In Malawi, one out of every two girls will be married by her 18th birthday and one in every four adolescents ages 15 to 19 has begun childbearing.<sup>9</sup>

Family planning can help adolescents delay pregnancy to a healthy age, allowing them to stay in school, to work, and to achieve greater social and economic empowerment. In Malawi, the lifetime cost of adolescent pregnancies is equal to 27 percent of annual gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>10</sup>

By making strategic investments in family planning, Malawi's children can be better-educated and grow into more-productive, financially secure adults. With an additional focus on gender, women can make greater contributions to the workforce and contribute to improvements in economic growth.<sup>11</sup>

## Health and Nutrition

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A healthy population forms the backbone of a vibrant and productive society. The following indicators illustrate some of the gaps in health in Malawi:

- Every two hours, a woman dies from causes related to pregnancy or childbirth.<sup>12</sup>
- One in eight infants is born with low birth weight, indicating poor nutritional status and an increased likelihood of dying during childhood.<sup>13</sup>
- Stunting—when children are too short for their age—is a key indicator of malnutrition, and nearly half of all children under 5 are stunted.<sup>14</sup>
- Among adults ages 15 to 49, 11 percent are infected with HIV/AIDS.<sup>15</sup>

Although the causes of these poor health outcomes are complex, family planning can be an important part of the solution. Family planning can ensure adequate spacing between the births of two children. Research shows that when births are well-spaced, a baby's chances of having adequate birth weight and of surviving increase dramatically.<sup>16</sup> The odds of stunting during childhood also decrease when births are optimally spaced.<sup>17</sup>

In Malawi, almost half of all pregnancies are unplanned—either wanted later or not at all—and high-risk pregnancies among groups such as adolescents are common.<sup>18</sup> Family planning can help prevent such pregnancies and, in turn, prevent poor nutrition outcomes at birth, such as preterm birth, low birth weight, and small for gestational age. Reducing unplanned pregnancies also results in fewer mothers dying during childbearing, an important goal given Malawi's high rate of maternal deaths.<sup>19</sup>

Social norms and gender inequities often result in males and females not participating equally in decisions about ideal family size or the use of contraception. This includes the use of condoms, which can not only prevent unintended pregnancies but also reduce HIV transmission between partners. These are important issues that require the input of both partners and can further exacerbate gender disparities in health outcomes. For example, in Malawi, more than three times as many females than males are HIV positive.<sup>20</sup>

By integrating health, nutrition, and family planning policies and programmes, Malawi can improve its overall health status. Further attention to gender can yield even greater benefits, and might include, for example, programming that empowers women to negotiate condom use or that engages men in the uptake of family planning services.

## Agricultural Productivity and Food Security

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Agriculture is the backbone of the Malawian economy, accounting for about 30 percent of GDP. This sector also contributes 75 percent to foreign exchange earnings and employs about 80 percent of the total workforce.<sup>21</sup> Thus, optimising agricultural productivity is a top national priority.

In Malawi, one in three people experiences extremely low food security, and an additional 10 percent have low or marginal food security.<sup>22</sup> As the population grows, the demand for food, as well as the vulnerability to hunger, will increase.

Since unplanned pregnancy is an important driver of population growth, family planning can help slow the pace of such growth. The number of children preferred by couples in Malawi has decreased in the past few decades. Today, Malawian men and women report that, ideally, they would like to have four children. However, on average, women in Malawi have six children.<sup>23</sup>

Helping couples achieve their desired family size can reduce the demand for food and ease food insecurity. Further, it can reduce strains on resources such as land that can lead to high food prices, and poor-quality or low agricultural output.<sup>24</sup> When families are smaller, household heads can better manage their resources and access the food they need to keep their families healthy and well-nourished. And when women farmers have their desired number of children, they can spend less time in pregnancy, breastfeeding, and child care; and more time providing farm labour and supervision and learning new agricultural techniques.<sup>25</sup>

Attention to gender is important because women in Malawi perform the bulk of agricultural labour; however, due to entrenched gender inequities in agriculture, female-managed plots in Malawi are 25 percent to 38 percent less productive than male-managed plots.<sup>26</sup> Women farmers generally have less access than males

## Narrowing the Gender Gap in Agriculture

Narrowing the entrenched gap in agriculture can help Malawi improve agricultural productivity and national development. *Levelling the Field: Improving Opportunities for Women Farmers in Africa*, a report by the World Bank and the ONE Campaign, highlights the major drivers of the gender gap and proposes 10 policy priorities to combat these drivers (see table).

Malawi can use this guidance today to sow seeds for a more-equitable and productive tomorrow. By adapting and integrating gender-sensitive agricultural policies to meet the country's particular needs and context, Malawi will be at the forefront of an agricultural movement bound for great success.

### Policy Priorities for Narrowing the Gender Gap in Agriculture

DRIVER OF THE GENDER GAP	POLICY PRIORITY
Land	Strengthen women's land rights.
Labour	Strengthen women's access to hired labour. Enhance women's use of tools and equipment that reduce the amount of labour required on the farm. Provide community-based child-care centres.
Non labour Inputs	Encourage women farmers to use more of and higher-quality fertiliser. Increase women's use of improved seeds.
Information	Tailor extension services to women's needs, and leverage social networks to spread agricultural knowledge.
Access to Markets	Promote women's cultivation of high-value/ cash crops. Facilitate women's access to and effective participation in markets.
Human Capital	Raise education levels of adult female farmers.

**Source:** Adapted from Michael O'Sullivan et al., *Levelling the Field: Improving Opportunities for Women Farmers in Africa*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2014), accessed at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2014/01/19243625/levelling-field-improving-opportunities-women-farmers-africa>, on June 2, 2014.

to improved seeds, fertilisers, mechanical tools, credit, and extension services.<sup>27</sup> In general, they have also completed fewer years of education than men, and face greater challenges when it comes to hiring or performing labour, accessing markets, and producing high-value or export crops.<sup>28</sup> In addition, land tenure policies tend to restrict women's land ownership, and what they do own is usually smaller and of poorer quality.<sup>29</sup> Women farmers also face different challenges than men due to increased child care and household responsibilities.<sup>30</sup>

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, opening up women's access to the resources required to produce, process and market food products could increase yields on women's farms by up to 30 percent, raising total agricultural production by as much as 4 percent and reducing the number of hungry people by 12 percent to 17 percent.<sup>31</sup> And when women have secure rights to land, this increases their status, access to resources, and decisionmaking power. As a result, household food security and nutrition improve because women's choices about the types of crops to grow, and the quantity and quality of foods to purchase, are often aimed toward improving the health and well-being of their families.<sup>32</sup> Increasing availability and access to other resources such as child-care centres can also contribute to increasing women's productivity.

By investing in family planning to slow the pace of population growth and ensuring that women farmers have equitable access to needed resources, Malawi can increase agricultural production and improve food security.

## Environmental Sustainability

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Environmental degradation negatively affects agriculture, health and human livelihoods. Thus, protection of natural resources is essential to fostering strong social and economic development. Malawi is currently facing many environmental challenges including climate change and other threats to sustainability, such as decreased soil fertility and erosion, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, declining water quality and availability, and air pollution.<sup>33</sup>

Since large, dense populations put tremendous strain on the environment and its resources, population growth is an important driver of environmental degradation. Recent research shows that lowering fertility is among the most tractable options for countries such as Malawi to manage and adapt to climate change and other environmental crises.<sup>34</sup>

Women are often most affected by environmental degradation given their roles as farmers; caregivers; and providers of food, water and firewood. Yet they also lack the resources to respond to its effects and the power to influence action on environmental issues.

The *2011 Human Development Report* states that "greater equality between men and women and within populations may have transformative potential in advancing

## Family Planning and Marine Conservation

Malawi can learn from the successes of other countries. In Velondriake, Madagascar, a recent project shows that integrating family planning into conventional conservation programmes can benefit both public health and the environment, and ultimately improve social and economic development.

Velondriake is a locally managed marine area where much of the population is poor and depends on natural resources for food and income. This leads to considerable environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity.

Recognising the link between population pressures and conservation efforts, communities in Velondriake worked with Blue Ventures, an international marine conservation nongovernmental organisation, to develop a population, health and environment programme. To this end, three family planning clinics were opened in the area to provide sexual and reproductive health services alongside ongoing conservation and research activities.

Prior to the start of the project, Velondriake faced several sexual and reproductive health challenges. For example, condoms were only available in one central village, misinformation about family planning was widespread, teenage pregnancy was common, and families were typically larger than what couples desired.

During the first three years of the programme's implementation, contraceptive uptake increased considerably, averting more than 355 unwanted pregnancies and 88 unsafe abortions, and resulting in cost savings of at least US\$50,097. In turn, this achievement prevented a 15-fold increase in Velondriake's ecological footprint—substantially fewer environmental resources such as coral reefs and fish would need to be exploited to support the community.

**Source:** Alasdair Harris et al., "Integrating Family Planning Service Provision Into Community-Based Marine Conservation," *Oryx*, no. 46 (2012): 179-86.

environmental sustainability." As such, the report emphasises the importance of ensuring greater participation by women in decisionmaking at all levels, from community-based management of natural resources to drafting national policies.<sup>35</sup> Although women hold many top positions in the Malawi government, they are still underrepresented in national parliament, holding only 22 percent of all seats.<sup>36</sup>

Family planning and gender equality can play an important role in helping Malawi improve the environment and secure its valuable natural resources. Two key steps include expanding access to family planning information and services, and ensuring the meaningful participation of women in decisionmaking about environmental issues—at the community and government levels.



# Implications of Investing in Family Planning and Gender Equality

By expanding access to family planning services, Malawian couples can avoid unplanned pregnancies and achieve the family size and spacing they desire. The effects of such a shift in fertility can improve social and economic well-being at the household level. And it can also positively affect various aspects of national development, including education, health, agriculture and the environment—ultimately leading to a boost in national economic growth. This progress can be accelerated by reducing gender inequities; and ensuring that men and women have equal voice, agency, and participation within all areas of programming and policy.

Together, these strategic investments in family planning and gender equality can accelerate Malawi's progress on the road to development and prosperity.

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# For More Information about Malawi's Population

[Malawi's Pathway to a Demographic Dividend](#) is a policy brief that explains the connection between the demographic dividend and investments in voluntary family planning; highlights Malawi's particular challenge in achieving a demographic dividend and the need for immediate action; and prioritises actions and investments in health, education and gender equity; as well as subsequent economic policies needed to open and take advantage of this window of opportunity.

[www.populationmalawi.org](http://www.populationmalawi.org); [www.prb.org/pdf14/malawi-demographic-dividend-2014.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf14/malawi-demographic-dividend-2014.pdf)

[A Vision for the Health and Well-Being of Malawi's Young People](#) Together, this policy brief and its focus point summaries serve to inform policies and programmes that invest in the well-being and livelihoods of Malawi's youth. Ensuring that education, health and employment systems can meet the needs of today's youth and absorb even larger numbers of young people in the future will help support more sustainable development. These investments will not only protect the health and well-being of young people and equip them with the knowledge and skills to positively shape their families and communities, but will also lead to greater social and economic development at the national level.

[www.populationmalawi.org](http://www.populationmalawi.org); [www.prb.org/pdf14/malawi-youth-report-2014.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf14/malawi-youth-report-2014.pdf)

[The Malawi Population Data Sheet 2012](#) provides information for 20 population, health, and environment indicators. Selected indicators are compared over time, and among regions, wealth quintiles, and education levels.

[www.populationmalawi.org](http://www.populationmalawi.org); [www.nsomalawi.mw](http://www.nsomalawi.mw); [www.prb.org/pdf12/malawi-datasheet-2012.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf12/malawi-datasheet-2012.pdf)

[Why Population Matters to Malawi's Development](#) examines selected priority issues addressed Malawi's Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) and their relationship with rapid population growth. For Malawi to achieve its full set of growth and development goals, it must address population growth, and family planning is a key strategy toward achieving these goals. This primer provides information on the relationship among population growth, family planning, and seven of the MGDS priorities. Each section offers facts about specific priorities, the relationship of the issue to population growth, and suggested actions for mobilizing support.

[www.prb.org/pdf12/malawi-population-matters.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf12/malawi-population-matters.pdf)

["Malawi: Investing in Our Future Now"](#) is a multimedia presentation that highlights the advances Malawi has made and the challenges it still faces as it strives to become a middle-income country. Exploring the impact of rapid population growth at the national and the family level, the presentation underscores the importance of addressing rapid population growth and meeting unmet need for family planning to reduce poverty and achieve national development goals.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3AQX0egt0o&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3AQX0egt0o&feature=youtu.be)

**Coming Soon!** A Malawi youth population data sheet 2014, pocket fact sheet and discussion guide, and two multimedia presentations, *Carrying Our Nation Forward: Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health for Young People*; and *Malawians Together: Faith and Family Planning for Development*.

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