

Reimagining Women's Empowerment and Motherhood: Exploring Local Definitions and Development Measurement in Central and Southern Malawi

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by

Karoline Becker

St Antony's College

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Table of Contents

Abstract ..... **iv**

Acknowledgements ..... **vi**

List of Tables ..... **x**

List of Figures ..... **xi**

List of Abbreviations ..... **xii**

1. Introduction **1**

1.1. Conceptualising Women's Empowerment and Agency 12

1.2. Introducing Empowerment into Development Practice - Ideas and Challenges 19

1.3. Debates Around Motherhood 36

1.4. Conceptual Framework 57

2. Women in Central and Southern Malawi **61**

2.1. Matriliny and Motherhood 64

2.2. Agriculture in Malawi: Food Production, Gender Norms and Women Farmers 71

3. Methodology **82**

3.1. A Feminist Epistemological Approach 83

3.2. Qualitative Research 87

3.3. Mixed Methods Research 100

3.4. Ethical Considerations and Challenges 109

3.5. My Positionality 116

4. Towards a Conceptualisation of Motherhood **123**

4.1. Practice 126

4.2. Discourse 130

4.3. Social Identity and Discussion 139

4.4. Conclusion 163

5. Empowerment and Motherhood **167**

5.1. What do Women Consider Empowering? - Agency as Resistance 168

5.2. Agency as the Desire to Take Care of Children 185

5.3. Is Becoming a Mother Empowering? 188

5.4. Rupture Between Practice and Discourse of Motherhood 200
5.5. Conclusion 212

6. A Mixed Methods Approach to Measuring Empowerment: Pro-WEAI Findings and Women's Own Experiences 216
6.1. Theoretical Framework of the pro-WEAI 218
6.2. Sample Characteristics 223
6.3. Pro-WEAI Results 225
6.4. The Twelve Pro-WEAI Indicators - Adequacies and Contribution to Disempowerment 228
6.5. The Twelve Pro-WEAI Indicators - Triangulation with Qualitative Findings 232
6.6. Conclusion 263

7. Conclusion 270

Bibliography 284

Appendix 306

Abstract

Questions about motherhood and empowerment are cross-cutting and of universal importance for women's identities and responsibilities. Using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and mixed methods analysis with the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI), I explore how mothers in Central and Southern Malawi negotiate motherhood and empowerment within intersecting social, cultural, and economic structures, and how these negotiations are represented in development practice.

Approaching motherhood through theories that prioritise women's lived experiences and understandings rather than dominant discourses, I conceptualise motherhood as a relational, evolving practice rather than a fixed or universal category. Through everyday mothering practices and the formation of maternal identities, women navigate and reinterpret expectations of caregiving and moral responsibility within their specific contexts.

Building on theories of women's empowerment that move beyond agency framed solely as resistance to patriarchal structures, I understand agency as taking multiple forms depending on women's circumstances, including adaptation, negotiation, and strategic enactment within prescribed roles. I argue that motherhood has empowering implications that emerge from within this space of agency, while also holding the potential to extend into resistance, particularly through collective agency enacted in shared caregiving and assistance networks.

I then examine qualitative findings alongside pro-WEAI results to assess both the context and measurement of women's empowerment in development practice and to evaluate whether this aligns with women's own conceptions and lived realities. While several of the 12 pro-WEAI indicator domains resonate with women's priorities, their measurement design often obscures important nuances, particularly relational dynamics that shape whether empowering processes can

occur. Moreover, the measure does not capture motherhood as a central dimension of empowerment or its influence on pro-WEAI domains.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative insights, I highlight the need for contextually grounded understandings of motherhood and empowerment, and more nuanced approaches to their measurement in development practice.

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List of Tables

Table 1 Rounds of Research.....91

Table 2 Individual and Household Characteristics of Respondents.....223

Table 3 Pro-WEAI Results.....226

Table 4 Percentage of Indicator Adequacy.....229

List of Figures

Figure 1 Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework 22

Figure 2 Kabeer's Three Domains of Empowerment 26

Figure 3 Map of Northern, Central, and Southern Malawi 62

Figure 4 Map of Study Area Districts.....63

Figure 5 Pro-WEAI 219

Figure 6 Indicator Contributions to Disempowerment.....231

List of Abbreviations

3DE:	Three Domains of Empowerment Score
CAPI:	Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing
CBCC:	Community-Based Childcare Centre
CUREC:	Central University Research Ethics Committee
DPhil:	Doctor of Philosophy
FGD:	Focus Group Discussion
FISP:	Farm Input Subsidy Programme
GDI:	Gender Development Index
GEM:	Gender Empowerment Measure
GHI:	Global Hunger Index
GPI:	Gender Parity Index
GVH:	Group Village Head
HUMA:	Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town
IFPRI:	International Food Policy Research Institute
IPV:	Intimate Partner Violence
MCP:	Malawi Congress Party
MPhil:	Master of Philosophy
NEEF:	National Economic Empowerment Fund
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGSE:	National Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy
OPHI:	Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative
Pro-WEAI:	Project Level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index
RAI:	Relative Autonomy Index
TA:	Traditional Authority

UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development
WEAI:	Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index
WFP:	World Food Programme
cRCT:	Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial

1. Introduction

Martha[1] and I are sitting on the front porch of her house, about half an hour's drive from Zomba in Southern Malawi. A large mango tree, whose trunk also serves as the post for her laundry line, stretches overhead, creating a roof of shade. The late winter sun filters through its leaves, warming us after a cold morning typical of the mountainous region at the foot of the Zomba Plateau. Today, I picked her up from her morning shift at the guesthouse where she works, and now we share a lunch of tomato and fish relish that Martha has cooked, along with the *Nsima* prepared from the maize meal I brought. Her four-year-old daughter half-joins us, though she is mostly distracted by play with the neighbours' children and with her brother's children, whose family lives on the same plot. We eat quickly, because soon the *Destiny's Girls* will arrive for their Tuesday meeting under the mango tree in front of Martha's house.

I met Martha three months ago at the guesthouse where she works as guest manager, and where I stayed for several weeks when I first arrived in Malawi. Martha lived in a community near Zomba, and I stayed at my rented home at the outskirts of the town. We are of a similar age and soon became friends. I visited her often. In the beginning, our conversations ranged across the myriad topics two women share when getting to know one another and coming from vastly different cultures. Soon, I told her the reason I was in Malawi: to learn more about the lives of women - especially mothers – in the wider sense of how they navigate their day-to-day lives, what wishes and desires they hold, what meaning they ascribe to motherhood, and to explore how their lives are influenced by the presence of international organisations. More and more, Martha told me about her life: how she manages a full-time job, supports her own family as well as her two brothers' families financially, and raises her four-year-old daughter. Our conversations moved

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

between her daily struggles and her desires, the opportunities she wished to create for herself, and the changes she hoped for.

One day, Martha exclaimed with excitement: 'You need to come and see what I do with my *Destiny's Girls*!' When I looked at her in puzzlement, she explained that *Destiny's Girls* is a group she founded, composed of mothers who had left school due to their pregnancies, and whom she now teaches, primarily in English. Martha recounted that the initiative began when she shared with a friend her desire to go to college and, after graduating with a diploma in hospitality, to secure more stable and better-paid employment. To prepare, she wanted to strengthen her English, already fairly advanced as she had completed Form 4 (secondary school), and began buying English books. Said friend expressed interest in joining, and soon others followed. Within two months, nine women had joined; today, the group has grown to 19 members. They now meet three times per week. While the focus remains on learning English - for some members with the goal of re-entering formal education, others in pursuit of more remunerative work - the meetings also extend beyond. The women lend each other money, exchange advice, and discuss family planning. Martha stressed that family planning, in this context, was not about discouraging childbirth but about exercising control over the timing and number of children, so as to align reproductive choices with broader life aspirations and the ability to take care of their families. That afternoon, when the group members and their children assembled in front of Martha's house, they began their meeting, as always, with dancing and the singing of their group anthem: "To have a child is not a sin, to have a child is not a failure." Meeting this group of mothers in June 2022 was a crucial moment in my research in Malawi. It emblematised ways in which women actively claim agency over their lives, the ways they seek to reconcile this with their lived experiences of motherhood, and how motherhood itself can create important spaces of solidarity and collective action.

Women in Malawi continue to face significant disadvantages embedded in present-day cultural norms around gender. These norms position women primarily as caretakers, constrain their agency, reinforce inequalities through gendered divisions of labour that grant men far greater freedoms, and prescribe pathways of limited education and early marriage that often curtail women's opportunities (Wilson & Kachipande, 2020).

In this context and thinking about women's empowerment and motherhood in Central and Southern Malawi, due to their cross-cutting and universal nature, there are vast volumes of literature that I could draw on to make sense of these concepts. At the same time, there are highly particular ways in which scholars in different regions have thought about womanhood, motherhood, agency, or empowerment in different settings. When grassroots feminist scholars from South Asia formatively conceptualised 'women's empowerment' in the mid 1980s, their main inspiration was radical ideas of gender equality through approaches of structural change to fight women's oppression. Often, the focus here is on the exercise of different levels of agency, understood as expanding women's ability to make life choices. This understanding of agency entails the resistance against subordinate gender roles and the transformation of them (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1999).

Many of the women, considered by these grassroots scholars when they conceptualised women's empowerment, were mothers. Within their framework of empowerment, motherhood is regarded as a space preassigned on the basis of women's gender that has restrictive implications (Kabeer, 1999). While this is true to some extent, what is missing in those considerations is, that the experiences of motherhood of many women are often closely intertwined with their conceptions of empowerment and, in fact, often promote them (Amadiume, 1997; Arnfred, 2011; Oyěwùmí, 2000).

During the abovementioned afternoon when I met the *Destiny's Girls*, this became particularly evident to me. *Destiny's Girls* emerged from a group of mothers who came together to support one another in the multiple roles they fulfil in their lives. The sense of collective agency that emerged from this space promoted women's aspirations for education, livelihood, or reproductive autonomy, serving as a powerful lever to expand their capacity to act within and against persistent structural constraints. At the same time, these aspirations were closely linked to their desire to have the capacities to perform their mothering roles and to be able to raise their children well.

While this encounter highlighted the interconnectedness between motherhood and empowerment through collective agency that can indeed entail a sense of resistance, this represents only one pathway. Within the space of motherhood, other pathways with empowering potential do not necessarily equate to resistance against patriarchal norms (Amadiume, 1997; Arnfred, 2011; Oyěwùmí, 2000), as suggested by prominent definitions of empowerment (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1999). Rather, they require a more nuanced understanding of how individuals exercise agency within oppressive spaces, and how women perhaps inhabit norms in order to navigate and strategically manipulate them (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001).

Thus, for my purposes of conceptualising empowerment, I am conceiving of agency as an analytical category that goes beyond acting through direct resistance, and instead regards its exercise as relational and negotiated within societal structures (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994).

What is crucial for my study is attention to two strands of thinking that grapple with the nexus between empowerment and motherhood and that stand in an ongoing theoretical debate about motherhood as a possible means for empowerment. In one dominant strand drawn from Western feminisms, in the vein of Adrienne Rich (1976), Sara Ruddick (1989), and second-wave feminists, it is argued that the experience of motherhood within Western society is tightly bound up with patriarchal expectations and restrictive implications. By contrast, a strand coming from African

feminisms[2] highlights the integral connections between motherhood and women's identity, activism and power. I will return to these theoretical understandings and debates when analysing my findings.

At the same time, there is little scholarly literature that examines how mothers in specific contexts themselves define and make sense of their lived experiences of motherhood, and how these experiences influence, and, in a reciprocal manner, shape other areas of their lives (Walker, 1995). In addition to this, a nuanced understanding of how women conceptualise the interconnections between motherhood and their own emic[3] understandings of empowerment represents a significant lacuna in the scholarly literature (Amadiume, 1997; Arnfred, 2011; Oyěwùmí, 2000). This opened up the central research question that motivates this thesis:

> *How do women in Central and Southern Malawi experience motherhood, and how do these experiences shape their understandings of empowerment and agency?*

In grappling with this, I set out to answer closely interrelated sub-questions that weave through this thesis:

> *1. How do the social, cultural, and economic factors in these women's lives constitute their experiences of motherhood and their identities as mothers?*

[2] As I will lay out in Chapter 1.3, and following Nnaemeka (1998), I am using the pluralism 'African feminisms', to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of movements, thought and activism, shaped by diverse cultural imperatives, historical contexts, and localised realities. Drawing from her concept, I use the term 'Western feminisms' to acknowledge the pluralism and heterogeneity therein too.

[3] 'Emic' connotes an individual's intrinsic conception of phenomena. In contrary, an 'etic' perspective is concerned with an outsider's scientific classifications (Grenier, 1998).

2. How do these women conceptualise their own empowerment and agency, and which dimension of motherhood do they understand as empowering or disempowering?

To approach these questions, I draw on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) that I conducted between March 2022 and December 2023. Central and Southern Malawi provide a particularly interesting environment in which to study women's empowerment since kin systems are primarily matrilineal. This entails matrilineal land tenure, in which land is inherited through the female lineage (*mbumba*), uxorilocal settlement after marriage, whereby the husband moves to the wife's village, or guardianship of a wife (*nhkoswe)* (Berge et al., 2014; Davison, 1993; Johnson, 2018). These societal structures can enhance women's authority and influence in their communities (Peters, 1997a), or provide support structures for women in times of hardship, such as food scarcity, because they live with their matrilineal kin (Vaughan, 1982). Especially, women's land ownership can foster their decision-making power[4] over income and labour (Djurfeldt et al., 2018).

At the same time, these dynamics intersect with gendered norms that position agricultural decision-making as a predominantly male domain, limiting women's ability to make decisions even about the land they own. Thus, wider social structures can diminish the potential of matrilineal dynamics to translate into women's empowerment. Historically, the British colonial government contributed to the institutionalisation of gender inequality by favouring men in commodity production (Davison, 1993) and by challenging matrilineal land rights (Hirschmann & Vaughan, 1984). This illustrates just some of the historical and socio-economic circumstances that shape

[4] Throughout this thesis, 'decision-making power' refers to an individuals' say in decision-making processes within the household.

present-day gender dynamics and understandings of empowerment and motherhood, situating my research within its broader context.

Alongside these, Malawi's political and social landscape has also been profoundly shaped by external international actors, such as nongovernmental organisations, or multilateral or bilateral donor agencies, particularly since the country's independence in 1964. These actors have advanced development agendas centred on a range of objectives, most prominently poverty reduction, improved agricultural practices, education, health, or humanitarian responses to climate shocks. As a result, Malawi has become a country with a particularly high density of development interventions and has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis (Biruk, 2018).

Within development theory and practice, questions about gender have been highly contested. Radical ideas of gender equality, through approaches of structural change to fight women's oppression, were the main drivers of feminist scholars striving for 'women's empowerment' in the mid-1980s (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1999; Longwe, 1991). Meanwhile, the transformation of these radical ideas into measurable quantitative outcomes of development practice has been critiqued for stripping empowerment of its transformative character (Kabeer, 1999). Feminist scholars further argue that 'much of the development narrative focuses on instrumental gains - what women can do for development rather than what development can do for women' (Cornwall 2016, p. 342).

Concerning women's roles as primary caretakers, development interventions commonly instrumentalise women's empowerment as a means by which to improve the health or nutrition of their children. Within this framing, women's empowerment is often understood as the outcome of trainings on nutrition and agricultural practices that are expected to increase women's decision-making power over resources, which are then allocated towards child well-being. Consequently, a substantial body of research has emerged on the association between women's empowerment and

improved child nutritional outcomes in development practice (Cunningham et al., 2015; Heckert et al., 2019; Malapit et al., 2015; Ruel & Alderman, 2013; Ruel et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2003; Yaya et al., 2020). However, whether these interventions de facto impacted women in an empowering way often remains unexplored (Van den Bold et al., 2013). Van den Bold et al. (2013) synthesised and reviewed studies on this relationship. Since then, little has been written on the topic.

Prior to the development of the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI), in interventions' impact evaluations, the measurement of women's empowerment relied on indirect, and often macro-level proxies that did not directly measure empowerment as experienced by individuals. Qualitative research as part of impact evaluations, which could capture nuances of local meanings and processes of women's empowerment, remained a rare exception (Alkire et al., 2013; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Malapit et al., 2019; Narayan-Parker, 2005; Yount et al., 2019).

To address this gap and the tension between qualitative and quantitative measures, in recent years, the pro-WEAI was developed with the aim of quantitatively and directly measuring women's empowerment in development practice, and to do so in a way that reflects the specific contexts and lives of women studied. It consists of 12 sub-domains designed to capture different dimensions of women's agency and is grounded in both quantitative and qualitative research (Malapit et al., 2019; Yount et al., 2019). This tension between quantitative and qualitative measures of women's empowerment prompts a further research question that I set out to answer in this thesis:

> *To what extent do the areas of quantitative measurement of women's empowerment encompass the understandings and lived experiences of empowerment held by women in Central and Southern Malawi?*

Drawing on the pro-WEAI as a quantitative measure, I conduct a mixed methods study that draws on baseline survey data from an impact evaluation of an integrated nutrition and agriculture development intervention in Central and Southern Malawi. Using this data, I calculate the pro-WEAI and its 12 subdomains. I then compare these quantitative findings with qualitative insights from interviews and FGDs that capture women's own understandings of empowerment and their lived experiences within the pro-WEAI domains.

A Road Map

This thesis is structured as follows. In this introductory Chapter 1, I set the stage for my research questions and lay out the relevant literature that I reviewed. I begin with the origins and early concepts of women's empowerment, highlighting how these were rooted in visions of structural transformation and delving into understandings of power. I proceed with the ideas and challenges of conceptual application and measurement, that emerged when these concepts entered the space of development practice, and show how mothers in particular are often instrumentalised thereby. I present different theoretical perspectives on motherhood as possible means for empowerment and how those widely reflect ongoing debates between strands of thinking in Western feminisms and scholars of African feminisms. From these bodies of literature, I develop my conceptual framework.

The context and geographical setting of this thesis are Ntcheu district in Central Malawi, and Balaka, Machinga, and Zomba districts in Southern Malawi. In Chapter 2, I provide an account of historical and contemporary influences, as well as socio-economic dynamics that shape present-day gender structures in Malawi, and their implications for women's agency and motherhood. My study hinges on the importance of existing matrilineal structures, to which I therefore pay particular attention.

In Chapter 3, I outline my research methodology, where I adopt a feminist epistemological approach. I draw from qualitative methods for my first two empirical chapters, including semi-structured interviews and FGDs. For my third empirical chapter, I apply a mixed methods approach. Here, I introduce the pro-WEAI conceptually and in its technical components. I then describe processes of data collection and analysis. I reflect on ethical considerations and challenges of my study before I discuss my positionality and how this has shaped my work therein.

In the three empirical chapters that follow, I develop my core arguments. In Chapter 4, *Towards a Conceptualisation of Motherhood*, I examine how women in Central and Southern Malawi conceptualise motherhood as a relational and evolving practice rather than a fixed or universal category. Drawing on Walker's (1995) framework of practice, discourse[5], and social identity, I explore how women navigate and reinterpret dominant expectations of caregiving, provision, and moral responsibility. I move beyond theoretical debates that oscillate between viewing motherhood as an oppressive institution of patriarchy on the one hand and as an enabling identity on the other, by foregrounding the complex and situated ways women themselves define what it means to mother and be a mother. I argue that while restrictive discourses often frame motherhood in limiting ways, women actively contest and reshape these norms through their daily practices and the social identities they forge as mothers, workers, and community members. Motherhood emerges as a site of both affirmation and constraint, where women negotiate competing obligations, pursue recognition, and link caregiving with provision and future-making for their children.

[5] Walker's (1995) use of discourse as an analytical category is specific to the topic of motherhood, as I will delineate in Chapter 1.3. More broadly, throughout this thesis, the way I understand 'discourse', draws from Halls' (2001) reading of Michel Foucault's conception of discourse and underlies the assumption that discourses, which represent meaning and knowledge about a particular subject, are produced, regulated and reinforced by a multitude of layers of practices and rules rooted in social and historical formations. Discourse is language and practice whereby together they produce and define the object of knowledge. This then becomes a dominant way of thinking and speaking about a matter that can extend into normalisation and institutionalisation.

In Chapter 5, *Empowerment and Motherhood,* I examine how women in Central and Southern Malawi conceptualise empowerment and its relationship to motherhood. I argue that women's empowerment is deeply contextual and embedded within relationships and existing social structures. Importantly, I focus on what women themselves regard as empowering to understand how abstract concepts such as agency, independence, or collective action are enacted and given meaning in the realities of women's daily lives. I find that, through different channels, motherhood has important empowering implications for women. I argue that agency inherent in empowerment can take multiple shapes, depending on women's positions and circumstances. For some, this entails forms of resistance against restrictive gender norms; for others, agency is enacted within ascribed roles, through adaptation, negotiation, and the strategic use of existing expectations to expand their room for manoeuvre. I found that especially important for empowerment is the space of collective agency, where women mobilise in matrilineal kinship networks, but also through other mutual support groups that form around motherhood.

In Chapter 6, *A Mixed Methods Approach to Measuring Empowerment: Pro-WEAI Findings and Women's Own Experiences*, I assess the extent to which women's own understandings and experiences of empowerment align with how it is measured in the 12 indicator domains of pro-WEAI. To do so, I use a mixed methods approach and compare quantitative survey results with qualitative findings. I argue that while some domains - such as those grappling with women's own income generation, decision-making, or access to resources - resonate with women's priorities, their lived realities often diverge from what the survey captures. The ways women act within these domains, and the experiences and meanings they attach to them, are more complex than the measurement framework allows. For example, I show that joint decision-making can mask underlying power imbalances, and that self-efficacy is shaped less by internal belief than by access to resources, partner support, or the reconciliation of care responsibilities. I argue further that

motherhood, which is central to women's lived experiences of empowerment, remains absent from the framework. This omission demonstrates how standardised quantitative measures risk flattening complex, context-specific, and often gendered dynamics of power and obscuring forms of agency that women articulate in their own terms.

In my concluding Chapter 7, I bring together the findings from the previous chapters and elaborate on the theoretical and methodological contributions of my research. I also offer suggestions for policy-making and point to areas for future research.

In summary, in my study, I investigate the intersecting spaces of motherhood and women's empowerment, and to what extent these are considered within development practice. While my empirical chapters address different pieces of my central research questions, overall, I argue that motherhood plays a crucial role in determining processes of women's empowerment, and that one cannot be missed when thinking about the other. This interconnectedness needs to be recognised by scholars across different feminisms, as well as by policymakers engaged in development practice.

1.1. Conceptualising Women's Empowerment and Agency

To study women's empowerment in the context of Central and Southern Malawi, I use theories that postulate a processual understanding of empowerment. In the following, I elaborate upon such theories, discuss literature surrounding the origins of women's empowerment, how they understand processes of structural change, and what understanding of power they entail.

Grassroots Ideas of Empowerment

Women's empowerment as a concept was first articulated in the mid-1980s amid debates surrounding women's movements from Latin America and South Asia, regarding women's

incorporation into mainstream development practice, primarily through approaches aiming to increase female participation in the economy. Such approaches have been critiqued as 'apolitical' (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994). Srilatha Batliwala's (1993) and Naila Kabeer's (1994) coinciding studies on grassroots women's and development organisations in South Asia provided the first detailed insights into conceptualisations of women's empowerment based on the perceptions and practices of local feminist activists engaged in advancing gender equality. Both cast empowerment as a comprehensive process that transforms a society by challenging gendered power relations. Batliwala (1993) suggested that this ought to happen in three critical and interlinked ways: challenging patriarchal ideologies that justify social inequality; enabling women to gain access to and control over resources; and transforming structures and institutions that perpetuate gender discrimination. Kabeer's (1994) work further enhanced this framework as she recognised that women need to be an active part of this process, which cannot simply be bestowed from the outside. Yet, she stressed that restrictions on 'disempowered' women's lives may be so well-established that it prevents them from knowing other ways of 'doing and being' and from engaging in critical thinking towards their subordinated state and its oppressive implications (Kabeer, 1994). Women might accept this state because the injustice of it might not seem self-evident if the existing state is the 'natural way to be' (Shklar, 1990), whereby social norms and practices conceal the pervasiveness of gender inequality (Kabeer, 1994). This argument was reinforced by studies in other contexts, such as Shaffer (1998), who explored gender inequality in rural Guinea and argued that while women faced heavier workloads and men dominated private and public decision-making, both recognised the existence of inequalities but neither considered them unjust. Shaffer (1998) further contended that women's preference for sons over daughters and their participation in discrimination against daughters-in-law, was indicative of how women have internalised their lesser status in society.

Structures and Change

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *doxa* helps to understand how norms of gender inequality determine women's actions and preferences in the context of empowerment. *Doxa* is what Bourdieu (1977) calls behaviours and rules that are so 'taken-for-granted' in a society that they become 'naturalised' and eventually become incontestable norms. This process of normalisation veils the arbitrary nature of underlying normative rules (Bourdieu, 1977). These rules are rooted in cultural belief systems that have evolved over time, and that follow certain beliefs and role expectations, and guide the behaviour of its actors. These structures classify their actors into different groups that are valued differently, determining a social order. This manifests in material arrangements whereby the marginalised group hold less resources than the dominant group (Giddens, 1979). *Habitus* then describes the perceived range of actions and being of an individual – the ability to feel and think in accord with those internalised and material structures, reproducing them over time (Bourdieu, 1977).

Given these structures, to understand individuals' scope to contest or even transform aspects of structures, it is useful to look at Gidden's (1979) structuration theory in which he sought to resolve the tension between an individual's agency – the extent to which they are able to determine their action within prevailing structures. For him, knowledgeable agents produce structures and simultaneously, structures act back on them. Thus, agents are both, the constitutors and subjects of structures. This links to what Giddens (1991) later termed 'ontological security' - a stable sense of self and continuity that women experience when living according to this gender unequal *doxa*, that even if marginalising, can offer a sense of order and predictability. Conversely, 'ontological anxiety' arises when this continuity is disrupted - when foundational assumptions about the self or social world become uncertain. For women, challenging entrenched norms or stepping outside established roles can provoke such anxiety and involve emotional, social and material risks.

To change unequal structures through the process of empowerment, it is critical that women are enabled to think differently about themselves and the situation they are in. It is understood as impinging on norms of inequality (*doxa*), as transition 'from *doxa* to discourse', as being able to imagine alternatives: material or social possibilities that are different from the normalised social order. Empowerment moves women out of the sphere of acceptance of norms, to a critical perspective on them, that questions their naturalised character and reveals the arbitrariness of the given social order (Kabeer, 1999).

An active engagement of an individual in critical reflections on their own situation is what Freire (1968) discussed in his 'conscientisation approach', in which individuals achieve 'critical consciousness' if they gain a deepening awareness of their oppressive sociocultural reality and the capacity to transform this reality. While Freire's (1996) approach, as part of his 'liberation theology', was an influential framework, it ignored the subordination of women and spoke specifically of a 'male liberation' (Batliwala, 2007). However, the critical consciousness approach was picked up by feminist scholars when conceptualising empowerment. For instance, it denotes what Kabeer (1994) described as 'power within', which entails women's ability to recognise inequalities that have hitherto been taken for granted. 'Empowerment strategies' must hence build this 'power within': 'The capacity of those who have a stake in challenging the status quo to deal with resistance cannot be taken for granted; it has to be built up through processes of empowerment' (Kabeer & Subrahmanian, 1996, p. 24). Empowerment starts from here – building 'power within', including self-respect, self-esteem, or confidence, is crucial before anything else can be achieved. It is critical that an 'action element' succeeds whereby women act on existing power relations and assert their rights to bring about structural change and work towards greater equality (Batliwala, 1993).

As shown above, due to structural constraints, this can be very challenging for an individual woman. Feminist scholars then highlighted the empowering potential of challenging and transforming power relations in a society through solidarity organised as a collective action (Batliwala, 1993; Rowlands, 1997), or in Kabeer's (1994) words: 'from a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of "I cannot", empowerment contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of "we can"' (ibid., p. 262).

Forms of Power in 'Em-power-ment'

Understanding empowerment, which is intricately tied to structural change, necessitates an exploration of power in its multiple guises, as it is the critical operating concept in 'em-power-ment'. This is to delve into power's operation within societal structures and its role in shaping gender norms and inequality. Jo Rowlands (1997) is concerned with this analytical stance. She incorporated the value of collective action as 'power with' and individual conscientisation as 'power within'. Both lead to 'power to' as generative power that increases an individual's capacity to make their own life choices without necessarily making another individual worse off.

Those three forms of power ('power within',' power with', and 'power to') are in contrast with 'power over'. If 'power' in empowerment were to be defined as 'power over', this would lead to an understanding of power as a finite entity acquired at a cost to another individual and entailing the control of one individual over the actions and choices of another. In turn, 'power over' is rather the oppression exercised over women, which women ought to become aware of and resist in the empowerment process (Rowlands, 1997). Lukes (1974) writes about the unobservable enforcing of 'power over' where a person's oppression is internalised. For example, if a woman is subject to abuse every time she states her opinion, she would begin to withhold it and eventually internalise the belief that she has no opinion of her own. Given this, individuals in positions of

power will no longer need to exercise coercive power (power over) except when their authority is contested. Love's (2018) research on gender policies in Indonesia then displays more subtle forms of this. She delineated how a woman is prevented from working by her husband, who told her that 'her body was not strong enough, that she would be too tired if she worked' (Love, 2018, p. 103).

For Rowlands (1997) and other empowerment scholars, the process of women's empowerment does not demand that women acquire 'power over' men. For them, empowerment entails 'power to', a generative power, coming from 'power with' and 'power within' that leads people to become aware of their interests and impinges on constraining social norms to create new possibilities and actions without dominating. Yet, among feminist scholars, there is no uniform thinking about the form of power in empowerment. Batliwala (1993) for example, states more radically, that 'if it is a real success, [women's empowerment] does mean the loss of men's traditional power' (ibid., p. 9), but stresses that in this process, men are also enjoying a liberation from stereotyping, just like women.

This being said, framing empowerment as occurring at the expense of men's power might imply a threat that then becomes an obstacle to women's empowerment (Rowlands, 1997). In support of this, a recent qualitative study of Meinzen-Dick et al. (2019) the emic meanings of women's empowerment in the context of development interventions in eight countries showed that for both men and women, women having 'power over' carries negative connotations. Women participants of the study 'never considered an empowered woman as one who has "power over" her husband or others in her community' (ibid., p. 17).

These different feminist perspectives complicate narratives of women's empowerment whereby it is possible to extract a conception of women's empowerment that aligns with the majority of approaches: the process of empowerment is not a zero-sum game and implies

individual conscientisation (power within) and perhaps solidarity in a sense of collective action (power with) to bring about change (power to) towards gender equality (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997).

A demonstration for the process of empowerment as 'power to' could, for example, be a woman who learns how to farm, which opens up possibilities for her, such as independent income generation, without restricting other individuals apart from those who have profited from her inability to farm (Mosedale, 2005). 'Power within' here comprises the awareness that due to restricting gender norms, she was not able to conduct farming activities, but due to empowerment gains confidence that she wants to learn it. She might find other women who think the same way, or perhaps the exchange of ideas with other women has helped her to become more aware and confident (power with). She alone, or they collectively, could then be enabled to challenge the norm of women not farming and resist against it in learning how to farm, which is empowering in a sense of productive power (power to). Because empowerment processes are dynamic, positive changes in one dimension may encourage changes in others. A woman's farming and concomitant income could, for example, then help her gain more influence in decision-making in her household or community. This, in turn, could challenge the norm that women were not previously involved in such decision-making processes.

Metaphorically, empowerment can be regarded as a journey that women travel either alone or in the company of other women, sometimes taking difficult routes or dead ends, but also opening new possibilities and expanding vistas. Importantly, women themselves have to commence this journey with the first step of recognising that the situation they live in is a place worth leaving (Cornwall, 2016).

1.2. Introducing Empowerment into Development Practice - Ideas and Challenges

The role of external actors, such as development institutions, that feminist scholars wished for was to encourage women to challenge the status quo and to embark upon this journey. This could happen by clearing obstacles from travelled paths, providing signposts and sustenance for those on the journey, and supporting the exchange of information among travellers (Cornwall, 2016). Concretely, feminist scholars expected development institutions to look at empowerment in a holistic way, trying to understand relational dynamics of power and initiating positive change for women at various levels and spaces over time. For example, building awareness about structures of inequality and supporting the development of critical consciousness, or creating spaces where women could gather and mobilise collectively, were regarded as fruitful approaches. Above all, these scholars championed the treatment of women as agents of change rather than as recipients (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994). Yet when women's empowerment entered the space of development practice, women were treated as recipients, and the transformative character of the original concept has been diluted (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). In this section, I highlight the challenges that accompanied the application of women's empowerment in development practice and measurement, with a focus on concepts of Kabeer (1999) and Longwe (1991), and review literature that discusses the consequences of development practice 'empowering' women in their roles as mothers to reach other objectives.

Sara Hlupekile Longwe (1991), an influential feminist activist and consultant on gender and development from Zambia, set out an empowerment framework based on her grassroots experiences, to provide a framework to evaluate the impact of development interventions with regard to increasing empowerment for participants. She argues that even when development

practitioners[6] do not explicitly seek to influence a community's social relations, any intervention introduced into a given context inevitably reshapes them, and, in doing so, affects women's status and power.

She shows that people in the so-called 'Global South[7]', and especially women, are often hardworking farmers who produce food but are seldom able to profit from their hard work, due to structures of oppression. In general, she stresses that poverty is not due to a lack of productivity but stems from historical exploitation and oppression. Development interventions should hence not just focus on productivity but on meeting people's needs, participation, and equality, which will enable them to take charge of getting out of poverty. Then, the critical aspect is that women not only need to be enabled to be more productive or use their labour more efficiently, but they need to be empowered in terms of participating in developmental processes equally with men in order to gain control over factors of production and to profit from their labour invested (ibid.)

Longwe (1991) defines gender awareness as, first and foremost, the recognition that women have special needs that differ from those of men because of biological differences, an obvious example being access to healthcare that supports healthy pregnancy and childbirth; secondly, acknowledging that women are disadvantaged compared to men when it comes to their welfare and access to and control over factors of production; and thirdly that development must entail the working towards equality between men and women which entails the empowerment of women. She differentiated between 'women's concerns' and 'women's issues'. Women's concerns are

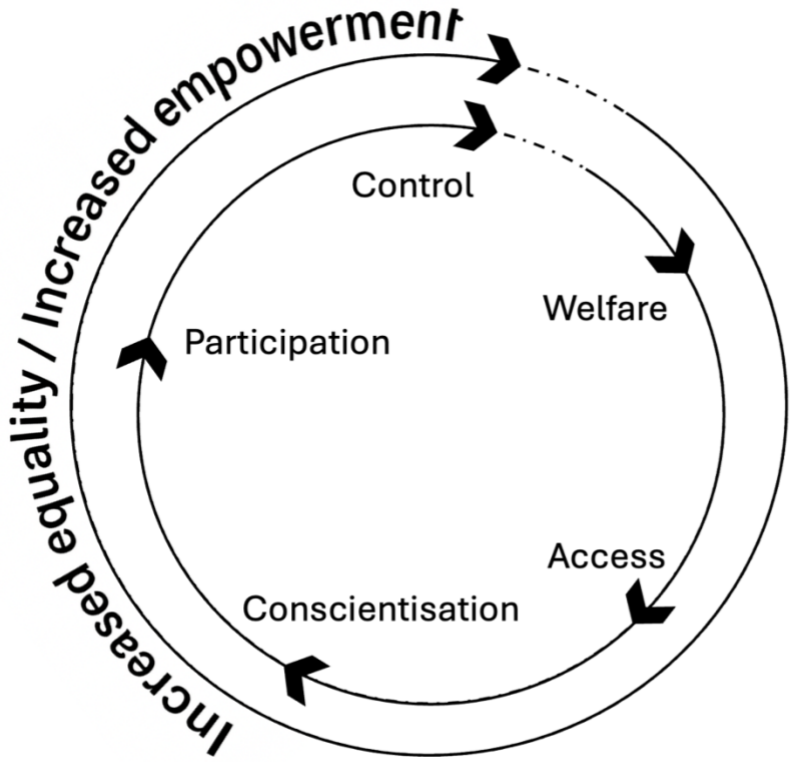
[6] In this thesis, I use 'development practitioners' to refer to individuals involved in the design and implementation of development interventions, and 'development agencies' to refer to the organisations within which they operate.

[7] Following Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea (2022), I use the terms 'Global South' and 'Global North' not as fixed geographical designations but as analytical categories that illuminate unequal distributions of power in the contemporary world system. The Global South can be understood in multiple, overlapping ways: as territory, referring to regions, primarily Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, historically subjected to colonial domination and postcolonial marginalisation; as relationality, produced through everyday practices of differentiation, including racialised hierarchies, that extend beyond territorial boundaries and shape global patterns of labour, mobility, and extraction; and as structure and politics, naming positions within global systems of inequality and the sites where these inequalities are contested.

matters that come up when women perform their subordinate gender roles. In contrast, women's issues, when addressed, lead to structural equality between men and women in any social and economic role.

Longwe (1991) articulates a framework to recognise women's issues that is constituted of five levels of equality of welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control, as criteria to understand the level of women's development in different areas of their social and economic life. According to her, increased equality equals increased empowerment and development. Those levels are hierarchical, whereby control is ranked higher than welfare. In their 2024 book, Longwe and Clarke then highlight that the levels of the framework are not to be understood as a linear sequence but are interrelated and in a cyclical process, reinforcing one another (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework



Source: *own presentation of Longwe (1991)*

'Welfare' is women's material welfare, such as access to resources, such as food supply or income, relative to that of men. 'Access' is women's access to factors of production such as land, credit or publicly available services and benefits. This access needs to be equal to that of men, which entails the removal of discrimination against women to ensure equal opportunities, which would often imply a reform of the law. 'Conscientisation' is based on Freire's (1996) work on the process of gaining a critical consciousness. As noted above, this entails recognising oppressive aspects of one's life and taking action against them, even if they are regarded as 'normal'. As per Longwe's (1991) utilisation, this often happens collectively, when women come together and discuss gender issues, and involves gaining an understanding that gender roles are culturally constructed and

therefore open to change. It involves acknowledging that labour should be divided through mutual consent, not imposed through the dominance of one sex. In such an arrangement, women's own interests are genuinely represented, rather than merely reflecting patriarchal expectations about how they should view themselves (Longwe & Clarke, 2024). This belief in equality between women and men is the groundwork for collective participation in the process of development. 'Participation' then denotes the inclusion of women into processes such as decision-making, policy-making, or planning. In development interventions, this means involving women in identifying needs, formulating the implementation and evaluation. 'Control' is the outcome of the preceding processes and represents achievements of equality, such as the control of productive resources and the distribution of benefits derived from them. Equality of control implies an equal balance of power between women and men, with neither occupying a position of dominance (Longwe, 1991). This circular process of struggling for equality of control - the equality in social and economic roles - in turn enables women to gain improved access to resources and material welfare, thereby continuing the empowerment process (Longwe & Clarke, 2024). Longwe (1991) stresses that development interventions in fact only address women's development if they target women's issues and the inherent framework of empowerment.

Yet, in the 1990s, when women's empowerment was broadly introduced to the agenda of development practice as a 'more progressive' approach towards gender issues, it was met with criticism. Feminist scholars argued that by translating the concept into targets for development interventions, the actual empowerment approach was, in fact, shrunk into a set of 'magic bullets' of poverty alleviation and economic growth (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). They argued that 'much of the [development] narrative focuses on instrumental gains - what women can do for development rather than what development can do for women' (Cornwall 2016, p. 342). Thus, in the process of becoming a 'buzzword' of development, women's empowerment

lost the premises of its initial conceptual approach and its radical political meaning was diluted (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 1999). Referring to the initial ideas of women's empowerment, Sen (1997) argues that 'it is a short step from thinking of governments or agencies as empowering people through interventions to viewing empowerment as another handout: something governments do for or on behalf of people' (ibid., p. 3). The danger here was that the focus shifted to the provision of access to external resources to address the material status of poor women and away from initiatives that would create spaces for women to build confidence and self-esteem, to challenge their position in a patriarchal society, and to initiate social transformation (Cornwall, 2016).

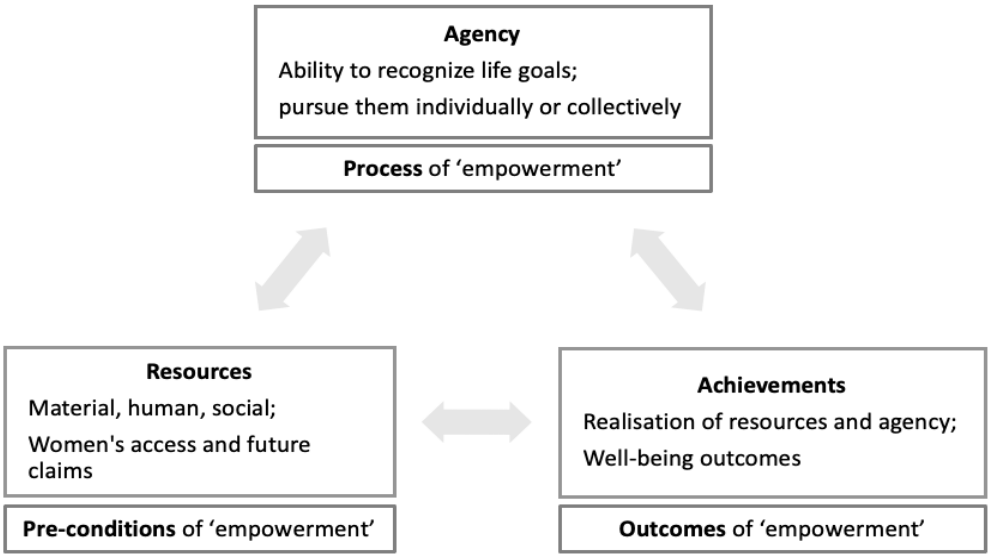
Rowlands (1997) further stated that empowerment as a 'gift' of development practice did not involve a structural change in power relations and can hence easily be withdrawn and could have negative effects on women's situations. This is echoed by Longwe & Clarke (2024), who stress that their empowerment framework is grounded in a 'bottom-up' approach in which gender interventions are planned and implemented by the very community of women whose empowerment is sought. Within this framework, the role of development agencies is limited to providing funding and support, with no mandate to impose agendas based on external ideas of development.

In addition to this, compared to the individual level, collective action among women is much more fruitful in initiating the uncovering and challenging of normalised discriminatory practices as part of the empowerment process. External actors can create and fund spaces for collective action, but the political process of empowerment has to come from the bottom up and cannot be imposed (ibid.). However, the potential of creating spaces for women's collective action to struggle for empowerment is often not exhausted by development interventions that mostly focus on the individual level (Mosedale, 2005).

In reality, when introducing approaches of women's empowerment, development actors engaged with the idea of empowerment as an integrative process of shifts in norms, structures, and power relations to strive for gender equality, only in very limited ways (Cornwall, 2016). Kabeer's (1999) grappled with this tension between theory and practice and gave an explanation for the focus of development practice on instrumentalist ('etic') goals when she noted that being concerned with feminist objectives in intrinsic ('emic') terms would take policy makers of development out of their familiar conceptual territory and into much more open ended one of power and social justice (Kabeer, 1999). A key issue in this context constitutes the measurement of processual conceptions of empowerment as open-ended social change, whilst measurement constitutes a major preoccupation in development practice to endeavour an effective allocation of scarce resources.

Kabeer (1999) reflected on previous attempts to measure empowerment and draws on approaches of empowerment provided by feminist scholars when building her foundational theoretical framework to measure and interpret processes of empowerment contextually. She determined empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (ibid., p. 437). 'Power' is understood as the ability to make choices, while 'empowerment' entails a process of change for those who have been denied such choices previously. She defined 'strategic life choices' as choices that critically influence how a person lives their life, such as choices of livelihood, or whether to have children at all. By definition, three indivisible dimensions are required to exercise the ability to make strategic life choices: (1) Resources, (2) Agency, and (3) Achievements (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Kabeer's Three Domains of Empowerment



***Source**: own presentation of Kabeer (1999)*

Resources are the current allocation, as well as future claims of material, human and social resources that facilitate the capacity to exercise choice. Access to resources does reflect norms and rules that govern distribution and priorities in a certain context. Agency is defined as one's ability to recognise one's life goals, what has been discussed as 'power within', and pursue them individually or collectively ('power with'). People's exercise agency and act on their life goals in a generative meaning ('power to'), pursuing their own life choices even if they face opposition from others. Achievements are well-being outcomes - resulting from strategic life choices - such as, for example, women having the desired number of children, good nutrition or literacy.

The traits of those three domains really reveal why the domains are difficult to measure. First of all, the understanding of achievements requires a further qualification to measure choice at the centre of empowerment. Differing achievements do not necessarily depict inequalities due to the fact that people have different preferences. When analysing gender differences in achievements, one then has to distinguish between those that reflect women's inability to act on their choices

due to gender inequality, and those that result from differences in preferences. Another issue in the interpretation of achievements is the degree of women's internalisation of their inferior social status, which I earlier referred to as Bourdieu's (1977) *doxa*. If women accept their inferior social status and possibly become complicit in their oppression, the choices they make can still be determined by social norms and their inferior social status. An achievement that reflects a meaningful choice needs to not only be possible materially but also needs to be made among other alternative choices that are not bound to gendered norms.

When applying the resource domain to measure choices, one must be careful not to assume that access to resources indicates that it would automatically allow women to make choices. It has to be regarded as a measure of potential rather than an actualised choice because whether changes in women's resources translate into their ability to make choices depends on further conditions too. For example, a woman who has the right to inherit is by no means automatically exercising choices over the inherited (e.g. land). To put it in the words of Das Gupta (1987) study on kinship systems in rural Punjab, India: 'If she should insist on her right to inherit land equally under civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered' (Das Gupta, 1987, p. 92). Hence, a measure of resources that captures choice needs to comprise the potential for exercising agency and achievements under the existing framing conditions.

Employing the agency domain to measure choice also requires careful attention to how the concept is operationalised. Studies that conceptualise decision-making at the core of measuring empowerment, agency or choices, show that the most common way to measure agency is decision-making agency (Lukes, 1974; McElroy, 1997). When doing this, one has to carefully select decisions and areas and stages of the decision-making process to serve as indicators that bear a consequential significance and relate to strategic life choices or choices that have been denied to women in the past. This is to avoid measuring only observable action, but not the values that give

purpose to this action. Women's actions need to encompass a sense of agency (power within), which is the meaning and purpose that women individually and collectively (power with) bring to actions they initiate (power to). Moreover, when women play a role in making decisions of little consequence or within spheres that are assigned to women anyway by pre-existing gender norms and responsibilities, measuring these decisions would not display agency in a way that displays their power to choose (Kabeer, 1999). In her later work, Kabeer (2005a) terms this the exercise of 'effective' as opposed to 'transformative agency'. The former occurs when women's choices contribute to carrying out their normatively given roles, while the latter happens if women become empowered, if they challenge their restrictive roles and responsibilities by exercising choice. Difficulties in grasping transformative agency are closely related to the issue of measuring achievements that depict a meaningful choice, noted earlier. Achievements then testify to women's positions as effective or transformative agents. Kabeer (1999) provided a concrete example for this distinction in her reference to the study of Dréze and Sen (1996), who described that reduced child mortality, as an achievement, testifies to women's greater agency as a result of female literacy – of education as a resource. Kabeer (1999) however argues that the impact on child mortality is rather an achievement of women exercising effective agency in their roles as caretakers, whereas the decrease in female child mortality in particular can be a result of transformative agency because educated women gave daughters the same value as sons, which is against the grain of gender norms, and exercised equal effort to their survival.

The above shows how closely related the three dimensions of resources, agency and achievements are and that all of them have to be equally taken into account to make a good measure of empowerment, of gaining the ability to make strategic life choices. When measuring resources, the validity of an indicator largely rests on the potential for exercising agency embodied in that resource. Similarly, a valid measure of agency depends on its consequential and

transformatory significance, which is represented by achievements. In turn, an achievement measure is valid if it depicts changes in prevailing inequalities in resources and agency and not their reinforcement. However, when Kabeer's (1999) approach was adopted by development actors such as the *World Bank*, the emphasis on triangulation and relational transformation of empowerment fell out of the frame, and, for example, 'asset endowments' were used as indicators of agency (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

In earlier years, international development institutions, most notably the *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, relied on standardised, country-level indices such as the *Gender-Related Development Index (GDI)* or the *Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)* to assess women's empowerment. Although GEM has since been discontinued, these indices illustrate the historical reliance on aggregated national data (Alkire et al., 2013; O'Hara & Clement, 2018). Such indicators fail to capture heterogeneities between regions or reflect the lived reality of gender relationships at the community and household level. They are also prone to inappropriate use and tend to focus on gender inequality in a broad set of domains, but do not comprehensively measure women's empowerment (Schüler, 2006).

Recognising these challenges, a current effort to develop a direct measure of women's empowerment at the individual and household level is the pro-WEAI[8]. It is directly based on Kabeer's (1999) approach and recognises the processual nature of women's empowerment. It focuses on the agency dimension and consists of multiple sub-indices to capture women's intrinsic (power within), instrumental (power to) and collective agency (power with). Importantly, all those reflect generative types of power as opposed to the execution of 'power over'.

[8] The Pro-WEAI is an adaptation of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Malapit et al., 2019). I will explain the index, technical details, and its application in detail in Chapter 3.3 of this thesis.

Scholars who developed the index focused on the agency, acknowledging that it may be a more direct measure of empowerment than resources or achievements, as those could be more easily mistakenly considered as adequate in situations where women are very disempowered. Also, measures for resources (such as for assets (Doss et al., 2011)) and achievements (such as women's well-being outcomes) are currently more elaborate than those for agency (Malapit et al., 2019). For the pro-WEAI, resources and achievements are conceptualised as latent constructs that are in relationship with the measures of agency (Yount et al., 2019). Working on a measure for agency then also allows for a further understanding of how resources, agency and achievements interact.

Half of the 12 pro-WEAI indicators measure women's instrumental agency, a field in which scholars have developed a number of measurement approaches, often incorporating decision-making questions. The other half of the indicators is concerned with the measurement of intrinsic and collective agency, for which only a few measurement approaches exist (Malapit et al., 2019).

To conceptualise adequate survey measures, pro-WEAI indicator domains, and adequacy thresholds were developed drawing from the interaction of findings from a pilot pro-WEAI questionnaire between April 2016 and June 2018 (Malapit et al., 2019), and qualitative findings on women's emic understanding of empowerment in 13 development interventions between November 2016 and February 2018 (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). While the pro-WEAI is still a standardised measure, among all indicators used in development practice to measure women's empowerment, it provides the most nuanced attempt to capture intervention outcomes related to women's empowerment because its suite entails customisable qualitative guides designed to capture contextual meanings, cultural differences, and the process of empowerment (Yount et al., 2019). It identifies key areas of women's disempowerment which can serve as a base for appropriate empowerment strategies in different regions and cultural contexts (Malapit et al., 2019).

Mothers as an Instrument of Development Practice

I have shown that the concepts of women's empowerment delineated above have been modified and adapted for implementation in development practice. The outcomes of this largely did not align with grassroots empowerment ideas. For example, in a recent paper, (Kabeer, 2020) provides a comprehensive critique of how, in the field of development economics, women's empowerment is still an assumed outcome of economic development without focused attention on structural factors of gender inequality. Moreover, to 'empower' women, development interventions often do not target societal structures that propagate women's subordination, and women's empowerment is not treated as a goal in its own right but rather represents an intermediate instrument to achieve other objectives of the development intervention (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 2021; Van den Bold et al., 2013).

A growing body of research demonstrates that, because women bear the primary responsibility for children, development interventions often instrumentalise women in their roles as primary caretakers and promote women's empowerment as a means by which to improve child outcomes, including nutritional status. For example, in Ruel and Alderman's (2013) framework, three of the six pathways they suggest for agriculture to influence nutrition-related outcomes revolve around women. One pathway specifically focuses on women's status and empowerment as determinate of nutrition. These findings have influenced nutrition-sensitive development interventions in their design and implementation (Ruel et al., 2018).

In the last decade, many empirical studies of development interventions in agriculture or nutrition have simply assumed women's empowerment to be included as an instrumental means of improving child-related outcomes. Women's empowerment here is often defined and aimed

for as improvements in women's access to resources or their decision-making power[9] as a result of agricultural or nutritional trainings. This is then expected to translate into more resources allocated towards children (Cunningham et al., 2015; Heckert et al., 2019; Malapit et al., 2015; Ruel & Alderman, 2013; Ruel et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2003; Yaya et al., 2020). Having healthier and better nourished children may indeed be an important choice that women themselves would make according to their own preferences and considerations (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Yet, in intervention evaluation, the effect on women's lives remains largely unexplored. This is because these interventions focus on children. Still, they claim to do this by empowering women.

For example, the quantitative study of Heckert et al. (2019) evaluates whether women's empowerment as part of a nutrition-sensitive development intervention in Burkina Faso improves child nutritional status. Here, women's empowerment is defined, following Kabeer's (1999) theory, but then measured according to three domains of decision-making (purchasing, healthcare, and family planning decisions) and spousal communication. The authors found that increases in those three domains had positive impacts on child nutrition measures. At the same time, it is not explained how these domains relate to Kabeer's (1999) conception as the 'ability to make strategic life choices' (ibid., p. 437) and its inherent nuances of structural change. Whether the three domains of decision-making align with women's own ideas and strategies for empowerment, or what empowerment means for women themselves, remains unclear. While they state that 'empowerment is important not only because of its intrinsic value, but also the instrumental value it provides in enabling the use of available resources' (Heckert et al., 2019, p. 94), an elaboration of the abovementioned intrinsic value is not provided.

[9] Throughout my study, 'decision-making power' refers to an individuals' say in decision-making processes within the household.

Unlike the studies above, Van den Bold et al. (2015) explicitly researched the impact on women's empowerment of an integrated agriculture and nutrition intervention in Burkina Faso. Applying a mixed methods approach, they look at how the intervention impacted gendered norms around ownership, use and control of assets of men and women. The intervention targeted women and aimed at improving maternal and child health and nutrition outcomes, and women's income generation through productive asset transfers, and trainings on agricultural, health and nutrition. The authors indeed find positive changes for women. For example, they find that ownership of land continuously is more common for men than for women, but that the community perception around land ownership for women became more favourable with the intervention, where men realised that 'a woman can garden' (Van den Bold et al., 2015, p. 1168). In a similar vein, Quisumbing, Ahmed, et al. (2021), who study a nutrition-sensitive agricultural intervention in Bangladesh to understand how, in particular this impacts women's empowerment, measured as per the pro-WEAI. They find that the intervention that involved agricultural elements and a gender sensitisation element for men and women did increase women's empowerment, gender parity within households, and also, to a small extent, attitudes towards gender roles of both men and women. The knowledge that women acquired in the agricultural space, for example, could normalise that women are involved in credit decisions on agriculture. Qualitative work further indicated that because men and women were involved in the intervention's agricultural trainings jointly, this would ease the joint decision-making within their household and may have led to an increase in women's voice therein. Engaging men in the nutrition component that often targets women only may also have introduced them to areas that they are typically not responsible for, as it is regarded as women's responsibilities. The authors mark this joint engagement as a promising area for future research to approach gendered responsibilities.

While these two studies found positive changes in women's empowerment, how these interventions, by instrumentalising them in their roles as mothers, could have adverse consequences for women's lives remains largely underexplored. Studies have shown that this mostly happens in two spaces: they increase women's workload, which is often already high, or they could perpetuate gendered responsibilities around childcare, especially when commonly only women are targeted by trainings. Both could prevent women from having the choice to pursue other activities, such as, for instance, becoming involved in the labour market (Blackden & Wodon, 2006). Van den Bold et al. (2021) explore how targeting women to influence child health and nutritional outcomes in an intervention in Burkina Faso may come with time-related trade-offs. A previous study on the same intervention did find positive impacts on women's empowerment (Olney et al., 2016). Van den Bold et al. (2021) yet found that by participating in the intervention, women spent significantly more time on agriculture and child nutrition. How this further influenced their choices to do other activities, or if this prevented them from doing them, remained unexplored. Quisumbing, Sproule, et al. (2021), for Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Ghana, Mozambique, and Tanzania, look at trade-offs between WEAI domains of empowerment and women's nutritional outcomes. They found trade-offs between women's greater involvement in agriculture (greater number of agricultural decisions, greater autonomy in production, and greater number of agricultural assets owned), which would increase women's empowerment score, and women's dietary diversity score. This could be due to women's increased workload reflecting tensions between women's productive and childcare roles due to constraints in time and energy. Again, because women often already face the double burden of agricultural and care work, instrumentalising women as means by which an intervention's training is carried out increases both parts of this double burden, which could then come at the cost of their own nutrition.

Furthermore, approaching women in their mothering roles could perpetuate existing gender normative roles. Molyneux (2006) captured these effects in her study of the development intervention *Progresa* that took place in Mexico in 1997, which positioned women's roles as mothers as the key to poverty alleviation. It aimed to empower mothers through conditional cash transfers to secure improvements in their children's lives. Improving children's well-being was not considered to be a great effort for women, but rather understood simply as part of their roles as mothers. The intervention's success then depended on women fulfilling these roles. There was no attempt by *Progresa* to instigate that men and women share those responsibilities. Gendered norms and responsibilities around care work remained unproblematised and were fostered throughout. Molyneux (2006) found that targeting women as primary managers of their children's needs perpetuated the gender normative division of labour and required women's greater commitment to domestic roles. In other words, while improved child nutrition is a valuable consequence of women's empowerment, which women indeed could appreciate, targeting them in their assigned and socially sanctioned reproductive roles might anchor them further in these roles and does not enable them to challenge the social restrictions or pursue their life choices (Kabeer, 2021; Molyneux, 2006).

To conclude this section, I refer to Quisumbing et al.'s 2023 recent research on 'what works' to empower women within agricultural and nutrition-sensitive interventions. Reviewing multiple studies on the matter, they underscore the importance of moving beyond approaches that instrumentalise women primarily as conduits for improved child or household outcomes. The authors stress the need for intervention designs that provide direct benefits for women, in ways that are attentive to cultural and contextual specificities, engage with household and community decision-making dynamics, and remain alert to potential trade-offs in women's time and capacity.

Only then can such interventions meaningfully contribute to women's empowerment, and especially relevant in this context, to the empowerment of women who are mothers.

1.3. Debates Around Motherhood

Reviewing existing literature on empowerment revealed that motherhood is either absent in empowerment theory or predominantly associated with its restrictive dimensions, despite the fact that many of the women who are written about in empowerment narratives, are mothers. Conceptualising motherhood to set out an analytical framework for the purpose of my study implies going on a journey across an array of disciplines, and forms of literature.

This reviewing process showed that the majority of prominent work on motherhood comes from Western scholars, where in general the mother in question is Western, cisgender and heterosexual (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989). Yet respective conceptions of motherhood claim universality in their application but are lacking discussions of race, class, culture, history, conceptions of gender, power, and other interesting factors (Acholonu, 1995; Amadiume, 1987; Lewis, 1993; Maqubela, 2021; Oyěwùmí, 2000), leading to essentialism and exclusion (DiQuinzio, 1999). This was criticised and responded to by scholars of African feminisms[10]. In the following sections, for the purpose of illustrating the debate and its arguments, I conceptually distinguish

[10] When writing about 'Western' and 'African feminisms'; I do recognise that motherhood in both scholarly movements has emerged as important area of study and that both are not monolithic or homogenous movements but diverse and multifaceted and encompass a range of perspectives and approaches (Dosekun, 2019; Walker, 1995). I will use this distinction to analytically differ between scholarship coming from African scholars, or scholars of African diaspora and scholars who are positioned in the so-called Global North. The term 'feminism' in 'African feminisms' has been debated, supported, or entirely rejected from different scholars within the field. Acknowledging this debate as well as alternative terms as for example 'Africana Womanism' (Hudson-Weems, 2023) or before that 'Womanism' (Walker, 1983), I am using the pluralism 'African feminisms', following Nnaemeka (1998) to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of movements, thought and activism across the African continent, shaped by diverse cultural imperatives, historical contexts, and localised realities. The use of the plural term 'feminisms' highlights the heterogeneity of African feminist engagement, reflected in strategies and approaches that may sometimes align and reinforce one another, yet at other times diverge or even stand in opposition (Nnaemeka, 1998). Drawing from her concept, I then use the term 'Western feminisms' to acknowledge the pluralism and heterogeneity therein too.

between Western and African feminisms, while acknowledging that drawing a binary line between the respective understandings of motherhood would not be conducive to a nuanced analysis of mothers' own experiences either (Walker, 1995). Aspiring to set out a conceptual framework that allows for this nuanced analysis and for an exploration of empowering experiences of motherhood, I explain concepts of agency that go beyond understanding agency as direct resistance against the patriarchy. I conclude by giving a detailed elaboration of Walker's (1995) multidimensional framework of motherhood that allows for a contextual investigation into women's own experiences of motherhood.

Western Feminist Theories and the Problem of Exclusion and Essentialism

As part of the second-wave of feminism in the United States, Adrienne Rich (1976) and later Sara Ruddick (1989) brought forward a strong critique that motherhood has not been a field of feminist enquiry and that the prevailing notions of motherhood as a trajectory inherent in women's biology are immensely reductionist and oppressive, as it assigns mothers the sole responsibility for motherhood.

This is what Rich (1976) calls the institution of 'patriarchal motherhood', which is not a 'human condition' any more than other oppressive social structure that aims at ensuring (patriarchal) control, and that is forcefully imposed on women to redeem them from 'impure womanhood' (ibid., p. 34). She then points to the different, yet coexisting, 'two meanings of motherhood', one superimposed on the other: The first refers to the potential relationship of any woman to her reproductive capacities and to children - what Rich (1976) understands as the lived experience of the practice of mothering. This dimension can be a source of power, creativity, and fulfilment for women. The second meaning refers to the institution of motherhood, which is

designed to ensure that women's reproductive capacities and women themselves remain under male control.

In a similar vein, Ruddick (1989) defines motherhood through 'maternal thinking', a practice which involves the commitment to meeting a child's demands for love, nurturing, and training. Moving away from biological and gendered expectations of motherhood, she views this as a positive and fulfilling experience of preservative love, which can be performed by anyone who is committed. Because caregiving inherently fosters practices of nonviolence, empathy, and conflict resolution, she states that maternal thinking can extend into political peace activism. Simultaneously, Ruddick (1989) acknowledges that in conditions of gender inequality, maternal practices are required of women in ways that reinforce their exploitation, deny their choices, and limit their freedom.

It becomes clear that Rich's (1989) and Ruddick's (1989) understandings of motherhood are conceptually different from earlier Western feminist discourse, such as that coming from Simone De Beauvoir (1997), which frames motherhood as the barrier to all those opportunities women could take if they were not mothers.

Another important critical stance on motherhood comes from Patrice DiQuinzio (1999). She discusses the complexities inherent in women's individual experiences of motherhood and how they shape women's identity and subjectivity. Central to this is her critique of motherhood often being constructed as a biologically natural role for women within patriarchal societies. This reinforces heterosexual, normative gender roles and expectations, confining women's agency and subjectivity to their reproductive capacity, misrepresenting crucial aspects of women's lives, and undermining their individuality. This is what she calls out as 'essential motherhood'. Furthermore, DiQuinzio (1999) raises that subjectivity in Western societies is reduced to an individualist ideology that follows a masculine rationale of homogenous human experiences. This leaves no

space for diverse lived experiences, collective perspectives, or modes of being that exist among women and marginalised groups in general. Essential motherhood within an individualist ideology then puts women in a double bind. DiQuinzio (1999) calls it the 'impossibility of motherhood'. It denies women subjectivity as it expects them to fulfil their very particular roles as mothers. Simultaneously is normalises gender inequality based on the assumption that women merely fulfil their functions ascribed as mothers, rather than acknowledging male dominance implicit in social formations.

Then, what she calls 'difference feminism' is her main stance to reconceptualise subjectivity away from individualism. It is a 'discourse that emphasises the significance of difference for theorising women's subjectivity and representing women's situations and experiences.' (ibid., p 6) At the same time, DiQuinzio (1999) acknowledged that feminist claims have had to rely on individualism because of its effectiveness and intelligibility as the dominant ideology, to claim that women as subjects are equally entitled to men at various societal and political levels. This is exemplified by the *Beijing Platform for Action*, the landmark document of the *Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women* in 1995, in which visions of gender equality were modelled around 'feminine future on male terrain' such as wage work (Arnfred, 2011, p. 119). This makes it plausible that recognising the significance of difference may jeopardise women's claim for equal political and social subjectivity and agency. While recognising this 'difference dilemma', she highlights that theorising motherhood in terms of difference outweighs the risks it poses because it grapples with women's lived experiences of motherhood, rearticulates subjectivity by challenging individualism, and eventually supports changes in the social institution of motherhood.

The difference dilemma manifests itself in the work of scholars writing on motherhood and their concepts of subjectivity. She argues that inevitably this results in different theoretical attempts that underlie the 'paradoxical politics of mothering' (DiQuinzio, 1999, p. xvi). For example,

acknowledging that Rich (1976) and Ruddick (1989) provided important feminist ways of thinking about motherhood and mothering in the 1970s and 1980s, which move away from regarding women as doomed to fulfil the role of a mother, DiQuinzio (1999) also discusses the flaws of their work. She states that in Rich's (1976) work, the valorisation of experience which is different from the oppressive institution of motherhood, recuperates elements of essential motherhood such as the bodily focus or the desire for motherhood, and supports the promise never held by individualism of 'a unified, stable, and coherent subjectivity' (DiQuinzio, 1999, p. 213) and unity among women under the umbrella of motherhood. Ruddick's (1989) account of maternal thinking questions assumptions of maternal embodiment inherent in essential motherhood and highlights the need for a fragmented understanding of subjectivity. Yet, neither is she successful in negotiating the difference dilemma because her approach rarely represents the reality of women's lived experiences of motherhood (DiQuinzio, 1999).

More than looking at the negotiation of the difference dilemma in prominent Western feminist theory, in her previous work, DiQuinzio (1993) grappled with the issue of essentialism therein, which is typically defined in opposition to difference. Here, she puts a strong emphasis on differences in experiences of motherhood across women. This depends on the conceptualisation of gender and how it relates to other aspects of women's identities, particularly those that cause women to experience forms of oppression. Hence, women's experiences of motherhood in relation to gender strongly depend on their particular social, cultural and historical context. This needs to be respected when feminist theory grapples with the difference dilemma to represent the fragmented experiences of women in a particular local context. It can also succeed if feminist theory moves away from the hegemony of individualism and essential motherhood and, in fact resist those (DiQuinzio, 1999).

At the same time, the prominent Western theorising of motherhood to which Rich (1976) and Ruddick (1989) belong among mothers has been starkly criticised for falling into this essentialism that dovetails with the problem of exclusion. This critique revolved around the problem that Western feminist theory primarily focuses on gender and does not consider factors such as such as race, class, culture, or sexual orientation and makes universalising claims about mother's experiences that are true only for Western, heterosexual middle - or upper-class women, living in nuclear families, in capitalist ideologies and patriarchal structures (Bailey, 1997; DiQuinzio, 1993; Lugones, 2003; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Patricia Hill Collins, a pivotal figure in the development of theoretical frameworks within the domain of United States-based Black feminism during the 1990s, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (1990) explained that all women do share a history through the material conditions of sexuality and reproduction, but that Western feminist angles of vision often lack intersectionality that involves spaces such as race and class. For Black women, this adds a shared history through systems of domination.

Motherhood in African Feminisms

Many scholars of African feminisms put forward this critique of exclusion and state that those Eurocentric concepts have historically shaped notions of motherhood and are inappropriately applied to other cultures and communities, which misinterpret the realities of non-Western mothers (Acholonu, 1995; Amadiume, 1987; Lewis, 1993; Maqubela, 2021; Oyěwùmí, 2000).

However, when looking at the body of literature mostly coming from African feminisms, it becomes clear that motherhood, which is not necessarily bound to gender, takes on various shapes of meaning and experience - as concept, as identity, as practice, as activism, and more, depending on intersections of culture, class, race, family, tradition, among other factors (Acholonu, 1995; Amadiume, 1997; Collins, 2016; Lewis, 1993; Maqubela, 2021; Oyěwùmí, 1997). The scholarship

on motherhood within African feminisms has emerged as an important area of study, highlighting the experiences, challenges, and agency of African women in their roles as mothers, reflecting this diversity and continues to evolve as scholars from different regions and backgrounds contribute to the discourse (Maqubela, 2021).

Many scholars of African feminisms argue that Western feminisms dismissed diverse conceptions and practices of motherhood prevalent in African and African American contexts. This disregards the rich and complex meaning embedded in various cultural frameworks (Atanga, 2013), and also overlooks the potentials for identity formation and the exercise of agency that arise from African conceptions of motherhood (Collins, 2016; Oyěwùmí, 2000). Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1995) goes as far as ascribing a 'radical anti-nature, anti-mother, anti-wife and anti-nurture ideology' (ibid., p. 8) to Western feminisms, which makes her reject the term 'feminism' altogether and terms her ideology 'motherism'. It is centred around what she calls 'matriarchal metaphysics', which she refers to as the supreme value that African women place on nature and nurture. She then argues that in African philosophies, this is not in opposition to culture as it is in the West.

Another main point of critique of African feminisms is that Western feminisms look at the institution and practice of motherhood as a source of oppression and a barrier to women's liberation. While scholars of African feminisms in general acknowledge that motherhood has been constructed and exploited in a way that benefits and preserves the patriarchy, they question focusing on this framing when trying to understand women's lived experiences as mothers (Maqubela, 2021). In her landmark book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society,* Ifi Amadiume (1987) writes: 'At no period in the history of the patriarchal cultures of Europe has motherhood been accorded the same status and reverence it has had in African cultures. This, in my opinion, epitomises the arrogance and insensitivity of 'abstract anthropology',

an attitude which unfortunately also permeates the work of most Western feminist theoreticians' (ibid., p. 3). In the context of gender in South Africa, drawing from post-colonial and post-modernist writings on Eurocentrism and subjectivity, Desiree Lewis (1993) highlights a distinct contrast between 'Western' and 'Black' notions of maternity and motherhood. While her argument acknowledges the influence of patriarchy on Black motherhood, she emphasises the importance of respecting women's unique perceptions of motherhood. This perspective views motherhood not only as a source of power for women but also as a means for Black women to resist colonial and racial oppression. She underscores that 'White women' should refrain from defining the political objectives or passing judgment on the identities of 'Black women', as their experiences remain beyond complete comprehension. It becomes clear that African feminists such as Acholonu (1995), Amadiume (1997), or Lewis (1993) belong to the group of scholars that propose a stark dichotomy between African and Western feminist approaches to motherhood. They, among others, stress the need to centre African women's voices, knowledge and practice in this context and resist the dominant Western narratives to decolonise the scholarship around motherhood (Acholonu, 1995; Amadiume, 1997; Collins, 2016; Lewis, 1993; Maqubela, 2021; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Moreover, the connecting of motherhood to women's biology and the general understanding of gender in Western societies is challenged by multiple scholars of African feminisms. For example, Amadiume (1987) elaborates on gender dynamics in Igbo societies in Nigeria that include the understandings of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands', which points at the gender fluidity that existed in precolonial Igbo society. Categories of male and female were negotiable and understood in relation to social and economic needs, much more than as fixed biological categories. For instance, women could become 'male daughters' to inherit property or act as 'female husbands' to sustain lineage. In a similar vein, fellow Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónkẹ́

Oyěwùmí (1997) argued that in precolonial Yoruba societies, caregiving was ascribed to social status and seniority rather than allocated following a fixed male-female binary. Drawing on this work to study matrilineal Bantu communities, Saidi (2023) found similar social dynamics.

In 1900, these gender systems were starkly disrupted by colonialism, where rigid gender binaries were imposed together with patriarchal structures that restricted the roles of women and transformed motherhood into a role for women linked to their biology. Colonial structures and policies promoted wage labour for men, or wage migration, and ascribed care work to women and to the domestic space, which prevented women from participating in the economic and political life of their communities (Amadiume, 1987; Nzegwu, 2006; Oyěwùmí, 2015; Saidi, 2023).

Acknowledging that the experience of motherhood has been redefined and complicated by these influences, African and African American thinking around the matter still highlights that motherhood can be an important site of power and activism. For example, Amadiume (1987) explains that in different African cultures, the closest kinship bonds are the relationship to one's mother and maternal siblings, whereby the focus is not on the woman per se but on mother-child relationships. She does not conceptualise an individual social position but moves towards intersubjective social relationships of motherhood. Through this, she presents a nuanced understanding of motherhood within Igbo culture but also other African cultures and highlights that here, women's power and identity are often based on the logic of motherhood, and that African women have historically mobilised around issues affecting mothers and children, especially in matrilineal societies. Parallels can be found in the work of Oyěwùmí (2000). She argues that in many African societies, roles of wifehood and motherhood are inhabited separately, whereby African constructions of motherhood are significantly different from any 'nuclear motherhood', which is motherhood in a nuclear family arrangement. She raises that '*mother* is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women' (ibid., p. 1096). This is because

African family arrangements are centred around the mother as the determining institution in society, no matter the norms of marriage residence, which makes motherhood a powerful arena for women's agency.

For the context of the United States, Collins (1990) then gives a nuanced analysis of the experiences of motherhood among Black women and acknowledges that motherhood can be burdensome and has been used as an oppressive means, but crucially, also serves as a base for self-actualisation and status in the community. She also elaborates on mothering as activism and shows that marginalised Black women use communal motherhood as a source of power and resistance against the racist and sexist societies they live in. Motherhood as a space for activism also played an important role in the context of South Africa, where it became the centre of political organisation for movements such as the Black women's resistance movement as an important part of the 1950s anti-pass campaign[11] (Walker, 1991).

Related to this, another theme reflected in the writings of African feminisms on motherhood is the practice of leadership inherent in motherhood. This is emphasised by Filomina Chioma Steady's (2011) writing from a West African perspective. She notes that 'The concept of motherhood and leadership is not limited to reproductive and nurturing roles in households but reflects the normative values and humanistic ideologies that embrace notions of preservation of past, present, and future generations; prosperity and well- being of society as a whole and the promotion of equality, peace, and justice (ibid., p. 22). Thus, for the benefit of their children, mothers become visionaries who constantly try to predict the future.

[11] Black women, led by prominent South African activists like Lilian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu, organised and protested against the Apartheid government's discriminatory pass laws, which required non-white individuals to carry identification passes at all times. These passes restricted their movement and were a symbol of racial oppression. This resistance took the form of demonstrations, petitions, and acts of civil disobedience. As reflected in the speeches, or reports, the main focus of concern was the impact of the pass laws on women's children (Walker, 1991).

Many scholars of African feminisms further highlight the importance of extended family networks, kinship systems and community support in the upbringing of children. Consequently, motherhood is viewed as a collective responsibility rather than an individual task, and the contributions of a broader community in nurturing and raising children are acknowledged. Collins (2016) conceptualises 'community other-mothering', which is a community involving mothering that she ascribes to many African societies and African American families in the United States, and that again deviates from an understanding of 'nuclear motherhood' and individual responsibility. Collins (2016) further inquires into Western feminists' delineations of motherhood as a public-private dichotomy. This division corresponds with the former to the patriarchal institution and expectations of mothers fulfilling their care responsibilities, and with the latter to the day-to-day experiences associated with the nurturing and maternal care of children within the private sphere. She disputes this individualist view and contends that both the experience of motherhood and the practice of mothering demand a more intricate perspective beyond the confines of a public-private dichotomy, to acknowledge the diverse experiences of non-Western mothers across the globe. For the Kenyan context, Njoki Nathani Wane (2000) draws on Collins' (2016) concept of community other-mothering. Here, community other-mothering is understood as 'lineage of mothering' that roots in pre-colonial African societies and that has always served as an educational space to teach community-based values and practices of care while also allowing for activism (Wane, 2000).

It is crucial to acknowledge the privilege of scholarship of Western feminisms within academia, to push back against ethnocentric assumptions and to challenge the essentialism inherent in a universal application of claims that are based on Western, middle- or upper-class women's realities. It is also important to acknowledge that multiple scholars of Western feminisms have moved away

from or questioned the conservative and patriarchal approaches to motherhood in question (Arnfred, 2011, 2023; Schreiner, 1986; Walker, 1995), and too have criticised underlying universalist and ethnocentric assumptions, arguing for a particularised, localised account of motherhood (DiQuinzio, 1993; Keller, 2010). Schreiner (1986), for example, moves away from constructing motherhood as conservative or oppressive. She applies a Marxist perspective to understand the motherhood and community politics that were rooted in the organisation of the Food and Canning Workers' Union[12] in South Africa in 1950. Drawing from this, she regards motherhood as a force for collective action of emancipation, which is different from viewing mothers as nurturers within the private space of a nuclear family. Arnfred (2011, 2023) also urges us to acknowledge the different ways in which motherhood can be a source of power and authority and argues that in many African societies it constitutes a ground for women's empowerment, yet remains a 'blank spot' in most of Western feminist thought. She draws from different theories of African feminisms to carve out a contextual understanding in her own work on gender in a matrilineal society in Mozambique.

Motherhood and Empowerment: Agency Beyond Resistance

Drawing from these understanding of motherhood as source of power and agency and linking it back to the conceptions of agency in prominent empowerment theory that I discussed above (Kabeer, 1999, 2005a; Longwe, 1991), it becomes clear that women's exercise of agency in the space of motherhood would be deemed as the exercise of 'effective agency', that serves the fulfilment of women's preassigned roles (Kabeer, 2005a) or as gendered responsibilities or 'women's concerns' (Longwe, 1991), which are considered to have very limited empowering

[12] The Food and Canning Worker's Union was a racially non-segregated and assertive labour organization that yielded significant enhancements in wages, labour conditions, and living standards for its affiliated workforce (Goode, 1986).

potential. Following this would deny the empowering potential of motherhood and exercising agency as an individual or as a group. While the fulfilment of a mother's caretaking roles can fulfil gender norms and state a duty that restricts her, regarding it only as such undermines a woman's decision for motherhood and its possibly empowering consequences. As elaborated above, this is starkly reflected in the critique of many scholars of African feminisms.

Moreover, to make this assessment, Kabeer (1999) indeed warn us that it 'require(s) us to bring in an external normative standpoint, a set of values other than women's own as the basis for assessing the meaning of their choice' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 458). The danger is that from an external standpoint, women's agency becomes undermined and women are presented as victims, which over-emphasises the influence of preferences and roles that are imposed on and internalised by them (Narayan, 2002). This tendency is what Mohanty (2005) criticised when she describes how 'Third World women' have been stigmatised and homogenised by Western feminists, assuming that the preferences of the former are somewhat deformed by social conditioning. This is especially problematic when Western feminists try to reveal the 'real' choices of women in the so-called 'Global South' and to turn them from 'victims' restricted by social norms into 'agents' that challenge them (Khader, 2011). It also disguises possible pathways that women might regard as empowering but that are regarded as coercive externally. This is valid when women are seen in their caretaking roles as mothers, which presumes some kind of duty that women simply have to fulfil. This notion can be true, but might as well undermine a woman's decision for motherhood and its consequences (Walker, 1995).

Then, to gain a nuanced understanding of the empowering potential of motherhood, one needs to conceptualise agency in a way that is not limited to resistance against the patriarchy, but that still might allow women to gain the ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1999). Saba Mahmood's (2001) important work critiques the conception of resistance as agency for being too simplistic

and narrow to capture women's lived realities, especially in contexts where direct action against oppressive norms may not be possible for women. Drawing from the women's mosque movement in Cairo as an ethnographic case study, she described notions of self and moral agency, as expressed by the women participating in the movement. She argues that activities such as wearing a veil in public, which would be regarded as instances of 'limited agency' by Western feminism, reflect women's agency to actively pursue values and desires, in this case, Islamic traditions, that are products of their own historical trajectories. Consequently, she argues that agency should be redefined 'not as symptom for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (ibid., p. 203). She too stresses that methodological approaches ought to foreground the way women regard their lives rather than the way Western feminist researchers perceive them. In a similar vein, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) explains that Western feminist conceptions of freedom and liberation are relevant in their respective contexts but that the subjectivities of women in other histories and cultures are shaped by different capacities, desires, and aspirations.

In her most recent book, Kabeer (2024) then grapples with different forms of agency that are not a direct resistance against the patriarchy. She acknowledges that this form of agency is often not possible because it bears high risks for them or because women do not have resources at their disposal. At the same time, women do engage in meaningful forms of agency within structural limits, often with the effect of reinterpreting and subtly influencing customs and structures to their advantage. She speaks about three broad concepts of agency that are not direct resistance.

The first one is agency as bargaining and negotiations that take place when women are sufficiently dissatisfied with the existing social order and seek to influence practices when negotiating for a greater scope of flexibility, but with continued caution not to jeopardise their social status or relationships that they value or need (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2000). If women

have few material resources, they often draw from less tangible resources to bring about desired change. This could be social networks or cultural knowledge deployed to modify the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Drawing from her study of women in rural Mexico, Magdalena Villareal (1994) terms this 'wielding and yielding', which is the making of concessions in order to increase the forms of agency permitted to women. Important for this is also Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of 'nego-feminism' - the feminism of negotiation and also no-ego feminism – acknowledges the multitude of feminisms on the African continent but builds on a recurring feature in many respective cultures, which are the principles of negotiation and compromise. African feminisms challenge strategically, through negotiation of cultural norms and compromise over confrontation, navigate their lived experience of the patriarchal structures around them. Furthermore, nego-feminism highlights the intertwinedness of local and global exigencies that are grappled with by African women through contextual nearness.

The second form of agency that Kabeer (2024) refers to occurs when women are aware of injustices and recognise potential alternatives for change, yet their capacity to act is limited by the high costs associated with potential sanctions or repercussions (Scott, 1990). While conforming to structures and paying respect to their cultures, women might exercise hidden expressions of rebellion that are relatively safe. Those could be, for example, through songs, folk tales, disapproving silence, or secrets among women to hide knowledge from male authority or to cover for each other (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

A third form of agency occurs when women operate within patriarchal cultures without challenging them, as they do not perceive these structures as unjust. Their sense of self has been within these cultural contexts and through cultural practices, and they realise their goals within the limits imposed (Abu-Lughod, 2002). They may place great value on their cultures, including family

closeness or the exercise of piety, and that gives them stakes in conforming and upholding the status quo (Mahmood, 2001).

Those three forms of agency that are not a direct form of confrontation and seek to avoid jeopardising women's place within their families and societies are particularly relevant for understanding their lived realities as mothers.

Practice, Discourse, and Social Identity – a Multidimensional Understanding of Motherhood

A useful framework to analyse women's experiences of motherhood comes from Cherryl Walker (1995). In line with the statements of scholars of African feminisms, her first major critique is towards the 'collusion with patriarchy' theme as a dominant theme in literature around motherhood that collapses motherhood into matrimonial subordination and regards it as a source of oppression which misses complex meaning mothers themselves attach to their experiences and how these influence everything from their identity making to their political behaviour. To undergird her critique, she discusses literature from the South African context that considers women's endorsement of motherhood as such, but also as a (political) means, to be the evidence of internalised conservative and patriarchal conditioning. This was, for example, in the context of the anti-pass campaign resistance movement. Wells (1991) denies what she calls a 'motherist movement' to be feminist and argues that those are not fighting for their rights as women but for their rights as mothers, which come with a very limited scope, duration, and success in achieving feminist goals. Campbell (1990) then writes about the role of mothers in South African townships and acknowledges that this role comes with some degree of power, but that this power must not be exaggerated: 'It appears that the respect and authority a woman is accorded comes to her by virtue of her role as a mother - and falls strictly within the sphere of the household. Men speak

admiringly of the role their mothers play in their lives, but the praises of their mothers fall strictly within the boundaries of traditionally defined women's roles.' (ibid., p. 11) According to this literature, any acquisition of power through the experience of motherhood happens within the discourse of patriarchal relationships. This would be bound by the overriding confines of psychological processes through which women have internalised the oppression imposed on them (Posel, 1991). Accordingly, gaining 'real respect' and power can only take place outside those patriarchal confines of motherhood (Campbell, 1990; Posel, 1991; Wells, 1991).

Walker (1995) then stresses that 'women invest in motherhood (and the family) and this needs to be understood - understood not simply as the product of their socialisation or patriarchal ideology but as something mediated by their own experience of this role' (ibid., p. 435). Integral to her understanding is an interrogation into the exercise of different forms of agency in the space of motherhood. As part of her framework, which I explain later in this section, this is particularly in the space of the formation of a social identity. She refers to her earlier work that says: 'What I am trying to develop is a view that recognises women's agency and begins to take their demands seriously, on their own terms, as an expression of their particular location in society and their active engagement with that' (Walker, 1991, p. xxii). In this, women's complicity with patriarchal norms and their activist capacities and resilience towards oppression can co-exist.

Walker's (1995) second major critique then is towards what she terms the 'difference theme' – literature that highlights differences in the experience and construction of motherhood. While she appreciates that in this strand of literature, motherhood and patriarchy are not necessarily linked, she criticises that here, these differences are largely mapped along the lines of race. Progressive and emancipatory understandings of motherhood are ascribed to African or African American mothers and respective discourse, whereas motherhood in the West is regarded as

conservative and tied to oppression. This becomes obvious when looking at the abovementioned work of Amadiume (1997), Acholonu (1995), or Lewis (1993).

It is to note here that Walker's (1995) critique of the 'collusion with the patriarchy' theme is similar to DiQuinzio's (1993) discussion of essentialism and exclusion. Both grapple with the metanarrative of liberating women from patriarchy, whereby the social construction of gender and women's lived experiences are falsely regarded as essentially the same across different cultures and histories. With regards to their experiences of motherhood and mothering, this involves falsely making universal claims about mothers, based on women's experience of gender in Western patriarchal cultures, without considering the social, cultural, or historical specificity of a different context. In her critique of the 'difference theme', she then warns us that thinking in polarised dichotomies along the lines of race, again, prevents us from paying attention to historical and cultural contexts, complex configurations and differences and similarities in experiences of motherhood that have cut across racialised cultural boundaries.

In other words, Walker (1995) urges us to move away from the binary of a 'universalist' and the 'particularist' construction of motherhood prominent in literature and stresses the value of a multi-dimensional account that allows motherhood to be emancipatory, unifying and nurturing, but also takes seriously the workings of difference that women experience. In line with this, Collins (2016) writes that instead of supplanting one's group's theory with that of another, particularly divided along the markers of race, we need to place those groups in systems of privilege. This allows for an emphasis on the divergent experiences with motherhood depending on intersectional factors such as race, class, sexuality, age, or cultural and historical specifications.

Analytically, while the approaches discussed above bring different lenses to the meaning and experiences of motherhood, none of them provides an interrogation into the dimensions and nuances that in fact constitute lived experiences of motherhood, and which could help establish a

multi-dimensional definition of the concept itself. Walker (1995) has worked on such a framework in which motherhood embraces three interrelated dimensions of 'practice', 'discourse', and 'social identity'. She argues that such a framework allows for addressing historical and social formations within particular cultures and traditions that determine the meaning, power and constraints of motherhood, that the three dimensions are located in.

Practice

The practice of motherhood or mothering consists of several different activities within a particular social and cultural context. Childbirth is one of them, yet biological motherhood does not necessarily lead to social motherhood, and the latter is not dependent on the former either. It also involves physical care (such as feeding or bathing the child); emotional care ('caring about the child', including nurturing and loving); or socialisation (such as the value transmission of a society, including values around gender and family relations). Mothering can entail all those activities or only some of them. Tasks are sometimes delegated to a domestic worker, which is often the case for upper-class women or to a woman relative, which is more common for working-class women (Walker, 1995)

Discourse

The category of 'discourse' of motherhood encompasses a broad spectrum of assumptions and expectations around the concept of 'the good mother', but it also extends beyond this. It is intrinsically linked to local conceptions of womanhood and gender identity, as well as to notions of childhood and children's needs (Walker, 1995). A discourse of motherhood represents the meaning and knowledge surrounding the matter that are created and reinforced through multiple layers of societal and historical practices and rules. These discursive formations represent, and in

turn constitute a dominant way of thinking and speaking about a matter, which may become normalised and institutionalised (Hall, 2001).[13]

At any given moment, various discourses may coexist, shaped by socioeconomic factors such as race or class. Some discourses overlap, while others, including oppositional and marginalised discourses, stand independently alongside a dominant discourse. Although discourses shape and inform the 'practice' of childcare, they are analytically distinct from practice. For example, for upper-class women, the dominant discourse of the good mother would entail the direct physical and emotional care for her children. Different to this, the discourse in many working-class communities may place less emphasis on women's direct involvement in day-to-day childcare and instead highlight their responsibilities in terms of financial support (Walker, 1995).

Importantly, Walker (1995) states that most of the scholarship on motherhood, including the two themes she criticises - collusion with the patriarchy and difference - is overly occupied with the space of discourse. This has limited the analysis since, in doing so, we cannot gain an understanding of women's mothering practices or social identity formation. For example, while motherhood has been appropriated and structurally exploited by patriarchal discourses, these discourses must not be regarded as definitive of women's experiences and identities as mothers. Mothers' grappling with limitations and oppression based on gender and patriarchy, mediated by other socioeconomic factors, can go side by side with experiences of power and identity forming that, for instance, result from values they ascribe to motherhood or that come from community

[13] This draws from a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, in which the production of knowledge is inextricably tied to power in a mutually constituting way. Discourses shape the ways in which subjects act, and these ways of acting can become normalised and institutionalised within societal structures, most strongly when they are supported and reproduced by dominant groups. A comprehensive discussion of Foucauldian concepts of discourse and power lies beyond the scope of this thesis. However, see Chapter 1.1, where I elaborate on Bourdieu's (1997) concepts of *doxa* and *habitus* to explore how subjects inhabiting particular discourses come to normalise certain ways of being, and how gender-unequal structures develop accordingly. I also draw on Giddens' (1979) structuration theory to examine the tension that arises when subjects seek to exercise agency within prevailing structures, and I emphasise how, through the exercise of agency in processes of empowerment, these structures can be challenged.

belonging. This is well depicted in Buchi Emecheta's (1979) novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, considered a classic in African women's writing, where stories of struggles of mothering due to limited access to productive or cultural resources, or multitasking, are simultaneous with women's bonding, or community group mobilising. While supporting some discourses, mothers might not accept others or draw from different understandings of tradition or culture. The content of, as well as the degree of alignment or conflict between discourse and practice or discourse and social identity, then becomes subject to historical investigation (Walker, 1995).

Social Identity

This leads to the third category of Walker's (1995) framework. Social identity is concerned with a mothers' own construction of their identities. It is influenced by the prevailing discourse of motherhood and shaped by the practice of mothering, yet not simply a derivative of either. It is important to note that there can be multiple social identities. Those can harmonise or potentially conflict with one another. For example, women do not solely identify as 'mothers' but encompass a spectrum of additional gendered and non-gendered identities such as 'wife', 'worker', 'student', 'Christian', and so forth. These other identities may take precedence or interact with the social identity as mother, influencing women's choices in complex and sometimes subconscious ways. They come with their own discourses and practices, which can diverge from those of motherhood, which may impose constraints or adaptations on the expectations, attitudes, and behaviours associated with being a mother.

The category of social identity allows for a consideration of women as active agents. It involves a mother's emotions and considerations that come with this role and relationship, and its respective activities. While this is an individual perception, it is firmly rooted in a social context and hinges upon their own recognition to be part of the group of mothers within this context.

Then, social identity enables an examination of the intricate dynamics between individual and collective processes in shaping subjectivity and influencing behaviour. Subjectivity here is regarded as something that is created and sustained in the reflexive activities of an individual. They sustain a narrative that interplays between their own behaviour as well as the reaction of others, and with a changeable storyline (Giddens, 1991). This also highlights the roles of community as a reference point or support network for an individual to develop and influence their own narrative and engage in behaviour respectively. This is in line with the critique of individualism when conceptualising motherhood coming from scholars of African feminisms (Amadiume, 1987; Collins, 2016; Oyěwùmí, 2000; Wane, 2000). It also speaks to DiQuinzio's (1999) reconceptualisation of subjectivity away from individualism in her suggestion of 'difference feminism'.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

In this thesis, I explore firstly, how mothers in Central and Southern Malawi conceptualise and negotiate motherhood; secondly, how this space of motherhood interacts with and determines their understandings and experiences of empowerment; and thirdly, I then consider to what extent these understandings and experiences of empowerment are matched and represented by a quantitative survey measure, namely the Pro-WEAI, in development practice. To set out a conceptual framework for analysis, I draw on the work of scholars elaborated on throughout this chapter.

I gave a detailed elaboration on the discussions around conceptions of motherhood coming from Western and African feminisms. Taking critiques of essentialism and exclusion seriously, I draw from Walker's (1995) tripartite framework of motherhood – practice, discourse, and social identity – to gain a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of mothers in Central and

Southern Malawi, and to put findings into perspective with arguments from theories on motherhood of both Western and African feminisms. For instance, discussions regarding 'motherhood as a site of power and activism' will be examined within the realm of women's social identity.

In the following, I understand 'women's empowerment' as a transformative process of structural change towards gender equality, happening within a society. I combine the theoretical frameworks of Kabeer (1999) and Longwe (1991), as an etic framework, to map and analyse women's emic understandings of empowerment. This includes Kabeer's (1999) theoretical framework of resources, agency, and achievements, which defines empowerment as a process of 'expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (ibid., p. 437). It also includes the five stages of Longwe's (1991) women's empowerment framework. These approaches facilitate a recognition of gender inequalities and consider the potential of individual as well as collective agency in challenging patriarchal structures in a society. They underlie the assumptions that empowerment is the 'pushing back' against restrictive gender norms and hence imply a sense of resistance.

Drawing from these approaches, women's exercise of agency within the space of motherhood would not be regarded as resistance but as happening within the gendered roles ascribed by patriarchal structures. However, this conception is too simplistic and narrow to capture women's lived realities within structural constraints of gender norms and the ways they make sense of their realities, especially in contexts where direct action against oppressive norms may not be possible for women (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001). It would also 'victimise' women as it implies that women cannot exercise agency from within normatively preassigned roles (Narayan, 2002; Mohanty, 2005; Khader, 2011). Hence, to carefully investigate empowerment in the context of motherhood, and to add nuance to prominent empowerment scholarship, I draw from theory that

detaches women's exercise of agency from the concept of resistance and explores women's capacity for action within a relational framework of historically and culturally specific, enabling and restricting structures (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001). This involves more subtle forms of agency, such as, for example, women's negotiations, cautious not to risk their social standing (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994).

In Walker's (1995) framework of motherhood, the space of social identity and its inherent agentic and interactive understanding of subjectivity has great relevance for an analysis of empowerment. It allows for an investigation into the 'why', 'when', and the extent to which women in their roles as mothers might 'collude with patriarchy'. As Kaplan (1992) described: 'How can any historical (i.e. 'real life') mother know whether what she thinks she wants really reflects her subjective desire, or whether she wants it because it serves patriarchy (that she has been constructed to please)? Since patriarchy wants women to want children, in other words, how can a woman distinguish between her desire for the child and that imposed on her? […] women's activist capacities and resilience in the face of oppressive institutional positioning exist alongside the centrality to their lives of the intra-psychic and unconscious terrain, which often produces women's complicity with patriarchal norms' (ibid., p. 410).

This meaningful quote highlights the need to consider resistance as well as complicity with dominant norms in the space of women's identities as mothers. It is not to deny patriarchal structure at work, but considering reflexivity in subjectivity formation allows for focusing on women's agency as mothers who are social actors within social frameworks and not simply passive recipients of an underlying ideology. For mothers, especially the space of conflict between discourse and practice or discourse and social identity, where behaviour or identity formation deviates from established structures, can bring about the potential for social and structural change (Kabeer, 2024; Walker, 1995).

While emphasising the empowering potential of motherhood, my research also speaks to the critique that in development practice, women's empowerment has been instrumentalised to improve child-centric objectives. To do so, women's empowerment has been quantified and made measurable. Different feminist scholars have criticised this process for diluting the radical and transformative character of women's empowerment and for not supporting women's specific and contextual needs according to their intrinsic notions of empowerment.

Then, to analyse to what extent women's experiences of empowerment are represented by a quantitative survey measure, I analyse them in front of the theoretical backdrop of the 12 pro-WEAI domains that I will elaborate in detail in Chapter 3.3 on my mixed methods methodology. It is to note here that the pro-WEAI is based on Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework domain of agency and her conception thereof.

In the next chapter, and before starting the analysis using this conceptual framework, I describe the context and geographical setting in which this thesis research is set.

2. Women in Central and Southern Malawi

This thesis research is set in Balaka, Machinga, and Zomba districts in Southern Malawi and Ntcheu district in Central Malawi (Figure 3 and Figure 4, with the study area in grey). This chapter begins with a historical and cultural overview of matrilineal kinship in Central and Southern Malawi, tracing how lineage, land tenure, and marriage practices shape present-day gender dynamics, particularly in relation to motherhood and women's authority. I then examine how these structures have been influenced by colonialism, Christianity, and post-independence state policies. Next, I turn to the role of agriculture in everyday life, with a focus on women's labour, food production, and land access. I conclude the chapter by exploring current challenges such as land scarcity, cyclical food insecurity, and the role of development interventions, which continue to shape women's everyday lives, responsibilities, and forms of agency within their households and communities.

Figure 3 Map of Northern, Central, and Southern Malawi

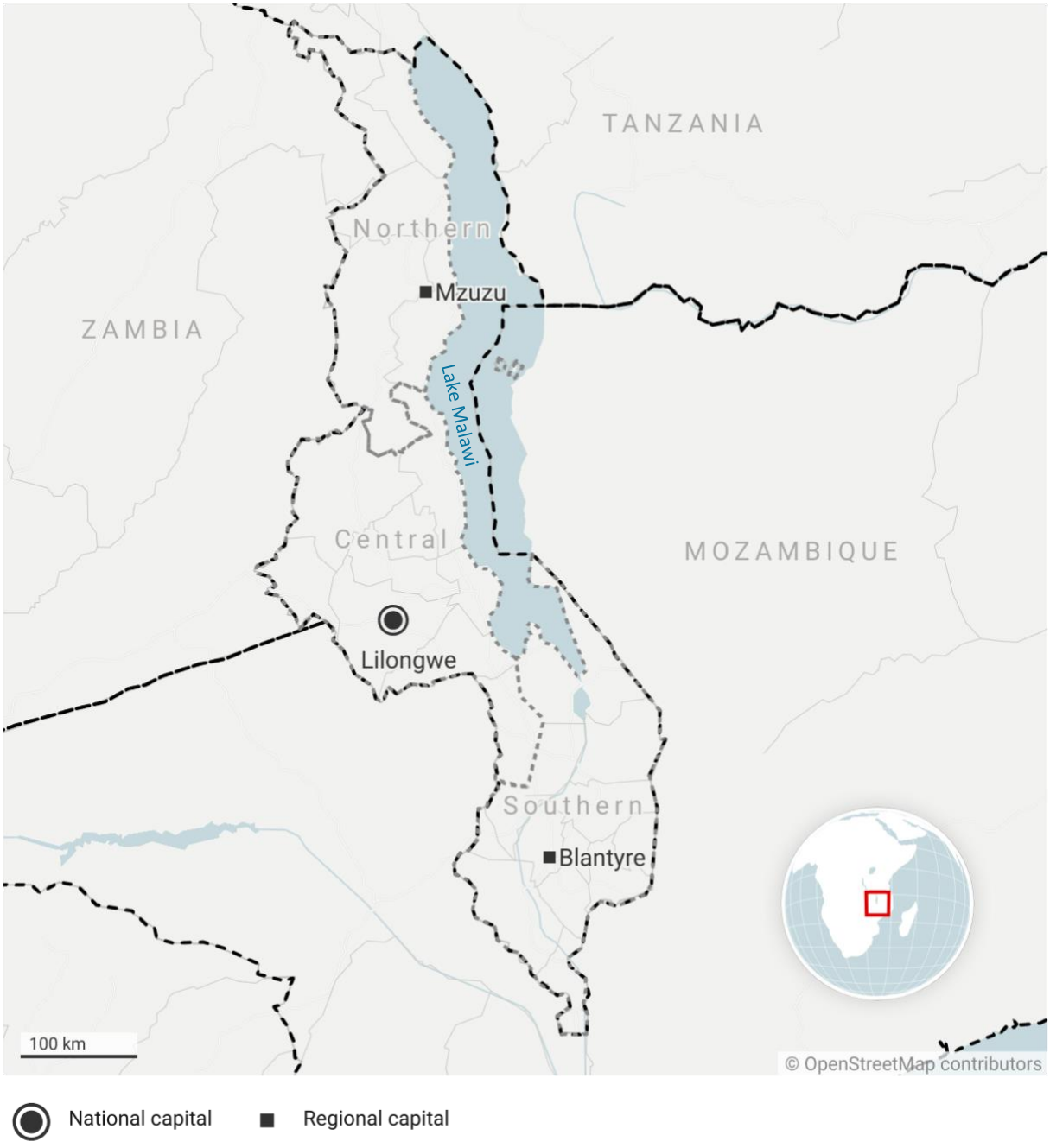
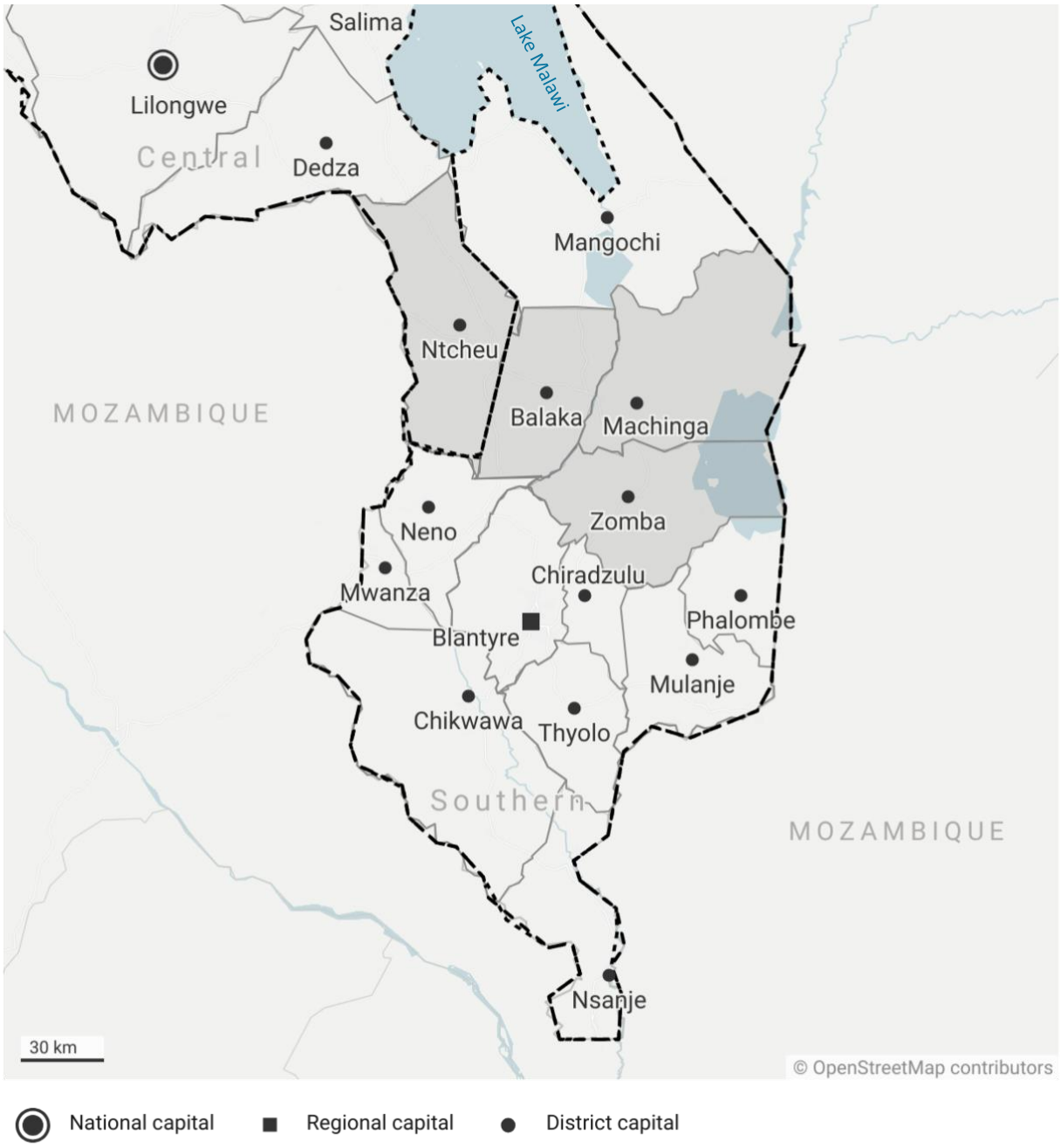


Figure 4 Map of Study Area Districts



2.1. Matriliny and Motherhood

Different to Northern Malawi and the districts at the most Southern tip of the country, Balaka, Machinga, Zomba, and Ntcheu (Figure 4) lie on the so-called matrilineal belt. For South-Central Africa, this belt stretched across northern Zambia, central and southern Malawi, and northern Mozambique.

Thus, in the four districts of my study area, matrilineal kinship systems have traditionally prevailed. Most prominently, this means that social life is shaped by matrilineal land tenure and uxorilocal marriage. According to matrilineal land tenure (*mbumba*), land is inherited following the female lineage. Men have the right to use land, but not to own it, which makes this form of inheritance the strongest in terms of land rights for women in Sub-Saharan Africa (Berge et al., 2014). 'Our daughters inherit our field', Peters (2010) captures in her study on matriliny and land in Malawi. 'Daughters' refers to the young women members of the matrilineal lineage. They inherit land from their mothers or grandmothers and at times from their mother's sisters or other women relatives if they do not have daughters themselves. This inheritance can happen from the living or after a woman's death. In some cases, when an older woman dies, the woman heir not only receives the land but also the name or personage of the deceased older woman and the younger woman is addressed with the deceased's name (Peters, 2010).

Uxorilocal settlement, then, is a custom where, after marriage, a husband moves to the village of his wife. Only rarely do married men live on the land that belongs to their own matrilineage, but if they divorce, they can return to their natal community and borrow fields from their sisters, mothers, or aunts. Spouses typically live in a conjugal unit (*banja*) with or without children. The wife's brother becomes the marriage guardian (*nkhoswe)* to his sister and her children. The *nkhoswe* also sustains her social, legal and economic interests and hence is important for her protection and consults closely with his sister (Phiri, 1983). The *banja* is typically embedded in a cluster of

households of a group of women relatives and their descendants. At times, *banja* can also be used to refer more generally to the family in terms of co-resident relatives, especially the wife's matrikin, beyond the conjugal unit (Davison, 1993; Peters, 1997a). The matrilineal lineage system in Malawi gives considerable weight to the 'mother right', the right of the mother to remain with her kin to raise her children (Phiri, 1983), which elucidates the collective nature of mothering (Perianes & Ndaferankhande, 2020). In this context, entering motherhood is associated with entering adulthood and the ability to care for others (Johnson, 2018)[14].

In their study on menarche rituals and womanhood in Malawi, Perianes and Ndaferankhande (2020) assert that motherhood in Malawi has a great impact on a woman's identity. They refer to matrifocality in Malawian consciousness by virtue of which mothers are put at the heart of the family, which makes motherhood a source of power, status and centrality. Moreover, the authors found that the bearing of children is regarded as a communal responsibility, which also creates a great pressure to realise an expectation. In matrilineal societies, motherhood holds a special status as it is also tied to the primary responsibility of ensuring the continuity of the maternal lineage (Saidi, 2023). At the same time, Perianes and Ndaferankhande (2020) link this communal responsibility to *umunthu*, a way of being deeply ingrained in the Malawian ideology, which, among other social dynamics, is the collective consciousness and responsibility precipitating individual identity and wholeness. This underpins the role of the collective of mothers for a mother's self-narrative of subjectivity upon entering motherhood.

Pointing to a more spiritual source of the power inherent in motherhood, Moyo and Mlenga (2024) lay out how the Malawian *Makewana* (mother of all children), who is considered a wife of

[14] There are relatively few studies specifically examining the role, meaning, and social dynamics of motherhood within Malawian cultures, particularly when compared to the broader and more developed body of literature on motherhood in other African contexts. For example, substantial scholarship exists on Nigeria (Akujobi, 2011; Makinde, 2004; Oyěwùmí, 2000, 2015), Zimbabwe (Batisai, 2017; Chisale, 2018; Makaudze, 2018), or South Africa (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Lesejane, 2006; Mamabolo et al., 2009; Maqubela, 2016).

God, occupies an important position in the spiritual beliefs of many Malawians. *Makewana* is a rain priestess who blesses agrarian societies with rain to allow for the production of food and for progeny. She holds enormous nurturing powers and is a true symbol of motherhood.

While marriage remains an important institution in Malawi, and while first marriage and having a child are widely desired, divorce rates among matrilineal societies are high (Perianes & Ndaferankhande, 2020). Divorced mothers often seek greater independence from their husbands, and when single, they remain embedded in the groups of their matrilineal kin. This life could indeed be attractive for women, given their access to land and their and their children's belonging to their mother's community, granting immaterial support and resources (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2016; Johnson, 2018).

Peters (1997a) shows that these aspects of matriliny serve Malawian women's status, and allow them to gain considerable authority and influence in their households and communities. She points at different anthropological studies on matriliny that observe that women enjoy 'greater degrees of independence, autonomy, formal authority in local politics and ritual, control of income, decisions concerning child-bearing, family relations and so forth' (Peters, 1997b, p. 134), compared to women living in non-matrilineal societies. Many scholars emphasise the importance of kinship systems due to their implications for access to land, which is the primary means of livelihood in Malawi and is becoming increasingly scarce too (Peters, 1997a). Moreover, Gottlieb and Robinson (2016) demonstrate that gender disparities in political and civic engagement are smaller in matrilineal societies than in patrilineal ones. They argue that this is due to the long-term expectation of resource entitlements conferred by matrilineal inheritance that reduces unequal gender norms about women's roles in society.

Historically, the *banja* is the unit of production, consumption and reproduction (Davison 1993). Importantly, Mandala's (1990) account of the household in the pre-colonial Lower Tchiri

valley in Southern Malawi highlights that the matrilineal *banja* is neither a homogeneous nor a static formation. Gender relations within the *banja* depend on a multitude of factors, such as age, class, and external factors interfacing with gender (Davison, 1993). While the *banja* is a fairly autonomous entity, among matrilineal kin, there is a considerable degree of inter-household sharing and exchange (Vaughan, 1982)[15]. Vaughan (1987) further highlights the safety granted by matrilineal extended family in the context of the 1949 famine, where matrilineal kin shared and exchanged food when men left women and children behind in search of work and food.

In present-day Central and Southern Malawi, the matrilineal kinship system still plays a key role in social life (Johnson, 2018), and the studies above undergird the rejection of the false idea of a universal male dominance that would undermine women's status therein (Mandala, 1990; Peters, 1997b). Nevertheless, these matrilineal structures exist in community structures where the authority and dominance of men prevail. This power is manifested in practices such as early age marriage, or an expected obedience of a wife towards her husband (Peters, 2010; Phiri, 1992), or through men making most of the decisions about the use of women's land, albeit matrilineal land tenure in place (Djurfeldt et al., 2018) I will explain the dynamics of the latter subsequently in this chapter.

Matriliny in Change: Colonial Influence and Christianity

Indeed, matrilineal practices have been in constant flux, and it is impossible to provide a comprehensive story of the decline of women's status in matrilineal communities. Already in pre-colonial times, matrilineal communities in the geographical area of what today is called Malawi

[15] While Megan Vaughan's influential writings on agriculture and gender relations in Malawi date to the 1980s, they remain pivotal for situating current analyses. Her historical account of women's labour, food provisioning, and household economies provides a foundational backdrop that continues to inform more recent studies on gender norms and agricultural production.

have undergone several changes to their family systems due to several different influences, including those of migration, warfare, encounters with patrilineal communities, and others. However, an understanding of contemporary matriliny necessitates situating it within its broader historical context. Some drastic and detrimental changes came through the impacts of the transatlantic slave trade, missionary Christianity from around 1870 onwards, and the British colonial rule from 1891 until 1964 (Davison, 1993; Phiri, 1983). Then, how gendered power relations and matriliny interacted and evolved, and influence women's lived experiences today, cannot be understood without taking these influences into account (Johnson, 2018).

When missionaries came to Malawi, they promoted Christian patriarchal ideals of subservience and wifely obedience that were hostile towards women's status in matriliny (Minton & Knottnerus, 2008). This was exacerbated when Church of England missionaries directly undermined matrilineal land tenure by giving land to men and not to women on their marriage. White (1989) wrote: [this supported] 'the pattern already evolving (at the mission) by which the most important rights and powers were vested in men, to whom women became subordinate'. (ibid., p. 37)

The British colonial administration regarded matrilineal land tenure and uxorilocal settlement as antithetical to the development of what they regarded as progressive, modern agriculture (Peters, 1997a). They reduced the matrilineal claims to land to a 'communal' tenure but directed this at men and cast them as family heads and authorities over women. This was then incorporated into the body of the 1930s restated 'customary law' that was set up to support indirect rule (Peters, 1997b, 2010). In the later years of the colonial administration, in a last-ditch effort to promote agricultural and economic development, there were more efforts to impact the customary tenure by introducing certificates of claim or titling. Those were based on Western experiences of growth and modernisation, and once more took land claims away from women (Peters, 2010).

Matriliny in Change: Post Independence: President Banda and Democracy Until Today

Since independence in 1964 until today, there have been several more attempts to change the matrilineal customary tenure. After 1964, Malawi's first president, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who exercised a one-party system under the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), although he critiqued the colonial practice of land alienation prior to his presidency, himself and other powerful politicians of his era became the owners of large chunks of land. Banda also regarded it as an obstacle to agricultural development. This view was shared by international donors such as the World Bank, which increasingly started intervening in Malawi. Echoing much of the positions on land tenure of the 1940s and 1950s, these governmental and non-governmental institutions again promoted land titling to create enforceable property rights to create the necessary 'security' for agricultural investment and the 'productive' use of land. The proprietor was again usually a man, often the *nkhoswe*, the brother customarily assigned as guardian for his sisters. As opposed to creating security, women lost security in the form of their land rights under matrilineal custom (Peters, 2010).

Moreover, President Banda directly manipulated other elements of the matrilineal custom to appropriate gender concerns stated by the Women's League movement, under Rose Chimbambo and rooted in the MCP, to promote women's interests and to increase his political power. Using the role of the brother as guardian of this sister, he declared himself as 'Nkhoswe No. 1', he constructed an image of a community benefactor and offered benefits - such as building houses or plane trips - for his supporters, in particular for women from the Women's League movement. However, in return for these favours, women had to wear uniforms of Banda's party, emblazoned with his portrait. They also had to sing and dance for their *Nkhoswe No. 1* at party meetings. This diminished women's political influence in politics to that of supported of men politicians while Banda received mass political organisation (Semu, 2002).

Since then, and after Malawi entered a multi-party system in 1994, wider political shifts influenced matriliny, most directly in its premises around land tenure. For example, Peters (2010) critically discusses the formulation of the New Land Policy in Malawi. While it explicitly aims at protecting land rights for women, it does this by granting land inheritance to both sons and daughters and gives great authority regarding the administration of land to traditional leaders. This might have the opposite effect on women in matrilineal areas. Of this formulation, a suite of land-related bills was passed into law, leading to the 2016 Land Act (Government of Malawi, 2016).

These snapshots of Malawi's history and political development reveal some of the forces that have affected the characteristics underlying matrilineal systems, and, importantly, women's status within. However, and contrary to the expectations of many, the resilience of matriliny in Southern Africa is one of the features that has been most remarked upon in more recent scholarship (Arnfred, 2011; Johnson, 2018; Kishindo, 2010; Wilson & Kachipande, 2020). Matrilineal systems might exist in forms altered over time and space, with modified characteristics, but they still play a key role in women's lives in Central and Southern Malawi today.

The above reflects my experiences during my research in matrilineal communities, especially in terms of matrilineal land tenure and uxorilocal settlement after marriage. Most women I interviewed resided in the communities they were born in, in *banja* units and in close proximity to women relatives. Many of them have inherited land, either from their mothers or grandmothers. When elaborating on their land inheritance, these women explained that it makes sense to give land to women because, unlike men, they remain in the area. When speaking about the mobility behaviour of men, they invented the term 'moveous' to describe this behaviour. This could refer to a migration for labour and return to the household, but also to the natural progression of him leaving the community if a marriage ended.

2.2. Agriculture in Malawi: Food Production, Gender Norms and Women Farmers

For food and income generation, the residents of Balaka, Machinga, Ntcheu and Zomba largely rely on subsistence and rainfed farming, such as 84 percent of Malawi's population (Government of Malawi, 2020). Maize is the main staple food in Malawi. This becomes clear as many Malawians I encountered use the word for food (*chakudya*) and for maize (*chimanga*) interchangeably. *Nsima* is made from maize and water and consumed in different forms and thicknesses, as smooth porridge, sometimes sweetened, or as stiff savoury porridge, two to three times per day. *Nsima* is typically eaten with relish, which can be made out of different types of green leaves, such as sweet potato, pumpkin, or cassava leaves, or cabbage. If the budget allows for it, either as part of the relish or separate, this is accompanied by dried or fresh fish, or meat, eggs, beans, or others, cooked in a tomato and onion sauce. Depending on availability, some other common foods were sweet potatoes, cassava, or rice. Most often, these foods are shared by a group of people sitting together, eating with their hands from a communal platter. Commonly, men eat together and separately, women and their children. Women often share food with other households belonging to their matrilineal kin. Some popular snacks were seasonal fruit such as mangoes, bananas, papayas, groundnuts, fried dough such as doughnuts or *mandazi*, or store-bought biscuits.

When setting the stage for a study of women's lives, especially those of mothers in Malawi, it is impossible to exclude the space of agriculture and food, and women's roles as farmers, from the analysis. Those spaces are central to all aspects of life in Malawi. They also determine women's access to resources and interact with and shape the gendered norms of a society.

Elias Mandala (1984) describes that for the Mang'anja in mid-19th century Southern Malawi, for the agricultural production of a *banja* unit, a woman and a man would both contribute with their labour. Women's and men's economic activities were equally socially recognised despite gender-specific tasks, such as men preparing the field and women taking care of the harvest,

storing produce. The non-agricultural sector was more gendered, with women producing and trading salt and pottery and men engaging in hunting, textile and iron manufacturing, and trade. In a more recent contribution, not specifically for Malawi but drawing from primary literature on women in different contexts of pre-colonial Southern Africa, Moagi and Mtombeni (2019) support this by saying that despite the prevalence of a gendered division of labour, women and men often cooperated in labour domains such as farming, house building, or fetching water. Hence, for agricultural production, women played honourable, important roles and worked with considerable freedom and autonomy (Mandala, 1984; Moagi & Mtombeni, 2019). Wilson and Kachipande (2020) even go as far as saying that women most likely played a greater part in agriculture than men. These accounts also support that women always engaged in market organisation and trading with goods they grew and produced.

A comprehensive elaboration of historical factors that influenced women's roles in agriculture lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, in the following, I grapple with certain events that eroded women's authority and socioeconomic power as farmers and influenced the gender relations of production. Critical for this are also the historical events explained above, which deteriorated women's land ownership as per matrilineal land tenure and as a critical agricultural resource.

When Malawi came under the British colonial government in 1890, this had several impacts on the lives of the Malawian people. The introduction of a cash economy, the creation of a labour market and the land grabbing that the colonial government forcibly conducted to put ostensibly idle land under 'productive use', altered the political and economic structures of the country but also directly impacted relations within families and destabilised gender relations of production (Davison, 1993; Phiri, 1983; Vaughan, 1985).

Cotton, tobacco, and coffee were introduced as the main cash crops on European privately owned estates. Gender inequality was institutionalised by British colonisers when they carried forward the transition into a capitalist economy and differentiated men's and women's roles as they favoured men in commodity production, which left subsistence agriculture to women (Mandala, 1984; Vaughan, 1985).

Facing labour shortage for production, the British colonial government introduced the 'hut tax' to husbands and single women in what they named 'Nyasaland', which would compel people into labour out of the necessity to pay it (Davison, 1993). This brought with it great levels of violence and insecurity, and people who could not pay the hut tax were often seized by government officials (Phiri, 1983). For the colonial government, the focus of their policies around production was the involvement of men in the capitalist economy, who, as husbands, were regarded as responsible for their wives, which was different from men's roles as matrilineal kinsmen. "The consistent assumption that the farmer was a man and women were no more than farmers' wives was completely at odds with the reality [..]. That women actually worked in the fields was recognised, but this observed fact was interpreted as women's being, at best, helpers of their husbands, the farmers" (Peters, 2010, p. 186). The capitalist economy further devalued women's domestic work and agricultural contribution to the household. At the same time, men gaining the main control over households' income strengthened their bargaining position in their households and altered women's dependencies on their husbands. Moreso, being confined to the precarious subsistence sector diminished women's previous leverage of power and independence and made them more vulnerable to poverty (Davison, 1993; Vaughan, 1985).

This dynamic was perpetuated by increased male wage labour migration due to the need to meet the tax demands of the colonial government and partake in the new cash economy (Davison, 1993). Furthermore, colonial estate administrations in the Shire highlands appropriated the

thangata system. The Chewa word *thangata* means 'to assist'. In its original form, it amounted to communal labour provided to a chief who rewarded the labourers with great amounts of food and beverages. Under the estate policies, this was turned into a dependency system of forced labour in exchange for the right to reside and cultivate land (Kandawire, 1977). As a result, these men's wives were left with managing their households and the bulk of agricultural work on their own and spent most of the year without the cooperation of their adult men family members (Davison, 1993). Meanwhile, living outside of their previous social boundaries, men were introduced to patriarchal value systems that were at odds with the matrilineal systems their wives lived in (Phiri, 1983). As Vaughan (1985) then puts this decline in women's status throughout the colonial government: 'As women became economically marginalised, they lost much of the political and ideological control they had previously exercised through the matrilineal system' (ibid., p. 43). As a consequence, women's decision-making power was undermined, and their work burden increased (Phiri, 1983; Vaughan, 1985).

Then, after independence, government agricultural programmes and services were directed towards men farmers and have reiterated the norm of the men being the household head. Moreover, men were favoured in education and employment programmes, which made them much more conducive to income and other opportunities than women (Peters, 1997a). Women were also the strongest impacted by the hammer of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), first introduced in Malawi in 1981. This was due to SAP-induced reductions in health care services, which increased women's workload, or reduced access to fertiliser and seed purchases for staple food production (Gladwin, 1992). In the early 1990s, development interventions' attempts 'to "target" women in agriculture have done little to shift the underlying [structural] assumptions' (Peters, 1997a, p. 205).

Chirwa and Dorward (2013) discuss the gendered aspects of the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), an agricultural policy that has been run in Malawi from 2005 to 2020[16] with the aim of addressing food security constraints. They conclude that, in married households, access to subsidised fertiliser under the programme reduced bias against women's ownership of farming plots. They attribute this shift to women's responsibility for a household's food production, which aligned with FISP's emphasis on promoting the cultivation of food crops. At the same time, however, the design of FISP reinforced norms of men's authority within the household – particularly in relation to agriculture - because it identified men as the main recipients of resource coupons. Moreover, redeeming these coupons outside of their communities could have been more difficult for women than for men, due to security concerns or mobility restrictions linked to domestic work responsibilities. Interviews conducted as part of the study further confirmed that both husbands and wives regarded the husband as the main responsible for decisions regarding the subsidised fertiliser, including whether to use it or to resell it (ibid., 2013).

When trying to understand gendered social dynamics in matrilineal Central and Southern Malawi today, it is important to remember that for more than a century, the abovementioned events and policies enforced patriarchal norms and served to favour men as household heads and main decision-makers (Peters, 1997b). This is also an outcome of men's control over their labour and the established norms on how this labour should be used (Djurfeldt et al., 2018). It shows how the construct of a gendered division of labour and restrictions in women's mobility influence today's gender norms around work (Peters, 2006).

[16] The FISP was succeeded by the Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP) with a similar goal of food security at the household level and increased economic well-being for famers through access to 'improved' farming inputs such as seeds, fertilisers. The AIP besides large government investments faced immense challenges such as for example failure to access inputs, inadequate stock availability, or rent-seeking among officials involved in the programme execution In 2022 the AIP was perceived as 'collapsed' (Lewis, 2024),

In accordance with my own experiences, in her recent anthropological study on concepts of gender justice in Malawi, Johnson (2018) observed that men and women are doing agricultural work together, but that women lift the main agricultural workload while men are involved primarily during planting and harvesting. Then, concerning the characteristics of matriliny, during my research, I observed that while land was generally owned by women, the decisions on land use and cultivation were most often made by their husbands. This is in line with recent studies on matrilineal land tenure and household decision-making in Malawi. Even if women's land rights are undisputed, they exist in a broader socio-cultural scheme in which the norm of husbands holding the main decision-making power might be outweighing women's authority and control related to their land ownership (Djurfeldt et al., 2018; Kathewera-Banda et al., 2011).

Households then supplement the output from their agricultural production with incomes from formal employment that is mainly earned by a husband, and that often requires temporary labour migration; men's and women's income from *ganyu* (casual labour), which is a form of casual labour, often a short-term and informal employment arrangement; or incomes from men's or women's small-scale business. At the same time, women are assigned the role of primary caretakers of children and the home. This limits their time, capacities, and mobility for participation in agriculture, agricultural trading, or conducting *ganyu*. For single women, the sole carrying out of all farming and caretaking responsibilities is especially challenging and requires hard work. This makes them extremely vulnerable even if they are living among matrilineal kin (Djurfeldt et al., 2018).

Another important issue impacting women's lives is that of land scarcity. This could be due to the external forces of land alienation, pressure from a growing population, among other factors (Davison, 1993). In their study on women's food production and income generation in Southern Malawi, Hirschmann and Vaughan (1984) found that the majority of their respondents had

insufficient land to grow sufficient staple food to feed their families. Land scarcity might also foster labour migration of husbands because they are less willing to invest in *banja* production and would rather take on wage employment elsewhere (Davison, 1993). Thus, in terms of gender relations, the effects of less land available for cultivation also exacerbate the abovementioned dynamics of a wife's dependence on her husband's wage unless she has the skills and capacities to participate in the labour market herself (Davison, 1993; Hirschmann & Vaughan, 1984).

Hunger and Cyclical Food Scarcity in Malawi

Subsistence farmers are vulnerable to unpredictable external shocks, such as weather events or economic and political dynamics, causing food insecurity (Barrett & Headey, 2014). In Malawi, hunger can be a seasonal occurrence during the 'lean season', from November to March, right before harvest, when households have depleted their food reserves (Anderson et al., 2018; Mandala, 2005). In the last 30 years, however, food shortage has been a persistent issue for the population due to an interplay of extreme weather conditions, food price spikes, government and international policy mismanagement, and capitalist penetration into rural economies, among other factors (Bryceson, 2006; Conroy et al., 2006). This was most devastating during the famine of 2001-2002, which brought about high rates of mortality from hunger. The exact numbers are contested and range from 300 to 3000 (Devereux, 2002). In her book on the 1949 famine, Vaughan (1987) gives a detailed exploration of how mothers experience food crises more severely than men because they not only have to feed themselves but their children too. The most recent Demographic and Health Survey of 2024 of Malawi further indicated that 38 percent of the children are too short for their age and considered stunted, a sign of chronic malnutrition (National Statistical Office Malawi, 2024), which is regarded as one main cause of child mortality (UNICEF, 2010)

While today, seasonal hunger is more present than a famine, still, on the Global Hunger Index (GHI)[17], Malawi ranked 93rd out of 127 countries, indicating that its citizens suffer from a serious level of hunger (Concern Worldwide & Welthungerhilfe, 2024). Moreso, in the last ten years, Malawi has experienced a series of compounding food insecurity crises, including the 2015/2016 El Niño-induced drought, Cyclone Idai floods in 2019, the collapse of the Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP) in 2022, Cyclone Freddy early 2023, and the 2023/2024 dual crisis of El Niño-induced drought and localised flooding, all of which have disrupted agricultural production, strained rural livelihoods, and deepened the country's reliance on food aid and humanitarian interventions.

My fieldwork time (March 2022 to December 2023) coincided with several of the events above, and I observed how concomitant bad harvests and resulting food scarcity starkly exacerbated seasonal hunger. In March 2022, when I arrived in Malawi, the previous year's harvest was exhausted, the new season's cobs could not be plucked yet, and people were desperately waiting for the new harvest. After the main harvest was collected in April, food was available. Still, the main harvest, supplemented by a smaller winter harvest around September, was supposed to last for about a year. Many households already in July could foresee that this would be tight and that they would have to purchase maize from markets or better-off community members. Then, Malawi was hit by Cyclone Freddy in March 2023, which caused devastating destruction. It took people's lives, destroyed housing and a lot of the harvest and caused stark food insecurity with many people experiencing hunger, or relying on emergency food programmes. When 2023 was already a year marked by food scarcity, after many households started planting in late October 2023, the rains were a long time coming and many of the planted seeds, foremost maize seeds,

[17] The GHI is a tool to measure and compare hunger at global and regional levels. Four indicators of (1) undernourishment; (2) child wasting; (3) child stunting; and (4) child mortality are calculated and put in standardised scores, which are then aggregated to calculate the GHI (Concern Worldwide & Welthungerhilfe, 2024).

died in the drought. This was then followed by erratic heavy rains in January 2024 that further destroyed the harvest and also destroyed homes and again displaced people.

Malawi has a long history of development institution involvement, research and policy execution. Biruk (2018) goes as far as saying that Malawi has become a site of experimentation for development agencies. They explain that this long-term entanglement with donors has existed due to a perceived political stability and the cooperative bureaucracies of the Malawian government, particularly under Kamuzu Banda's leadership as the country's first president (ibid.). In recent years, reading reports of international organisations active in Malawi, the impacts of these weather events are often one of the main rationales for interventions that are concerned with emergencies in food security and general health. For example, after the 2023/2024 El Niño droughts and flooding, which were considered to have caused a 40 to 60 percent decline in agricultural harvest against the five-year average (FEWSNET, 2024), 5.7 million people were suffering severe levels of food insecurity. In response, the World Food Programme (WFP), as one of the main external actors, carried out an eight-week emergency humanitarian intervention to provide food assistance, treatment of acute malnutrition and emergency school meals to around 2 million recipients (WFP, 2024).

During times of food crisis, many of those affected rely on food and income from these interventions. When looking at the influence of these development interventions, however, one has to consider how they commonly depoliticise complex social and structural issues, rendering them into something technical that is 'solvable' through immediate external influence. At the same time, they become political actors themselves, who have an immense impact on the local context

they interact in and, for example, shape power relations, mediate access to resources, or reproduce or challenge authority (Biruk, 2018; Ferguson, 1994)[18].

As discussed in Chapter 1.2, in terms of gender relations, scholars have critiqued a number of unintended outcomes when women are targeted in development, often with the aim to 'empower' them but without paying attention to the structural nature of gender inequality. For example, mothers are often approached by development practitioners in their roles as caregivers to become empowered as a means to improve their household's food security and nutrition and especially that of their children. Here, unintended effects could be increases in women's workload, which is often already higher than that of their husbands, or it could perpetuate gendered responsibilities around childcare, especially when commonly only women are targeted by trainings (Blackden & Wodon, 2006; Van den Bold et al., 2021).

Finally, concerning Malawi's continuation of donor dependency, the annual food insecurity assessments and emergency responses normalise crises focused short term policies and reduced space for structural and long-term responses (Booth et al., 2006). While this is still a valid concern, it is to note that in the 2024 annual country report for Malawi, the WFP explicitly writes: 'WFP's approach in Malawi goes beyond immediate relief to include interventions aimed at building long-term resilience among vulnerable populations' (WFP, 2024) followed by an elucidation of the resilience and productivity enhancing programme for smallholder farmers (ibid.). Yet, this perpetuates the vicious cycle of external actors determining the crisis response, thereby

[18] A detailed analysis of the politics of development interventions lies beyond the scope of this chapter. This it is provided by scholars such as Biruk (2018) on global health research on the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Malawi, or James Ferguson (1994) drawing from development planning and interventions in Lesotho. To summarise briefly, from different angles, both acknowledge how research and interventions produce 'development' as a technical problem that ignores local histories and power relations, whilst, far from being neutral, they become powerful political actors themselves.

exacerbating aid dependency and further weakening the government's capacity to intervene (Booth et al., 2006).[19]

This is the scene within which this thesis research is set. The processes described in this chapter underscore the complex interplay between kinship, gender, land, and power in matrilineal Central and Southern Malawi. These dynamics do not exist in isolation - they are mediated by histories of colonisation, agricultural systems, and development interventions - all of which contour women's present lived experiences, especially in relation to motherhood, livelihood, authority, and social belonging. Building on this contextual foundation, in the following chapter, I turn to the methodological choices that guided my research.

[19] A detailed analysis of the underlying historical roots and politics of interactions between the Malawian government and external developmental actors, lies beyond the scope of this thesis. However, this is provided by Booth et al. 2006.

3. Methodology

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her TED Talk titled *'The Danger of a Single Story',* argues that narratives of rural women's lived experiences have suffered from partial telling whose understanding is often based on Western, middle-class women who, in global discourse, have the power to tell a (single) story about others. Results are misrepresentations and misappropriations, minimising women's diverse roles while normalising their subjugation in ways that victimise them. This conceals the root causes of women's challenges in distinct patriarchal contexts in which gender inequalities are sustained and underpinned by systemic, structural, and global issues. Consequently, gender and development policies and interventions, influenced by these narrow portrayals, often fail to understand or address the underlying structural dynamics of gender injustice (Adichie, 2009).

Adichie's (2009) powerful words strongly influenced my thinking during the process of choosing methodologies for my research, particularly with regard to the question of how I could 'produce knowledge' as a Western feminist researcher, who is an outsider to the context of Central and Southern Malawi, and without falling into the trap of telling a 'single story'. Through the use of feminist epistemological principles, in this thesis, I seek to move beyond problematising Malawian women's subjective experiences within oppressive gender discourses and to elevate women's own voices and worldviews, recognising them as 'knowers or agents of knowledge about themselves' (Wood et al. 2007, p. 44). This knowledge lays the groundwork for a critical exploration of contemporary gendered experiences of empowerment and motherhood in Central and Southern Malawi, which are grounded in historical and cultural contexts. I also examine how women's accounts of these experiences interact with the perspectives introduced by development agencies. The methods and ethical choices employed in my study are deeply informed by these epistemological considerations, ensuring that the research remains grounded in a commitment to

due sensitivity and care when analysing the words of marginalised voices and acknowledging their significant cultural contributions (Mohanty, 2005; Narayan, 2004). In this chapter, I begin by outlining key principles of feminist epistemology. I then describe the qualitative and mixed methods approaches used in my study, including semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and pro-WEAI, as a quantitative measure. I reflect on my ethical considerations and challenges and conclude with a discussion of my background and positionality as a researcher.

I provide an in-depth elaboration of my research methods and process because 'methods don't just describe social realities but also help to create them' (Law, 2004). Rather than applying neat, linear methods to social realities that are often messy, elusive, and multiple, in order to provide a tool for understanding, such methods must match and honour these realities (ibid.).

3.1. A Feminist Epistemological Approach

Epistemology encompasses the intricacies of knowledge production. It represents the implications of how we know what we know and through which methods and validations (Tamale, 2020). Feminist epistemology is an umbrella for the valuing of plurality in knowledge creation of themes such as situated knowledge, lived experiences, collaboration, acknowledging the bearing of power on knowledge and the responsibility implicit in holding knowledge. Feminist epistemology is not unified but rather values collaboration among different perspectives to create more complete knowledge. Collins (1990) describes that it 'investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why' (ibid., p. 252).

Uma Narayan (2004) explains the central idea of feminist epistemology as a 'manifestation of the general insight that women's experiences as individuals and as social beings, our contributions

to work, culture, knowledge, and our history and political interests have been systematically ignored or misrepresented by mainstream discourses in different areas' (ibid, p. 213). This oblivion led to a 'male' representation of certain human activities such as politics and science, and to a rendering inferior of other activities that were ascribed to women, such as care work (ibid.). It represents the principles of dualisms in Western philosophical thinking, such as reason versus emotion, culture versus nature, or universal versus particular. Therein, the former of each set is ascribed to science, rationality and masculinity, whereas the latter is non-scientific, nonrational and the feminine (Harding & Hintikka, 1983). Feminist epistemology critiques this tendency to consider the 'masculine' as superior and recognises the contents of 'feminine' areas of expertise and knowledge (Narayan, 2004), and acknowledges that values and emotions inevitably are present and contribute to the making of knowledge (Gilligan, 1982). The inclusion of women's perspectives will not merely add to the picture but will rather lead to a nuanced repainting of it, restoring a sense of richness to women's history and knowledge. Analogously, it resembles a space for marginalised groups to reclaim the value of their lived experiences and to document the complexity and wealth of their societies, histories and cultures (Narayan, 2004). This is to write against the enterprise of dominant Western knowledge systems that 'epistemicided'[20] (Dladla, 2017) the knowledge systems of people that were colonised (Tamale, 2020).

Narayan (2004) emphasises that feminist epistemology exists differently in different contexts. In particular, she delineates how feminist epistemology is experienced differently by women in Non-Western cultures and those in Western cultures. In other words, and as Oyěwùmí (2005) stated: 'If gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space' (Oyěwùmí, 2005, p. 11). This contextual variability in feminist epistemology closely

[20] 'Epistemicide' connotes the colonization of the mind, knowledge and social structures of indigenous societies. Intellectually, colonised countries were forcibly oriented towards Western values, aesthetics, philosophical outlooks, and others. Their own systems of knowledge production and worldview was devalorised (Dladla, 2017).

relates to Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of 'intersectionality', which critiques the tendency of dominant frameworks to erase the complex, overlapping identities of marginalised subjects. Crenshaw (1989) argues that women's experiences cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender, but must be analysed in conjunction with other factors such as race, class, culture, or religion, embedded in structural and historical forces that shape present local realities.

Crenshaw (1989) and Narayan (2004) both insist on the non-universality of feminist experience and the need for epistemologies that can account for multiple, intersecting dimensions of identity and oppression. While there is no universality in the experience of non-Western women[21], some preoccupations of Western feminists, like the critique of women's roles tied to family, marriage, or religion when trying to analyse 'women's experiences', may be counterproductive for women in non-Western societies. There, these roles such as motherhood may carry status, value, and complex meaning, even when embedded in structures that generally are oppressive towards women. Instead of questioning these roles, it may be desirable for women to stay in them, and it would be problematic to uncritically echo the themes of Western feminists, as this would take away such status (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 2000). Narayan (2004) recognises that it is a fine balance act, then to, on one hand, value a certain culture and women's experience therein and not ascribe it to the internalisation of oppressive traditional structures, and on the other hand refrain from romanticising this to an extent where limitations to its subject are ignored (ibid.). This principle fundamentally informs my research and the ways I, as a Western feminist researcher, engage with the knowledge and narratives of women in Central and Southern Malawi. Here, Francis Nyamnjoh's (2015) theorisation of 'incompleteness' offers a vital epistemological orientation: he cautions against the drive to complete or finalise knowledge, instead advocating

[21] I draw on Narayan's (2004) use of the term 'non-Western' as a political category that reflects a shared history of experiencing the dominance and colonization exercised by Western powers. I acknowledge that non-Western women do not form a homogenous group, and that the term non-Western itself risks reinforcing the centrality of the West.

for openness, relationality, and the accommodation of plurality. Nyamnjoh's (2015) philosophy of pluralism reinforces the need for an approach that honours coexisting knowledges, acknowledges ambivalence, and embraces incompleteness as a more truthful and respectful mode of engagement. Importantly, his notion of 'epistemological humility' highlights that all theoretical frameworks in use are themselves partial and situated.

It becomes clear that feminist epistemology does not represent a singular or homogenous concept but requires contextual adaptability. This shapes the methodological and ethical considerations of my research, wherein I interrogate dominant ideologies in theory and question what is considered knowledge and what is not. By deploying feminist epistemology, I aim to foreground the lived experiences of women who are mothers in Central and Southern Malawi with a focus on how they articulate meaning within their own cultural frameworks. Feminist epistemology provides the tools to gain a nuanced understanding of women's lived realities, their co-existing concepts of feminisms and empowerment, and the values they ascribe to different areas of their lives as mothers. It gives due significance to their contributions to culture, society, and history. At the same time, acknowledging the intersectionality of different factors influencing women's lives, a gender lens is applied throughout to continuously interrogate gendered power dynamics that create the particular conditions and experiences that respondents describe.

My first and second empirical chapters (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) will hinge on qualitative research, namely semi-structured interviews and FGDs, to understand Central and Southern Malawian women's lived experiences of motherhood and how those relate to their emic[22] conceptions of empowerment. In my third empirical chapter (Chapter 6), I am deploying a mixed

[22] 'emic' connotes an individual's intrinsic conception of phenomena. In contrary, an 'etic' perspective is concerned with an outsider's scientific classifications (Grenier, 1998).

methods study to explore how women themselves describe their experiences in domains quantitatively measured by the pro-WEAI, and how those qualitative and quantitative findings speak to each other.

3.2. Qualitative Research

I am applying qualitative research to understand 'the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). This approach allows for gaining 'insight into the processes involved in co-constructing meaning, lived experiences, cultural rituals, and oppressive practices' (Atkinson, 2017, p. 65). Qualitative research offers the adaptability to pursue emerging lines of inquiry and to explore inconsistencies or contradictions between what participants express as beliefs and how these manifest in actual practice (Janesick, 2000). Emphasising the value of lived experiences, they enable the capturing of participants' perspectives in their own words, clarifying how they themselves understand and negotiate social categories (Bernard, 2006).

Feminist qualitative research focuses on patriarchal power structures and how those impact marginalised women's lives in different contexts (Atkinson, 2017). Several scholars have critically questioned and often dismantled traditional binaries such as male/female or man/woman in favour of categories that are not biologically fixed but unstable, socially constructed concepts that shift over time and across cultures (Butler, 1990; Oyěwùmí, 2005). Nonetheless, in this thesis, I follow the approach that recognising the discursive and fluid nature of gender does not render the categories of 'woman' and 'man' irrelevant for empirical inquiry (Diaz-Leon, 2016; Mayer, 1989; Walby, 1992). As Walby (1992) argues, conceptualising 'woman' remains crucial to understanding gendered structures, just as retaining the concept of 'patriarchy' ensures that the power dynamics embedded in gender relations are not obscured. I am aware that 'woman' and 'man' as categories

are contextually constructed by intersections of history, culture, class, race, and religion, among others (Butler, 2021; Mohanty, 2005). As Tsing (2015, p. 29) puts it: 'If categories are unstable, we must watch them emerge within encounters. To use category names should be a commitment to tracing the assemblages in which these categories gain a momentary hold.'[23]

I thus connote the terms 'women' and 'men' not as categories of analysis with a homogenous notion, but vis-à-vis the context of my analysis and according to how respondents used the terms. Gender as a social category remains deeply embedded in institutional structures and everyday practices, shaping and limiting the positions of individuals based on their perceived gender. Moreover, despite cultural diversity, recurring patterns of female subordination and structural inequalities can be observed historically and trickling into the present, across different societies (McDowell & Pringle, 1992). As discussed in Chapter 1.3, one must be wary of the dangers of essentialist notions of feminism and womanhood. At the same time, its institutionalisation as an analytical category in scholarship is a significant political and epistemological milestone (Udayagiri, 1995).

Importantly, understandings of a person's own gender identities and of the gender categories and norms of a society are among the most fundamental types of 'taken for granted' knowledge. Feminist qualitative research enables a critical engagement with what is taken for granted, interrogating what people perceive as 'natural' or self-evident, and encouraging reflection on socially constructed beliefs and practices. In doing so, it opens up such norms and behaviours to discussion, creating potential and imagination for change. This is the converse of naturalisation (Bernard, 2006; Rubin, 2016).

[23] Based on this, throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'woman', 'women', 'man', and 'men', which are politically significant and contextually specific, as opposed to the biologically fixed terms 'female' and 'male'.

At the same time, under the umbrella of feminist epistemology, it aims for co-creation in an anti-hierarchical manner and seeks to avoid the manipulation and exploitation of the research participants by the researcher. This approach is in contrast to positivist and androcentric approaches that often claim objectivity while ignoring the influence of power and positionality in knowledge production (Wambui, 2013). Related to this, the premise that all theoretical frameworks themselves are partial and situated is inherent in Nyamnjoh's (2020) concept of 'epistemic humility', which became especially prevalent when interrogating women's emic understandings of empowerment. For example, the utilisation of the term 'empowerment' in its literal sense would result in a preoccupation with a particular idea of women's actions and behaviours that have been disseminated and promoted by international organisations, a challenge that I will elaborate on later in this chapter.

Feminist qualitative research thus underscores the importance of navigating the 'differences in realities' among participants and between participants and researchers, as well as interrogating the power dynamics inherent in research (Stanley & Wise, 2013). Reflexivity remains central to the research process, which requires me to interpret collected data with careful attention to context and my own positionality (Wambui, 2013). I will elaborate on the latter more later in this chapter.

Following the above principles, as qualitative research methods for this thesis, I deployed semi-structured interviews to understand individual experiences of respondents and FGDs to hear different views and understand what views are more widely held, and to create a safe space for discussion among respondents, especially when the discussed context is sensitive.

Selection of Research Participants

All qualitative research was conducted by me and Monice Kachinjika, my research assistant, who is a Malawian woman, who is a mother and was born and raised in Zomba.

The process of identifying women for my interviews and FGDs commenced when, in anticipation of the part of this thesis that follows a mixed methods approach, for about a third of the respondents, I randomly drew names from the list of participants of the '*Mazi*ko trial' baseline survey, that constitutes my quantitative data and that I will explain in detail later in this chapter (see 3.3). All survey participants were women with children under the age of five. Doing this identified some of the respondents in Balaka and Ntcheu. However, if the chosen respondents were not available, I conducted interviews with other mothers in the same community.

Gaining access to research participants in Malawi implies that, I, or any other the person wanting to pursue the research had to visit the respective Traditional Authority (TA)[24] at their house, gift them a small present, explain the purpose of my research, show documents such as interview questions or the consent form and ask them to for their permission to implement the research. For all communities that I wished to interview, Monice and I determined where the respective TA lived, and did these visits. For the communities, as per the survey respondent list, we found the TA and gained permission.

We then proceeded to contact different TAs south of Balaka and Ntcheu, in Machinga, and Zomba districts, since these districts were physically accessible and underlie matrilineal practices. In order to identify women for interviews and FGDs, under the umbrella of gaining an understanding of motherhood and empowerment, I set out to have a significant share of interview

[24] In Malawi, a Traditional Authority (TA) is the highest traditional leader below the district level, overseeing several Group Village Heads (GVHs), who in turn are responsible for individual communities, who also have individual Village Heads. This hierarchical structure, enshrined in the Chiefs Act, plays a critical role in different areas as for example customary land administration, dispute resolution, or granting access to external organisations such as NGOs.

and FGD participants who are biological mothers of children under the age of five. Based on this criterion, the respective TAs often indicated in what communities we would find women who were excited to speak to us and many of whom were mothers of young children. Through this process, we identified the other two-thirds of interview and FGD participants and their respective communities. While this was not my intention, the way my research project was communicated, from TA to Group Village Heads (GVHs) to community members, and the perceived nature of my research focus meant that, ultimately, when I met them, all participants (except Lindiwe) happened to be biological mothers of children under five[25].

Table 1 Rounds of Research

	Round 1	**Round 2**
Timeline	June-August 2022	November/December 2023
Number of Interview Respondents	39	14 (10 previously interviewed in Round 1, 4 new)
Number of FGD Respondents	58 (from 10 FGDs)	14 (from 2 FGDs. All previously interviewed in Round 1)
Total	97	28

We conducted semi-structured and FGDs in two rounds of research, from June to August 2022, and in November and December 2023. In different communities in the districts of Balaka, Machinga, Zomba and Ntcheu, I interviewed 43 women who are mothers. 39 of them were part of the first research round. 10 of them participated in the second round of interviews, in which I also interviewed four new respondents. During the first round of research, I conducted FGDs with ten groups of mothers encompassing five to nine respondents, with a total of 58 participants. Two of these FGD groups - 14 respondents - participated in my second round of research (Table

[25] While I do not understand motherhood as inherently biological, I acknowledge that this selection procedure introduced bias, as all participants articulated their conceptions of motherhood from the perspective of having become mothers through childbirth. This presents a limitation of my study.

1). At the point of the second round of FGDs, Lindiwe had also given birth to her first child, which made all my respondents biological mothers. During the interviews and FGDs, we on average interviewed five mothers of each community and held one FGD per community with different mothers.

In addition to all respondents being biological mothers of children under the age of five, there were more unifying factors. Across the combined sample of 101 respondents, 43 mothers as interview respondents, and 58 mothers as FGD participants, at the respective times of their first interviews and first FGDs, they were 18 to 48 years old with an average age of 28 years.

Of those 101, 66 women were married, but two of them lived in separation. 24 were divorced. Here, Racheal particularly explained that she divorced from her husband due to the experience of domestic violence. Nine respondents were never married, and two were widowed.

84 women resided according to matrilineal custom and in the communities in which they were born. Seven participants from FGDs and 10 from interviews did not follow this custom. The 10 mothers in the interviews explained different reasons for this. Mavuto's family moved to her current community when she was 13 years old. Mwawi, Alinafe, Tiyamike, Kettie, and Teleza accompanied their husbands as they searched for work. Madalo explained that she lives in her husband's community because work opportunities there were better for both of them. Ireen moved to the community where she lives now to find work for herself. Charity moved to Lilongwe to find work in the capital but visited her home community at the time of the interview. Similar to this, and also visiting at the time of the interview, Esther moved closer to Lake Malawi to find work there in the tourism industry.

They all had between one and eight children. As mentioned, Lindiwe was not a biological mother during the first round of FGDs but had given birth to her child shortly after and before the second round. On average, the mothers participating in interviews and FGDs had three

children. For interview respondents, the youngest age at which a woman had given birth to her first child was 13, and the oldest age was 28. The average age for this was 19 years. I did not ask this question to the FGD respondents.

As the highest level of schooling attained, Beatrice has a diploma in community development, and Martha has one in hospitality management. 35 of the 101 mothers had attended secondary school. Of these, ten had completed it. The remainder of mothers attained primary school, of which 19 had completed it. Two of the mothers never went to school.

Farming as a primary occupation was mentioned by only 15 out of 101 interview and FGD respondents, primarily in terms of subsistence agriculture, farming maize, cassava, pigeon peas, or rice if there was enough water. For most, it is paired with *ganyu* (casual labour) or small-scale business activities. 29 respondents were engaged in some form of small-scale business, selling their own agricultural produce such as tomatoes, onions, potatoes, sugarcane, or vegetables. Those, even if they did not state farming explicitly, grew these in their own home gardens. Some baked and sold doughnuts or samosas. Others sold rice or maize, either grown at home or bought and resold. Three bought and resold (dried) fish. Two made and sold charcoal. some bough and resold (dried) fish. Ida was the only one trading g with quarry stones. Ten of the mothers engaged in small-scale business, mostly conducted this at the local market, while the other five mostly sold from home because that was more feasible to reconcile with other responsibilities, such as taking care of a young child. Tiyamike and Racheal explained that they used to have bigger businesses that, in Tiyamike's case, failed due to monetary issues. Racheal explained that her husband sabotaged her business by taking away her buckets of fish. Her business never recovered from that. Martha and Beatrice, who were the two respondents holding a diploma, stated exemptions. Martha worked in hospitality and was employed in a guest house in a nearby town. Beatrice ran

an online shoe business where she ordered shoes from a large-scale supplier and resold them in her community and surrounding areas.

As the most common occupation, 56 respondents did *ganyu*, either as a primary activity or occasionally. Here, some activities mentioned by respondents were labour related to brick making or providing farm labour on other people's land. The latter was mentioned by women who did *ganyu* as their primary occupation, which could indicate that it is more profitable for them than tending to their own land and consuming or selling the produce thereof. Mwawi mentioned that she occasionally plaited people's hair, and Tamara washed people's laundry.

Looking at this variety of activities, it is worth noting here that in almost all married households, the husband earned the main share of the household income, and women added to this with the work they did. In 9 interviews, women indeed stressed that they live in a strong dependency on their husband's income. Those especially indicated household work as their main occupation and carried out other activities such as *ganyu*, farming or tailoring only occasionally.

All the mothers who were divorced, widowed, or never married were the main breadwinners for their households. Those who were married but lived in separation still often had some income flow coming from their husbands. Eunice, who is divorced and has four children, and Tamara, who is a young mother of a small child and was never married, both made clear that they really struggle to earn enough income for their children and themselves to survive. An exception was Rhoda, who is also a young mother of a small child, but with the support of her parents, still manages to go to school.

Data Collection and Analysis

As noted, all semi-structured interviews and FGDs were conducted by me and Monice, my research assistant. Monice and I have a close relationship as colleagues and friends since I hired

her for the first time during my MPhil research in 2020/2021, when, due to the Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions, I could not travel to Malawi, and the entire back-and-forth process between researcher and research assistant had to happen virtually. Based on the positive outcomes of this first occasion of working together, I employed her again for my DPhil research, this time from June 2022 to August 2022 for the first round of research and again in November and December 2023 for the second round of research.

It is important to consider how Monice, as my research assistant and translator, is positioned, as this significantly influenced the process of data collection and the content of data collected (Turner, 2010). Monice grew up near Zomba and hence holds deep internal knowledge about the social and normative particularities of the contexts researched. She spent most of her life in a semi-urban setting and left her rural community at a young age when her family moved near Zomba. She grew up speaking Chichewa and English, completed high school and a diploma and hence has an exceptional educational background. I was introduced to her through the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), where she was working as a research assistant on a previous intervention evaluation, whose primary data I was able to use for my MPhil research. She has previous experience researching sensitive topics around issues of women and gender, and is a mother herself, which I regarded as an advantage in terms of shared experiences when speaking to other mothers.

At the same time, there was a noticeable gap in class and education between her and my research participants[26]. Monice was aware of this and approached it in different ways. For example, she dressed in a *chitenge* and wore a headscarf and instructed me to wear a *chitenge* too, explaining that this is common and respectful behaviour in the rural communities, different to the more

[26] This was further influenced by my presence as a white Western researcher. I discuss the implications of this later in this Chapter 3.5 on my positionality.

urban spaces. Also, the way she engaged with participants and their children was humble and respectful, and with a lot of kindness and empathy towards personal issues that were shared with us.

Monice functioned as a gatekeeper for me, and as per the process explained above, she asked local chiefs (TAs) for research permission. In this process, we visited six different TAs. During the time of data collection, a typical day could look like this: Early in the morning, I would pick up Monice, and we would drive to a community that a respective TA had recommended. There, we would identify the Village Head and introduce ourselves and my research. The Village Head would then point towards possible respondents that we would then approach and again introduce ourselves. The days following this introduction, and in the same community, we would go directly to the respondent's house or spend the day doing the FGD. As recommended by the TA and advised by Monice, as part of common and respectful behaviour when entering communities as a researcher, we brought a kilogram bag of brown sugar, which women commonly use to sweeten their children's teas or porridges, to every interview and FGD respondent, in exchange for their time and because they welcomed us into their homes. We would then find a space that was secluded enough to be able to speak in private but also visible enough not to make the interview or FGD seem suspicious and as something that would need to happen behind closed doors. For example, this could be on a respondent's porch or on the edge of the community.

Proceeding with an interview or FGD, we would obtain oral consent from study participants. All of them also agreed to us recording the interviews. For interviews, I developed questions broadly around three topical areas, including conceptions of women's empowerment at the household and community level; experiences around motherhood; and if and how these conceptions and experiences have changed throughout their lives and what other events influenced them.

I chose semi-structured interviews to create spaces where respondents can speak in their own words and invest their identity. Monice proceeded according to an interview outline with all questions listed, but fostered a conversational dynamic that aligns with feminist principles of reciprocity and respect. This method can feel more like 'talking with' rather than 'researching on', allowing participants to guide the narrative and articulate their lived experiences on their own terms (Finch, 1993). Especially when women kept elaborating topics they regarded as important, she deviated from the outline and followed the 'natural' path of the conversation (Hermanowicz, 2002). To gain a nuanced understanding of women's perceptions and desires, questions often begin with 'would you like (…)', or 'in your opinion (…)'. Monice often created intimacy by making jokes with the respondents. These interviews took around an hour to an hour and a half.

For the FGDs, the topical areas of the questions also encompassed conceptions of women's empowerment and experiences of motherhood, but were also more broadly asking about attributes ascribed to men and women who were considered role models in a community, and gendered norms, particularly around decision-making. FGD respondents were also asked about their daily time-use and respective chores, and about their mobility.

Again, following a flexible set of questions, I conducted FGDs to observe respondents' interactions on attitudes and experiences, their relationships and group dynamics – in other words, they reveal what happens when people share differing individual experiences and attempt to collectively make sense of them (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Especially when aiming to gain a contextual understanding of concepts of empowerment and motherhood, respectively and also in the ways they interact, it was helpful to see what factors were presented in a group setting and which were not, compared to individual interviews. Those not presented could either not be considered important or be too off limits to be mentioned in a shared space (ibid.). One respondent's ideas of empowerment can have importance and meaning for the broader group.

Across cases, comparisons of scenarios, or agreeing or disagreeing with statements, highlighted the relative importance of some and the rarity of others. Further, questions and answers to each other could point to differences in the frames of reference that different participants are using.

While speaking about these concepts reveals a lot about gendered norms, when asking about these norms in particular, it was interesting to observe group reactions and see how women would navigate speaking about changes. For example, participants joked together about how they could be starting to 'disrespect' their husbands if they would just behave in a certain way, such as suddenly earning more money than their husbands. Participants often gauged the amount of consensus on the issue stated and whether they shared experiences. Being aware of the formation of collective agency in the context of empowerment (Kabeer, 1994, 2024), FGDs also became spaces for sharing and discussing ideas, giving each other advice, or simply observing what other women have achieved around them. These FGDs took around two hours. Throughout all interviews and FGDs, Monice translated from Chichewa to English and back, between the respondents and me.

The qualitative data collection was a back-and-forth process where we remained flexible with questions and the structure of interviews and FGDs (Janesick, 2000). Monice and I debriefed after almost every interview and assessed if and when we needed to revise interview questions, include topics that were mentioned by respondents, or adjust the way we spoke about certain issues. During the process of data collection, I commenced analysing the qualitative data and took these findings into account. I discussed with Monice how to introduce new topics, broaden or refine certain existing areas of research, or how to deepen my research based on existing findings.

Drawing from findings of my first round of research and these consultations with Monice, I then set out revised sets of interviews and FGD questions for the second round of research. The second round of qualitative research was also part of my mixed methods approach that I will

explain in more detail below. As part of this, questions were specifically about women's experiences in the different domains of empowerment that constitute the pro-WEAI (Figure 5).

Elaborating on the different roles Monice carried out clearly shows that she played a central role in my qualitative research. I agree with Middleton and Cons (2014), who stress the importance of foregrounding the relationship between researcher and research assistant in their multitude roles with inherent epistemological, political, and social dimensions. For example, this includes the negotiation of the researcher's understanding of their research subjects and vice versa, to leverage their own position and knowledge to enable research access, inquiries, explorations, or objectives, or to grapple with research challenges more generally. In most of the existing literature, research assistants are sketched as ad-hoc and 'opaque presences' (ibid., p. 282), limited to footnotes, or formal acknowledgements, rather than acknowledging their centrality to the research in question. Among other factors, institutional norms of privileging individual authorship and proficiency undergird this issue. Meanwhile, erasing the presence and impact of a research assistant re-inscribes a kind of alienation starkly criticised by many postcolonial scholars (Chakrabarty, 2000; Spivak, 1999).

To analyse my qualitative data, I followed the steps suggested by Schutt (2018): I transcribed interviews, FGDs, observations and notes I took in both research rounds. I then organised the data transcripts, compiled relevant themes and concepts, and coded data excerpts accordingly using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

I started with broadly predefined codes drawing from the literature, such as practice, discourse, and social identity (Walker, 1995), when analysing conceptions of motherhood. However, in the realm of feminist epistemology and given my research questions that investigates into the specifics of concepts of the empirical context, primarily, I worked inductively, stayed close

to interview and FGD findings, and allowed concepts to emerge from the data. This follows an 'emic' rather than an 'etic' approach. 'Emic' connotes an individual's intrinsic conception of phenomena. In contrary, an 'etic' perspective is concerned with an outsider's scientific classifications (Grenier, 1998).

Then, I analysed the data for recurring, assimilable themes as well as for unusual cases. Despite notably similar views among respondents throughout the different areas of my research, I attempted not to homogenise but to carefully incorporate diverging views among respondents with different characteristics, including age, marriage status, or level of education, to name a few. While I conducted interviews or FGDs with all 101 women, a limitation of my study is that I was not able to include the experiences and perspectives of all of them.

3.3. Mixed Methods Research

In Chapter 6, I conduct mixed methods research to 'obtain different but complementary data on the same topic' (Morse, 1991, p. 122), to gain an understanding of the complex and multi-layered phenomenon of women's empowerment, which is richer and more nuanced than using one approach alone (Behrman et al., 2014). Standardised measures of empowerment, that are commonly applied in studies on development, are valuable for measuring change, comparing outcomes across locations and over time, for identifying patterns within a research population, or for testing different scenarios to attribute relationships between different dimensions of empowerment (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2006; Doss & Rubin, 2021). However, they often fail to grasp contextual and incomparable, more 'messy' factors. They neither provide an in-depth understanding of underlying processes, which is necessary when exploring women's empowerment, defined as a process of change (Kabeer, 1999).

As elaborated above, to gain an understanding of these processes, qualitative methods are well situated to explore contextual understandings and cultural differences. They enrich the quantitative findings with an understanding of complex social realities of women, that shape their thoughts, actions and ideas of empowerment (Nightingale, 2003; Shaffer, 2012). For example, strategies for empowerment other than those determined by categories of a quantitative measure.

Moreso, the process of change inherent in empowerment implies changes in restrictive gender norms that often are normalised and taken for granted in a society. Inherent beliefs then also determine responses to standardised questions of quantitative methods. Yet, this would remain unexplored. Then, qualitative methods can make visible and help investigate gendered beliefs and practices otherwise taken for granted. This can even open up a discussion and, in turn, create potential for processes of change (Bernard, 2006; Rubin, 2016).

To conduct a mixed methods approach, I followed a two-stage approach: Firstly, I calculated a standardised index, the pro-WEAI and its 12 constituting indicators, from baseline household survey data of biological mothers, to measure women's empowerment quantitatively. This generated representative and comparable data (White, 2002). For my study, the pro-WEAI is particularly useful because it draws on Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of women's empowerment as women's ability to make life choices, which I employ too.

Secondly, I draw from semi-structured interviews and FGDs with biological mothers to explore their emic conceptions of empowerment and also their own experiences within the categories measured by the index.

I followed the principles of an integrated mixed methods design. This implies that quantitative and qualitative data are considered concurrently in different research stages of study development, data collection, processing data, and an integrated analysis in terms of preliminary analysis and integration (Castro et al., 2010). For the integrated analysis, I moved back and forth between the

quantitative data, the qualitative data and the literature. Exploring relationships, I triangulated quantitative and qualitative findings from data and analysed the similarities or differences in the pictures they painted. I also explored how qualitative findings related to the way the 12 pro-WEAI domains are conceptualised.

In Chapter 6, integrating both approaches in my analysis allows me to explore quantitative trends and patterns in women's empowerment as per pro-WEAI categories, while engaging with the contextual complexities within which empowerment takes meaning for women. It reveals where emic and etic conceptions of women's empowerment in the context of motherhood diverge. It allows me to explore to what extent women's experiences coincide with what is measured by indicators and hence to validate and bring nuances to approaches of measurement. Subsequently, I will delineate quantitative and qualitative methods that constitute my mixed methods study.

Quantitative Data Collection: The Maziko Trial Baseline Study

The quantitative data of my mixed methods study comes from the baseline household survey of a cluster-randomised controlled trial (cRCT), the 'Maziko' trial, conducted in a collaboration between *IFPRI*, *Save the Children*, and *Give Directly*. This trial was designed to evaluate the impact of the Maziko intervention that operates for three years in Ntcheu district in the Central region and Balaka district in the Southern region of Malawi.

The Maziko intervention aims to improve maternal and child nutrition, health and development, household food security in communities that already receive a 'standard of care' government programme. They use community-based childcare centres (CBCCs) and parenting care groups as platforms to carry out variations of nutrition-sensitive intervention packages. These packages either entail the implementation of a set of nutrition-sensitive social behaviour change

components or this, together with two different tiers of a cash transfer component[27]. The study area consists of 156 clusters around communities with CBCCs that are part of the SoC government programme. The Maziko trial cRCT enrolled 2674 women aged 15 to 49 years, who were either pregnant or caretakers of children under the age of two. Clusters were randomly assigned to one of the four intervention arms, which amounted to approximately 40 clusters per intervention arm, 20 mother-child pairs per cluster.

The Maziko design positions women's empowerment as an intermediate outcome across all intervention arms aimed at improving nutritional and health outcomes. Because of this, the pro-WEAI questionnaire was a fitting measure to be integrated into the baseline survey of the Maziko trial (Maziko Trial Team, 2024).

The baseline survey data collection took place for about four months from March 2022 onward. Data was collected by enumerators who, over three weeks prior, were trained on a number of topics, including research ethics and questionnaire comprehension, interviewing techniques, and data entry using the Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) tool of the software Survey CTO. At the time affiliated with IFPRI, I conducted the trainings on the pro-WEAI, during which we also translated the instrument from English into Chichewa. Enumerators were grouped into specialised teams that would conduct household interviews, or carry out dietary assessment and child anthropometry. These teams had supervisors who would spot-check during interviews, help with issues that arose, and debrief with their teams at the end of every day. In private settings, the enumerator teams, conducting household interviews that covered other topics too, used the complete pro-WEAI questionnaire in Chichewa to collect data on all 12 indicator areas. The 2674 enrolled women were interviewed. 1659 of them lived in dual-adult households,

[27] See study protocol (Maziko Trial Team, 2024), for a detailed elaboration of the intervention's components, intended pathways and objectives.

of which the primary man of the household was also interviewed. As a research consultant, I was actively involved in the enumerator training, collection, data cleaning, pro-WEAI calculation and analysis. While the baseline study was still ongoing, I repeatedly imported all data sets into the quantitative data analysis software STATA and cleaned them. I then calculated all 12 indicators that constitute pro-WEAI and its aggregated indicators, 3DE, GPI, and the pro-WEAI score. As a requirement of the index calculation, respondents must have a complete set of responses in all 12 constituting pro-WEAI indicators. 2094 women and 1494 men had this complete information. I present a description of the sample characteristics in Chapter 6.2.

The Pro-WEAI

I quantitatively measure women's empowerment by calculating the pro-WEAI from baseline survey data of the Maziko trial. The pro-WEAI is a tool that was designed for agricultural development interventions to 'identify key areas of women's (and men's) disempowerment, tailor appropriate strategies to address identified deficiencies, and monitor intervention outcomes related to women's empowerment (Malapit et al 2019, p. 675).

The pro-WEAI is one of the latest versions of the WEAI, a tool launched in 2012 by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), IFPRI, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). A motivating factor for the WEAI development was that previous indicators that measure women's empowerment usually did so at the aggregated national level, which, in its broadness, did not take into account heterogeneities between regions or socioeconomic factors such as age, marital status or ethnicity (Alkire et al., 2013; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Narayan-Parker, 2005). Aiming to bridge this gap, the WEAI was conceptualised, being sensitive to heterogeneities across regions and across women (Alkire et al., 2013; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Then the pro-WEAI was set up because, despite the commitments of many

agricultural development interventions aiming to empower women alongside agricultural goals such as agricultural productivity or improved nutrition, consistent approaches to measure the interventions' impacts on women's empowerment in agriculture were lacking. The broader family of WEAI tools have been tested, adapted and implemented in 53 countries globally (Malapit et al., 2019). While the WEAI is a standardised measure that might not fit all aspects of women's empowerment in a local context, it is valuable as it provides a starting point for exploring women's empowerment in the agricultural context. Importantly, it allows for comparison across places and encourages development practitioners to think about their intervention's impact on women and identify areas of their greatest needs. When data is collected at multiple points in time, it is possible to track changes in women's status (Meinzen-Dick, 2013).

The pro-WEAI was conceptualised to quantify areas of women's empowerment and is designed to be computed from survey data (Malapit et al., 2019). Its measurement properties and cross-context measurement equivalence have been tested using statistical modelling (Yount et al., 2019). At the same time, qualitative research played a central role in the development of the index. Different qualitative methods were implemented to gain a richer understanding of women's situations of gender inequality in local contexts, of the significance of index domains measured, or interactions between development interventions and outcomes of empowerment. This information was then taken into account when setting up the contents of the pro-WEAI survey questionnaire or determining the indicator adequacy cut-off definitions (Malapit et al., 2019; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). The authors further recommend the use of the index in conjunction with qualitative methods to enhance the interpretation of results and ultimately improve the adequacy of development interventions (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019).

Pro-WEAI Computation

The pro-WEAI is the weighted mean of two sub-indices, the Three Domains of Empowerment Score (3DE) (weighted 90 percent) and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) (weighted 10 percent).

The 3DE consists of 12 indicators of empowerment that measure the agency component of Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment as 'intrinsic agency', 'instrumental agency', and 'collective agency'. Those are: (1) Autonomy in Income, (2) Self-Efficacy, (3) Attitudes about Intimate Partner Violence against Women (4) Respect among Household Members, (5) Input in Productive Decisions, (6) Ownership of Land and other Assets, (7) Access to and Decisions on Financial Services, (8) Control over Use of Income, (9) Work Balance, (10) Ability to Visit Important Locations, (11) Group Membership, and (12) Membership in Influential Groups (Malapit et al., 2019)[28][29].

Following the pro-WEAI survey questionnaire[30], sets of questions covering each of the 12 indicators are collected separately for the primary woman and primary man of a household, or only for a primary woman if it is a women-only household. From the responses, for each indicator, a score is calculated. Each indicator then has a cut-off definition that determines a respondent's adequacy (Appendix 1). Each indicator is weighted 1/12. If a respondent is adequate in nine out of 12 indicators (or 75 percent of the indicators), they are considered empowered.

From all individuals' weighted adequacies or inadequacies in those 12 domains, following the axiomatic and counting-based approach of the Alkire Foster methodology (Alkire & Foster, 2011), for the women and men of the whole sample, first, an index of disempowerment (1-3DE) is computed to identify the sample's key areas of disempowerment. From this, the 3DE can be

[28] I explain the respective theoretical underpinning of the 12 indicators in Chapter 6.
[29] It is to note here that two of the indicators, respect among household members and membership in influential groups have been dropped from the most recent, revised version of the pro-WEAI (Seymour et al., 2023).
[30] The pro-WEAI survey tool can be accessed here: https://weai.ifpri.info/files/2022/03/Pro-WEAI_main-module_01.03.2022_online.pdf .

obtained. For women, the 3DE reflects the proportion of women in the sample who are considered empowered (H_e), plus the mean empowerment score of disempowered women (A_e), weighted by the proportion of women in the sample who are considered disempowered (H_p):

$$3DE = H_e + (H_p \times A_e)$$

For a given sample, this equation reflects the extent of empowerment and how close disempowered individuals are to becoming empowered. An advantage of the 3DE is that it can be disaggregated into its individual indicators, which can be analysed separately. For a dual-adult household, 3DE is computed for the primary woman and the primary man. Importantly, 3DE is computed for all women of the sample, regardless of whether she belongs to a household where an adult man is present who could be a decision maker, or a women-only household. Thus, 3DE reflects the extent of empowerment for all women in the sample without taking gender parity into consideration. This explains why there are often more women than men reflected in the 3DE section of a pro-WEAI table.

The GPI then focuses on the average difference between the empowerment score of the primary woman and the primary man of a household. It can only be calculated for dual-adult households. A household reaches gender parity if the woman is considered empowered or if she is considered disempowered, her weighted inadequacies are equal to or lower than those of the man in her household. The GPI is constituted by the proportion of sample households that achieve gender parity in terms of the empowerment score ($1 - H_{GPI}$), and the mean intra-household empowerment gap for households that do not achieve gender parity (I_{GPI}):

$$GPI = 1 - (H_{GPI} \times I_{GPI})$$

As noted, when computing the full pro-WEAI, the 3DE is weighted 90 percent and the GPI is weighted 10 percent:

$$pro - WEAI = \frac{9}{10}3DE + \frac{1}{10}GPI$$

The weighting approach prioritises individual empowerment as the central focus. The GPI is given a smaller weight, which acknowledges the importance of empowerment dynamics within a household but also the limitation that it is only applicable in dual-adult households with a primary woman and man present.

Consisting of the two elements of the 3DE: the percentage achieving empowerment and the empowerment score among the disempowered; and the two elements of the GPI: the percentage of households achieving gender parity and the mean empowerment gap, the pro-WEAI then encompasses both the prevalence and intensity of empowerment in a sample, taking gender parity into account. The pro-WEAI score ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater empowerment (Seymour et al., 2023).

Qualitative Data Collection for Mixed Methods Research

As mentioned above, as part of my second round of qualitative research, I conducted semi-structured interviews and FGDs to investigate women's emic conceptions of empowerment and whether this aligns with how it is measured by the pro-WEAI framework and explored the extent to which the 12 pro-WEAI indicators capture women's lived experiences within the 12 pro-WEAI indicator areas.

To do so, for interviews and FGDs, the topical areas of sets of questions for this part of my study then further included instrumental agency (decision-making within the household in terms of productive decisions, decision on financial services, use of household income and women's own income; ownership and use of land and other assets; workload and care work; and mobility); intrinsic agency (self-efficacy, attitudes about gender based violence, and respect among household members), and collective agency (group membership and group influence). For interviews and FGDs, the process of qualitative data collection was as I delineated above.

3.4. Ethical Considerations and Challenges

Throughout the research process, there were several practical and ethical challenges and constraints to my study, which I grappled with in a reflexive process. Formally, ethical approval was obtained for all stages of my research. For my qualitative research, as well as for my research assistant contracting, I gained ethical approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) (reference SSH/ODID DREC: C1A_21_072). In my *University of Oxford Microsoft Nexus 356* cloud, I stored interview recordings in a password-protected folder that only Monice and I had access to for transcription. I redacted names in transcripts by pseudonymisation and stored the transcripts in a different password-protected folder than the pseudonym key document, which only I had access to. Consequently, the names presented for quotations in my study are pseudonyms.

Considering possible implications for women participating in my qualitative research, I always prioritised their psychological and social well-being, and Monice and I had multiple conversations about this beforehand. She always ensured to meet the interviewees with empathy and respect. When we spoke about more sensitive topics, such as their attitudes towards intimate partner violence (IPV), and she could feel that participants felt uncomfortable with the interview questions

or could not speak openly, she renegotiated consent and adjusted the interview topics accordingly. This happened very rarely. In most cases, women seemed to really appreciate having a space where they could talk about their sorrows. Monice and I further made sure to interview women in a safe place, but mostly outside and visible for others to avoid any sort of suspicion women would face afterwards. Finding a private space was usually not a problem, and, in some instances, when during an interview or FGD, respondents felt that men would get too close, they would let the men know and tell them that we need space to speak about 'women's things'.

Given these considerations, I am still aware that participating in my study could have had negative implications for women. For example, by participating, women could have later faced sanctions by household or community members who might have had issues with women's critical statements or their expressed desire for empowerment. Below, I will discuss the challenges I faced when investigating women's emic conceptions of empowerment. It is to note here that in general. I was careful to frame my questions in a way that would not portray men negatively or characterise them as opponents to empowerment. I also was cautious not to imply that women would want to exert power over men (Malapit et al., 2017; Rowlands, 1997).

For the quantitative data collection as part of the *Maziko* trial, ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review boards of IFPRI (protocol number 7490) and of the University of Malawi (protocol number P. 02/22/128), after discussing the procedures, purpose, and risks of the study. Research processes followed the guidelines of the *Declaration of Helsinki* (WMA, 2013) and the guidelines of the *International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use (ICH, 2016)*. Both are internationally recognised frameworks that set ethical and quality standards for research involving people. Quantitative data collected was anonymised and encrypted. All members of the *Maziko* trial team had access to the anonymised dataset, and only the principal investigator stored identifying data in a password-protected cloud

to track and identify survey respondents for midline and endline surveys. This identifying data was stored for 12 months and then deleted.

Issues of Consent - When Is It Really Informed?

For interviews and FGDs, Monice followed an oral consent script that informed participants about the purpose and potential risks of the study and asserted our status and confidentiality as independent researchers. Although we followed a script, we regarded consent not as a box to tick but as something that is iterative and renegotiated throughout the research process. Nevertheless, ambiguities and challenges persisted.

For example, many respondents were introduced to us by the respective TA. Could these women really choose whether they wanted to speak to us? Eventually, we made efforts to build relationships with the women and were careful not to disturb their schedules. The issue of consent was naturally further complicated by spending whole days over several months in a community and observing dynamics between people and across genders, which all informed and influenced the way I analysed and interpreted the qualitative findings. Even though the community members were aware of our presence as per the introduction of the village head, were they always fully aware when being observed?

As Thorne (1980) discussed in his paper titled 'You still Takin' Notes?', I realised that the boundaries of my perceived role as a researcher were blurry and that even outside of the process of implementing the actual research, I never stepped fully out of that role. Even during the time that I did not actively work on my research, when I did my shopping at the local market, when I spent time with my Malawian friends, or when I spent time with Monice's family in their family environment, and in other situations, I found myself perceiving my surroundings at least partly through the lens of my research interests. This was, for example, when I observed the experiences

of motherhood of women around me, when they were selling onions and tomatoes at the local market, while nursing their babies. This also extended to moments with women friends that were regarded role models in their communities because earned higher incomes than many other women, or in my interactions with Monice, who would describe herself as 'extremely empowered' (Monice) due to her education, her substantial contribution to household income, and the relationship she had established with her husband, one in which she did not compromise on most of her choices. I was aware of the fluid movement between being a researcher and being an insider or friend, a dynamic that sometimes made me feel uncomfortable and extractive. Whenever I raised these concerns with my Malawian friends, they often, in fact, wanted to share more about their own views or jokingly commented that I 'never stop working'.

Then, for the quantitative research as part of *Maziko*, the enumerators obtained written informed consent from all household survey respondents (Maziko Trial Team, 2024). Still, power relations presumably existed between enumerators and respondents because of their affiliation with the *Maziko* intervention that would commence being implemented after the *Maziko* trial. This may have pushed respondents to give informed consent or have pushed respondents to give survey answers they thought would be what enumerators wanted to hear or that would allow them to participate in the intervention. This exemplifies the problematic nature of generating knowledge from within an international organisation because of underlying power relations (Toye & Toye, 2005). When conducting qualitative research with the selected *Maziko* trial participants, Monice made clear that participating in the research and also stating any critical opinion had no effect on future participation in the intervention. Despite this, I cannot rule out that respondents have been influenced towards giving consent out of fear of *Maziko* support limitations.

Empowerment Is a Charged Term

To grasp an emic understanding, I attempted not to include my own beliefs or definitions in interview questions and processes of result interpretation (Acker et al., 1983). For example, I never directly used the term 'empowerment' because it is a term fraught with preconceptions, affiliated with a particular idea of women's actions and behaviour that has been communicated by inter alia Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) and international organisations (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019; Monice).

Discussing this issue was an important part of my preparational meetings with Monice. To find a starting point to iteratively define empowerment for our research questions, we drew upon Kabeer's (1999) conception of empowerment as the 'ability to make strategic life choices' (ibid., p. 437) and to put those into action. We also drew from the findings of my previous study conducted for my MPhil thesis, where, following a similar approach, I found that almost all respondents described women who were respected, respected themselves and had high status in their communities. In these findings, some attributes of empowerment were a certain degree of independence and non-reliance on others, being a 'hard worker' who earns her own income and decides upon its use, or, in more relational terms, the ability to fulfil mothering roles, contribute to the family well-being, and help others in the community. I hence found that certain attributes spoke to Kabeer's (1999) definition that entails a degree of women's resistance against restrictive gender norms, while others related to women's agentic behaviour within preassigned roles such as that of motherhood.

Taking this into account, during our discussions, Monice suggested that we use the Chichewa concept of *ufulu* to circumscribe empowerment. Literally, *ufulu* would translate to 'freedom'. However, rather than referring to freedom in an individual sense, *ufulu* entails an understanding of freedom that acknowledges a society that has a deeply relational foundation. Johnson (2018)

further points out that since the mid 1990s, *ufulu* has also been used by the government or international NGOs to describe the concept of 'Human Rights' (*ufulu wachibadwidwe*), including 'Women's Rights' (*ufulu wa amayi*), and 'Children's Rights' (*ufulu wa ana*). Then, as understood and employed by community members, *ufulu* is not just confined to this but holds and navigates the entanglement of human rights and customary law (Johnson, 2018). Thus, *ufulu* remains a flexible and ambiguous term that, when used to approach empowerment, does not necessarily predefine a sense of resistance, but emphasises relationality. This speaks to the critiques of different and mostly non-Western scholars of equating empowerment and resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Mahmood, 2001; Nnaemeka, 2004). Including these traits in interview and FGD questions, Monice asked respondents to elaborate upon what makes a woman 'empowered' but translating into 'gaining *ufulu'*, what makes her respected or have high status in the community, or if and why she is able to make important choices in her life and to put those into action. Throughout the research process, I gained a deeper understanding of what can be empowering for women and built on these definitions, although this surely did not prevent me from partially imposing a definition of empowerment on women.

Especially when asking about the topical areas of the pro-WEAI and the forms of agency implicit within it, I assume that using these predetermined categories may have been reproduced in respondents' thinking around empowerment. Such external influence became apparent when we enquired into how and why certain social dynamics towards empowerment had materialised for women, such as women doing work that is considered 'men's work'. Respondents often stated that this is because 'nowadays there is *jenda*' (FGD 6), which relates to concepts of gender equality introduced by international organisations and which have become more prevalent in communities in recent years (Johnson, 2018).

Translation and Accessibility

All research findings were translated from Chichewa to English, a process that brought its own challenges. One of these was that certain conceptual nuances in Chichewa, such as those embedded in the term *ufulu*, are very difficult to translate exactly. Translation itself is a political process shaped by the interests and positionalities of those involved (Lewis & Mosse, 2006), which renders meaning slippery and causes some of it to become lost in the process. I am conscious of Monice's positionality as a well-educated woman who, according to her own personal beliefs and working experience in similar research, holds certain expectations and assumptions, which manifested in the way she asked questions and in the words she used when translating from Chichewa to English. Moreover, although I aim to give prominence to the voices and lived experiences of Malawian women and mothers in particular, their voices are inevitably and literally filtered through Monice's and my own voice.

In this context, and not just relevant for the concept of empowerment but for my entire study, is that most of my respondents could only understand very little English or, more often so, could not understand English at all. Consequently, the outcome of my writing in its current form, after translation and filtering through my own voice, remains inaccessible to almost all study participants. Unfortunately, this issue is a common occurrence due to the nature of research in the social sciences, which can feel very extractive. While I am still grappling with this issue, my approach before entering my second round of research was to outline a short documentary film. Due to the nature of my study, I wanted this to remain unscripted. Having obtained ethical clearance from CUREC (reference SSH/ODID DREC: C1A_21_072-amend-1) and oral consent from everyone who appeared in the footage, I began filming interviews, FGDs, and selected scenes in respondents' homes. Once I have finished my DPhil, I intend to process the footage and create

a short documentary film in Chichewa with English subtitles. This film could then be shared with the participants, or Monice could show it to them during a future visit.

I am aware that documentary films as a medium are embedded in a history of politics and power, and have been used as tools thereof. Especially during colonial rule on the African continent, documentary films were a key component of the British imperial strategy, shaping colonial subjectivities and reinforcing asymmetrical power through carefully constructed visual narratives under the guise of historical neutrality (Groo, 2013; Rice, 2019).

Documentaries create, challenge, and reproduce social contexts and meaning. At the same time, they possess a remarkable authority to make claims of accurately representing reality. Hence, using this medium to enrich my study and to challenge extractive research practices required me to think critically about how its creation and use could be ethically informed. I approach my own documentary practice with reflexivity, not as a search for objective truth, but as a process of co-creation (De Groof, 2013; Stoller, 1992). Using Chichewa as the main language, engaging collaboratively with research participants and Monice, and resisting the imposition of scripted voiceover are intentional decisions to foreground participants' voices and partial perspectives. The aim is not to resolve the contradictions inherent in my visual representation of a context, but to remain transparent about the mediations involved. In doing so, I acknowledge that even ethically informed filmmaking remains situated, mediated, and interpretive. I also recognise the risk of reproducing the very dynamics I seek to resist.

3.5. My Positionality

In my study, I am prioritising theories from scholars of African and Non-Western feminisms more broadly, with the aim to write against the dominant grain of theory of Western feminisms, questioning its inherent Eurocentrism and the false premise of its universal applicability. This is

particularly pertinent when considering conceptions of agency and empowerment, as well as the influence of motherhood on women's lives, especially in relation to the former.

This being said, my position as a researcher, as a white Western young woman, shaped the research process. Visibly, I was a foreigner and carried an association with European countries that colonised the African continent. This is particularly relevant to my geographical research area, as Zomba was the colonial government's administrative capital of 'Nyasaland' before independence in 1964. Because of this and also because of the strong presence of Western-led NGOs, which hold great influence on the lives of many people in Malawi, I was perceived as someone of influence and power, not just as a doctoral researcher. This happened in the communities where I conducted my qualitative research, but also when I participated in the enumerator trainings, whereby my affiliation with IFPRI, acting as someone who holds knowledge, heightened this perception.

In the communities, I learned soon that there existed a stereotype of a Western researcher who would come to a place once, ask questions, and leave swiftly without the study participants really understanding what the study was about or if and how they would benefit from participating. It is obvious that this could feel very extractive[31]. Initially, I was perceived as conforming to this stereotype. However, as I proceeded with my research, I could feel that my relationship with the village head and community members developed further as I returned to the communities multiple times over the course of two years, and they started trusting me more.

They did indeed say that they appreciated me coming back time and again, unlike other researchers they had encountered. It was also from these conversations with the village heads that I started bringing a kilogram bag of brown sugar for the women I interviewed. My last visit, in

[31] This was different from the perception of local enumerators working for NGOs and often in the context of bigger development interventions.

particular, felt very personal, and apart from conducting research, I spent a lot of time just spending time with the women, sharing food, playing with their children or chatting about all sorts of things.

My position as a white Western young woman shapes and distorts the lens through which I analysed and interpreted findings (Mudimbe, 1988). My own interpretive thinking about the issue of gender inequality and empowerment was developed in a Western feminist community and defines my personal belief system with certain ontological and epistemological premises (Mama, 1996; Riessman, 1987). This further challenged my understanding of the lives of women in Central and Southern Malawi and is central to the claims to knowledge that I am making, which is partial and situated in my own point of view (Nyamnjoh, 2015). In short, my understanding is fundamentally shaped by my own positionality.

I also recognise that the research I conducted inherits historical power hierarchies of Western feminist research in Africa (Tamale, 2020). Even though the principles of feminist epistemology guide me as a researcher and in my research process, with an inherent contextual adaptability, regarding knowledge as particular and situated, and foregrounding the meaning that women in Central and Southern Malawi articulate, I recognise the epistemological limitations and power asymmetries that shape knowledge production. Drawing on Narayan's (2004) concept of 'epistemic privilege', I recognise that I belong to a dominant epistemic group, which historically has had the authority to define what constitutes valid knowledge and that has often marginalised or misrepresented the perspectives of Non-Western women. I acknowledge that my interlocutors, who experienced the circumstances that I am writing about, especially the layers of oppression, themselves, rather than me from the outside, are more likely to have critical insights into the emotional complexities of their own condition and what they have learned and understood about it. Yet, they do not hold the power to articulate their 'epistemic advantage' (Narayan, 2004).

Grappling with the ethical concerns inherent in the study of a context of the African continent, Amina Mama (2007), an African feminist scholar and activist, puts it so aptly: 'Researchers and the researched communities, all of whom inhabit bodies that are perceived, received, and related to in ways that convey histories and historical relations. Perhaps the best we can do is become more conscious of the ways in which our identities, who we are, influence what we do and how we do it, so as to make more informed ethical choices (ibid., p. 7)

In my research, I was careful not to homogenise and stigmatise 'third world women' as victims. I paid attention to women's characteristics and how their ideas of empowerment and motherhood are subjective and depend on their lived realities that are embedded in larger political and economic frameworks (Mohanty, 2005).

Even though I am privileged in those respects, I was still under the impression that being a woman and having experienced oppression based on my gender sensitised me and allowed me to empathise more with the concerns of my interlocutors that I neither have experienced nor do fully understand (Narayan, 2004). Furthermore, the women I interacted with as part of my study exercised a profound impact on me and my thinking - not just in terms of my research but regards to my own conceptions of feminisms, empowerment, (the possibility of) motherhood, forming community among women in a patriarchal and capitalist world that exploits us, just to name some food for thought coming out those interactions and time spent in Malawi. Grappling with this, I found that Audre Lorde's (1984) words put it so felicitously: 'And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, "I can't possibly teach Black women's writing - their experience is so different from mine." Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare

and Proust?' (ibid., p. 43-44). Then, it is important that readers of my work are aware that I am not trying to 'speak for' the women who participated in my study, and that I encourage them to consider my positionality when reading my work.

Important to note here is also that I write from within the University of Oxford, a globally renowned institution whose intellectual prestige and positionality as an academic institution are deeply entangled with colonial legacies, which I must also acknowledge as part of my own academic positionality. As Go (2024) argued, the reverberations of the colonial empire continue to structure institutions through persistent discourses, symbolic power, and holding up global patterns of dependencies. This manifests itself in multiple layers of existing power imbalances in academic knowledge production between the West and Africa. This manifests itself in multiple layers of existing power imbalances in academic knowledge production between the West and Africa. Those are, for example, the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies and theories and the false belief of universal applicability (Aboderin et al., 2023), which is a main focus of discussion in Chapters 4 and 5. Those imbalances also refer to the dominance of Western concepts of 'development' (Pailey, 2020), to dependencies of African scholars' and universities' research activities and outputs on international collaborations, or to the marginalisation of the knowledge created from the space of policy-making processes for the continent (Aboderin et al., 2023)

Grappling with these layers of reflexivity and the ethics of knowledge production during my DPhil, I spent a year as a visiting doctoral fellow at HUMA - the Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town in South Africa under the directorship of Professor Divine Fuh. HUMA is a critical interdisciplinary space that brings together scholars working on questions of social justice, knowledge production, and the enduring structural legacies of colonialism in Africa and globally. Its work is grounded in a commitment to decolonial thought, with a focus on reimagining the humanities through African intellectual traditions and lived realities (HUMA, n.d.).

Considering the above, scholars involved with HUMA actively seek to transform existing extractive research models and rebalance the positioning of Africa and the West in the global science and research ecosystems (Aboderin et al., 2023).

My time at HUMA was deeply formative as I was welcomed into a community of decolonial thinkers that was constantly interrogating the conditions under which knowledge is produced, shared, and legitimised. Through weekly interdisciplinary seminars, reading groups, and writing retreats under the framework of 'decolonial disobedience', I became part of a space that critically examined global structures of power, dominant ways of thinking and being and encouraged radically ethical ways of engaging in research - ways that resist extractive logics and that foreground relationality and responsibility (HUMA, n.d.). These spaces not only sharpened my understanding of global structures of inequalities that are reflected in the research process but also allowed me to reflect more meaningfully on my position as a white and Western scholar. In my own work, I try to remain critically attuned to processes of unlearning and reimagining in both scholarship and practice when exploring the lived experiences of women participating in my study and remain committed to using theories from scholars of the African continent and of African feminisms[32] in particular when analysing my findings.

Finally, and taking to heart the critiques and complex entanglements of power discussed in this section, I am reminded of what Audre Lorde conveyed in a lecture she gave at Stanford University in the early 1990s. Paraphrasing her words, Garber (2001) recounts that 'privilege is not neutral. If you do not pick it up and use it in the service of justice, if you leave it lying in the street, someone will pick it up and use it against you.' (Lorde, n.d., as paraphrased in Garber, 2001, p.3).

[32] As explained in Chapter 1.3, I am using the pluralism 'African feminisms', following Nnaemeka (1998) to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of movements, thought and activism across the African continent, shaped by diverse cultural imperatives, historical contexts, and localised realities. Drawing from her concept, I then use the term 'Western feminisms' to acknowledge the pluralism therein too.

The methodology laid out in this chapter provides the background against which the next three empirical chapters are set. In what follows, I delve into women's conceptions of motherhood; their understandings of empowerment, and spaces where motherhood and empowerment intersect; and how these emic conceptions and respective intersections are reflected in the measures applied within development practice.

4. Towards a Conceptualisation of Motherhood

Motherhood is often regarded as a fundamental aspect of women's identity, yet its meaning and experience are far from universal. While dominant narratives frequently frame motherhood as a biologically determined and uniform phenomenon, in reality, it is fluid and context-dependent, shaped by gender norms, kinship structures, economic systems, and broader historical and geopolitical power relations. Women's identities as mothers are not static; they are continuously negotiated, contested, and redefined within different social and cultural environments.

Feminist scholarship has long grappled with the meanings and implications of motherhood, but Western feminist theories have historically dominated these discussions, often positioning motherhood primarily as a site of patriarchal control. Scholars such as Rich (1976) and Ruddick (1989) have critiqued motherhood as a mechanism that confines women within domestic and nuclear family structures, reinforcing their subordination to men. While these critiques are relevant in the specific Western contexts, in which they were developed, they have often been applied in a universalising manner, overlooking the diverse ways in which motherhood is conceptualised and practised in other regions, particularly in African societies.

Early scholars of African feminisms[33], including Oyěwùmí (1997) and Amadiume (1987), have strongly critiqued the Western feminist tendency to impose nuclear family and capitalist models of motherhood onto African contexts. Unlike these individualised, domestic-focused models of Western motherhood, African motherhood is often communal, economically active, and embedded in extended kinship networks. Scholars of African feminisms argue for a decolonisation of feminist thought on motherhood, calling for analyses that prioritise African women's lived

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experiences rather than relying on externally imposed theoretical frameworks. Importantly, they do not deny the existence of oppressive structures, but they also emphasise women's agency (Oyěwùmí, 2015), resilience (Collins, 2016; Mama, 1995), and strategic negotiations (Nnaemeka, 2004) within their roles as mothers.

Walker (1995) critically engages with these debates, particularly addressing the tendency of prominent feminist scholarship to collapse motherhood into matrimonial subordination. She argues that focusing too narrowly on political discourse at the expense of examining mothering practices and mothers' social identities erases the complex meanings that women themselves attach to motherhood. At the same time, she challenges rigid distinctions between Western and African feminisms, advocating for a historically grounded approach that recognises both difference and intersection in women's experiences of motherhood.

In this chapter, I draw on Walker's (1995) tripartite framework of 'practice,' 'discourse,' and 'social identity' to analyse how women conceptualise motherhood in their own terms. My findings are based on 43 semi-structured interviews and 12 FGDs conducted with women who are mothers in Central and Southern Malawi.

Analysing motherhood, a phenomenon that is profoundly embodied, deeply rooted in women's lived experiences, and intertwined with all aspects of their lives, through an etic framework is necessarily heuristic and cannot fully capture its complexity. Nevertheless, the application of these interconnected categories is useful, as it enables a detailed examination of the areas that mothers themselves identify as important and helps to move beyond abstract theoretical debates.

Acknowledging the underlying fuzziness and the ways in which the framework's domains mutually influence one another, my empirical approach remains grounded in women's lived experiences and captures the ways in which they actively shape and negotiate their everyday lives

as mothers. By incorporating both individual narratives and collective discussions, the analysis reveals a diverse and nuanced understanding of motherhood shaped by local realities.

I explore how women practice motherhood, the discourses that shape it, and how a social identity as a mother is constructed and contested. I offer a context-specific understanding of motherhood that moves beyond universalising Western assumptions that would overlook the complexities of experiences of motherhood in Central and Southern Malawi. My findings illustrate that motherhood is neither a uniform experience nor easily categorised within rigid theoretical frameworks. Women's accounts reveal that a mother's social identity is shaped by both structural constraints and individual agency, negotiated through economic realities, kinship obligations, and shifting social expectations.

While dominant discourses impose normative ideas of the 'good mother', women actively redefine their roles in ways that reflect both continuity and change. The negotiation of these identities as mothers is not a passive acceptance of dominant norms but an active process in which women draw upon cultural, economic, and relational resources to assert agency within their roles as mothers. Collective group spaces serve as an important site for these negotiations, providing women with a platform to share knowledge, resist social pressures, and build new narratives of motherhood that align with their lived realities.

Furthermore, rather than fitting into a binary opposition between perspectives of Western and African feminisms, experiences of motherhood in Central and Southern Malawi demonstrate both shared struggles and locally specific meanings, shaped by historical, cultural, and economic factors.

4.1. Practice

This section gives an account of the day-to-day practice of mothering of women in Central and Southern Malawi. While all women in my interviews were biological mothers, for the understanding of practice, biological motherhood is not a necessity. As elaborated in detail in Chapter 1.3, practice involves different activities within a mother's social context, such as physical care, such as feeding or bathing, emotional care, such as nurturing and caring about the child, socialisation in terms of transmission of societal values, or financial provision[34] (Walker, 1995). The feeding and nourishing of their children were, in most cases, the first thing that women mentioned, or they stated this when asked about the most important decisions that they make as mothers: 'I am making sure that the children are eating. In the morning, I prepare porridge; in the afternoon, I prepare *nsima* and relish[35] in the evening too.' (Victoria) Grace also highlighted that she teaches her children how to work in the garden, so they are able to grow their own food. All women with children under a year old were breastfeeding during the interviews. Aside from feeding the child, this was also to nurture and soothe.

The second most prominent field of practice among respondents was their children's education. Almost all women highlighted that they want to ensure their children attend school. Many considered this to be among the most important decisions to be made to ensure that their children are growing well and prospering in the future. Esther, for example, showed 'I force them to go to school. So that they should be independent and stay well, in future.' Grace added: 'I feel that the best decision for the children to grow is that they have to be educated because when they

[34] 'Financial provision' is not part of Walker's (1995) conception of practice. Yet, I added this since many women had to take on paid work to provide for their children.

[35] *Nsima* is a staple food in Malawi and is often part of every meal that a person has throughout the day. It is a thick porridge made from white maize flour and water. Typically, *nsima* is eaten with *ndiwo* (relish). If a household can afford it, *ndiwo* consists of a protein such a meat, or *matemba* (small, dried fish). If a household cannot afford the protein, *ndiwo* is comprised of only vegetables such as tomatoes, onions, cassava leaves, moringa leaves, potato leaves, or pumpkin leaves.

are educated, they will be able to be independent in future.' Some women said that they assist their children with reading and writing to manage their household chores. Many respondents could only acquire a very low level of schooling due to the financial hardship of their parents or because they had to drop out of school when falling pregnant. They highlighted the importance of their children's education to set them up for a life that is better than their own, to have a job and not live in poverty. Women also stressed the importance of providing food before and after school, so their children would not be hungry when doing their household chores.

Many respondents highlighted the importance of mothering practices that guaranteed their children's health, which showed the emotional care they provided. As defined earlier, emotional care is caring about the child and not simply looking after them (Walker, 1995). Food and health were often equated in terms of feeding the children well, so they stay healthy. Agnes explained: 'I make sure that my child is growing up very well and that the child is being fed well. I give him good food like porridge that has groundnut flour so that the child should not get sick.' An ill child was not only a concern because of the illness, but also because taking care of an ill child intensifies a mother's physical and emotional care work: 'When she gets sick now, it is so difficult because she does not even want to chat with other children. She just clings to me.' (Lindiwe).

Further, the fulfilment of other basic needs of their children came up frequently. This involves buying soap for bathing the child but also buying clothes, washing clothes and nappies, and doing household work such as cleaning to make sure the child grows up in a clean environment. All these practices involved physical care in terms of fulfilling a child's physical needs, but also emotional care in terms of caring about the child and feeling responsible for their child.

The practice of socialisation in terms of transmitting the values of the community, including gender and kinship dynamics, became clear when women elaborated on the advice they give their children. Chimwemwe said: 'I make sure that the children do not just move around. ' Thandiwe

related: 'I make sure that they [the children] are chatting good things, that they are not chatting things that will destroy their life.' Brenda added: 'They should not chat with their friends who have very bad behaviour. I also make sure that they do not go to bad places.' Chikondi said: 'If they are misbehaving, I sit them down and tell them that they are doing this wrongly.' Going to church or praying was also emphasised as part of growing up well.

Women gave insights into the transmission of societal norms around gender when being asked if they would raise a boy and a girl differently. Some women said that they would raise them equally. From what they elaborated, this was true in terms of food and schooling, yet it deviated when it came to work distribution. For example, girls were more often involved in household chores and boys in farming. This could point to women's internalisation of those norms around work. Some women highlighted that they would give the same work to boys and girls in terms of household chores, such as making fire, cooking, sweeping, fetching water, or farming. This contradicts gender norms around work and could be motivated by women's wishes for their husbands to take on 'women's work'. On that note, many women stated that they did not acquire farming skills as young girls since this was regarded as boys' work. Most women eventually had to learn how to farm, especially to feed their children. Having their girl children conduct farming work might then be in preparation for this. Another important differentiation between boys and girls at an older age was related to concerns about young pregnancies that were raised with daughters and not with sons. Mavuto's statement was emblematic of this: 'The boys, when they go to school, they come back. But for the girl, when she goes to school, she has to be picked up to avoid meeting boys on the way. I do not want her to get pregnant as I did.' In general, many respondents raised that girls were advised not to get pregnant too early or as early as their mothers. As I will delineate later, this was linked to community shaming that young mothers experience if

they become pregnant before marriage or to the repercussions of dropping out of school due to pregnancy.

Almost all women highlighted struggles of having enough money and other resources to carry out the mothering practice. This was with regard to all those activities: providing enough food for the child so it was not hungry and would stay healthy, paying school fees for a child or being able to do so in the future[36] when the child graduated to secondary school, paying for school supplies such as books, uniforms, or lunch, being able to take the child to hospital if necessary, or buying soap or clothing. Regarding this concern, women spoke about the different ways they are trying to earn an income. Many women did *ganyu* (casual labour) or small-scale business. For women, *ganyu* most often was either the provision of farming or gardening assistance or carrying water for brick moulders. For small-scale businesses, women were selling garden produce such as tomatoes, onions, or local leafy green vegetables; or homemade baked goods such as samosas, doughnuts, *mandazi* (fried sweet bread), or *zigege* (potato fritters). Some sold small, dried fish, cooking oil, or charcoal if they could find some seed capital for the initial buying, while others mentioned that they used to do this kind of business but that their business failed because it was not profitable or because they had to take money out of the business to use it elsewhere. Two respondents worked occasionally as both a hairdresser and a tailor. The main incentive for all paid work was to provide financially for their children. Agness said: 'I do business because of the child, to buy food for the child. When I make money, at least I buy porridge for the child so that the child goes healthy.' Esther explained: 'When I do not find *ganyu*, it is difficult to feed the children.' Especially, the act of providing financial support made women delegate other mothering work to women relatives

[36] The Malawian government, in 1994, introduced a free primary education policy (Inoue & Oketch, 2008). However, fees for sending a child to secondary school are a considerable burden for most households.

or sometimes to community members. This showed that mothering practice does not just involve physical and emotional care, but that women value providing for their children as part thereof.

4.2. Discourse

Discourses around motherhood embrace norms and values about 'the good mother' (Walker, 1995). These discourses represent culturally and historically produced ways of thinking and speaking about a matter, which shape how subjects act and which can then become normalised and institutionalised (Hall, 2001). These discourses around motherhood are bound up with notions of children's needs, and with cultural norms and values, such as ideas about gender identity. Below, I elaborate on existing discourses around motherhood as explained by respondents. Various discourses can co-exist: some are more dominant while others are marginalised; some overlap, while others are oppositional and stand independently alongside dominant discourses. This shows that while some mothers support certain normative structures, others may not agree or instead draw from different interpretations of culture or tradition (Walker, 1995).

Discourse and Practice

Discourses of motherhood determine what a 'good mother' does. They inform the practice of mothering, but are analytically not the same. The prominent discourse entailed the adequate fulfilment of the mothering activities (practice) elaborated above, resulting in having a healthy child that is not malnourished or 'swollen'[37]. For example, Pemphero showed: 'I am a good

[37] The term 'swollen' was used to refer to 'kwashiorkor', which is a type of malnutrition characterised by severe protein deficiency. It causes fluid retention and a swollen, distended abdomen. Kwashiorkor most commonly affects children, particularly in food insecure places where their nutritional needs cannot be met (Lin et al., 2007).

mother, I do not see any problems with my child. Other children swell because they are lacking food, but my child never has swollen; it is just growing up very well.' Further, women emphasised sending children to school, having them look clean and dress 'smartly'. The discourse also included the transmission of community norms and values to their children. This was reflected in advice that women gave to their children: As shown above, children should not associate with other children that have behaviour considered as 'bad', say bad things, go to bad places, 'just move around', or girls were advised not to get pregnant at a young age and would be picked up from school to not meet boys on their way home.

To adequately carry out the mothering practice as per the discourse of a good mother, she is required to make decisions regarding children and household chores. At the same time, processes of intra-household decision-making about children, such as what the child eats or whether they are going to school, are determined by local gender norms. Hence, acting in accordance with this prominent discourse around motherhood was directly influenced by discourses around intra-household decision-making. This became evident in women's elaborations of a multitude of co-existing discourses of how a good mother makes these decisions.

In married households, when women made these decisions, almost all explained that consultations and discussions with their spouses would take place. When it came to the last say, half of the married women stated that their husbands would have it in all of the household's decisions, including those on children. The reason for him holding this power was that the husband was the main breadwinner or the head of the household who controls the household income, and/or because this was regarded as 'natural' and according to local gender norms around intra-household decision-making. Some of those women explained that when the husband is away from home to do activities outside the household, they can take over as main decision-makers for that time. For example, Agnes and Miriam lived in permanent separation from their husbands,

who had both found employment far from their communities. Both women noted that their husbands would provide money and participate in decisions whenever they returned, but that the mothers were the main decision-makers in their husbands' absence.

The other half of married women explained that they would have the final say in decision-making on children. They explained that this is particularly because it is regarded a good mother's responsibility to stay with the children for most of the time and perform physical and emotional work and care about the children more: 'The mother is the one who makes the decision on their children, because she's the one who stays with the children, and also because the husband is getting ready to go to work and doesn't even care what is happening to the children.' (Ireen) This could point at two possible explanations for women's right to have the final say in decision-making on children; either, because it is regarded her 'natural' role and responsibility once she is a mother, or because her husband is not interested in making those decisions, even though he could exercise his 'natural right' to have the last say in decision-making on children.

It shows that the co-existing discourses surrounding the practice of making child-related decisions can position and enable the mother to have some input but not the final say, or alternatively, as the primary decision-maker. This may be either because she is viewed as the most informed person or because this is simply considered her natural role. However, for some mothers, their experience of discourse may not involve any significant degree of decision-making power regarding their children. Instead, gender norms around intra-household authority may dominate, suggesting that, overall, the husband remains the main decision-maker. This dynamic can generate tension: while the prominent discourse expects women to perform as good caretakers, their capacity to fulfil this may be undermined by a lack of authority in decisions concerning their children. Discourses are starkly shaped by those prevailing gender norms, yet

shifts in discourses, vice versa, can reshape those very norms. In the context of intra-household decision-making, I will elaborate on this more in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

This dynamic was different for the third of respondents who were divorced or widowed. For these women, the fulfilment of the mothering practice was complicated by not having a husband's income, but in terms of decision-making about children, they could make these decisions on their own and often with the support of women relatives. As explained in Chapter 2 on matrilineal structures apparent in Central and Southern Malawi, women often resided in the communities where they were born, together with their women relatives. This is due to the uxorilocal marriage custom, in which a husband migrates to live in his wife's community (Davison, 1993; Johnson, 2018). Hence, many women lived close to their sisters, mothers, aunts, or grandmothers. When women moved back into their mothers' houses after getting divorced or becoming widowed, the elder women of the household, their mothers or grandmothers, were the main decision-makers on matters concerning their children, which some respondents appreciated, and others disliked (FGD 1).

Many women mentioned that their ability to act on being a good mother depended on the number of children they had to take care of. Most of them had clear ideas about how many children they could provide resources for and could manage in terms of time and workload. Some discussed this with their husbands and agreed upon a number. Other women just took control over their bodies and started using contraceptives after reaching the desired number, mostly an injection, sometimes without their husbands knowing. Women said that they planned the number of children, but also the age gap between them, to be able to do things outside the household (Chimwemwe, Agnes), and also to ease the provision for existing children (Tiyamike). In some cases, where a husband wanted to have more children than his wife, she had to obey this wish.

Doing an injection behind the husband's back was not an option for those women because they feared his reaction if he found out.

Gender norms around childcare responsibilities were evident in discourses around motherhood. Reportedly, childcare and household chores such as making fire, cooking, cleaning, or fetching water were regarded as a woman's responsibility. Often, women's husbands were out for work during the day or for consecutive days. Men were reported to be the primary breadwinners of the households and sold farming products, did *ganyu*, wage labour, or infrastructure work. This was also reflected in men's wages in general being higher than women's.

In general, according to the prominent discourse, a mother was supposed to do the unpaid work inside the home, while a husband would do paid work outside the household. Then, concerning the farming work on the household's land, which was usually the woman's land, men and women often collaborated, but respondents stated that women undertook the heavier share of the labour. These findings coincide with other studies on gender norms in Southern Malawi (Kululanga et al., 2012; Mudege et al., 2017).

A multitude of discourses co-existed regarding the childcare chores that a mother was supposed to perform. About two-thirds of married women said that their husbands would assist them with some kind of care or household work, but to different extents. When they were home, these husbands would sometimes help sweep the floor, cook, or wash dishes or clothes, especially when their wife was not feeling well or had left the home to do other things. 'Fetching water' was considered a woman's task only and was never taken on by a husband. Only some husbands would help with childcare chores, mostly carrying the child, while others would help in the household but did not do childcare chores. One-third of respondents reported that their husbands would just not help with household chores or explicitly refused to do so. Some said that this was because the role of the husband is to find food or money for the household, while women take care of the

household. Mwawi explained: 'The thing is with any household chores, because my husband tells me that it is his duty to go and search for food, work somewhere, bring the money here so that I would be able to eat. So, all the work that is at home is mine.' She indeed said that she regards this arrangement as fair sharing and does not see a problem with that.

It shows that the dominant discourse regards childcare as a woman's sole duty. Women appreciated it if their husbands assisted them with their 'women's chores' but did not take it for granted (FGD 3). Furthermore, many women elaborated that if a husband is helping with those chores, community members would start talking badly about the wife and assume that she has given him *wamudyetsa makhwala* (traditional medicine) to make him docile or would laugh about the husband for being 'stupid'. These rumours could further perpetuate 'gender-related rigidities in the intrahousehold substitutability of labour' (Kabeer 1994, p. 106).

However, those women whose husbands helped with chores either said that their husbands did not care about these rumours or that their husbands would not know that people are talking behind their backs: 'Usually, the men don't know that they are being called names. But the women they know because they hear from their friends. I would not tell him; he should stop working, or what?' (Brenda) Chimwemwe explained that people who are spreading rumours are jealous of husbands and wives assisting each other and stressed that: 'in reality, it is just love of the husband to assist the wife.' Different from that, women explained that other people in the community would encourage such behaviour and that such a couple would be admired in the community. It would set a positive example for other households and encourage men to assist women with household and childcare chores.

Importantly, these elaborations reveal how different discourses can co-exist while representing varying stages of changes in norms. Men taking on women's work goes against traditional gender norms. Splitting up parts of the mothering practice between husband and wife

then creates a tension between practice and discourse. A new discourse that represents the normalisation and even admiration of this then manifests in a positive community perception of the detaching of the mothering responsibility from a woman based on her gender.

Another prominent discourse around motherhood expects women to be able to provide for their children, which deviates from the discourse that bound women to the home space where their main chores lie. This became clear when respondents explained that they would take on or want to take on paid labour outside their household. Less directly, this discourse emerged when respondents explained that if a young woman becomes pregnant, she is expected to get married and live with her partner instead of her parents, since she, rather than her parents, must provide for the child. Then, in almost all married households, the man was considered the main breadwinner and left the house for periods to perform employed work or search for *ganyu*. While a man's income was commonly larger than a woman's, it was still often not sufficient to solely provide for the family. Associated with having an own income, interviews also showed that a 'good mother' should to some degree be independent from her husband and not fully rely on him: 'I did not want to be dependent only on my husband. Because the men do a lot of things. They can disappoint. So, if I do not do anything, I feel that it is not going to help.' (Tiyamike) A factor playing into this is the matrilineal structures of Central and Southern Malawi, where women often stay in a place for their whole lives, while men are moving around much more. Some women ascribed their need to remain partly independent to provide for themselves and their children in case their husbands would become 'moveous'[38] (Evelyn), and leave the community at some point, sometimes to find work, other times to separate from their wives and children. Yet, not all women

[38] While this word does not exist in formal English, it reflects a specific perception shared among many respondents. As explained in Chapter 2, women used the term 'moveous' to describe men's behaviour in the existing uxorilocal settlement custom. Because a husband migrates to live in his wife's community, he is less attached to the place and would leave if a marriage failed. He would also move around more to find work or to visits his relatives.

could work outside the household, either because their spouses would not allow them to, or because they lacked the skills or could not find work opportunities. While those women wished to do so, they solely remained in their roles as housewives.

Discourse and Social Identity

Adjacent to discourses directly linked to practice, women spoke about discourses in terms of norms, ideas and values that determine their behaviour and identity as mothers. This links to the space of social identity. While I will elaborate on women's conceptions of their social identities in the following section, here, I map out the discourses that inform those.

In this realm, starkly highlighted by most women was the need to wear a *chitenge*[39] and sometimes a headscarf when entering motherhood, as a symbol of concomitant internal respect and adulthood, and to cover herself adequately and accordingly: 'I was wearing trousers and miniskirts. But now, when I became a mother, I knew that now I am a woman, I should be covering myself, so now I wear a *chitenge*.' (Esther) Besides this, respondents said that a mother needs to have a neat and clean house. Also, they should not move around for too long: 'I would go to chat and not even think of coming back home. But when I go to chat, I know that I need to come back home to take care of the children.' (Alinafe) Young mothers especially said that when a woman becomes a mother, she stops chatting or playing games with younger girls and starts associating with other mothers. Joyce stressed: 'Now I am judged about the things that I speak. I would not just begin to speak; I would actually think about it before.' Pointing at gendered activities, Thandiwe showed: 'There's a certain game that we call *bao*[40]. I see a lot of men where I

[39] A *chitenge* is a traditional piece of cloth worn by women in Malawi, as well as in different parts of Southern Africa and other parts of Africa under a different name. The *chitenge* is worn around the waist, or the chest while the latter is more common for women who are breastfeeding. It can also be worn for example as a head wrap, to hold a child in a baby sling or as path to collect period blood (Monice).

[40] *Bao* is a traditional mancala board game played in many countries in East and Southern Africa (Mwale, 1996).

do my business. They do not care; they come to play *bao* and go back home by themselves. But the women, they cannot do that because they start thinking: "What the children are going to eat?".' (Lindiwe) While some women said that their movements did not change when they became mothers, Thandiwe explained that she cannot go to nightlife places anymore: 'People in the community would think that I am a sex worker, because these places are for girls and not for older girls or mothers like myself. If I go there, people will think that she has stopped caring for her children.' (Thandiwe) It shows that the prominent discourse ascribes to a mother an overarching sense of responsibility for the child that is different from the responsibility of the father.

Another important discourse around motherhood was revealed in FGD 2, of which all respondents happened to belong to the group *Destiny's Girls*. *Destiny's Girls,* which was founded by Martha, is a group for mothers who had to drop out of school early due to their pregnancies and/or marriages. I will explain the importance of this group and its particular dynamics in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood. Relevant here is that their group theme chanting revealed a prominent discourse around motherhood that regards it as an offence that a woman commits when she becomes pregnant before being married. This was most often for young women who had not finished primary school (standard eight). The group's chanting theme then pushed back against this conception: '*Destiny's Girls*! To have a child is not a sin. To have a child is not a failure.' (FGD 2) Martha further explained: 'Yes, it is true that an unwanted pregnancy or early pregnancy is not good at all, but it is not that you have failed or that it is a big sin. But in cultural terms, she is a failure. She herself contributed to her poverty.' Thus, one reason for this shaming was the culturally embedded coupling of marriage and pregnancy. This could be due to religious values that regard having a child before marriage as sinful. Drawing from the case of South Africa, Gaitskell (1990) explains how this can be rooted in Christianity as a powerful and through colonialism imposed ideological force that elevated and entrenched the importance of

marriage, wifehood and motherhood. Another reason for this stigma was that those pregnant women had to drop out if they were still in school, and if they brought a child to their parents' house, then the parents had to take it on. This could easily exacerbate the hardship of a household. Martha said that many young and unmarried girls who were pregnant sometimes even committed suicide out of fear of the shame that would be imposed by the community or because they were too scared to tell their parents. This perception persists even if she eventually marries the father of the child.

4.3. Social Identity and Discussion

Social identity is mediated by practice and informed by discourse. This category depicts women's self-image and own identity as mothers, considering them as active agents constructing this identity. Mothers can have multiple and varying social identities (Walker, 1995). Their identity formation and subjectivity hinge upon the reflexive interplay of individual and collective dynamics of a social context. It happens consciously and subconsciously, and influences and sometimes constrains their choices and behaviour in their roles as mothers defined by discourse (Giddens, 1991; Walker, 1995). Social identity is the space I chose for discussion because it allows for an analysis of motherhood as a lived and constructed identity, rather than a role imposed by external discourses or shaped by daily practices. While practice focuses on what women do and discourse on the societal expectations that frame motherhood, social identity in particular reveals how, in the space of motherhood, women actively negotiate, internalise, and sometimes contest these forces in shaping their own self-conception within their specific historical and cultural contexts. The space of social identity allows for an engagement with both Western and African feminisms and highlights how the interplay of structural constraints and exercise of agency shapes mothers' lives.

Social Identity and Practice

Women's understanding of their own social identity as mothers was directly approached when they described themselves as a person. About half of the women either referred to themselves as a mother, a caretaker or someone who is able to take care of their children because they do business, *ganyu*, or farming. This again shows how discourses of good motherhood, and its underlying norms and values coins women's social identity: the ability to perform what is considered good caretaking directly feeds into women's self-perception. The other half of respondents identified themselves more through the activities they do, as 'business lady', farmer, gardener, or through their marriage status and livelihood status. For instance, Grace referred to herself as a divorcee who proudly manages her life independently, without her former husband.

Social identity involves women's feelings and concerns around their roles and activities as mothers. How this is mediated by mothering practice and informed by prominent discourses became particularly clear when women described the best and hardest parts of raising their children. Acts of mothering evoked a spectrum of emotions for women, ranging from contentment to concerns. When asked about the parts of childcare practice that they enjoy most and find easiest, women often responded that this was when they were able to find food for their children. 'The best part (of raising a child) is when my child is having food because I know that having food will make the child grow and the child will not be malnourished, so I am happy to see the child growing up.' (Tamara) Moreover, when asked about 'turning points' in their lives, some women referred to an occurrence in their lives - such as when they were able to generate an income - that allowed them to provide food for their children more easily. Eliza, Martha, Miriam, and Tionge stressed that they feel really content to have children and enjoy spending time with them and doing care work. Several other women emphasised that it directly links to their sense of happiness to see their children content, healthy and well nourished. While the best part often

aligned with the prominent discourse of good motherhood, the hardest part often spoke to a non-fulfilment of it.

Women spoke about being very worried or ashamed to not have enough (nutritious) food for their children and not being able to feed them three times a day: 'The hardest part is when I do not have food for the children to eat. Because there are seasons like now, it is then off-season, where food is a problem. Children, they do not understand what that is. They want to eat, but sometimes during this time it is very difficult. They can go to other people's houses to beg for food, and this is not good for the children' (Tiyamike), or 'When I do not find food for the children, I feel very depressed about it. I start thinking: "Why did I give birth to all these children? Maybe they will be envious if other children [who have enough food]. Yes, why am I failing as a mother?".' (Thandiwe) It shows that the worry around malnourishment and not providing enough food then becomes part of their identities as mothers while having a malnourished child or a child asking for food in the community is a marker for not being a 'good mother'. Women's social identity did not only involve emotions attached to physical childcare but also to the transmission of societal values to their child to ensure that it will stay well in the family and the community in case anything happens to the mother. Concerns about their children's health were similarly stark. Related to this, the best part of motherhood was described as having a healthy child, and the hardest part was when the child was ill.

These elaborations are coherent with Ruddick's (1989) definition of 'maternal thinking' as a cognitive and emotional framework that emerges from the practices of caregiving and that women take on. She identifies three central aims of mothering: preservation of the child's life, fostering growth, and training for social acceptability. The mothers' descriptions of their joy and fulfilment in feeding their children directly align with Ruddick's (1989) notion of preservative love, reflecting a mother's commitment to preserving the child's life, which Ruddick (1989) sees as a foundational

element of maternal thinking. Inherent in her concept is that maternal thinking is not an innate biological function but a learned practice that fosters specific cognitive and emotional capacities. Her approach removes biological and gendered expectations around being a mother and states that the mothering practice can be exercised by anyone who commits to it. Ruddick (1989) provides ways of thinking that move away from a traditionalist view of a cisgender woman assuming the role of a mother.

However, and important to acknowledge when applying her theory to the findings of the interviews with women in Central and Southern Malawi, critics have argued that her work is ethnocentric and essentialist in the universalist claims it makes (DiQuinzio, 1993; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Lugones (2003) recognises what she calls the 'problem of difference' inherent in Ruddick's (1989) work when she aims to represent universal experiences of maternal thinking of women of colour based on her own personal experiences as a white, heterosexual, well-educated woman (Lugones, 2003, p. 69).

Meanwhile, the experiences of women of colour are determined by structural racisms, gender and class, among other intersecting factors (Collins, 1990, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Ruddick's (1989) claim to universalise her own experiences then marginalises the lived experiences of women from social locations different from her own (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Collins (1990, 2016) uses the concept of 'motherwork' to explain these subjective experiences of motherhood of women of colour. For example, motherwork extends beyond the individualist assumptions of a nuclear family to women's communities as part of community survival. It also means grappling with intersecting factors such as economic hardship that impede their children's well-being. Bailey (1994) provides a close reading of this and respects the necessity for contextual analysis that takes race, class, and gender as categories of analysis to understand how power and inequality shape mothering practices. While Bailey (1994) eschews universalism altogether, Keller (2010) suggests

a middle path between universalism and localised accounts of mothering that incorporates categories of analysis that are tentative, relational and unstable. Drawing from these provisional and contextually dependent categories allows for looking at similarities in theories of motherhood, however, playing out in different ways in different contexts (Keller, 2010). In this vein, mothers in economically and structurally disadvantaged contexts experience the pervasive concern with ensuring their children's survival. Those are deeply seated in their own conception of social identity, reflected in strong emotional responses, and can be regarded as a contextually specific form of Ruddick's (1989) idea of preservative love (Keller, 2010).

In addition to this, Ruddick (1989) rejects that maternal thinking would be a biological function based on gender but is a social and intellectual practice, shaped by the demands of caregiving. It can be cultivated by anyone engaged in caregiving, not just biological mothers. This rejection of the biological essentialism of motherhood is in line with Amadiume (1987) who challenges the biological framing of motherhood, showing how precolonial Igbo society allowed for gender fluidity, where women could take on traditionally 'male' social and economic roles, including that of 'female husbands'. Oyěwùmí (1997) goes a step further and argues that in precolonial Yoruba society, caregiving was ascribed to social status and seniority rather than allocated following a fixed male-female binary. Drawing from this premise, Saidi (2023) studied matrilineal Bantu communities, including those in Southern Malawi. Her findings were very similar. As shown, these studies can be placed in conversation with Ruddick's (1989) through the rejection of biological determinism. But Amadiume (1987), Oyěwùmí (2015), in her later work, and Saidi (2023) go further by stressing how colonialism imposed rigid gender binaries and restricted the social roles of women, transforming motherhood into a more biologically fixed identity. They then critique that this is often integral to Western feminist assumptions. Furthermore, while Ruddick (1989) sees maternal thinking as a universal epistemology, Amadiume

(1987) and Oyěwùmí (1997) emphasise the historical and cultural specificity of caregiving structures, particularly in African societies that did not traditionally centre gender in the same ways as the West.

Linking this back to the interview findings above, it became clear that these binary gender norms that ascribe the mothering practice to women were very prominent in my research context. This comes with the societal expectations to raise, protect and nurture their children, even in circumstances beyond their control, such as systemic barriers of food insecurity. These societal pressures, which in a prominent discourse define 'good mothers' as those who can consistently provide for their children, exacerbate women's emotional burdens and create feelings of shame and failure. As mentioned above, if a husband helped a wife with these chores, often she was even accused of having given him *wamudyetsa makhwala* (traditional medicine) to make him 'stupid'. These dynamics speak to Rich's (1976) argument that women's experiences of motherhood are different from the institution of motherhood. The former is manifested, for example, in the feeling of reward and fulfilment when caregiving and nurturing or in a sense of (social) identity. Then again, the emotional response of distress when 'failing' to meet caregiving standards is a response to the institutionalised expectations of motherhood and also reveals how mothers have internalised those. These institutionalised expectations of motherhood then reflect how motherhood has been instrumentalised and exploited by the patriarchy in emphasising women's reproductive function while limiting their access to political and economic power.

When drawing from Rich (1976) to contrast these structures, I need to be cautious to acknowledge that her understanding of patriarchal oppression is rooted in her social context of a white woman living in nuclear family structures in the United States, while having been applied in a false universalist manner (Oyěwùmí, 2015). These structures led to Rich's (1976) assumption that 'the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr.' (ibid., p. 237)

This victimisation would dismiss the multifold coexisting experiences of motherhood that women in different social contexts experience and that relate to agency, power, and identity while also grappling with oppressive and gendered structures (Oyěwùmí, 2015). More nuances and historical context are provided by scholars of African feminisms such Steady (1981, 2005), or Nzegwu (2006), who recognise that motherhood has historically been an important source of status, power and agency for African women, but argue that colonialism and imposed patriarchal systems have exploited and redefined it in oppressive ways. As indicated above, these structures assigned care work to the domestic sphere and to women based on their gender, which, for example, largely restricted their ability to participate in economic and political life. Mama (1996) expands on this and discusses how this patriarchal control was further manifested and structuralised in postcolonial African states. For example, women were positioned as 'mothers of the nation'. Meanwhile, this symbolic elevation did not translate into political or economic leadership positions but rather reinforced women's domestic roles of caretaking.

While the above section refers to the nurturing roles of mothers within these domestic roles of caretaking, the following grapples with women's roles as economic agents. Generally, what women described as the hardest part of motherhood was most often related to struggles of having enough money and other resources to carry out the mothering practice. While most prominently this was in relation to providing food for children and maintaining their health, this came up interlinked in all areas of practice. For example, if a woman cannot feed her child, the child might be too hungry to go to school (Ireen). Not having the resources to buy material necessities or to pay school fees also fed into not being able to fulfil the discourse of 'good motherhood'. In the space of social identity, this came through in terms of women feeling regretful, sad or depressed, and generally worried about their child's future. While some married women fully relied on their husbands to provide income for the household, as shown in the section on practice, many women,

in addition to the mothering work, had to financially support the household and worked for an income or wished to do so. Having an own income also fostered women's level of independence, which I will explain more in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

These delineations highlight women's dual roles as caregivers and economic agents, which again speaks to Collins' (1990, 2016) concept of 'motherwork'. Collins (1990) explains how the fulfilment of both roles is often required from women in marginalised communities to ensure the well-being of their families. This makes being a 'good mother' partly contingent on material contributions. It also implies that women had to reconcile their social identities as mothers with those as wage workers. As Walker (1995) has shown, women's interacting and multiple identities shape their choices and behaviours as mothers. Even though many women stated that they really enjoyed spending time with their children and felt fulfilled by care work, they wanted to secure resources that made them spend their time away from their children and seek paid labour. As shown in the section on practice, the types of work women conducted were either *ganyu*, small-scale business, or work as hairdressers or tailors. How mothering practice mediates women's social identity, or the reconciliation of multiple social identities, is captured by women's own experiences of the work they are doing. They often favoured small-scale business over doing *ganyu*. As Agnes explained: 'I am able to make money and to feed my children and also to dress them. I sell tomatoes to make sure that our children grow up well. In cases where the business is going on very well, I can even stop doing *ganyu*.' At the same time, not having enough resources as starting capital restricted many women from proceeding with their own business in the first place. Furthermore, for about half of the women, childcare prevented them from being able to generate an income due to time, capacity, and mobility constraints of childcare and household chores. This was especially for mothers with young children who still required more intense care, such as regular breastfeeding. For those mothers, business from home was sometimes reconcilable with

simultaneous childcare work, yet it was regarded as less lucrative than doing business at a market or finding *ganyu*.

Descriptions of respective everyday scenarios, balancing caring and working, varied vastly. Mothers of children who went to school could use these schooling hours for doing paid labour. Others had to rely on women relatives for childcare or leave their children with older siblings or with the children of other members of the community. This reconciliation was eased in cases where a husband would help his wife with household and childcare chores so she could go out of the house to do *ganyu*, sell things at the market, or do other paid labour. This was the situation in Eliza's case: 'My husband is able to assist in this household. He's able to assist in a number of ways. For example, I go to the market to sell things. In my household, I find that the husband has cooked and has done all those things. And even for this little one [the child], sometimes she leaves him a bath, and when the husband comes home, he bathes him.' (Eliza) Slightly different were Mavuto's circumstances. She had six children, and her husband helped her with household chores and also did certain childcare chores. She explained that she has enough leisure time when her children are in school, and because some of them are old enough to assist in the household. However, since she also had a five-month-old baby, caring for this child did impact her ability to do work outside the house, which is more lucrative than doing business at home. Also, she mentioned a group that does irrigation farming and that she would like to attend, but could not because her child is still too young. Different to that, Ireen stated that even though her husband was not helping her in the household, childcare was not preventing her from doing any kind of work inside or outside the house. Upon the birth of her firstborn, she took the baby on her back and worked in a restaurant. She stated that any kind of work she is capable of doing, even with her child on her back, even if it is 'men's work', like moulding of bricks. She, however, said that she usually does not have a lot of leisure time.

More generally, carrying out both childcare and paid work seemed to come at the cost of women's leisure time, which is an issue discussed in feminist scholarship over the last few decades (Arora & Rada, 2017; Folbre, 1984; Kabeer, 1994; Miedema et al., 2021). Both are physically and emotionally demanding. This notwithstanding, women are expected to balance both, which often depletes women's energetic resources and does not leave time to rest and recuperate.

In interviews, emblematic of this was Chikondi's depiction of a typical day: 'I do not have much leisure time. In the morning, I will make sure that the children are ready to go to school. After getting the children ready to go to school, I also make sure that the home is clean. I do the household chores. After that, I go to the business and come back late. When I come back home, it is time to prepare *nsima* (white maize porridge).' (Chikondi) An exception was Grace, who has four children and is divorced. She explained that: 'Early in the morning, I will put porridge for the children. I wake up the children, and they eat the porridge. When this is done, I am telling the children to heat water for bathing. I make them bath when the water is hot. When the children go to school, I go to the garden to farm or try to find *ganyu*. I really do not see any disturbance; I have managed to balance.' (Grace) She also said that she had enough leisure time. Hence, while some women perceived their workloads as really high when reconciling physical and emotional childcare work, with paid work to provide for their children, others stressed that they could manage it well and also liked feeling busy. In fact, most mothers only awarded themselves with the label of 'hard working' if they managed to reconcile care work and paid work.

While some community members acknowledged this hard work, this storyline was yet challenged by rumours around women working outside the household, especially in places with other men around. For example, one respondent explained that some people in her community would say that she might not actually be going to the market in the next town to sell goods but

would, in reality, work as a sex worker.[41] This stigma also prevented women from conducting paid work, which resonates with other studies on how social sanctions can perpetuate restrictive gendered norms around work (Lawless et al., 2020; Miedema et al., 2021).

In addition to the constraints of access to resources, stigma, time and workload, many women could not take on better-paid work that would require the mastery of English, or other qualifications beyond primary school education. Due to early pregnancy or marriage, many women dropped out of school very early on, most often during or just after primary school. Additionally, respondents showed that not finishing school, aside from the actual lack of qualifications, also had a psychological effect of not feeling confident enough to even try finding work outside the house. With regard to sending their own children to school, women frequently drew from their own experiences and explained how painful it had been for them not to be able to go to school or not to have continued or finished school. This incentivised them to send their children to school in order to spare them this suffering: 'I always recall how I suffered when I did not continue with school. I do not want my children to suffer. So the best thing that I can do is to do business so I can afford for the children to go to school.' (Chisomo)

While a lot of the Western feminist literature on motherhood focuses on women in their nurturing roles as mothers (such as Rich, 1976, or Ruddick, 1989), these findings speak to Amadiume (1997), who highlights the significant roles of women as economic agents in many pre-colonial African societies, conducted alongside their caregiving responsibilities. She shows that historically, women have organised and controlled market systems what allowed them to establish economic autonomy. Amadiume (1997) makes the case that colonialism then disrupted these social structures by imposing rigid patriarchal structures and capitalist frameworks. This restricted women's access to resources and redefined their social roles, confining them to reproductive

[41] Considering this particular statement, the respondent asked to stay anonymous.

labour in ways that were largely absent in pre-colonial contexts. Interviews showed that while women wanted to be economic agents, for reasons of greater independence but also to provide for their children, those roles indeed were shaped by intersecting constraints of class and gender. Limited access to resources, time, and mobility frequently restricted their economic abilities. Moreover, economic roles were gendered in a way that domestic responsibilities were regarded as a woman's responsibility, while men were the main breadwinners working outside the household. This also made men generally earn higher incomes than women.

Wilson and Kachipande (2020) then give a detailed account of how the colonial period significantly changed women's roles in Malawi. They show that in pre-colonial Malawi, women had greater economic autonomy through access to land or control over agricultural labour. This was supported by uxorilocal marriage practices in parts of the country living under matrilineal systems. In pre-colonial societies, women played central roles in agricultural production and had substantial economic autonomy, controlling the land they cultivated and the labour they contributed to their families and communities. Women were also integral to spiritual and cultural life, serving as mediums, prophets, and custodians of rain shrines, which put them in leadership roles in religious and ecological matters. Similarly, Nzegwu (2006) highlights how precolonial matrilineal societies in West Africa granted women economic and political autonomy, including inheritance rights and leadership in kinship networks. Colonialism, however, undermined these roles by, for example, promoting male-dominated wage labour or restructuring economies to prioritise cash crops. Policies such as the hut tax forced men to migrate for work, leaving women to shoulder the burden of unpaid domestic and subsistence labour. Bourdieu's (1997) concept of *doxa* describes how social conventions and behaviours – often imposed by a dominant group such as the coloniser and to serve the patriarchal system – over time become internalised, replicated and normalised. These shifts not only disrupted existing structures but entrenched patriarchal

norms, confining women to reproductive and small-scale agricultural roles while limiting their mobility, access to resources and continue to shape gendered inequalities in Malawi today (Nzegwu, 2006; Wilson & Kachipande, 2020).

At the same time, interviews support Amadiume's (1997) argument that women adapted to these structural restrictions in a sense that they mobilise and actively navigate and challenge these expectations to balance their economic activities with their cultural expectations of motherhood. This further reflects Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of 'nego-feminism', where African women strategically, through negotiation and compromise over confrontation, navigate their lived experience of the patriarchy around them. This promotes an understanding of motherhood as site of power and activism and again supports that African women's co-existing roles as mothers, economic agents, and leaders must be understood within their socio-cultural and historical contexts, rather than being reduced to Western feminist notions of subordination (Amadiume, 1987; Collins, 1990; Lugones & Spelman, 1983; Nnaemeka, 2004; Nzegwu, 2006; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Steady, 1981). I will elaborate on this in detail in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

To further understand the challenges that women face when navigating their multiple social identities as mothers, workers, and other roles, it is useful to look at the construction of social identity through Giddens' (1991) idea of 'identity' as 'reflexive awareness', which is what an individual is conscious of in terms of their self-perception. While intertwined with both, self-identity is neither merely in an individual's behaviour nor in the reaction of others. It is their capacity to sustain a self-narrative that is repeatedly created by the individuals' action in reflection to their social environment, to social roles they inhabit in their cultural context, that is informed by different discourses of motherhood. Giddens (1991) distinguishes between individuals with a secure sense of self and those whose sense of self is battered, which can be due to distressing events, internal or external to the individual. This evokes the feeling of lacking biographical

continuity across space and time as interpreted reflexively by the individual. It also involved a sense of failing to achieve their own conception of aliveness. Individuals engulfed by these feelings may not have filters to cope with a changing environment and be occupied with fear of possible threats to their own existence, which can paralyse them in terms of taking action (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 1965).

My interview findings come from women who are disadvantaged as a group and whose opportunities in life are restricted on the basis of their gender. This most certainly has a diminishing impact on their sense of self, as their value as a person is considered to be inferior to that of men. Those women face two conflicting expectations: to stay home and take care of their children, and to earn an income to provide for them. The social stigma towards women who are mothers and also conduct paid work outside their homes is directly linked to the differentiation from the discourse of a 'good mother', who is staying at home, not moving around, and caring for her child. If she is married, her husband would be the main breadwinner. For women with an insecure self-identity, falling under this stigma presumably poses a threat to their social identity as mothers. Although many mothers wished to earn an income for the reasons explained above, doing so would involve pushing back against a discourse that is rooted in prevalent gender norms, and they might rather seek to 'blend with the environment' to escape this perceived threat. While Walker's (1995) concept of social identity, in line with Amadiume (1997) and Nnaemeka (2004), rightly emphasises women's agency in constructing and maintaining or changing particular narratives, it is also important to understand the obstacles women face in doing so and to unpack the grounding of their sense of self from which they act. Importantly, community groups have shown to be extremely important support networks. These collective spaces provide reference points for individuals when consolidating a social identity. I will touch upon this dynamic in group space more later in this section.

Social Identity and Discourse

While in the section above, I delineated conceptions of social identity mediated by practice, the following relates more to those informed by discourse. When being asked about changes that they experienced when entering motherhood, many women referred to bodily changes such as looking different in terms of a swollen belly, protruding breasts that produce milk for breastfeeding the child, or gaining weight. They also recounted experiences of weakness, fatigue, or sickness during their pregnancies.

Around half of the women linked 'becoming an adult' with entering motherhood. Some connoted this as 'thinking like adult people'. Grace stated: 'My present was the baby. So after that [giving birth], I saw myself as an adult, and I sat down and said, well, I am no longer a girl, I am now a mother.' Recalling the event of giving birth, Chikondi said: 'I saw something that I have never seen in my life. Giving birth, delivering a child, just doing that means that now I am an adult.' In this context, some women referred to a feeling of greater independence when entering motherhood because that made them live in their own household, where they were not under their parents' control, and their parents stopped making decisions for them. While many enjoyed the greater independence, some women also highlighted the concomitant challenges of not having their parents' direct support. Consistently, Oyěwùmí (2000) and Saidi (2023) argue that in many African societies, motherhood is a defining aspect of womanhood, closely tied to adulthood and linked to cultural values that emphasise the maternal role as central to individual identity and social contribution. At the same time, entry into motherhood is not linked to the biological event of giving birth, but to a profound redefinition of the self within a cultural and relational context. In

my interviews, however, entering motherhood through the event of giving birth was stressed to be an important aspect of entering womanhood and adulthood.[42]

Interestingly, when women were asked about turning points in their lives that shaped them as a person, only a small number of respondents referred to the event of giving birth. One of them was Joyce, who stated: 'I think that my turning point was when I gave birth. I started thinking on my own. The way I was thinking as a girl, it has changed now that I have become a mother, so I feel that this is my turning point.' On the other hand, Esther said that giving birth was a turning point, as from then on, she was not able to go out for paid labour anymore, which made her life much more difficult. The other two-thirds of mothers often mentioned money-related events, such as starting a business that created revenue; finding paid work or *ganyu*; migrating to a different community to find paid labour, mostly for the husband; or their husband going to South Africa to find work there. For others, turning points were when they started earning their own income, which made them less dependent on their husbands. For one woman, that was getting a divorce from a violent husband.

Many of the changes that women experience when entering motherhood, as laid out above, seem to incorporate and supposedly have a big impact on different areas of women's lives. One could understand them as turning points. The fact that many women did not perceive this as such might point to the normalisation of women's predestined roles as mothers in society. If it is assumed that 'naturally' women would become mothers at some point, this is not perceived as a turning point but rather as the natural progression into womanhood and adulthood. Turning point would then rather signify changes in mothers' lives that enable them to perform their tasks diligently and work towards the prominent discourse of motherhood. This reflects the arguments

[42] It is to note here that all my interviewees became mothers through the event of giving birth. I hence do not know non-biological mothers or non-mothers would relate the event of giving birth to adulthood and womanhood. I do not make any general premises that womanhood is contingent on motherhood.

of African feminisms delineated above, which highlight the diverse roles women held in pre-colonial societies – roles that were later narrowed by colonial patriarchal structures to focus primarily on mothering responsibilities (Amadiume, 1997; Nzegwu, 2006; Wilson & Kachipande, 2020). Interview findings could indicate that this narrowing became normalised over time, aligning with Bourdieu's (1997) concept of internalised social roles (*doxa*). This is not to say, however, that women's investment in motherhood as part of their social identity is merely a product of patriarchal socialisation, which includes expectations that women should become mothers and perform caring work, but rather that it is shaped by their own experiences of this role and how they exercise agency within (Walker, 1995).

The sense of adulthood was also connected to a feeling of responsibility to be the main caretaker that the child depends on and carrying out the mothering practice without relying on their parents' or grandparents' assistance. As noted earlier, this was a context-specific way of 'maternal thinking' (Keller, 2010), but was also connected to acting according to the prominent discourses of good motherhood. For instance, Mavuto said that she stopped moving around because she felt responsible. She also explained how she would now try to make sure to farm responsibly to ensure that the family has food all year round. Multiple respondents based their decision to take on paid labour on this sense of responsibility. This corresponds to Steady (2011), who, drawing from a West African context, highlights that the practice of leadership is inherent in women's roles as mothers, which may feed into their conception of social identity. She notes that 'The concept of motherhood and leadership is not limited to reproductive and nurturing roles in households but reflects the normative values and humanistic ideologies that embrace notions of preservation of past, present, and future generations; prosperity and well- being of society as a whole and the promotion of equality, peace, and justice (ibid., p. 22). They become visionaries who, for the benefit of their children, constantly try to predict the future.

Another relevant dynamic that played directly into their social identity was that women felt proud and began to respect themselves more when they became mothers. This again speaks to Oyěwùmí (2000), who highlights that 'mother is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women' (ibid., p. 1096). Respondents formulated this as an intrinsic feeling but also in terms of taking better care of oneself, such as making sure to eat enough or bathe regularly. Many of the behaviours that are linked to motherhood, and that I explained in the section on discourse, were in fact considered by respondents as symbols of greater self-respect. Those are, for example, wearing the *chitenge* or a headscarf to cover themselves, not 'moving around', changing the language they use to more 'adult language', or discontinuing associating with younger girls who are not mothers.

While this was true for a lot of respondents, from interviews it became clear that women who became mothers at a young age were often not ready to let go of their old identities as girls. Young mothers often really mourned these friendships and felt discriminated against by their friends who are not mothers. For example, Ruth, who became a mother at the age of 18 explained: 'when I became a mother, all my friends I was chatting with, that were at school, they were saying: "No, you are not our friend. You are now old enough. You now have a child; you should be chatting with mothers".' This also spoke to the difficulties experiences by young women who became pregnant before marriage and who dropped out of school, that I delineated on in the section on discourses. Many respondents who went through this revealed that they were really sad when they could not go back to school due to their pregnancies. This was happening in particular if a girl was married at an early age because her parents could not afford to provide for her any longer. Often, respondents' incentives to make sure that their own children go to school, and the advice they would give to their girls, not to get pregnant at a young age, came from their own suffering when

dropping out of school. These elaborations show that age is another important factor that intersects with women's experiences of motherhood.

They also point to women's marital status as another important intersecting factor, which was closely tied to age. On one hand, being married when becoming a mother was important to escape the community stigma mentioned above and to ease the economic provision for the child. On the other hand, as shown in the section on discourse, some mothers chose to divorce from their spouses due to marital issues. This led to greatly increased levels of independence and decision-making, but often at the cost of economic precarity. I will elaborate on this further in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

Overall, this again highlights the importance of recognising the influence of intersecting factors on women's lives, in a specific cultural, social, and economic context, such as race, class, gender, cultural norms, age or marital status, that complicate mothers' lived experiences. In doing so, Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term 'intersectionality', points to the structural and systemic questions that underlie and cause inequality and discrimination for marginalised groups. In the context of motherhood, these intersecting factors lead to the inner turmoil described above and create tension in the process of identity formation. Again, linking this back to Giddens' (1991) 'social identity as reflexive awareness', it became clear that through the reflexive formation of social identity, that happens in conjunction with prominent discourses that are grounded in a social context of values and norms, women base their own conception of self-respect through motherhood on social and behavioural expectations that their environment has towards a 'good mother'. Women indeed cherished entering motherhood and through this had positive experiences such as altered self-respect, a feeling of pride or entering adulthood. This feeling, however, was thwarted by being shamed for young motherhood before marriage, losing the potential for other important life aspects, such as schooling, being bullied, or even just detaching

from childhood friends at an early age. As explained earlier and more practice-related, having the primary burden of household or childcare work attributed to them because of their gender, or worrying about their own ability to provide financially for a child, was difficult and a source of regret and unhappiness. Mothers then negotiated those expectations and adhered to some of the discourses of 'good motherhood' but also contested others, which is a process I will elaborate on more in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

For this agentic behaviour in the process of forming a social identity, social groups serve as an important reference point and support network for participants in defining their own social identity and, as part of that, in pursuing or contesting a narrative. Through reflexive awareness, women engage with the collective spaces they inhabit when constructing and consolidating a social identity. These spaces also assisted with managing ontological anxiety when challenging existing gender normative structures (Giddens, 1991). It shows that women's self-image is derived from various social groups they belong to (Walker, 1995) and that their social identity is grounded in their cultural context and strongly influenced by the agenda, wisdom, and ideas of the multiple social groups (e.g. mothers, paid workers, wives, etc.) they belong to. Collective social and cultural spaces were the communities they lived in.

Moreover, all women explained that when they became mothers, they entered the 'group of mothers' of the community, which is not a formal group but a group that women were understood to join by virtue of becoming a mother.[43] For example, Tamara said that when she was a young girl, she did not care much about women's gatherings, but when she became a mother, she felt that now she belonged to the group of mothers in her community. These groups of mothers provided the most crucial space for reflexive identity formation, for reconciling sometimes

[43] Beyond that and as I will explain in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood, being a mother was also often a requirement to join formal groups of a community.

contradictory discourses, and for mutual support to exercise collective agency. Motherhood then provided a collective site of power and activism where women could chat about issues, exchange ideas, assist each other, and give each other valuable advice. For example, the group for young mothers, which I mentioned above, provided an important collective space to push back against the stigma around motherhood at a young age and before marriage, and to normalise that women take on both identities, that of a mother and that of a worker. These dynamics resonate with Mama (1995), who undergirds that African women have long leveraged their roles as mothers in maternal networks. They mobilise collective action and form support networks to navigate systemic constraints, resist oppressive structures, claim agency within patriarchal structures, and build informal safety nets during times of hardship. Steady (2005) also elaborates on the collective nature of caregiving in African contexts. She argues that this shared maternal practice fosters resilience, interdependence, and social cohesion, reinforcing the idea that motherhood is not just an individual role but a collective identity and resource. My interviews reflect this dynamic, as respondents frequently described how they relied on neighbours, relatives, and other mothers for childcare and support. Similarly, Collins (1990) conceptualises Black motherhood as 'motherwork', which is inherently political, and wherein practices such as 'other-mothering' extend maternal care beyond the biological family, creating networks that foster resistance and sustain both individual and collective survival in oppressive contexts. In that sense, collective caregiving is as much about resistance as it is about care. These dynamics of collective agency in groups of mothers will be explored in detail in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

The groups of mothers also provided spaces for extended family networks to support the raising of children. This was especially relevant in my research context since, due to the matrilineal residency systems, the women of a family most commonly stay in the same community. This again speaks to Collins' (1990) concept of other-mothering as a key aspect of African women's

community work and caring for children who are not their biological offspring. She states that this phenomenon is deeply rooted in African communal traditions and also facilitates intergenerational knowledge transmission and social cohesion. Respondents, however, described a tension between the communal practice of other-mothering and their discomfort with the idea of their children asking community members for money or food that they, as mothers, were unable to provide. Such behaviour would evoke a sense of shame, as it highlighted their perceived failure to fulfil their maternal responsibilities.

Then, in the broader community structures, belonging to the group of mothers was moreover signalled externally, in the way other community members changed their treatment of a woman after she entered motherhood. Respondents reported fostered respect in the community when entering motherhood. Martha explained: 'In our community, when a girl has a child, now, she is a mother. And everyone must respect that one.' Again, this was mediated by the fulfilment of a 'good mother's' behaviour delineated above and, as explained, depended on a mother's age and marriage status. Women delineated that this greater respect was due to community acknowledgement of a mother's status, but also because the act of becoming a mother was perceived as a transition into womanhood and adulthood, symbolising responsibility and maturity. The respect conferred by motherhood was often signified through naming customs, such as referring to women as '*Amayi* [child's name]', 'the mother of [child's name].' (Ireen) This not only acknowledges a woman's maternal status but also points to her elevated social standing within the community.

Such symbolic acts align with Amadiume's (1987) insights into African kinship systems, where motherhood is not merely a private or domestic role but a central pillar of social and communal identity. Amadiume (1987) highlights how African cultural frameworks position mothers as key figures in sustaining family and community cohesion, thereby granting them authority and respect.

Many women interviewed embraced this custom. This space of community respect around motherhood is where Oyěwùmí's (2000) premise of 'mother' being 'the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women' (ibid., p. 1096) is located. She highlights that this exists separate to the space of what she calls 'nuclear motherhood' and argues that motherhood in the nuclear family space is a Western concept, which in that context indeed has oppressive implications as it equates a mother's identity with that of the patriarch's wife. Saidi (2023) too shows that in matrilineal Bantu communities, being a mother is a much more significant role than being a wife. My interview findings largely align with the conception of a cherished self-identity.

As is common in matrilineal societies (see Chapter 2), most respondents lived in *banja* households. The matrilineal *banja* household can consist of a conjugal bond of husband, wife and their children. Still, it is different from a nuclear household since it cannot be understood as a sole household unit but only in its embeddedness in the matrix of community relationships[44] (Peters, 1997a, 2010). I found that in the household units of the *banja* households, too, the patriarchal expectations towards a wife, such as the gendered divide of paid work or sole care work responsibilities, were factors that constituted the difficulties that mothers experienced. At the same time, some women chose to divorce their spouses when they experienced marital problems and coped with single motherhood. This aligns with research showing that, increasingly, during the twentieth century, motherhood and marriage have been uncoupled by African women, visible in increasing numbers of women-headed households. This is due to a decrease in stigma around single motherhood to the point where women could prefer it to marriage, which occurs at the level of social identity and slowly changes a prominent discourse (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; Walker, 1995). Yet, in the study communities, this uncoupling of marriage and motherhood would

[44] When using the term *banja*, one may well include other co-resident relatives, especially the wife's matrilineal kin. At other times, *banja* is used to refer more generally to a close family beyond the conjugal household unit (Peters, 1997a).

be more feasible after having been married and not in terms of having a child before being married, due to the existing community stigma of having a child before marriage. This supports that motherhood cannot simply be equated with wifehood but has an autonomous meaning that appeals to women's identity (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997). *Banja* households were tightly woven into extended kinship community networks, so that, for example and as mentioned above, especially the group of mothers of a community could provide a support system of cooperative caregiving structures. As noted for my research context, the matrilineal structures may ease single motherhood due to the existing surrounding structures of women relatives. Consistent with my findings, and acknowledging these support structures of communal motherhood, Aryee (2005) still highlights the persistent conflict for mothers of having the main care responsibilities and simultaneously conducting paid labour, which depletes them of time and energy to an extent that they can barely manage both.

While I elaborated on the dynamics of increased respect through entering motherhood in community spaces, several women further explained that they felt more respected within their households and by their partners, if they were married. This was again manifested in the custom of instead being called by their own names, they were called *'Amayi'* together with their child's name. Some women reciprocated this and started calling their husband: '*Abambo* (father to) [child's name].' (Ireen)

Entering motherhood also manifested in greater independence for women in terms of decision-making power within their households. This was predominantly about their children, but also trickled into other areas such as the use of household income or agricultural production, which again corresponds to Steady's (2011) emphasis on the practice of leadership inherent in women's roles as mothers. Overall, Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism applies to understanding how women use motherhood to negotiate power within their specific social

contexts**.** They strategically navigate social norms through relational and collaborative activism rather than direct confrontation. Rather than outright resistance, women leverage their roles as mothers to subtly negotiate power within their households and communities, securing greater decision-making influence while maintaining social cohesion. This aligns with the idea that African women engage in maternal diplomacy—using their positions as caregivers and nurturers to mediate conflicts, advocate for communal welfare, and influence economic and political discussions. In this way, motherhood becomes a tool for navigating patriarchal structures, not through direct defiance but through a process of negotiation and the exercise of agency within constrained circumstances. Through this, they not only secure immediate benefits but also contribute to broader structural transformations which can be regarded as empowering. I will discuss the intricacies of these dynamics in more detail in Chapter 5 on empowerment and motherhood.

4.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how women in Central and Southern Malawi conceptualise motherhood, demonstrating that it is neither universal nor monolithic but a deeply relational and constantly evolving process. Women's narratives reveal that motherhood is shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and economic factors, making it a space of both affirmation and constraint. While dominant discourses construct an idealised image of the 'good mother', the lived realities of women show a far more complex negotiation of maternal identities, where practice, discourse, and social identity intersect in ways that both reinforce and challenge societal expectations.

I have argued that women's understandings of motherhood are neither wholly determined by external structures nor entirely self-defined; rather, they emerge from a continual interplay between dominant norms and individual agency. My findings illustrate that while motherhood is

often framed through expectations of care, provision, and moral responsibility, women themselves conceptualise it not only as a nurturing practice but also in ways that extend beyond prescriptive roles. Their experience of mothering is equally about social recognition, moral legitimacy, and the navigation of competing expectations.

A critical insight from my study is that motherhood is relational: it is defined not simply by biological reproduction but by networks of care, kinship, and social roles. The expectation that women will be primary caregivers is deeply embedded in local gendered structures, yet it is also shaped by broader economic realities that make fulfilling this role particularly challenging. For many women, motherhood is as much about the ability to provide for their children as it is about nurturing them. This is evident in how they describe their responsibilities - not only ensuring their children's survival but also securing their future through education, nutrition, and protection.

Drawing from 43 semi-structured interviews and 12 FGDs with mothers in Central and Southern Malawi, my findings show that while dominant discourses construct an image of the 'good mother', women's own narratives reveal multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations of what it means to be a mother. These interpretations emerge from daily practices of care, the negotiation of household and community roles, and the internalisation or contestation of gendered expectations. Walker's (1995) tripartite framework of practice, discourse, and social identity provided a framework to analyse how motherhood is simultaneously socially constructed and actively shaped by women's lived experiences. My study finds that mothering practices are embedded in economic survival, caregiving responsibilities, and social expectations, making motherhood a site of both constraint and negotiation.

As the interviews illustrate, dominant discourses of motherhood in Central and Southern Malawi emphasise care, provision, and moral responsibility, with significant social pressures placed on women to meet these expectations. Yet women do not passively conform. Drawing from both

traditional and contemporary influences, they strategically navigate, reinforce, challenge, and reshape these expectations in ways that enable them to exercise agency, even within restrictive structures. Collective spaces were an important source of leverage in this regard. Social identity, the third component of Walker's (1995) framework, emerges as a critical site where women reconcile individual, communal, and structural forces. Forming a social identity is influenced both by how women perceive themselves and by how they are perceived by others. For example, many women in my study gained social recognition and respect through motherhood, but this respect was conditional, shaped by age, marital status, and economic capacity.

Many Western feminist theories, particularly those developed within second-wave liberal feminism, have historically framed motherhood as a domestic and isolating institution that reinforces women's dependency on men (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989). However, as scholars of African feminisms such as Oyěwùmí (1997) and Amadiume (1987) argue, these frameworks are rooted in Eurocentric assumptions - particularly those tied to individualism, nuclear family structures, and capitalist labour models. These scholars emphasise that in many African contexts, motherhood is not an isolated domestic role but an economically and communally embedded practice. My findings align with these critiques. In Central and Southern Malawi, women's experiences of motherhood are inseparable from their economic and social realities. Here, motherhood is not only about nurturing and caregiving but also about provision, decision-making, and collective responsibility.

While scholars of African feminisms have rightly critiqued the imposition of Eurocentric models of motherhood, the realities of women in Central and Southern Malawi demonstrate both the persistence of structural inequalities and the adaptability of mothers' identities. Thus, my findings challenge any simplistic divisions between Western (oppressive) and African (emancipatory) models of motherhood. Rather than existing in opposition, concerns of Western

and African feminisms do intersect. Both acknowledge the impact of patriarchal systems in shaping motherhood roles, but the key difference lies in their approach to resistance and agency. Western feminist critiques of motherhood often emphasise liberation from motherhood roles, whereas perspectives of African feminisms highlight how women redefine and negotiate these roles rather than seeking to reject them entirely.

The interviews in my study reflect this negotiation. While women in Central and Southern Malawi recognise the structural burdens placed on them as mothers - such as high workloads or restrictions on income generation - they also articulate a strong sense of purpose, pride, and authority. In this chapter, I have developed a non-universal and anti-essentialist notion of motherhood, located at the intersection of structure and agency, continuity and change, discourse and lived experience. Mothers' identities are shaped by historical legacies and patriarchal norms, but they are also actively negotiated, adapted, and contested.

While my findings contribute to theoretical debates about discourses of motherhood, importantly, they also move beyond abstract theory to centre the lived experiences of respondents. In other words, while theory speaks to the possible impacts of motherhood on women's identities, my study illustrates how those impacts manifest in women's lives.

As in this chapter, I have laid the foundation for understanding how women define and experience motherhood, in the next chapter, I will build on these insights by exploring the relationship between motherhood and empowerment. While in this chapter I have focused on how women conceptualise motherhood, subsequently I examine women's understandings of empowerment and whether motherhood itself is seen as empowering**,** and how different forms of agency emerge from this relationship.

5. Empowerment and Motherhood

Empowerment is widely discussed in feminist and development scholarship, yet its meaning remains contested. While dominant frameworks often define empowerment as gaining autonomy and resisting structural constraints, women's own understandings frequently diverge. In Central and Southern Malawi, empowerment is not always about individual independence but is often understood in relational and collective terms, shaped by social roles, economic conditions, and maternal responsibilities. In this chapter, I examine how women conceptualise empowerment, exploring its relationship with motherhood and how different forms of agency become visible in maternal experiences.

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of motherhood, in this chapter I investigate whether and how motherhood itself can be empowering. While Western feminist scholarship has often viewed maternal roles as restrictive, scholars of African feminisms[45] argue that motherhood can also be a site of power, social status, and decision-making authority (Amadiume, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 2000). My findings reveal that for some women, empowerment is linked to financial independence and resistance to gendered norms, while for others, it is embedded in maternal responsibilities, caregiving, and securing their children's futures. Rather than seeing empowerment as a rejection of motherhood, many women assert agency through and within their maternal roles.

At the same time, becoming a mother brings both empowerment and constraint. Women gain social recognition and influence within their families, yet they also face new pressures, particularly when economic insecurity limits their ability to meet maternal expectations. I also explore the space of rupture between discourse and practice, where the idealised image of the self-sacrificing

[45] As laid out in Chapter 1.3, I am using the pluralism 'African feminisms', following Nnaemeka (1998) to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of movements, thought and activism across the African continent, shaped by diverse cultural imperatives, historical contexts, and localised realities. Drawing from her concept, I then use the term 'Western feminisms' to acknowledge the pluralism therein too.

mother often conflicts with women's lived realities. Women's strategies for navigating these tensions highlight how empowerment is negotiated rather than absolute.

By engaging with debates on agency and empowerment, in this chapter, I critically examine how power operates within maternal roles. I move beyond binary frameworks of resistance versus subjugation, demonstrating that agency is often expressed through adaptation, negotiation, and relational forms of influence. In doing so, it builds on the previous chapter's exploration of how women conceptualise motherhood, shifting the focus to how they define and enact empowerment within their everyday lives.

Throughout this chapter, I move beyond the assumption that agency is always expressed through resistance to patriarchal norms. While Kabeer's (1999) and Longwe's (1991) frameworks of empowerment have been instrumental in shaping feminist discourse, their emphasis on transformation through resistance does not fully capture how women in Central and Southern Malawi navigate power. As Mahmood (2001) argues, defining agency primarily in terms of opposition to patriarchy risks overlooking the multiplicity of ways in which women enact power. Ignoring these dynamics leads to a homogenised view of women's experiences, one that assumes they either conform to or resist oppression, rather than acknowledging how they understand their own actions (Narayan, 2002; Mohanty, 2005; Khader, 2011).

5.1. What do Women Consider Empowering? - Agency as Resistance

Several definitions of empowerment provided by interviewees, and presented in the following section, correspond to Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment as the 'ability to make strategic life choices' (ibid., p. 437) for those who have been denied this ability previously. Empowerment consists of the framework of 'Resources', 'Agency', and 'Achievements'. Agency here is largely defined as the enactment of 'transformative agency' as resistance against the patriarchy and leading

to social and structural change towards gender equality. In spaces where direct resistance is not possible, women deployed agency as a form of negotiation to more subtly change restrictive structures (Kabeer, 2024). Those three domains are interrelated and determine each other's potential to lead to empowerment, as enabling women to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999). In the same realm, Longwe's (1991) framework would regard these findings as speaking to 'women's issues' as they underlie 'welfare', 'access', 'conscientisation', 'participation', and 'control' that, in this order, foster gender equality and women's empowerment. According to Longwe's (1991) framework, empowerment requires a recognition that women have special needs, are disadvantaged as a group, and that their development requires equality with men in the five spaces mentioned.

Kabeer's (1999) framework provides a theoretical foundation. Longwe 's (1991) model is more practically oriented and allows for a nuanced disaggregation of the processes that ought to take place within Kabeer's (1999) framework. As I delineated in detail in Chapter 1.2, both scholars differentiate between this transformative form of agency enabling women to act on the restrictive aspects of their given roles, addressing 'women's issues' and leading to structural equality between men and women; and 'effective agency', addressing 'women's concerns' which are their day-to day gendered responsibilities (Kabeer, 1999, 2005a; Longwe, 1991).

In the following, I combine these two etic frameworks of empowerment to map and analyse emic findings and explore forms of agency that women exercise to challenge gender normative and restrictive structures.

Achievements/Control as Outcome of Empowerment

Achievements are well-being outcomes that individuals attain using their agency over resources (Kabeer, 1999). Achievements speak to Longwe's (1991) criteria of 'control' as equal control over

factors of production for women, and the distribution of benefits accordingly. This represents the culmination of empowerment efforts. I begin by elaborating achievements since the way women are classified as empowered is often in terms of their observable well-being outcomes.

Every respondent explained that an empowered woman is someone who is respected and has a high status in the community. Importantly, this woman respects herself internally as an implicit condition to be respected in her household and the community. Respondents further mentioned that empowered women are content.

Empowered women were assumed to have the resources to look after themselves – to dress well, to have enough food, or to be healthy. They were ascribed to the 'middle-class' or to being 'prosperous'. Some respondents mentioned that empowered women do not lack anything at home and that their homes look well-maintained. Holding these resources was most often in a tight relationship with gaining an own income, which was in fact regarded as particularly empowering. This involved the engagement in farming activities and selling the farming produce, in a few cases, being employed, 'doing (small-scale) business', such as selling fish, tomatoes, bananas, sugar cane, rice, or clothing, or doing *ganyu* (casual labour). Women doing economic activities were further respected for being 'hard workers'. Some community members would admire them because they are doing well (Ruth; Tamanda), encourage them to continue making decisions (Alinafe), or even assist them in their independence. In this context and in more relational terms, further achievements ascribed to an empowered woman were that she can help others, helps 'the poor' of a community (Ruth), generally supports and 'brings up' the community. (Tamanda)

Almost every respondent equated 'empowerment' with being independent and the ability to make decisions in her household. Both were directly linked to the above-mentioned hard work and respective activities, and again, most importantly, having an own income. Chisomo explained that: 'Empowered women are those who are able to do business. They don't depend on their

husbands. Even if their husbands are doing other things [that do not benefit the household], these women do not really care, because they have the resources to think and decide on their own. This woman is a free person because she is able to make decisions on her own without waiting for her husband. She is able to proceed with things.' (Chisomo) The achievement of not depending on spousal support, as well as having the resources to decide on their own, was raised by many respondents. In this context, Ruth further explained that an empowered woman can manage here finance smartly: 'For example, when she gets, let's say MWK100.000, she deposits part of it in the bank and reinvests the remainder in her business. She keeps the money in the bank so that in the event that the business has crumbled, she can withdraw from her account and restart her business.'

That resources from their own income would translate into women's greater ability to make decisions in the household was explained by many respondents. Victoria explained that: '[Empowered women] are able to make important decisions in their households, because they are able to buy food after they make profits, and then that money is used for the home, so that is another important thing that a woman would do. Those [empowered] women are able to decide over the income they generate' (Victoria). In line with this, Chimwemwe further elaborated: 'A woman who is empowered in this community is a woman who is able to do business, she's a happy woman, she is able to do things on her own. She is able to decide on anything that she wants to do, as long as that assists her daily life. She's able to make decisions on her own because she's able. She has the resources.' (Chimwemwe)

An empowered woman was also regarded as a role model, an exemplary woman who can influence and encourage others. Chikondi explained: 'I can tell you that other women are motivated by this [empowered] woman's commitment as they also prefer to engage in business so that they become like her.' (Chikondi) Grace added to this: 'She urges her friends to see the goodness of doing a business instead of just staying and relying on men because if you do a

business, you may not lack even a soap, and people take this as a milestone.' (Grace) When mentioning their role models in this context, respondents would often refer to women whom they admired and who had acquired educational qualifications, such as for instance teachers, nurses, or doctors.

Given their descriptions of an empowered woman, when asked if they regarded themselves as empowered, more than half of the women responded that they did. When asked why, the majority linked this to having a degree of independence, being a hard worker, doing *ganyu*, or having the ability to run their own business. Those who did not regard themselves as empowered mostly attributed this to not currently having sufficient material resources.

Resources/ Welfare, and Access

Most of these achievements are co-constituting each other and become empowering resources too. However, while achievements can be regarded as outcomes, resources are the precondition to exercising agency, which can lead to achievements. Those are the current allocation as well as future claims of material, human, and social resources (Kabeer, 1999). Women's ability to use a resource to exercise agency in an empowering sense is derogated by gendered power structures (Kabeer, 2024). Thus, the value of a resource is determined by its implications for agency (Bourdieu, 1977) – by what it enables a woman to achieve. In Longwe's (1991) model, resources would correspond to 'welfare' in terms of the provision of basic needs such as food, shelter, or health services, as a first step towards empowerment. It also corresponds to 'access' that goes beyond welfare by ensuring that women have access to resources they need to be equipped to make choices, such as land, credit, or education (Longwe, 1991). Welfare in terms of the fulfilment of basic needs was mentioned in terms of an empowered woman looking healthy or having food and a home. 'Access' in terms of material resources that held potential for respondents' ability to

make choices were monetary means, farming input, credit from village banks, land, ownership of livestock and other assets. Human resources considered important included farming skills or literacy. Being respected in the community, or membership in women's groups, were raised as important social resources.

Women's own income from her business or employment outside the household was an achievement, but also a particularly important resource for women's potential to exercise agency. From interviews, it became clear that while men and women of the same household discuss with each other, according to gender norms, the man, as the main breadwinner, held the final say in most areas of intra-household decision-making, such as farming or the use of household income. At the same time, most women desired to have more power in decision-making. This was per example, if she would like to grow different crops than her husband, such as food crops, or crops that she could sell at the market. In turn, if women had their own income, they would often directly decide over the use of it and, for example, buy their preferred farming input or reinvest in their business to increase revenue. This is directly related to the achievement of an empowered woman being financially stable and independent. Moreover, women's economic activities and contribution to the household budget could increase their overall decision-making power in the household, including the allocation of household resources. This echoes findings from various studies on women's bargaining power conducted in the Global South (Doss, 2013). I found that similar dynamics occurred for money from loans that women had taken out. I will elaborate on this in Chapter 6.

Agency/ Conscientisation, and Participation

Restrictive gender norms influence women's abilities to act on their goals and use resources to actualise the achievements stated above (Kabeer, 1999). These norms are structurally rooted in

cultural systems that have evolved over time, and that follow certain beliefs and role expectations, and guide the behaviour of their actors. They create an unequal social order that manifests in material arrangements whereby the marginalised group hold less resources than the dominant group (Giddens, 1979). There is substantial evidence that this holds true for women as a marginalised group in different countries (Deere & Doss, 2006; Doss, 2013). It then shows why access to resources is the precondition for the exercise of agency and empowerment. These structures of gender inequality are then repeatedly enacted and become normalised in social practice (Shove et al., 2012). The process of normalisation veils the arbitrary nature of underlying normative rules (Bourdieu, 1977). *Doxa* is what Bourdieu (1977) calls this realm of habit - social conventions, behaviours, and rules, that people in a given context have internalised and routinely adhere to. *Habitus* then describes the perceived range of actions and being – the ability to feel and think in relation to those internalised structures (Bourdieu, 1977). This closely connects to what Giddens (1991) termed 'ontological security' - a stable sense of self and continuity that women experience when living according to this gender unequal *doxa*, that even if marginalising, can offer a sense of order and predictability. Conversely, 'ontological anxiety' arises when this continuity is disrupted - when foundational assumptions about the self or social world become uncertain. For women, challenging entrenched norms or stepping outside established roles can provoke such anxiety and involve emotional, social and material risks.

It becomes clear that for empowerment, understanding those structures becomes crucial when exploring women's sense of agency. Transformative agency would imply that women define goals according to preferences that impinge on norms of inequality (*doxa*), to transition 'from *doxa* to discourse' (Kabeer, 1999). This would allow women to navigate ontological anxiety and to imagine alternatives: material or social possibilities that are different from the normalised social order (Giddens, 1991; Kabeer, 1999). This involves women's 'conscientisation' (Longwe, 1991) or

'power within' (Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997), which is the acknowledgement that gender roles are constructed and can be challenged. For instance, this could be because women want to renegotiate an unequal influence on intra-household decision-making based on gender. It also implies 'participation' or 'power to' (Longwe, 1991; Rowlands, 1997), whereby women then translate this awareness into action. Again, in the process of decision-making, this would be an involvement to an extent where women's needs and wishes are considered and meaningfully influence their decisions (Longwe, 1991).

Certain restrictive gender norms were stated by women across all interviews, such as those around work. Domestic chores such as childcare and household chores were regarded as women's responsibilities, which bound them to the household and took up a lot of their capacities. This prevented them from engaging in other activities such as paid work. Men were the primary breadwinners of the household and conducted paid work outside the household, which aligns with other studies on gender norms in Southern Malawi (Kululanga et al., 2012; Mudege et al., 2017). This made women depend on their husbands' income to provide for the household. Already, the man was regarded as the head of the household, which came with great intra-household decision-making power. While I found that normally, women had low decision-making power with regard to areas that were not directly linked to their preassigned roles, such as childcare, the fact that men earned the main household income reinforced that. Considering this *doxa*, women's desire for independence and for greater decision-making power can then be seen as the outcome of a 'conscientisation' process that questions these role allocations and reveals a sense of agency – a 'power within', driven by women's own values (Kabeer, 1999; Longwe, 1991; Rowlands, 1997).

As shown in the section on resources, earning an income held a great potential for women to exercise 'transformative agency' to attain greater independence and push back against restrictive gender norms (Kabeer, 2005a). This links to Longwe's (1991) criteria of 'participation', such as

the inclusion of women into decision-making processes, and that can lead to the criteria of equal control over factors of production for women, and the distribution of benefits accordingly (Longwe, 1991).

However, for a woman to exercise this transformative agency, she needed to have a certain existing level of empowerment. While one could argue that the empowering potential of most resources depends on the degree of empowerment women already have, for women's own income, this became most obvious. Martha showed: I [who has an income] can make choices by myself. But for others, it is very difficult because they are just housewives, or they are just staying with their families, they have nothing they can do by themselves.'

In order to conduct paid labour and earn their own income, regarded as a primarily male domain, firstly, women had to act against structural gender norms around work. This can itself be regarded as a strategic life choice and requires a level of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999, 2024), since it comes from a place of conscientisation, leading to greater independence in terms of participation and control (Longwe, 1991). In the community, often these women were respected and admired for being 'hard workers' and supported in their activities. Others would not be content seeing a woman independently or earning and own income as this went against gendered norms. Alinafe explained: 'People would say: "You are a woman, why should you work, you have a man?" So they would do all sorts of things to demoralise that woman, to stop her from doing what she is doing.' (Alinafe) Some community members would even spread rumours that this woman is actually engaging in prostitution to gain an income (Chimwemwe). For some women, this was demoralising and could heighten the ontological anxiety they experience (Giddens, 1991) and would make it difficult for them to continue with their endeavours. Still, respondents explained that an empowered woman would still go ahead with her decision to take up paid work.

Regarding the household space, some husbands supported their wives' ambitions to earn their own income by joining a village bank or starting a business, acknowledging that the entire household would benefit from her income (Agnes). It was much easier for a woman to exercise agency if they had supportive partners. Evelyn explained: 'Empowered women are doing things together with their husbands, because the husband assists in the business. If they are borrowing money, they also do it together.' (Evelyn) Eliza was one of them. She said that her husband is a fisherman and could give her some fish to sell at the market. Through this, she could find some extra money to start doing business on her own. This speaks to Nnaemeka's (1998) work, where she states that in an African context, women and men collaborate to navigate the challenges of daily life and argues that this sense of collaboration is much more inherent in African feminisms than in the majority of Western feminisms.

In contrast to this, respondents explained that many husbands would want their wives to solely stay in the role of a caretaker of the home and children because this is due to the gendered norm of work allocation. Some attributed this to men feeling jealous when their wives prosper: 'Many men are not happy to see women prosper, doing business like that. They are jealous that when she goes for business, they're not sure what the woman is going to do. So, most men do not allow their women to do business here. But some of the women just see that they have a shortage in their house. Even if she is to listen to her husband that she should not go and do business, the woman still feels that it is not enough, so the woman still goes to do business, but most of the men don't accept their women to do business here.' (Brenda) Her statement also showed again that some women did push back against their husbands not accepting their work outside the household and would still conduct it. This form of agency, as direct resistance against community stigma or restrictions coming form then husband, only happened in a few cases and could jeopardise their claims within the family and relationships that they rely on. They instead often

exercised kinds of agency that avoid this direct confrontation that I will explore more later in this chapter (see 5.2). For example, this could be the framing of taking on paid labour for the purpose of being able to spend it on their children, which would fall under their gender normative responsibilities.

Secondly, to exercise agency over the income they generated, women again had to act against gender norms around decision-making in the household, where the husband was regarded as the main decision-maker as the head of the household. For some women, having their own income really made them resist these structures when exercising agency. One interviewee in particular gave insights into the nuances of this process. Martha is married and has one daughter. As mentioned earlier, she founded a support group for young mothers and was one of two respondents who held a graduate degree. Through her group, Martha has been very involved in exchanges with other mothers in her community. Her expositions also resonated with the stories of women from other communities. She expounded that: 'Most decisions in a family are made by the man. If a woman is able to earn some money, like I do, I am working, then she can say: 'I want to do this because I am working, I know that I have money, I will be able to do that.' (Martha) However, several interviews really showed how difficult it could be to enforce this as a woman. Emblematic of this was Grace's statement, where she explained that even when a woman is doing well in her business, her husband still holds the more powerful say. Grace expressed that if he feels threatened by his wife in his role as the main breadwinner, and decides that his wife should stop her business, she must just accept it and merely hope he changes his mind. Other interviews showed that in the rare cases where a woman would earn a higher income than her husband, he could very easily feel threatened.

As shown in Chapter 4, and as I will discuss later in this chapter, when women earned their own income, they would often not neglect their domestic tasks and try to reconcile paid work and

childcare in their daily schedules, which could lead to very high workloads. While some women could reinvest their income into their business, it was generally earmarked to be spent on their children and the general well-being of the household. Moreover, many of the respondents emphasised that they would not want to make decisions on their own and that they would still prefer to ask their spouses for consultation. This was again to respect their husbands according to their culture, to share the burden of decision-making responsibilities, but also simply because they were not used to making sole decisions due to restrictive gender norms. Even if women worked outside the household, their incomes were reportedly significantly smaller than those of men.

Again, this shows that exercising agency that openly defies the given structures could jeopardise women's place in the social order and comes at a high cost. Hence, women had to master a balance act of exercising agency and the simultaneous upholding of the respect they paid towards their husbands. This aligned with the exercise of agency as 'wielding and yielding', which Kabeer (2024) draws from Villareal (1994) where women strategically make concessions in order to bring about desired change and to reinterpret and modify structural boundaries of what is acceptable and to expand on their ability to exercise agency (Kabeer, 2024; Villareal, 1994). This strongly resonates with Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of 'nego-feminism', which emphasises the negotiation of cultural norms over direct confrontation, which African women engage in to create spaces for empowerment and agency. In my interviews, not overthrowing the man as the main decision-maker but rather maintaining an image of respect and consulting with him when making decisions can be regarded as such a process. Even as Agarwal (1997) highlights how patriarchal constraints often limit women's ability to control income, these findings suggest that income itself can provide women with the leverage to contest and navigate these very constraints. Then, while control over her own income might not automatically grant women control over the overall household income, seeing how she spends her own income in some cases encouraged her husband

to have her involved in more areas of decision-making over the general household income, which again could challenge gendered norms around decision-making. For example, Miriam showed: 'Men do not talk much, they just respect the fact that the woman is empowered and that she is helping in doing things at home.' (Miriam) This change in her agency, within gender normative structures, if representative of cracks in those same structures, can then assist in 'derailing' practice. Over time, this can become embedded in new strictures that normalise women's participation and manifest in the material and political life of a given context (Kabeer, 2024; Nicolini, 2012). These dynamics show how women's own income and empowerment can reinforce each other, but at the same time require a certain pre-existing ability to exercise agency. Group membership, for example, was a powerful lever to normalise women taking on paid work and to push back against restrictive norms. I will elaborate on this more later in this section.

Moreover, some women were members of village banks through which they could take out loans and explained that it is often women who are members and take out loans as opposed to men. This could give them increased levels of decision-making power over the loan money, but was again sometimes mediated by gendered power structures. Those findings are consistent with the literature on the empowering effects of microfinance on women's empowerment (Ganle et al., 2015; Kabeer, 2005b). If women could invest this loan money into their own businesses and generate income therewith, this was stated to have similar effects on their exercise of 'transformative agency' to those of having their own income. However, this requires a certain level of empowerment that would allow women to make decisions about the loan and to be able to pay it back. I will explain these dynamics more in 5.2 because, in most cases, women explained that motherhood was a requirement to join these women's village banks, but also other community groups. This also coincides with Meinzen-Dick et al.'s (2019) qualitative findings on processes of women's empowerment in development interventions. They show that economic inclusion of

women, through, for example, income-generating opportunities and employment, or access to financial services, can increase women's ability to make independent decisions. In general, my findings regarded earning an own income as empowering for women.

Contrasting these findings with literature that questions the emphasis on income as a marker of women's empowerment, scholars such as Chant (2016) and Cornwall and Rivas (2015) critique the economic framing of empowerment as overly instrumentalist, arguing that income generation alone often reinforces gendered expectations rather than challenging structural inequalities. Yet, women's narratives in my study reflect a tangible sense of agency tied to their earnings. My interviewees described income not just as a means to fulfil caregiving roles, as Chant (2016) warns in her critique of the 'feminisation of responsibility', but as a resource to pursue their personal aspirations, including reinvestment in businesses for financial independence. This resonates with Kabeer's (1999) and Longwe's (1991) emphasis on transformative agency, as women actively negotiated norms to expand their decision-making power. Connecting women's economic inclusion, decision-making, and empowerment starkly aligns with Kabeer's (2024) most recent suggestions of pathways towards gender equality in the context of Bangladesh. Importantly, and in the African context, this aligns with Mama's (1995) and McFadden (2005). Both argue that economic inclusion fosters women's social and political agency and is a form of resistance against structural inequalities. They both discuss that historically, women in Africa had to develop strategies to resist economic exclusion in colonial and post-independence contexts through informal networks and organising, or community-driven economic systems (Mama, 1995; McFadden, 2005).

It is important to note that the dynamic of empowerment may differ when the impetus to earn income is given from the outside rather than coming from women themselves. Cornwall and Rivas (2015) critique development interventions that position women as economic agents without

understanding their individual context and internal motivations. They often misaddress women's needs, increase their burden of work and can even reinforce gendered power hierarchies if women cannot decide over the resources they receive. Yet, in my findings, the women framed their income as a deliberate tool for what Longwe (1991) calls 'participation' and 'control', demonstrating how economic resources, even within restrictive environments, can facilitate empowerment when paired with the exercise of agency according to Kabeer (1999), as 'power within' and 'power to'. Hindering factors for women to gain an income will be elaborated in detail in 5.2.

It is important to note here that in certain cases and speaking to Chant's (2016) concept of 'feminisation of responsibility', respondents stressed the risk of a husband taking advantage of his wife's work: 'Men usually don't they don't assist in anything. They're just sitting in their homes. And when you give them money, they just go drinking, and when they come back, they talk all sorts of bad words to you and really do not support because they are just eating, they are just using the money that the woman has made (Thandiwe). For this reason, Thandiwe divorced from her husband. While having an own income would resist against patriarchal structures, in these cases women would moreover have to make up for the failure of the patriarchy to provide for household welfare. In these cases, women would carry great responsibilities within the patriarchal system. They had to fulfil their gendered roles and also provide for themselves, their children and their husband which could be very disempowering due to high workloads and possibly having to give money to their husbands instead of spending it according to their own preferences. While this was not always possible due to the high costs of confrontation mentioned above, open resistance to this kind of dynamic was what respondents considered an empowered woman would do. For example, Victoria explained: "She [an empowered woman] can speak to the husband, telling him that he is not doing anything in the household. She can tell the husband to join hands in sourcing

resources such as money to pay for the school fees of their children or to use it in meeting the daily needs of the family.' (Victoria)

In general, direct forms of resistance, such as engaging in paid labour when facing opposition from the community or spouses, insisting on making decisions regarding their own income, or openly criticising their spouses for their failure to contribute to household income, happened rarely due to the high cost they carry. Instead, women often deployed the forms of negotiation within the structures that I explained above to then subtly influence them. If direct forms of resistance happened, Kabeer (2024) gives the explanation that women are most likely motivated by a strong sense of injustice and desperation that results from a gap between their expectations of an exchange for their compliance and the reality they are confronted with. This could encourage action in spite of existing ontological anxiety (Giddens, 1991). Yet, this is most possible if women could gain access to resources that would mitigate the costs of pushing back (Kabeer, 2024). Apart from this being material resources, the fact that women lived in matrilineal societies, together with many of their women relatives, could have been an important social resource in my context.

This level of dissatisfaction with what Kabeer (2024) refers to as a husband's 'failure to honour his side of the patriarchal bargain[46]' (ibid., p. 167) was a strong factor that made women exercise agency and divorce from their husbands, among other severe factors such as the experience of intimate partner violence. In other words, even if women internalised their restricted roles in society, if their husbands would not fulfil their responsibilities that came with greater opportunities, this could constitute a critical turning point for women. Tapiwa, for example, divorced from her husband because she experienced this when he started drinking and consequently stopped earning enough money. He also sabotaged her small-scale business by

[46] The 'patriarchal bargain' refers to the implicit and normalised contract inherent in gender unequal patriarchal societies that set out gendered responsibilities embedded in structures of constraints and opportunities.

following her to the market and throwing away the buckets of fish she was selling, which she could not afford to repurchase. She explained that: 'I like the way I am staying. I do not even admire being married at all. I do not want to be married, even if someone were to approach me. Even if someone brought a lot of money, I could not accept it because what I really need is to be independent and make decisions on my own.' (Tapiwa) It showed that while spousal support could be very beneficial if the relationship was supportive, having a bad marriage could create a level of desperation for women, which made them fend for themselves. For unmarried women, their own income was often the only source of income they had. At the same time, they had much higher levels of independence, which they often enjoyed. As Flora put it: 'There are very few women who have a husband and are independent.' Some respondents explicitly referred to empowered women as women who are not married and able to manage their lives and caretaking responsibilities on their own. Brenda said that: 'This is a woman who is not married, and she is independent, she does her life on her own. She is able to do business, and she is able to feed her family. At the same time, she is able to pay school fees for her children. She is able to take care of her family.'[47]

This links back to the achievement of an empowered woman being independent or having her own income, which could mitigate the cost of pushing back and fending for herself, so she could leave the relationship if she needed to. Since in the matrilineal system, the divorced husband would leave the community, I assume that having their women relatives in close proximity would also play out as a social resource, easing the consequences of a divorce. This is corroborated by the findings of other studies on gender differences in matrilineal Malawi (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2016; Johnson, 2018)

[47] This woman would either have had to experience the stigma around having a child without a husband, that I explain in Chapter 4, or would have divorced from her husband and fend for herself. Given the social context, the latter is more likely.

5.2. Agency as the Desire to Take Care of Children

When asked about empowerment, in many cases, traits of an empowered woman were described as the social achievement of being a good mother. The ability to take care of the family and to have children who 'are doing well' (Grace) was regarded as an empowered woman's quality. This was terms of buying food for the household, feeding the children, paying their school fees and enabling the children to grow healthily and contentedly. 'She [an empowered woman] can do anything to bring some money home. She is able to take care of her family, and she makes sure that her children are looking good and that they are healthy and herself too; she looks healthy.' (Lindiwe)

The abovementioned description of an 'empowered woman' being a 'hard worker' in fact often went together with the ability to self-reliantly take care of the family from farming production and her own income. Furthermore, some of the respondents who stated that they regarded themselves as empowered linked this feeling to their ability to buy food for their children or pay school fees. As mentioned above, in some cases, this care-taking quality extended beyond the biological family and aligned with Collins (1990) principle of other-mothering: 'In the community people depend on her [the empowered woman] for orphan care activities.' (Martha) These achievements are more relational and situate women as primary managers of the needs of their children, household, and others in the community. This might foster the 'traditional' gendered division of labour and require women's commitment to domestic roles, which can be disempowering in preventing women from having a choice to engage in other activities (Bradshaw & Víquez, 2003; Molyneux, 2006). Following Kabeer's (1999, 2005a) early conception of empowerment, this would fall into the exercise of 'effective agency' within the sphere of preassigned female roles, rather than 'transformative agency', which would be the exercise of resistance explained above. Following this, women would regard 'being a good caretaker' as

empowering and exercise agency, such as channelling their resources to reach this goal, while not questioning its restricting implications because their preferences would be shaped by norms and *doxa* that they have internalised and that assign these roles to women (Bourdieu, 1977; Kabeer, 1999). This corresponds to Longwe's (1991) 'women's concerns', which are women's day-to-day needs for improving their existence within these preassigned gender roles, as opposed to 'women's issues', which would challenge these roles and entail the five criteria leading to empowerment explained above (Longwe, 1991). This way of looking at women's preferences as determined by gender normative structures is corroborated by findings where women could not quite give reasons why they are mainly responsible for the children, other than referring to norms.

Looking at empowerment as 'enabling women to make strategic life choices', which entails the exercise of 'transformative agency' (Kabeer, 1999) or focusing on the five criteria of 'women's issues' (Longwe, 1991), that both entail a degree of direct resistance, is one way of analysis. In the following, I turn to a different way of analysis because my findings relate to literature that criticises the underlying assumption that women's agency as part of empowerment necessarily is a form of resistance against patriarchal and oppressive gender norms, as this would limit an understanding of how women navigate their complex and differing realities (Mahmood, 2001). Such an assumption can even take away agency from women, as it presents preferences and actions that are not resistance as a mere outcome of internalised coercive socialisation. It homogenises women as group of victims whose 'actual choices' become revealed from an outsider standpoint (Khader, 2011; Mohanty, 2005; Narayan, 2002). Butler (1997), who deeply engaged with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *doxa*, argued that power constitutes the very subjects it governs. Rather than seeing agency as something that emerges only in opposition to structures of power, Butler (1997) highlights how norms are internalised, but also reiterated, and subtly reworked from within. This

view allows for a more complex understanding of women's actions, which may not always be confrontational but are nonetheless agentic.

In the context of women's lived experiences as mothers, the agency they exercise can be understood as coming from a 'maternal thinking' that directly links their interests and emotional responses to the well-being of their children (Keller, 2010; Ruddick, 1989). Drawing a line between intrinsic or societally determined motivation when analysing their actions as mothers is a sheer impossible task – as Kaplan (1992, as cited in Walker, 1995) puts it very accurately: 'How can any historical (i.e. "real life" mother) know whether what she thinks she wants really reflects her subjective desire, or whether she wants it because it serves patriarchy (that she has been constructed to want to please)? Since patriarchy wants women to want children, in other words, how can a woman distinguish her desire for the child from that imposed on her?' (Kaplan, 1992, p. 4) She highlights that for the exercise of agency as mothers, their resistance towards oppressive patriarchal structures can exist alongside the centrality to their lives of the terrain of motherhood that often produces complicity with these same structures (Kaplan, 1992). Hence, it is not to deny the role of these structures and the unconscious element that influences a mother's behaviour, but to understand the nuances and simultaneity of a mother's complicity and resistance in their exercise of agency. In other words, women are not just mothers because the patriarchy tells them to do so, but because it is also a really fulfilling and powerful piece of their identities. As I will discuss below, it also opens up spaces for women to exercise more agency that indeed can be regarded as resistance against oppressive structures.

Not directly related to motherhood, but rather grappling with the influence of patriarchal structures on women's ability to act, Kabeer (2024) elaborates on types of agency that do not necessarily correspond to her early concept of transformative agency. This kind of agency as resistance can trigger ontological anxiety (Giddens, 1991) and come with high costs for women.

It is hence often not possible to exercise, and women engage in purposive forms of agency within structural limits, to interpret custom and convention rather than mechanically following it. She speaks about three broad concepts (Kabeer, 2024).

Firstly, the concept of 'yielding and wielding' (Villareal, 1994), or nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), that I applied to women's generation of their own income in the previous section, is one of these forms of agency. Here, women are sufficiently dissatisfied with the prevailing social order and seek to influence social practices when negotiating for a greater scope of flexibility but with continued caution not to jeopardise their social status (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2000). A second form of agency is where women may be aware of injustices and even the existence of alternatives to bring about change is constrained by the high costs of possible sanctions as a consequence (Scott, 1990). Then, conforming to structures and respecting their cultures, women might exercise hidden expressions of rebellion that are relatively safe. Those can be secrets and silence among women used to cover for each other or to hide knowledge from male authority (Abu-Lughod, 1990). A third form occurs when women exercise agency based on their subjectivities that are shaped by their particular historical and cultural situations and that give great meaning to values of their culture, such as family or piety, and that give them stakes in conforming and upholding the status quo (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001).

Those three forms of agency that are not a direct form of confrontation and seek to avoid jeopardising women's place within their families and societies are particularly relevant for understanding their lived realities as mothers.

5.3. Is Becoming a Mother Empowering?

Hence, when looking at achievements, resources, and agency above, I apply the analytical lens of women's exercise of agency as resistance against patriarchal structures (Kabeer, 1999) or when

avoiding direct confrontation, negotiation within those structures for subtle change (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994), in the following, I foreground the way mothers make sense of their lives and actions within the constraints of structural gender norms (Grenier, 1998; Mahmood, 2001). I explore spaces where women seemingly conform to those structures and exercise agency within. In doing so, I will also show how this can also lead to overt departure from restrictive structures and become forms of resistance too.

Against this analytical backdrop and according to women's experiences of motherhood as laid out in interviews, I found that motherhood indeed has important implications for women's empowerment and that it would be too simplistic to categorise women's achievements of being a good caretaker for children as an exercise of 'effective agency' or as 'women's concerns'. To explore this, I draw from the categorisation of motherhood into practice, discourse, and social identity as per Walker (1995) in the previous chapter. Therein, I deployed Giddens' (1991) concept of identity as reflexive awareness as women's capacity to sustain a self-narrative that is repeatedly created by the individuals' action in reflection on their social environment. This lays a foundation for understanding women's agentic behaviour within structural restrictions.

The processes of empowerment in the space of motherhood happened primarily in two ways. Firstly, and as explored here, when entering motherhood and developing the social identity as mother, and concomitantly evolving discourse can be empowering for women as it improves their situation compared to before. Secondly, and in the next section (see 5.4), I look at discrepancies between practice and discourses as a space for empowerment. This implicates women's agentic behaviour when conducting mothering practice that deviates from a prominent discourse of motherhood, which is rooted in gender normative structures. This continued deviation, in the long term, can lead to alternative structures and discourses - from *doxa* to discourse (Kabeer, 1999).

Throughout my research, women shared a feeling of respecting themselves more because they became mothers. They spoke about motherhood as a step towards an internal process of womanhood and adulthood. The perception as an adult was mirrored by their communities and households.[48] This was further stated to trigger their wish for greater independence and taking better care of oneself, which can be regarded as fostering their feeling of 'power within' (Rowlands, 1997) or sense of agency (Kabeer, 1999). This directly links to literature that stresses the empowering effects of motherhood, with regard to it being a cherished identity, impacting self-actualisation and womanhood (Amadiume, 1987, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 2000, 2015; Saidi, 2023) and also coincided with Johnson's (2018) findings in Central and Southern Malawi on the implications of motherhood for women's identities.[49]

At the same time, the expression of this fostered self-respect was often linked to an adherence to the gendered norms, according to the prominent discourse on motherhood, which determined a way of covering oneself, behaving in certain ways and using or not using a particular language. Wearing a *chitenge,* for example, was not just seen as something to cover up. Mothers were proud to wear them and talked proudly about the beautiful quality of *chitenges* made from different materials. At the same time, these norms also imposed behavioural restrictions on mothers. In particular, the norms of 'not moving around' could restrain them from doing anything other than childcare or household chores.

Thus, my findings sometimes seemed contradictory since, as elaborated above, women regarded both challenging restrictive gender norms and conforming to them as empowering. As noted above, conforming to gender norms to pursue her values and desires can be a woman's act

[48] The intricacies of this are explained in detail in the section on social identity in Chapter 4.

[49] It is to note here that while scholars such as Amadiume (1987, 1997) or Oyěwùmí (2000, 2015) do not tie motherhood to the act of giving birth, and Collins' (1990) concept of 'other-mothering' ascribes power to non-biological 'othermothers' that conduct the mothering practice. As stated before, a limitation of my study is that it only involved women who became mothers by the act of giving birth. Hence it is beyond the scope of my study to make any statements about the social dynamics of becoming a mother when not having had given birth.

of choice, and thus becomes an empowering means (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001). Conforming to those structures when wearing the right clothes or behaving in the 'right ways' might also open spaces for greater agency and independence in their positions as mothers. For example, by wearing a *chitenge*, they make their belonging to the group of mothers visible. This group inhabits certain collective spaces which are conducive to empowering dynamics, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter. While women can increase their agency by adhering to these gender norms manifested in discourse, gender inequality still manifests in the strong pushback that women often experience if they do not want to adhere to them any longer. However, in 5.2 of this chapter, I will look at how not adhering to a prominent discourse – the rupture between discourse and practice or discourse and social identity - can also become an important space for women's empowerment.

As shown in Chapter 4, women experienced increased respect through entering motherhood and were perceived by their communities as having entered adulthood. This change in perception was within their communities and also often in their relationships with their spouses. In one FGD, Chikondiwe said: 'The men they start respecting you, yourself start respecting you, when you grow up, you become a mother'. This way of entering a social identity as mothers grounded in a social context aligns with Amadiume (1987), Oyěwùmí (2000), and Saidi (2023), who highlight the major implications for women's identity, adulthood and fostered community respect.

At the community and the household level, it showed that these factors made them 'be heard more' (Thandiwe). As Hilda explained: 'My voice in the community increased. People started listening.' (Hilda) It thus became clear that becoming a mother increased women's 'power to' (Rowlands, 1997) in terms of the ability to exercise agency (Kabeer, 1999), and 'participation' in decision-making processes (Longwe,1991). In Chapter 6, I will present a detailed study of intra-household decision-making processes in different areas of the household and how these are

determined by local gender norms. I found that in almost all married households, the husband was considered the main decision-maker in areas of the household concerning agriculture, household income, or assets such as land[50]. Explanations given for this were that culturally, the man is regarded as the head of the household and often is also the main breadwinner of the household.

For around half of the households, the husband would also make the decision-making on children. For the other half, mothers considered themselves the main decision-makers on their children. Yet, compared to before motherhood, it created a space for women to make decisions in their households. For example, in FGD 10, Yonadi illustrated: 'Compared to before I became a mother, more decisions were made by my husband. But when I gave birth, the decisions started being made by me, such as taking care of clothes for the children, soap for the children, and food for the children. Making decisions on the children became my responsibility.' Similarly, Chimwemwe showed: 'Before, my husband would just decide, but now that we have children, I can say that okay, but we need food for the children, we need clothes for the children. I am heard more now that I am a mother.' (Chimwemwe)

In general, women stayed at home more while their husbands were out doing other activities, such as work, sometimes for multiple days or weeks. Small decisions in their daily lives, such as what food to prepare, when to feed or bathe them, seemed to fall under their domestic responsibilities. Then, the childcare decisions that respondents mentioned above seemed to include those that required spending, such as on clothes, food, soap, or schooling materials. Particularly during the time when the husband was away, women would make decisions on their

[50] In this section, the discussion about intra-household decision-making is concerned with households that where a man and a woman live together, most often in marriage. As mentioned in Chapter 4, unmarried often lived alone or moved back into their mothers' households. They made their decisions on their own or consulted with their parents. For them, restricting factors were not due to gender norms regarding decision-making but rather due to monetary restrictions and having to solely provide for their households.

own. This was to different extents. Some women would stick to decisions that were directly concerned with day-to-day childcare, such as the feeding, bathing or dressing of the child and wait for their husbands to come back to consult on any other decision. Others would have more leeway, still with the purpose of the child's well-being, but in spaces of household decision-making where previously it was not accepted for the woman to have a sole say, such as to ensure that food for the child is available all year round. Gladys explained: 'When I was a girl, I was not farming at all. But now I am more independent. Without anybody telling, if the husband is at work, I will take seeds and go and plant on my own.' (Gladys)

In general, and also when the husband was present, entering motherhood came with greater decision-making power in other areas of the household, such as those on agriculture or income, where, according to gender norms, the husband would hold the main decision-making power. As noted, this was due to greater respect within their households but also to fulfil gendered responsibilities, as mothers need to provide food and use parts of the household budget on childcare needs. Regarding a household's agricultural decisions, women reported gaining more influence linked to the fact that they had to ensure that food for children was available. In FGD 1, respondents explained this most clearly. In a household, mothers would be the decision-makers on farming since they know the household's food situation best, and: 'Because the women are attached to the children. If there's no food, the children go to the women; they don't go to the fathers. And usually, the fathers are not in the homes; they are doing other things, like *ganyu*. So, the woman is the one who goes farming. So, most of the decisions are made by the women. [If men and women farm together], the women would always want to have food crops for their children, like maize, or cassava, those things. But the men would like crops that they could sell, like rice. So usually, there is a disagreement, but the women make the final decisions, and the man just gives up.' [Laughter followed this last comment] (FGD 1)

Regarding the household income, multiple respondents explained that where a husband would previously just use the household income according to his own preferences, now, because she is a mother, he would either give money to his wife or ask her what she wants him to purchase. Agness explained this change: 'Now if my husband finds money, there is no way he uses it without asking me for my input. I feel respected. When I was a girl, there was no way a man could have given me his money to do things. But now, because I have a child, the man gives me money to go and buy this, to go and see if you need anything in the market.' She goes on: 'And also, the time I was a girl, the man was not asking me about decisions on the money. But now, as a mother, the man is asking what we should do with our money.' (Agness) As stated above, at times, women added to the household's income with their own income, over which they could often decide the most freely and which women perceived as empowering. Hence, entering a social identity as a mother who nurtures their children's well-being increased women's independence and abilities to make decisions within their household. This manifested in a prominent discourse saying that a 'good mother' is making decisions to ensure their children's well-being (see Chapter 4).

Yet again, women often preferred not to solely decide but rather consult with their spouses: 'I feel that when I became a mother, I was responsible for food in the home. My husband accepts me to do everything I want, but also, I respect him and take ideas from him in order to make a decision.' (Mavuto) FGD 3 further revealed that if they made decisions on their own, their husbands would ask them where the money went, which could lead to conflict. And lastly, Charity explained: 'Because the head of the household is the father. As a woman, even if you've given birth, you just follow what your husband is doing.' (Charity)

It became clear that while generally, entering motherhood increased women's decision-making power, also in areas of the household that are primarily controlled by men, this was mostly to fulfil their childcare responsibilities. Analytically, this could be viewed as happening in the space of

women's concerns with an inherent exercise of effective agency that serves the fulfilment of their preassigned and restrictive roles as mothers (Kabeer, 1999, 2005a; Longwe, 1991). However, solely ascribing their actions and preferences to internalised restrictive norms would dismiss women's felt desire to take care of their children and their 'maternal thinking' in their specific context (Keller, 2010; Ruddick, 1989). This became particularly clear in Chapter 4, where women ascribed a feeling of happiness and the best part of being a mother to having necessities at home, having their children grow healthily and well-nourished, or sending them to school. This came from a space of experiencing joy in motherhood, rather than serving the institution of motherhood that has been instrumentalised to restrict women (Oyěwùmí, 2015). Challenging this would be looking at how women navigate those roles and exercise agency therein, which takes their wishes to be a good caretaker seriously (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001). In fact, as shown above, this ability to take good care of their children was what respondents articulated as being empowering. Entering motherhood supports women to navigate agency in restrictive spaces. The greater independence and decision-making power they hold as mothers is greater compared to before, regardless of the purpose it is supposed to serve.

This could, in fact, have a ripple effect of normalising that women make decisions in spaces of the household that they would not be able to decide on before. In terms of empowerment, according to Kabeer (1999) or Longwe (1991), this increases women's 'power within' as a matter of conscientisation, and 'power to' in terms of participation and control over factors of production, which is a form of resistance against restrictive gender norms. At the same time, my interviews showed that if women made decisions on their own and hence would directly challenge norms, this could lead to conflict. Jeopardising their social standing and relationships could then be too risky for women (Kabeer, 2024). Respondents reported that men would still hold the last say in many areas of decision-making of the household, such as income or agriculture. They would

hesitate to overtake a man in his position, as this would culturally be regarded as disrespectful or could also threaten the relationship with their spouse. As shown above, a good relationship with their husbands was appreciated on its own right, but also as a means to exercise agency. These findings again point to women's strategic exercise of negotiations (Villareal, 1994), where they would make the concession of keeping the public image of the male authority intake, while bringing about desired change, modifying structural boundaries of how much of their influence is acceptable, which expands their ability to exercise agency.

And in some cases, even if this was a difficult endeavour, women would push back against their husbands if they disagreed. While this was rare and could come at high costs, many respondents ascribed this trait to an empowered woman. However, I assume that their desire to ensure their children's well-being could be a great incentive to push back against gendered norms if circumstances required them to do so, such as in spaces of agricultural production or household income. Then, the risk of jeopardising their social standing and pushing against the familiarity of gender norms was challenged by the necessity to stand up for their children's needs. Following this, their maternal thinking would directly increase their sense of agency and power within and encourage women to act despite an experience of ontological anxiety (Giddens, 1991).

Another important space of empowerment when entering motherhood was that of group membership. Becoming a mother made women part of the group of mothers. This group was informal, but membership increased community respect and influence. It, for example, implied that the village head would involve the group of mothers in community activities such as funerals, weddings, or initiation ceremonies for women. Being a mother was also most often the prerequisite to join more formal groups, such as church groups, village banking groups, mutual support groups, or farming groups. While those groups were predominantly set up to carry out certain activities, at the community level, all respondents emphasised the empowering value of

being a group member. Importantly, they were described as safe spaces, exclusively for women, where they would often form strong friendships, chat about issues, exchange ideas, assist each other, and give each other valuable advice that was applicable in their households. This advice was often speaking to ideas about good motherhood bound up with discourses explained above, such as advice on how to take care of their children, having a clean home, or coming back in good time after leaving the house. Especially older women would give advice to younger women on how to raise their children: 'Those women gave birth a long time ago, and they have an idea on how the child can be raised, so they basically teach you how you can raise your child.' (Charity) Hajira further mentioned that they shared 'mature ideas' shared between adult women, which felt more right for her than speaking with younger girls. Those mature ideas also involved the teaching of knowledge on family planning and sexual and reproductive health in general (Martha). In the group, women also spoke about issues in their families and marriages and gave each other advice on how to grapple with them (Violet). Women would also establish farming groups where they would farm together whilst sharing farming techniques and knowledge: 'We make holes inside the ridges to store water. When the rain comes, it sticks there and goes little by little.' (Tendai)

When addressing the empowering potential of group membership, respondents particularly stressed that village bank groups are very useful as they gain access to resources. The village banks operated through a system of lending and borrowing among participants. Members would deposit money into the bank, and each participant had a designated date on which they could withdraw the collective amount as a loan. For this to function, it was stressed that every participant needed to contribute their share on time to ensure proper distribution and that loans had to be repaid promptly. Village banks hence allow for taking out larger sums of money that they can invest to establish their own business and augment capital therewith. Often, women could decide over the money they borrowed. Eunice showed: 'The group is helpful because the people do a lot of things.

They will enter into that group and receive the money, buy charcoal and start selling, so they've started this small-scale business, or they can receive that money to buy fertiliser or to feed the home. You receive that money; you'll be able to make decisions over what to do with it.' (Eunice) As shown in the previous section, being part of a village bank increased women's access to resources and allowed them to exercise greater decision-making power and thus enable the exercise of 'transformative agency' (Kabeer, 1999) and 'participation' (Longwe, 1991) within their households. Yet, this was mediated by gendered power structures through which, in some cases, men would still be the main decision-makers over the credit money. This finding is coherent with the literature on the effect of microfinance on women's empowerment (Ganle et al., 2015; Kabeer, 2005b).

Despite this, women grappled with the risk of not being able to pay back the loaned money. For many, this risk felt too high, especially if their husbands did not feel responsible for the repayment. Others have had bad experiences previously[51] when collateral was taken from their houses in such cases. For a few, their husbands would not allow them to participate, or they would not support them with capital to join the group. Some would use their own income to join the group, but often they did not have enough money to do so. Some women were in groups before, but needed to leave as they could not return the money borrowed. At the same time, almost all respondents stated the wish to be in a group doing village banking and added that in future they would wish for more women to be engaged in village banks.

Another important dynamic for empowerment was intra-group conversations on how to be more independent from their husbands or how to manage to support their households. Delita showed: 'I was also feeling happy because we were discussing things and encouraging each other

[51] Some women explained that they took out loans with the *Vision Fund Malawi* and when they could not pay it back, a collateral has been taken from their house. Yet for others the *Vision Fund Malawi* was a positive experience because they could take out big chunks of money and which would allow their businesses to grow.

to do business, and not only to depend on our husbands. I felt good to be in this group of women.'(Delita) This was in line with the statements of multiple respondents. Many respondents explained that they would feel encouraged by other women in the groups who they regarded as role models: 'These women are role models in my life because I was thinking if that woman is able to do that, I can also be able to do that.' (Lindiwe)

It became clear that for women, these groups provided important safe spaces for exchange and support. For example, by feeling inspired by other women who serve as role models, encouraging each other to do business, teaching each other farming methods, giving each other advice on family planning and marital issues, and promoting independence, these groups evoked collective agency or 'power with' (Rowlands, 1997) which was a powerful tool to challenge norms, create awareness, and support each other's actions (Kabeer, 1994, 2024). This collective action reportedly built women's confidence and 'power within' (Rowlands, 1997). It also trickled from the collective into the more personal household space and encouraged women to take action there. Many women explained that the group's advice and ideas changed their own thinking and encouraged women to exercise more agency in their homes. This again speaks to Longwe's (1991) concept of conscientisation and participation, leading up to empowerment. These findings also align with Meinzen-Dick et al. (2019), who found that participating in groups fostered women's confidence in an empowering way. In contrast to this, Martha explained that this is sometimes just not possible for women: 'Even if women of the group tell each other to be more independent and make decisions on their own, this cannot bear fruit if my husband says no. Women talk about this, but it can be really hard for them to bring this home. Every marriage is different.' Still, in general, collective agency was a very promising impetus for women's ability to push back against restrictive structures. In the next section, I will expand on this and explain how a group of mothers can serve

as an important space to challenge a prominent discourse of motherhood by normalising a differing practice and hence change structures through collective agency.

In this section, I have shown how entering motherhood and exercising agency to form their social identity as mothers can be empowering compared to their situation before. This happens in the broad categories of increased self-respect, greater status in their communities and households, and increased decision-making power through the discourse that ascribes childcare responsibilities to women but that also permeates into other areas of the household. It also happens through spaces of membership in groups of mothers that provided access to knowledge, such as on health or farming, access to resources, such as through village banking, but also were a space of collective agency as a powerful leverage for empowerment.

While in this section I have how the entering into motherhood can be empowering for women, in the following, I will show that within the space of motherhood, women's pursues of agency become particularly clear when there is an observable rupture between the mothering practice they carry out and a prominent discourse of the 'good mother', which is rooted in gender normative structures. I hence look at discrepancies between practice and discourses as a space for empowerment whereby a continued deviation, in the long term, can lead to alternative structures and discourses - from *doxa* to discourse (Kabeer, 1999).

5.4. Rupture Between Practice and Discourse of Motherhood

As explained in Chapter 4, prominent motherhood discourses are bound up with gender norms and expectations towards motherhood as an institution and represent the living circumstances of mothers in a society. Those norms are shaped by the social, economic, and political ordering of a context, concomitant changes, disruption, and reorganisation, which all impact social relations, including the position of women and gender relations. In her paper on motherhood in twentieth-

century South Africa, Walker (1995) emphasises that, in general, the scholarship around motherhood is falsely and primarily occupied with that area of discourse. She stressed the need to take into account the value that women themselves ascribe to their experiences of motherhood. This is in line with understandings of motherhood that Amadiume (1997), Oyěwùmí (2000), or Saidi (2023) provide and that link it to power and identity.

Walker (1991) then aims to develop 'a view that recognises women's agency and begins to take their demands seriously, on their own terms, as an expression of their particular location in society and their active engagement with that' (ibid., p. xxii), which again questions type equation of agency with resistance and is coherent with Mahmood's (2001) conception of agency discussed above. At the same time, there is historical evidence where women indeed exercised resistance when using their identities as mothers to challenge oppressive structures as well as domestic gender relations (Walker, 1995). This is not to ignore the fact that the institution of motherhood has been appropriated to serve the patriarchy in a sense of shaping women's roles in society as well as views of themselves (Amadiume, 1987; Mama, 1996; Oyěwùmí, 2015).

Hence, only ascribing motherhood to a 'collusion with patriarchy' that manifests itself in an imposed discourse ignores the meaning that women themselves give to motherhood and exercise agency therein. The analytical preoccupation of scholarship around motherhood, with the rather static area of discourse, would regard discourse as definitive of women's own experiences and identities. It fails to account for women's complex constructions of motherhood in terms of social identity and through practice. When aiming for an understanding of the nuances of potential for empowerment within the space of motherhood, it is important to look at the interactional space of practice, discourse, and social identity, and to highlight mothers' reflexive action as social agents to initiate change. This becomes particularly palpable when there is an observable conflict between practice and discourse, or social identity and discourse – a stark rupture in women's ontological

security (Giddens, 1991). Factors that lead to such deviations can be due to a conscious process of mothers initiating change. This could be due to the need for change in order to protect children (Kabeer, 2024; Walker, 1995). Again, if direct resistance is not possible, strategies to exercise practice that deviates could be due to more subtle negotiations (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994). Changes in practice, especially if they come with material resources, can have empowering implications as they inform and mediate prominent discourses. They can slowly manifest in more enabling, coexisting, and sometimes conflicting discourses that display processes of societal change. It is to note here that due to the nature of structures, behaviours and rules that have become incontestable as they were normalised over long periods of time, only change slowly (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979), which makes a prevalent discourse a rather static and continuous construct.

One area where this rupture between discourse and practice was observable was when women conducted paid labour and earned their own income. As mentioned above, interviews showed that according to gendered norms, the fulfilment of physical and emotional mothering practice, or childcare chores, was regarded as a mother's duty and responsibility. Household chores were considered 'women's work' as opposed to 'men's work', which was paid work outside the household. The role of mothers to be the main caretaker of the children and household, and the role of their husbands to be the main breadwinner of the household, were regarded as complementary.

However, as shown above, interviews showed that women would not want to rely on their husbands' income. All women stated the desire to earn their own income outside the household to be more independent and to be able to provide for their children. This was by engaging in *ganyu*, being employed, or running their own (small-scale) business. The latter was regarded as most lucrative and thus most preferable. The practice of women providing financially for the household

deviates from the prominent discourse of a 'good mother' staying at home where her chores lie, and she hence pushes back against established structures. This change in practice could moreover be leveraged by women's general wish to be more independent from her husband that they stated in the context of empowerment.

Exercising this resistance in spite of the emotional, social, or material risks and concomitant feeling of ontological anxiety (Giddens, 1991), the motivation could stem from great levels of dissatisfaction with what they had been led to expect from the patriarchal structures by complying with their domestic roles (Kabeer, 2024). This could be if the husband would not earn enough to provide for the family, if the share of a husbands income given to the mother was not enough for a mother to carry out any mothering practice, if a mother gauged that her husband was not working hard enough, or to remain secure in the event of the husband leaving the wife's community which was a fairly common occurrence.[52] This could lead to great concerns about their own and the children's well-being and sometimes even survival. While they may not have taken this risk to challenge gendered norms before being mothers, now the incentive to be able to provide for their children encourages women to do so. Women linked this with a feeling of relief and happiness to be able to improve their mothering practice, which then played a part in their social identity. Many respondents stressed that this process made them feel empowered and explained that giving birth encouraged them to harness ideas and how to improve their lives and the lives of their children: 'When I became a mother, it made me feel very empowered. For my children to eat, to dress up, to look well, I have stood up herself in business or in casual labour. I make sure I have a steady income that will support the children' (FGD 7).

[52] This was partly linked to the uxorilocal marriage custom as part of matriliny whereby men moved move to their wives' communities after marriage but then leave again if spouses separate.

Furthermore, and as a form of agency as negotiation (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994), bearing the image of the husband as the household head, they could frame taking on paid work for the main reasons of child provision, which would fall under their gender normative responsibilities. While this incentive might not be rooted in resistance against patriarchal expectations, as shown above, women earning an income (to provide for their children) would still often greatly enhance their general independence and household decision-making, which then, in turn, counteracts restrictive gender norms.

This, as well as their general wish for independence to be able to provide for their children, points to the exercise of agency to act on their choices within their gendered roles (Mahmood, 2001). This supports Amadiume's (1997) argument that historically, women in African countries mobilise and negotiate structural restrictions to balance their economic activities with their cultural expectations of motherhood. Interviews then showed that this change in mothering practice led to an alternative discourse that became prominent amongst many respondents, and assumed that a 'good mother' has enough financial independence to provide for her children. Then, in some cases, where a spouse would previously deny women the option to conduct paid labour outside the household, adhering to this alternative discourse would enable them to do so as part of the mothering practice of having financial responsibility for the child.

Having an own income would also make women contribute to the household's budget. This can increase their claim over households' resources, and ease the fulfilment of their responsibilities of mothering practice, which also supported other prominent discourses. For example, it would allow them to send their children to school or provide more regular meals for the children, whereas there might not have been enough budget for this before.

Again, and to connect to what I explained before, while many women had a low say in their household decision-making around income earned by the husband, they would have a much

greater say over the income they made. Having an own income was, in fact, mentioned as one of the most empowering means. Most of them would still avoid direct confrontation and consult with their husbands (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994), to respect the social order, but could largely spend their income according to their preferences, which was most often their children or to start or maintain their own business. The latter in turn would often lead to more own income. These dynamics would all enforce women's empowerment in terms of participation (Longwe, 1991) and acting on their goals (Kabeer, 1999).

While it is important to highlight these empowering implications, I have shown that processes of empowerment also complicate women's lives. Apart from the complexities of challenging restrictive gender norms, an obvious challenge was that of high workloads for mothers when trying to balance household and emotional and physical care work with paid labour. While a few said that this was possible with good planning, most women said that the time spent on childcare and housework, and being confined to the home, in fact, limited or prevented them from working outside the home.

The majority of women explained that they enjoyed spending time with their children and enjoyed carrying out those chores, and that they also have enough leisure time, but this was suffused with the feeling of being tied to the home and not being able to do anything else. This points to the quality that they ascribe to mothering works, which conflicts with the institution of motherhood, manifested in discourse, that restricts women by defining them as solely responsible for children and household (Nzegwu, 2006; Steady, 1981, 2005). Women indeed wish to carry out mothering practice, but they also want to be able to work outside the household and gain their own income to gain greater independence and provide for their children. They appreciated their women's dual roles as caregivers and economic agents, which aligns with Collins' (1990, 2016) concept of 'motherwork'.

In order to manage their workloads, women would need an organised support system that allows them to delegate some of their work when they need time and capacity to do other things than 'women's work'. This speaks to Aryee (2005), who looks at families situated in larger community structures in Sub-Saharan Africa to understand work-family conflicts when women try to reconcile paid work with childcare responsibilities. He suggests support systems that grant greater flexibility, reducing workhours, and provide child-care assistance. Meanwhile, he recognises that there is little formal support, which makes individuals rely on their interpersonal relationships to negotiate or mobilise social support. Hence, the conflict for mothers of having the main care responsibilities and simultaneously conducting paid labour persists. In interviews, some women explained that they could leave their children with women relatives or other women in the community, highlighting the importance of the collective nature of caregiving (Steady, 2005) and 'other-mothering' (Collins, 1990). Especially mothers of young children who could not go to school yet had to take their children to their work place as simultaneously carry out childcare practices. In a few cases, husbands would assist with care work. For those women who worked outside the household without being able to reallocate their childcare work to a partner or other women in the community, this could lead to an immense work burden that included household and care chores and paid labour. This issue has been discussed by feminist scholarship over the last few decades (Arora & Rada, 2017; Folbre, 2006; Kabeer, 1994; Miedema et al., 2021).

Moreover, women taking on paid labour, which goes against gendered norms, puts pressure on the patriarchy. As shown in the scenarios above, some husbands reacted to this in ways where they would stop working and hence stop contributing to the household income because their wives would gain an income now. In some cases, he would start hiding his own income and make her allocate her entire income toward the children. Then, not only did women have to fulfil their part of the patriarchal bargain, but they also had to make up for the shortfall of the patriarchy and

become the main breadwinners of their households. This was particularly difficult for women. Even if they managed to work outside the household, the empowering effects of having an income might be cancelled out by really high workloads and (feminised) responsibilities to provide for themselves, their husbands, and children (Chant, 2016), which would further not leave them with enough capital to, for example, invest in their own business. Often, respondents explained intra-household conflict around this dynamic. I will elaborate on this more in Chapter 6.

Very different to this were the empowering dynamics that occurred where there was a rupture in practice and discourse, considering the norm that women are the only ones responsible to carry out care work. Interviews showed that only in a few cases husbands would take on care work, which could decrease women's workload and free up capacities to do things outside the household. However, apart from this being against gendered norms, delegating some care work to a spouse was further complicated by stigma around this in all communities. This being a prominent issue, it was discussed in all FGDs. Women whose husbands would assist were often accused of having given them *wamudyetsa makhwala* (traditional medicine) to make the husband obedient and 'stupid'. In some communities, there were even songs about *wamudyetsa makhwala*. This negative external judgement around husbands engaging in what is considered 'women's work' might sanction women from asking for assistance and prevent them from doing activities outside the household due to high work burdens, and hence can be disempowering (Blackden & Wodon, 2006; Kabeer, 1994; Molyneux, 2006).

This really highlights how difficult it is to change a prominent discourse. Still, I did also find indications of change. For example, what was not stated in FGDs but in many individual interviews was that if women had a good relationship with their partners, their husbands would help with household and care chores 'out of love' (Flora). Commonly, if their husband were to help, women would often either not make this information public or not tell him about the

community rumours so as not to discourage him from assisting. This again pointed to a woman's relational exercise of agency to negotiate normative structures rather than outright confrontation (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994).

Furthermore, as shown in Chapter 4, and in support of this change, some community members would admire households that share these chores, as it would reveal a good relationship between husband and wife and that this would also generally improve the situation of the whole household. This could then indicate a certain degree of ongoing structural change and counteract community stigma to provide support structures for women in an empowering way. The normalising of men helping with 'women's work' and even admiration of this then manifests in a positive community perception of the detaching of the mothering responsibility from a woman based on her gender. This would speak to Amadiume (1987), Oyěwùmí (1997), or Saidi (2023), who both challenge the biological framing of motherhood but rather regard it as a practice that can be conducted by anyone.

In fact, in one particular FGD that involved both men and women of different age groups, men stated that they would be willing to take on 'women's work' if the community would not make fun of them in terms of their masculinity and if their wives would still respect them. Moreover, some men explained that they simply did not know how to carry out certain tasks, such as carrying water on their heads, but were willing to commence learning how to do it. This is similar to what Rost (2021) found regarding changes in social norms around men's participation in care work in Northern Uganda.

High workloads were an obvious hindering factor for women to empower themselves through the pathway of gaining an own income. Another difficulty was posed by community stigma regarding mothers who transgressed gendered boundaries when working outside the household and not staying in the domestic space as per prominent discourse. As shown, some members of

the community admire such hardworking behaviour. However, rumours that mothers actually engage in prostitution when they are away from the community, or have affairs with their bosses, have complicated the situation. The possibility of these social consequences may further prevent women from conducting paid work, which resonates with other studies on how social sanctions can perpetuate restrictive gendered norms around work (Lawless et al., 2020; Miedema et al., 2021).

While I have pointed out the empowering effects of a rupture between practice and discourse that can manifest alternative discourses and structural change (Giddens, 1991), the tensions and push-backs that came with it have shown how complicated it is for mothers to instigate such change. For example, for mothers to earn their own income, they do not just have to resist gender norms but also have to manage high workloads and community stigma. Hence, to exercise practice that deviates from a prominent discourse, women do require a certain level of empowerment that allows them to contrive this. If this applies, then the empowering effects of a rupture between practice and discourse can be mutually reinforcing. As I have shown above, group spaces where women create a sense of collective agency were a strong force to challenge norms, create and normalise alternative discourses, which can also permeate into the household space.

Furthermore, as explored in Chapter 4, and respecting that practice, discourse, and social identity are interconnected (Walker, 1995), it is important to note that changes in practice also mediate changes in a mother's different social identities. Looking at these complexities that occur when women aim for changing the practice, it becomes clear how difficult it is to reconcile their different social identities, such as that of a mother and a paid worker. For example, as just shown, the broader social context of the community either affirmed those mothers as 'hard workers' or imposed a stigma on them. Both shape women's reflexive conception of their social identity (Giddens, 1991). For an individual to promote a desired narrative of self-conception, this was a

complex process involving pushing back against a certain discourse of motherhood, but simultaneously also adhering to others. Again, for this reconciliation of social identities as mothers, the group space was a fruitful means.

The group *Destiny's Girls* in one of the communities exemplifies this strongly. The group consisted of 16 mothers who had to drop out of school early due to their pregnancies and/or marriages. They met three times a week with the major objective to help women reconcile motherhood with other life perspectives, such as having their own business or going back to school. Because the ability to speak and write English is important to succeed in the job market, Martha, who, as one of two respondents, holds a diploma degree, teaches English reading and writing to the group. In their meetings, the women share business ideas, give each other business advice, start village banking, and also speak about reproductive health and family planning. Through this, several participating mothers could attend technical and vocational educational trainings, or open their own hair salon or tailoring shop. Members of the group described this as extremely empowering, as it was enabling and encouraging mothers to go back to school or generate their own income through the teaching of skills and mutual support structures. This speaks to Longwe (1998) who stresses the importance of education for women's empowerment, especially when it directly tackles gender normative values and beliefs that limit women in a given context. Moreover, these collective spaces provide the social capital for women to assist each other when navigating subordinate roles and also to challenge stigma and norms that constitute those roles (Kabeer, 1994, 2024; Rowlands, 1997).

Regarding the dynamics discussed, the group gives women a secure ground to reconcile social identities as mothers with those as paid workers. For example, by chanting and being visible in the community, involving several community members, and meeting repeatedly, it introduces and normalises an alternative, leading to a transition from *doxa* to discourse (Bourdieu, 1977). Forming

their social identity in the reflexive space of the group then enables women to continue their efforts to deviate from restrictive discourse, as it normalises women holding both multiple identities at the same time, reducing the stigma associated with each, while recognising these mothers as 'hard workers'. Their messages also spread outside of the group meetings. The group was well-known and respected in the respective community, but also in neighbouring communities. Group members stated to be proud to be part of the group and happily identified as '*Destiny's Girls'*.

Furthermore, in Chapter 4, I explained the community shaming that mothers experience who become pregnant before marriage. Their group's theme: 'Destiny's girls! To have a child is not a sin. To have a child is not a failure' (FGD 2), pushes back against this stigma and gives women who suffered from the shaming a platform where they are supported and mobilised. This supports the uncoupling of marriage and motherhood, as discussed by Walker (1995), which might allow women to follow their wish for motherhood but not necessarily be linked to marriage. It also opposes the stigmatisation of single motherhood in general, although, as shown, single motherhood after divorce was better regarded than before marriage.

While this group for young mothers exhibited these empowering dynamics the strongest, some of the other groups that women were part of, too, provided practical tools to push back against women's subordination, such as access to monetary means or the sharing of farming techniques.

In the analytical space of motherhood, the formation of reflexive identity in group spaces really incorporates the effect of how collective agency can translate into empowerment for the individual. Subjectivity and a self-image are constructed in an interplay between the individual and the collective, whereby women themselves are the agents (Giddens, 1991). The interaction with collective spaces of encouragement and acting on felt needs fosters their 'power within' and

normalises the exercise of related choices (power to) (Rowlands, 1997) even if those choices deviate from a dominant discourse or constitute multiple social identities. This again is in strong support of the assumption that for women, motherhood can be a collective site for power and activism (Collins, 1990; Mama, 1995; Steady, 2005).

Another way in which a mother might counteract restrictive gender norms by the way she practised mothering was through the way in which she transmitted community norms that are different from common and restrictive gendered norms. Deviations from a prominent discourse also occurred here in the sense that, according to community norms, a good mother would be expected to transmit these restrictive gendered norms to her children. In my findings, this became an indirect tool for women's empowerment, in the sense that it is not impacting them directly, but the following generation of women. Interviews showed that what mothers transmitted to their children was adherence to some of the community gender norms, but then disrupted others. For example, they told girls not to move around too much, not to become pregnant before marriage, or at home, give them household tasks different from farm tasks given to boys. This replicates the restrictive structures discussion above. Counteracting these norms, other respondents stressed the importance of sending girls to school or giving the same chores to boys and girls. While the responsibility of early pregnancy should not lie solely with the girls, the advice of not becoming pregnant too early can also be regarded as a way of protecting girls from stigma and obstacles that young unmarried mothers face in their lives and opening up more possibilities for them.

5.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how women in Central and Southern Malawi conceptualise empowerment and its relationship to motherhood, illustrating that empowerment is neither a fixed nor universal concept but one that is deeply contextual, relational, and embedded within existing

social structures. Bringing together theories on motherhood with those on women's empowerment, I contribute to the limited research that explores the complex possibilities and channels of their relationships.

While prominent feminist frameworks often define empowerment in terms of autonomy, independence, and resistance, the lived experiences of women in my study suggest a more nuanced and negotiated process. Rather than positioning empowerment as a departure from roles of motherhood, women in my study describe multiple ways in which motherhood itself can serve as a site of agency, authority, and social recognition. A central finding of this chapter is that women's agency is not limited to overt resistance against patriarchal constraints but often operates within and through existing structures. While prominent feminist perspectives, such as Kabeer (1999) or Longwe (1991), assume that empowerment must be defined by opposition to gendered expectations, my study demonstrates that women in Central and Southern Malawi frequently enact agency through adaptation, negotiation, and strategic positioning within the very roles that might otherwise be seen as restrictive. Following Mahmood's (2001) critique of resistance-based models of agency, in this chapter, I have challenged the assumption that power is only exercised in opposition to prevailing norms. Instead, it recognises the multiplicities of women's agency that are determined by how women understand their actions and cope with patriarchal social structures around them.

I also discussed the complex dynamics of economic empowerment. Clearly, being a promising means, women in my study associate empowerment with financial independence, as access to their own income increases their decision-making power within the household and their social status within the community. At the same time, economic participation can also result in an intensified workload as women continue to bear primary caregiving responsibilities alongside income

generation. This paradox underscores the limitations of empowerment if women experience spouses or communities that insist on the replication of restrictive structural norms.

Furthermore, women's empowerment is about relational and collective forms of power. Women's participation in village banking groups, informal social networks, and kinship-based support structures provides access to resources and social capital that enhance their capacity to make choices and shape their lives. Women described an empowered woman as one who helps others in the community. These findings align with critiques of individualistic models of empowerment by scholars of African feminisms, emphasising the communal dimensions of agency and the importance of social networks in fostering women's ability to navigate constraints (Amadiume, 1997; Collins, 1990; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Motherhood itself emerges as an ambivalent force in relation to empowerment. While it can indeed impose significant burdens, particularly in terms of caregiving responsibilities and economic dependency, it is also a site where women exercise authority, make key decisions, and assert their social legitimacy. Scholars such as Amadiume (1997) and Oyěwùmí (2000) have emphasised that in many African contexts, motherhood roles extend beyond the domestic sphere and into areas of economic and community leadership. This challenges assumptions, prominent in Western feminisms, that caregiving primarily reinforces restrictive gender norms, and instead highlights how motherhood can serve as a foundation for power and influence. In the space of ruptures between discourse and practice, it is especially visible how women negotiate and redefine expectations of motherhood to assert agency in subtle but significant ways.

Women do not necessarily experience empowerment through rejecting motherhood roles, nor do they solely experience them as a source of power. Rather, they inhabit these roles in ways that reflect both personal agency and broader social expectations. This process is shaped by intersecting factors such as class, marital status, and economic stability, which influence the degree

to which women can assert control over their motherhood and social identities. Ultimately, in this chapter, I have demonstrated that empowerment in the context of motherhood is a dynamic and negotiated process. Rather than viewing power as something that exists outside of motherhood roles, my study highlights how women strategically navigate their positions as mothers to assert influence, gain access to resources, and shape household and community dynamics.

By centring women's own narratives, my research challenges universalist assumptions about women's empowerment, emphasising instead the importance of understanding power within the lived realities and cultural contexts in which it is enacted. My findings also call for a rethinking of women's empowerment frameworks to better account for relational and negotiated forms of agency in spaces that are significantly shaping women's lives, such as that of motherhood.

In the following chapter, I shift the focus to how empowerment is measured in development practice. By critically engaging with the pro-WEAI framework, I examine whether standardised indicators accurately capture women's lived experiences of empowerment and how these measurements align - or diverge - from the meanings women themselves attribute to empowerment. This discussion not only interrogates the methodological challenges of quantifying empowerment but also considers how these measures interact with structural gendered norms, further shaping women's realities in development interventions.

6. A Mixed Methods Approach to Measuring Empowerment: Pro-WEAI Findings and Women's Own Experiences

In the context of development practice, radical ideas of women's empowerment, which entail structural change towards greater equality between men and women, have been translated into measurable quantitative outcomes. Feminist scholars have critiqued this for losing the transformative character of the fundamental ideas of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Women's empowerment became an integral part of many development interventions, rarely as an object in its own right and more often to increase the interventions' effectiveness, and 'much of the development narrative focuses on instrumental gains - what women can do for development rather than what development can do for women' (Cornwall, 2016, p. 342).

A family of indices designed to measure women's empowerment in agriculture - the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) - has now been widely adopted. The project-level WEAI (pro-WEAI) aims to capture women's empowerment within development interventions, drawing from Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment and operationalising 12 indicators across the areas of intrinsic, instrumental, and collective agency (Malapit et al., 2019).

In this chapter, I investigate the tension between this quantitative measure and qualitative research, which focuses on contextual nuances in the space of women's empowerment, which is intertwined with gendered norms and implies structural change towards gender equality. To do so, I conduct a mixed methods study to examine whether the understanding of empowerment, of women who are mothers, aligns with how it is measured in the pro-WEAI framework. In particular, I explore the extent to which the 12 pro-WEAI indicators capture women's lived experiences within those indicator areas.

Using baseline survey data of an impact evaluation of a large-scale integrated nutritional and agricultural development intervention in Central and Southern Malawi, I calculate the pro-WEAI

and its 12 indicators. All women in this sample are mothers. Using this measure, 30 percent of the women in the sample are considered empowered. For each of the 12 constituting pro-WEAI indicators, adequacy levels for the sample are calculated. The highest rates of adequacy were achieved in indicators of 'input in productive decisions', 'ownership of land and other assets', and 'attitudes about intimate partner violence against women'. The lowest levels of adequacy came from 'membership in influential groups', 'autonomy in income', and 'group membership'. I compare these quantitative findings with qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews and FGDs with women who are mothers, which capture women's lived experiences within the 12 pro-WEAI indicator domains and speak to their own understandings of empowerment. Thus, I explore the extent to which the quantitative measures match women's lived experiences within those spaces and discuss what is missing in the picture that these measures paint. This triangulation identifies strengths and weaknesses of the methods used to calculate the pro-WEAI and the measurement of women's empowerment in general.

I find that the pro-WEAI captures important emic aspects of women's empowerment, particularly in relation to their own income generation, input into household decision-making, and group membership. Moreover, the pro-WEAI findings provide a useful overview of the status of women's empowerment within the sample and compared to that of men. This facilitates comparison across contexts and over time. In its disaggregated form, the 12 indicators identify trends and patterns of (dis)empowerment within a given context, by showing which indicator areas contribute most to a sample's (dis)empowerment. This is especially valuable for development interventions that aim to promote empowerment.

When contextualised with qualitative findings, only seldom did the qualitative findings lead to conclusions that starkly diverged from the quantitative results regarding adequacies within the indicator areas. Yet it became clear that, within these areas, the quantitative measures frequently

overlooked aspects and social dynamics, relevant for dynamics of empowerment, that women raised in interviews and FGDs. Consequently pro-WEAI findings did not fully align with, and at times even mismatched, women's own perceptions and lived experiences. Moreover, the pro-WEAI omits important dimensions that women themselves consider empowering, such as processes of identity formation and their desire to care for their children within the space of motherhood.

Furthermore, while the pro-WEAI is theoretically anchored in an understanding of agency as resistance against oppressive structures (Kabeer, 1999), many of the ways in which women exercise agency are subtle, negotiated, and embedded in relational responsibilities (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994). In this chapter, therefore, I speak to both the relevance and limitations of pro-WEAI indicators and points at the need to better account for the complexities of women's lived experiences when aiming to understand how women's empowerment can occur in a given context, such as that of Central and Southern Malawi.

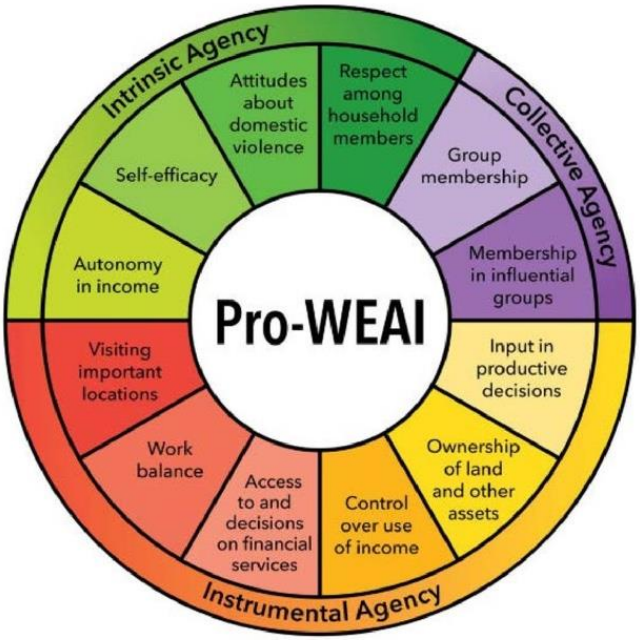
6.1. Theoretical Framework of the pro-WEAI

The pro-WEAI is the project-level version of the WEAI, a survey tool that was designed for agricultural development interventions to 'identify key areas of women's (and men's) disempowerment, design appropriate strategies to address identified deficiencies, and monitor intervention outcomes related to women's empowerment' (Malapit et al., 2019, p. 675). The pro-WEAI draws from Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment, as 'expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them'. This definition encompasses three interlinked dimensions: 'resources', 'agency', and 'achievements'.

As shown in Chapter 1.2, resources are defined as access and also future claims to material, social, and human resources, agency is processes of decision-making, negotiation, but also

deception and manipulation, and achievements are well-being outcomes. The pro-WEAI then focuses on the measurement of agency, considered as the most direct measure of empowerment that speaks to women's ability to make life choices. The authors raise that resources and achievements could even exist in a context where women are very disempowered (Malapit et al., 2019). Furthermore, agency is the least frequently collected dimension in standard data collection, whereas resources such as capital, or achievements like productivity and nutrition, are more commonly measured. While methodologies for measuring resources and achievements leave room for improvisation (Doss et al., 2011), these methodologies are more elaborate than those for agency. While the pro-WEAI is a quantitative survey tool, its developers conducted qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of women's situations of gender inequality, poverty and influences of development interventions (Malapit et al., 2019).

Figure 5 Pro-WEAI



As displayed in Figure 5, the 12 indicators of the pro-WEAI are then mapped into three areas of agency: intrinsic agency (power within), instrumental agency (power to), and collective agency (power with), reflecting those generative types of power (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Malapit et al., 2019; Rowlands, 1995). Its underlying theories of power are rooted in Freire's (1968) work on 'conscientisation' and freedom, and Lukes' (1974) work on power. Rowlands (1995) formatively applied those concepts to the space of gender and empowerment and articulated a typology of power that is generative rather than dominating: as opposed to the exercise of 'power over' others,

empowerment entails 'power within', 'power to', and 'power with'. While the first two are directly concerned with the individual, the third entails the collective acting towards shared goals. All three are interlinked and influence a person's ability to exercise agency in an empowering way.

Intrinsic agency, or 'power within', is women's ability to recognise inequalities that have hitherto been taken for granted. This involves gaining self-respect, self-efficacy and the awareness and formulation of self-determined (life-)goals (Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). The pro-WEAI measures 'autonomy in income', 'self-efficacy', 'attitudes about IPV against women', and 'respect among household members' (Malapit et al., 2019). Autonomy in (use of) income captures the extent to which women's decision-making on income from agricultural and non-agricultural activities is motivated by their own values as opposed to by external regulation. The Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) score based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is calculated, following a weighted scheme for a respondent's response to four vignettes about their (internal) motivation to action. Self-efficacy captures women's self-confidence and is measured by the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSE), a validated scale looking at eight scenarios to assess a respondent's belief in themselves and capabilities to reach the goals they set for themselves (Chen et al., 2001). Attitudes about IPV against women measures women's perceived right to bodily integrity. It does not aim to capture women's personal experience with IPV but asks attitudinal questions about IPV against women. Respect among household members gives an idea of intra-household harmony. It asks about mutual respect and conflict between spouses or between the two household decision-makers in four scenarios capturing conditions of respect. Intra-household harmony was considered important intrinsically but also as a positive carrier for greater capacity for other things such as group membership, group membership and earning an own income. Indicators to measure intrinsic agency in particular were new to the pro-WEAI compared to the initial WEAI. While indicators to measure instrumental agency are more

established and applied in existing literature, those for intrinsic agency have been distilled from qualitative studies that accompanied the pro-WEAI development. These sought to understand factors such as the impacts of interventions that aim to foster women's confidence or potential backlashes of interventions when they increase women's income.

Instrumental agency, or 'power to', then is the action element, the ability to act on those goals and generate new possibilities (Rowlands, 1997). A third of the pro-WEAI draws from questions to capture processes of decision-making in different aspects. Those are 'input into productive decisions', 'ownership of land and other assets', 'control over use of income', and 'access to and decisions on financial services' (Malapit et al., 2019). This is one limitation of the index because it implies that households with women decision-makers only are more likely to be counted as empowered (Alkire et al., 2013). 'Work balance' and 'visiting important locations' are the other two indicators of instrumental agency (Malapit et al., 2019).

In the qualitative research that was part of the pro-WEAI development, respondents stated the desire to have greater input in household decisions, but not to make decisions alone due to questions of respect, intra-household harmony, or in case something went wrong. Based on these findings, in the domain of input into productive decisions, the pro-WEAI developers decided to measure sole as well as joint decision-making regarding all agricultural and non-agricultural activities the household performs. It also captures the potential to be involved in decisions if a respondent wanted to, assuming that they do not necessarily want to be involved in all household decisions. Control over the use of income is measured for the income from the same agricultural and non-agricultural activities. For all these activities, it asks about the input a respondent has in decisions regarding the use of the output and income generated from the activity. For agricultural activities only, the indicator also enquires into decision-making around keeping (parts of) the output for consumption at home rather than selling. Ownership of land and other assets measures

the (instrumental) agency dimension rather than the resources dimension of Kabeer's (1999) empowerment theory, even though land and assets can be regarded as a resource too. This is because the indicator, rather than measuring externally documented ownership of assets, measures the self-reported claiming of ownership, which implies the realising of rights over a resource and is in itself a reflection of instrumental agency. Pradhan et al. (2019) undergird this. They conducted a qualitative study on control over assets in Nepal, which gives an account of how women explain their relationship with personal property (*pewa*), such as livestock or small assets, and which is the act of 'doing' *pewa* rather than 'having' *pewa*. Ownership of land and other assets then measures if a respondent reports ownership of land and the number of assets a respondent solely or jointly reports to own. Access to and decisions on financial services measures if a respondent has access to and makes sole or joint decisions on at least one credit source, and whether they have access to a sole or joint financial account (Malapit et al., 2019).

Work balance is part of the pro-WEAI based on the findings from qualitative pro-WEAI research that excessive workloads of more than 10.5 hours daily can have stark disempowering impacts on women's ability to pursue other things in their lives, such as being a member of a group or earning their own income (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). The indicator collects data on a respondent's allocation of time to paid work and unpaid work, such as domestic and care chores, in the 24 hours of the day before. Visiting important locations points to the empowering effects of freedom of movement that allows women to pursue life activities (Malapit et al., 2019). The restrictive implications of restricted mobility, owed to gender norms and lack of time, were again revealed by the qualitative pro-WEAI research (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019).

Pro-WEAI indicators of collective agency, or 'power with', are based on theories that regard group membership, in terms of participation and local organisational capacity, as social capital and a key element of empowerment (Narayan-Parker, 2005). The indicators are 'group membership'

and 'membership in influential groups', which are intended to capture a respondent's participation and influence in the community. This is important for empowerment as groups can provide social capital in terms of access to information, resources, and relationships with others. This is not bound to a particular type of group. Group membership then asks about membership in a wide range of formal and informal groups, while membership in influential groups asks about the influence in the community of the group they belong to.

It is to note here that two of the indicators, respect among household members and membership in influential groups, have been dropped from the current, revised version of the pro-WEAI (Seymour et al., 2023), but are both still part of the pro-WEAI that I used for my analysis.

6.2. Sample Characteristics

To calculate the index, responses on all 12 pro-WEAI indicators are required. I have 2094 women and 1494 men in my sample, who have this complete information.[53]

Table 2 Individual and Household Characteristics of Respondents

Individual and household characteristics of respondents	Percentage of respondents	
Variable	Women (n=2094)	Men (n=1494)
Individual level		
Age group		
<18	4.02	5.35
18-25	28.92	45.22
26-35	33.40	30.42

[53] In total, 2674 women and 1659 men were interviewed. Of those, 90 percent of men and 78 percent of women had complete information in all 12 indicators.

36-45	21.75	14.57
>46	11.91	4.44
Missing	0	0
Education (highest degree)		
Never attended school	3.77	4.48
Attended primary school	71.44	56.56
Attended secondary school	20.39	27.38
Attended post-secondary degree	0.53	0.80
Missing	3.87	10.78
Marital status		
Married	85.24	84.40
Unmarried (never married)	2.44	4.35
Unmarried (previously married)	7.88	0.40
Missing	4.44	11.84
Household level		
Lives in woman headed household	22.59	13.48
Number of children in household		
Under the age of five		
0	25.21	25.57
1	54.15	49.73
2	15.90	14.29
3	1.91	1.60
4	0.05	0.07
Missing	2.77	8.74
Under the age of two		
0	47.28	46.93
1	47.85	42.52
2	2.10	1.80
Missing	2.77	8.74

Around half of the women were between 14 and 25 years old, and men between 26 and 45. Thus, on average, women were younger than men. Most women attended primary school, but fewer than a quarter attended secondary school.[54] More men than women attended secondary school. For women and men, less than one percent of the sample attended a post-secondary degree. The majority of the sample was married at the time of the survey.

The percentage that was divorced or widowed was higher for women than for men; however, still relatively low. Regarding the household level, more women than men reported living under a female household head. Half of the households had one, and around 15 percent had two children under the age of five. For about half of those, the child was under the age of two (Table 2).

6.3. Pro-WEAI Results

The pro-WEAI results display the level of empowerment among women and men of the sample. Given the adequacy threshold of each of the 12 pro-WEAI indicators (Appendix 1), I classified respondents as either adequate (=1) or inadequate (=0). Table 3 shows the results of the aggregated pro-WEAI indicators, based on the adequacies in the 12 indicators of women and men in the sample. As explained above, the indicators are weighted 1/12. A respondent's empowerment score then is their average of adequacy in all 12 indicators. If their score is 75 percent or greater, or if they are adequate in nine out of 12 indicators, they are classified as empowered.[55]

[54] In Malawi, primary education is free, while secondary education requires fee payment. This policy, introduced in 1994, aimed to increase access to education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. However, secondary school fees have remained a significant barrier, limiting the transition of students from primary to secondary education, especially for girls and students from low-income families (Kadzamira & Rose, 2001)

[55] A detailed explanation of the index calculation can be found in Chapter 3.3.

Table 3 Pro-WEAI Results

Pro-WEAI results			
Indicator	Women (n=2094)	Men (n=1494)	Difference
Three domains of empowerment score (3DE)	0.68	0.75	0.07***
Mean empowerment score	0.62	0.67	0.05***
% achieving empowerment	30%	42%	12pp***
Number of dual-adult households	1494		
Gender parity index (GPI)	0.88		
% achieving gender parity	52%		
Mean intra-household inequality score	0.06		
Mean empowerment gap	0.25		
Pro-WEAI	0.70		
Notes Differences between men and women are tested using a two-sample t-test for the mean empowerment score, a Mann-Whitney rank sum test for the 3DE, and a two-sample tests of proportions for the binary indicator of achieving empowerment. Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$. Differences in percentages are expressed in percentage points (pp).			

The Three Domains of Empowerment Score (3DE) reflects the percentage of respondents achieving empowerment and adequacy among the disempowered. Women in my sample have a 3DE of 0.68, and men that of 0.75. This indicates that men in this sample are more empowered than women. This could either come from more men than women who achieved empowerment, or from higher empowerment scores among disempowered men.

The average empowerment score for all women in the sample is 0.62, and 0.67 for men. This means that on average, women are adequate in 62 percent of indicators or 7.4 indicators. Men, on average, are adequate in 67 percent of indicators or 8 indicators. 30 percent of women and 42 percent of men in the sample met the adequacy cut-off in at least nine indicators. It shows again that men are more likely to be empowered than women.

To calculate the Gender Parity Index (GPI), I use the sample of the 1494 dual-adult households in which both, a primary woman and a primary man reside and who have complete information for all pro-WEAI indicators. The GPI consists of the percentage of couples achieving gender parity and the average intra-household inequality score. 52 percent of households in the sample achieved gender parity. A woman achieves gender parity if she either is empowered or if her empowerment score is equal to or greater than that of the primary man of the household. Hence, this includes the 30 percent of women who are empowered, plus 22 percent who are not empowered but have an empowerment score that is at least equal to that of the primary man of the household. The average intra-household inequality score considers all dual-adult households in the sample. It is the mean difference between the empowerment score of the primary woman of the household and the primary man. The positive score shows that, on average, men are adequate in 6 percent more indicators, or 0.7 indicators, than women. Calculated from those two, the GPI of the sample is 0.88.

The mean empowerment gap, then, is the average intra-household inequality score for households that do not achieve gender parity. For the 48 percent of households that do not meet gender parity, it shows that the average intra-household inequality score of 0.25 is higher than the 0.06 for the entire sample. For households that do not meet gender parity, primary men have adequacy in 25 percent more indicators, or 3 indicators more than primary women.

The overall pro-WEAI score for the sample is 0.70. It is the weighted mean of 3DE (90 percent) and GPI (10 percent). As explained above, the 3DE encompasses the prevalence (the percentage achieving empowerment) and intensity (the mean empowerment score among the disempowered) of individual empowerment in the sample. The GPI elements are the prevalence (the percentage of households achieving gender parity) and intensity (the mean empowerment gap) of gender parity in the sample. Hence, the pro-WEAI reflects both, the extent and intensity

of empowerment, while taking gender parity into consideration. In this sample, the pro-WEAI is higher than the 3DE, which comes from a relatively high GPI. While fewer women are empowered than men, for those women who are disempowered, the intra-household discrepancy in empowerment scores between them and a primary male respondent must be relatively small.

6.4. The Twelve Pro-WEAI Indicators - Adequacies and Contribution to Disempowerment

While the aggregated pro-WEAI indicators are very useful to have a comparable measure of empowerment for women and men, across contexts, and over time, further disaggregating the multidimensional index by its 12 indicators reveals which areas contribute the most to women's and men's empowerment and disempowerment. Thus, in the following, I compare levels of adequacy in the 12 pro-WEAI indicators and indicator contributions to disempowerment for men and women. In the next section (6.5), I then contextualise these findings for women, using insights from interviews and FGDs with women in the respective areas.

Table 4 shows women's and men's adequacy in 12 pro-WEAI indicators. It reflects the percentage of respondents that reached the adequacy threshold in the respective indicator (Appendix 1).

Table 4 Percentage of Indicator Adequacy

Percentage of adequacy in 12 pro-WEAI indicators			
12 Pro-WEAI indicators	Women (n=2094)	Men (n=1494)	Difference
Intrinsic agency			
Autonomy in income	45.18	49.67	4.49pp***
Self-efficacy	59.03	69.49	10.39pp***
Attitudes about intimate partner violence against women	79.37	90.99	11.59pp***
Respect among household members	58.02	71.43	13.47pp***
Instrumental agency			
Input in productive decisions	90.64	94.13	3.47pp***
Ownership of land and other assets	90.07	88.32	-1.71pp
Access to and decisions on financial services	58.21	72.70	14.48pp***
Control over use of income	61.27	66.82	5.46pp***
Work balance	53.25	72.83	19.71pp***
Ability to visit important locations	66.57	62.95	-3.65pp**
Collective agency			
Group membership	47.61	38.45	-9.26pp***
Membership in influential groups	36.82	30.64	-6.30pp***

Notes Differences between men and women are tested using two-sample tests of proportions. Statistical significance is indicated as follows: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$. Differences in percentages are expressed in percentage points (pp).

The results of adequacy in the 12 indicators identified patterns of empowerment and disempowerment within the sample. Women achieved the highest levels of indicator adequacy in the area of instrumental agency, with almost all women respondents (90 percent) showing adequacy in input in productive decisions, and ownership of land and other assets. The third highest adequacy was in attitudes about intimate partner violence against women. The lowest levels of adequacy came from autonomy in income and membership in influential groups. For men, the

highest levels of adequacy were in the same areas as for women. Lowest adequacy was in group membership and membership in influential groups.

As a comparison, levels of adequacy for men were generally higher than for women, except for ownership of land and other assets, but not statistically significant, ability to visit important locations, group membership, and membership in influential groups. Adequacies for men were much higher (just under 20 percent more) in work balance and higher (greater than 10 percent more) in access to and decisions on financial services, respect among household members, attitudes about intimate partner violence against women, and self-efficacy. The differences in indicator adequacy between men and women are statistically significant for all pro-WEAI indicators except for ownership of land and other assets.

Figure 6 Indicator Contributions to Disempowerment

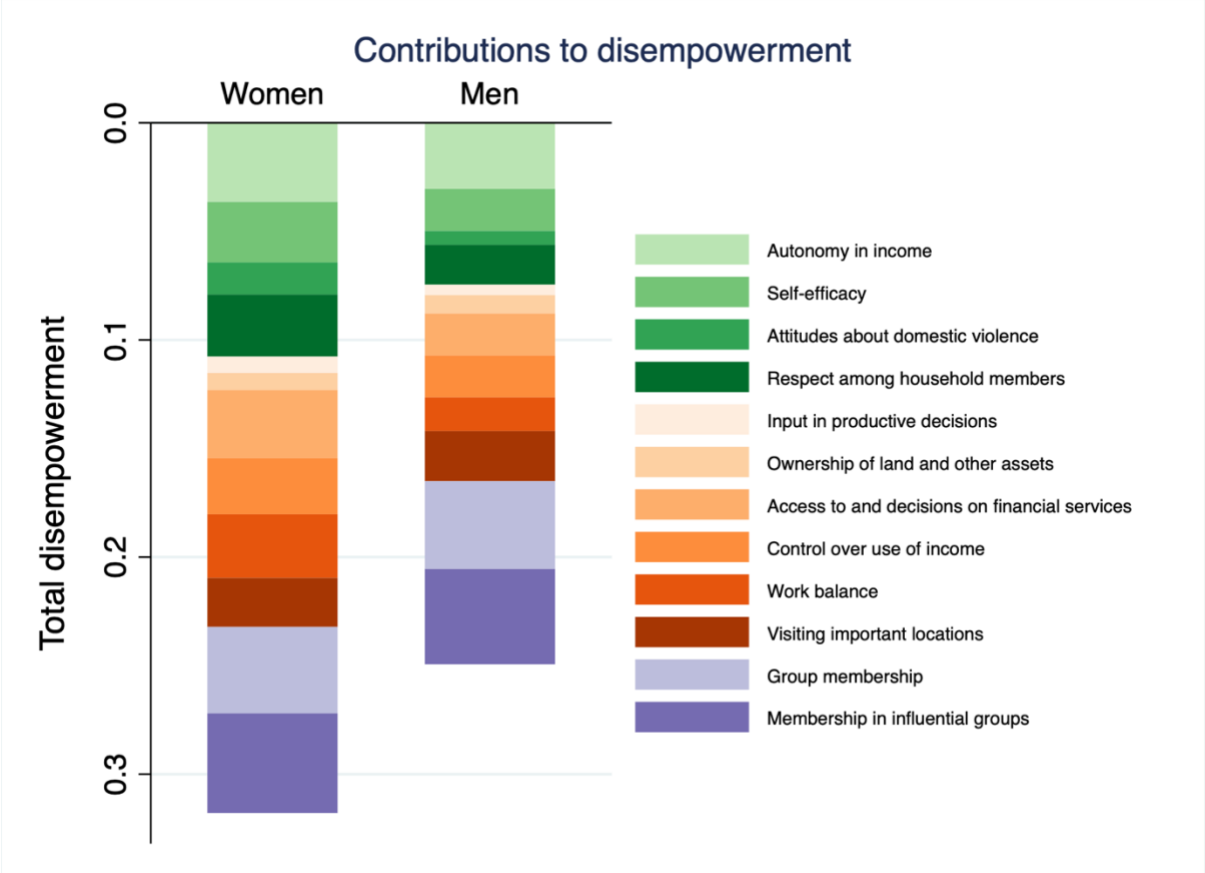


Figure 6 displays the contributions of each pro-WEAI indicator to the disempowerment index (1-3DE), which is the overall depth of the bar. This is 0.32 for women (n=1456) and 0.25 for men (n=872). 1-3DE is complementary to the 3DE score and reflects the proportion of women and men in the sample who are disempowered multiplied by their mean disempowerment score.

If the relative contribution to disempowerment of a given indicator exceeds its proportion of 1/12, it means that the disempowered population is more inadequate in this indicator compared to other indicators. In the following, I will highlight those indicators exceeding 1/12.

6.5. The Twelve Pro-WEAI Indicators - Triangulation with Qualitative Findings

In this section, I draw on interviews with women to contextualise the quantitative findings, provide deeper analysis, and illuminate aspects of empowerment within the indicator domains that women deem important but that may not be fully captured by the pro-WEAI measurement.

(Influential) Group Membership

The two largest proportional contributors to disempowerment for women and men were group membership and membership in influential groups. These are the indicators that measure collective agency. While generally, inadequacies in all pro-WEAI indicators contributed more to women's disempowerment than to men's disempowerment, these two indicators proportionally contributed more to men's disempowerment than to that of women (Figure 6). Those indicators count as adequate if the respondent is an active member in at least one group, and for the latter, if the respondent is an active member in at least one influential group (Appendix 1). Both revealed some of the lowest levels of adequacy for men and women, yet, as shown in Table 4, women have considerably higher levels of adequacy than men.

Although I do not aim to quantify qualitative findings in order to compare them numerically with quantitative findings, it stood out that, given the low levels of adequacy in the group membership indicator, almost all women reported belonging to a group in the qualitative interviews. Those groups were often village banks, farming groups, church groups and mutual help groups to support members in times of illness, with food, hospital bills, or burials.

Interview findings then strongly emphasised that the group space was immensely important for collective agency and women's empowerment. These empowering dynamics happened through different channels. Groups were safe spaces where women would often form strong friendships, chat about issues, exchange ideas, assist each other, and give each other valuable

advice that was applicable in their households. This supports the theoretical assumptions that undergird the collective agency part of the pro-WEAI (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019).

One mutual support group for young mothers who dropped out of school stood out in my interviews. Members of the group explained that the group had profound implications for women's empowerment. It provided important support structures and advice for women who faced community stigma, shame, and had to drop out of school because they became mothers at an early age. These pregnancies were often accidental, or the result of early marriages arranged by a girl's parents due to financial hardship. The mutual support group then was a space where women would educate each other to be able to go back to school. Women further encouraged each other to proceed with business endeavours and shared their business knowledge. This normalised for women to go back to school and engage in paid labour, which was a pushback against restrictive gender norms that tie women to the domestic space (Kabeer, 1999, 2024). The group's theme chant goes: 'To have a child is not a sin, to have a child is not a failure' (FGD 2). I regard this as a powerful mechanism for challenging stigma and shame, as the statement was performed publicly in communal spaces where it reached a broad audience of community members and confronted prevailing norms. This form of vocal and collective expression constitutes a direct form of resistance against restrictive norms (Kabeer, 1999, 2024). The group was also a safe space to exchange ideas and knowledge, such as about family planning or how to resolve marital issues.

These dynamics highlight the empowering potential of collective agency (power with), when group members encourage each other to take agency over their lives, albeit the difficulties they faced (Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). As demonstrated, such collective action is a powerful contributor to the normalisation of social conventions that are less restrictive for women and may challenge or reshape established gender-normative structures (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979). A

recent synthesis of literature on the persistence of gender inequality, despite development policies that seek to reduce it, highlights the importance of group spaces for fostering this structural change (Agarwal, 2026).

The pro-WEAI acknowledges the empowering potential of group spaces for women to access information, resources and encourage each other and includes both, formal and informal groups (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). At the same time, simply asking respondents about their group membership is unlikely to capture the specific dynamics of empowerment that can occur within different groups. Those have varying impacts on women's empowerment, and as shown above, approach multiple dimensions of women's own understanding of empowerment. They also influence other pro-WEAI domains, such as, for example, self-efficacy, income-related areas or intra-household decision-making more generally, which happened in the mutual support group mentioned above, which was a space extremely fruitful for change.

Furthermore, in many of the groups mentioned, women could only participate if they were mothers (FGD 1). As discussed in Chapter 5, interviews revealed that motherhood holds significant potential for fostering belonging, identity, and the exercise of agency (Collins, 1990; Mama, 1995; Steady, 2005). These empowering dynamics were closely tied to becoming part of the informal, yet socially recognised, 'group of mothers' within a community.

Motherhood is therefore highly relevant in the domain of group membership - both as a precondition for entry into many formal groups, and through the empowering dynamics inherent in the informal collective identity of motherhood itself. While the former may be captured by the pro-WEAI, the latter, the empowering dimensions of collective agency rooted in motherhood, is less likely to be captured, as it is not something women would typically mention in response to standardised survey questions. As a result, it would be overlooked by the pro-WEAI.

Understanding these different dynamics in the space of group membership and how they are interlinked with women's experiences of motherhood through concomitant qualitative research is crucial to identify the specific channels through which group participation may influence empowerment, what groups have greater empowering potential than others, and how collective agency interacts with other areas of empowerment that are also measured by the pro-WEAI.

Lastly, concerning the indicator about influential group membership, qualitative findings made it clear that the question of the influence of a group had varying interpretations. Some women regarded a group as influential if it was prominent and perceived positively, while others looked at the influence a group had on their personal lives. This might indicate that when asking about a group's influence beyond the group activities, there ought to be a detailed investigation into the kind of influence and its relevance for empowerment. Meanwhile, while this indicator is part of the pro-WEAI version that I used, it has been dropped from the most recent version of the pro-WEAI (Seymour et al., 2023).

Autonomy in (Own) Income

For women and men, the third largest proportional contributor to disempowerment was the lack of autonomy in income, and the indicator proportionally contributed slightly more to men's disempowerment than to that of women (Figure 6).

Using the RAI, and with regard to (1) the use of their own income from agricultural and non-agricultural activities, (2) the types of crops they grow, (3) the livestock they raise, and (4) if and how many crops or livestock they can take to the market, this pro-WEAI indicator captures a person's ability to act on what they value in their decision-making, asking about internal and external motivations that determine these decisions (Appendix 1). Doing so, the indicator is set out to capture whether women believe that an action is right and not because there was no other

choice, because they would get into trouble, or because others would think poorly of them if they took a different action. It counts adequacy if a person is motivated by their own self-determination (autonomous motivation) and not by coercion or fear of others' disapproval. This equals an RAI of greater than one, which just under half of the women in the sample exhibited (Appendix 1).

My qualitative findings revealed insights into the motivations underlying women's actions in two areas. Firstly, when respondents explained the extent to which they held a say in their households regarding what crops to grow or to sell at the market. They most often could influence the household decision-making around what to plant, explaining that they know best what food is needed in the household, but deferred to their husbands for major financial decisions. Then, if they managed to generate a surplus, they could most often sell it at the market. Still, for most, their husbands had the last say in agricultural decisions, and if he did not like their decisions on what to plant, they had to obey his vision.

Secondly, this was when women elaborated on how they decided on the use of their own income. It showed that most women had a current or previous source of income from *ganyu* (casual labour), such as working on other people's farms, or doing laundry; or from small-scale businesses selling farm produce, home-baked food items, clothes or fish. They further explained that if they made enough money, they would use this to start a (small-scale) business or invest in an already existing one to increase profits.

In their own conceptions of empowerment, women stressed the earning of their own income as an important means of empowerment, to gain greater independence in decision-making, which strongly aligns with recent studies on women's increased agency in Bangladesh and Tanzania (Kabeer, 2024; Lecoutere & Chu, 2024). Almost all women who earned an income explained that they have full control or are the main decision-makers over the use of it. In this process, many women still consulted their husbands or, if unmarried, consulted relatives over how to spend it,

especially when it came to larger expenses. This was to share the burden of responsibility, but also to pay respect to the husband, who was traditionally regarded as the head of the household. Esther explained: 'I would not want to overrule my husband; I would still want to respect him as the man of the house. It doesn't matter even if I am making a lot of money, I would prefer we do it the way we do it all the time. I would still prefer to sit and discuss.' (Esther) Eliza, who previously earned an income but currently does not, added to this: 'My husband is the one making more money and hence is the one who can make the final decision [in the household]. It is different now because I am making less money. It could be different if I had a business, and I would be making more money, I would take myself as a leader. However, I would respect the man as a man, I would not be boastful, I would just be deciding on the money I made. Last year, when I was doing business and had enough capital, I was able to decide on my money. Currently, the money comes from my husband, and when he sends the money, he will attach instructions on how I should spend that money, so I just follow, and that is why I am saying that my husband is the one who makes the final decision.' (Eliza) Many respondents regarded taking over the final say from the husband as disrespectful behaviour. In particular, this was explained regarding dynamics in the few households where a woman would earn a higher income than her husband and where parts of his decision-making power, linked to his role as the main breadwinner, were challenged. Eliza then showed: 'There are women who are indeed earning more than their husbands, so they choose not to respect them. They take the men to be silly or stupid.'

I give these detailed elaborations to highlight the different factors that all influence women's own self-determination. Respondents' statements point at the relevance of the exercise of agency as negotiation, as making strategical concessions to bring about desired change (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994), as opposed to following an autonomous motivation that would entail exercising direct resistance in contexts where women might not be able to openly defy given structures due

to potential high costs such as in this example conflicts with their husbands when 'disrespecting' him. This was even if he is not fulfilling his expected role as the main breadwinner, in cases where a woman earns the main household income. Some respondents stressed the importance of the quality of the relationship between husband and wife that should have mutual assistance at its core. Overall, women would have increased decision-making over their own income, but still balanced this with respecting the husband in his position as household head by consulting with him.

This was revealed by interview findings and would be likely to be missed by the indicator vignettes, as it would not be accounted for as a direct instance of internal agency and hence not be captured as a positive value of the RAI, leading to indicator adequacy. At the same time, these more subtle types of agency that women deploy to act on their internal motivation are extremely important to record, especially in contexts where acts of direct resistance might be too risky to pursue (Kabeer, 2024).

In general, women's motivation around how to spend their own income were greatly influenced by their household's and children's needs, which was in their own interest, as Rosa exemplified: 'Most of the times, I use it for the home like buying of food, taking care of my child by making sure that I buy good food so that she should not be malnourished, she should dress up well and she should be admired as Rosa's child.' (Rosa) Ensuring their children's well-being was deeply rooted in their thinking and feeling as mothers (Keller, 2010; Ruddick, 1989). While, as shown in Chapter 5, being able to provide for their children could indeed be empowering for women, this also follows gendered expectations that women would have internalised to an extent that they too factor into their internal motivation to action (Bourdieu, 1977). This is emblematical for Kabeer's (1999) argument that if a resource, such as women's own income, has the potential

to be empowering and how processes of empowerment take place, is determined by local norms and structures.

A mother's motivation to spend her own income is often influenced by economic hardship (Collins, 1990, 2016). This was true for my respondents, and was exacerbated when the money provided by their husbands as main breadwinners was not sufficient to grant the child's well-being, or if he was not willing to spend his money accordingly and expected his wife to use her income instead. Martha for example explained: 'Sometimes I am just calm, I just look at what is lacking at the home, let's say for example my husband provides money and it is not enough so by the tenth of the month, that money is finished, I cannot leave my child to sleep with hunger when I have the money with me, this is not possible, I sell *thobwa*[56] and from the money I make, I can buy relish to eat.' (Martha)

In addition to this, interviews highlighted the need to understand the circumstances under which women are able to generate their own income to have greater independence in decision-making, take care of their children and invest in their businesses. Almost all women indicated that they would like to do so. However, for many, this was not possible since they did not have enough business capital, or could not reconcile childcare work and household work. Some women who previously earned their own income had to stop either because they fell ill, had complications after giving birth, or could not maintain their own business as they had to spend their entire capital on household and child needs. A few women were restricted by their husbands from working outside of the household, which aligns with Dore et al.'s (2022) findings in rural Bangladesh. As shown in Chapter 5, entering motherhood was a strong incentive for women to commence earning their own income to be able to fulfil their wishes to take care of their children. This could also encourage

[56] *Thobwa* is a drink made from fermented maize flour, sorghum, and water. It is most often sold in a non-alcoholic form but can become 'sweet beer' as it turns into an alcoholic drink when fermenting further (Namaumbo et al., 2023).

them to manage ontological anxiety (Giddens, 1991) and challenge gender norms that previously tied them to the domestic space and would not allow them to conduct paid work.

In conclusion, the quantitative indicator based on the RAI focuses on women's autonomous motivation when they make decisions over their own income and also other productive decisions. In my sample, then, less than half of the women revealed this level of autonomy. On the other hand, in my qualitative findings, women made it really clear that having their own income was a means to great levels of autonomy in decision-making and that it underlies different decision-making dynamics than the general household income, mostly generated by their spouses.

At the same time, my interview findings showed that drawing a strict line between internal and external motivation, and categorising into RAI vignettes, is impossible, as they are overlapping, intertwined, and the latter is also internalised. As explained above, women would still want to consult with their spouses, to share the burden of responsibility or as a more subtle form of exercising agency if the cost of pushing back against gendered norms might be too high (Kabeer, 2024). Even if women spent their income solely according to their own preferences, these could still align with societal expectations of them, such as spending on their children.

Once more, distilling women's internal motivations as an outsider comes with its own difficulties. As per RAI vignettes, not understanding negotiation and collaboration as a form of autonomous motivation but as externally coerced, one runs the risk of undermining their agency and victimising women (Mohanty, 2005). This is especially problematic when Western feminists try to reveal the 'real' choices of women in the so-called 'Global South' and to turn them from victims restricted by social norms into agents that challenge them (Khader, 2011).

Control Over the Use of (Household) Income

Different to autonomy in (own) income as a measure of intrinsic agency, the control over the use of the household's joint income indicator is a measure of a respondent's input in decision-making as part of capturing instrumental agency. It is adequate if a respondent participates in decision-making on the income and output from all agricultural and non-agricultural activities of their household (Appendix 1), which held true for about 60 percent of the women in the sample.

Households' joint incomes primarily came from farming output, and the husband's income as the main breadwinner, supplemented by the wife's income if she had one. While both men and women engaged in farming, *ganyu* and business, men would usually have bigger businesses than women or do types of *ganyu* that were better paid (FGD 2). As the main breadwinners, the husbands were involved in fishing, *ganyu*, or brick moulding, running a business, or working outside the community, sometimes as far away as South Africa, and sending money home. In some households, the husband would farm, and the wife would engage in a small-scale business to sell the produce.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings point to relatively low levels of women's control over the use of their household's income but illuminate this from different angles. According to the pro-WEAI indicator, around 40 percent of women did not participate in decisions regarding output and income from their household's productive activities. Qualitative findings show that most women had input in decision-making regarding all household income sources, but that the nature of this input differed for each woman. Often, the final say was held by their husbands as head of the household. In some cases, the husband would make decisions without consulting his wife, and very rarely, the wife could use the income without consulting her husband. The latter was mostly in case of emergencies, for example, when a household member had to be admitted to the hospital or in case of urgent household needs. The process of consultation between husband

and wife over how to use the household's income primarily revolved around the fulfilment of household needs in terms of food and other material necessities such as soap or clothes. If there was money left, it extended to investing in business or village banking, among other expenditures.

The degree of input that women had in this varied. Some women explained that they would have a strong input since they do know best what is missing in their households, which speaks to Fisher et al.'s (2010) study on Southern Malawi, who show that a wife is more accurately aware of the household economy than her husband, especially if he works away from the household. In contrast to this, Linda said that her husband does not consult her often and would just spend the income the way he wanted to. However, he would give her some money to take care of the children's schooling expenses. As shown in the previous section, almost all women who earned an own income would be the main decision-makers over its use, but often still consult with their husbands. Moreover, contributing to the household budget with their own income could increase women's overall decision-making power in the household, including the allocation of household resources. This is in line with existing studies on women's bargaining power, conducted in the Global South (Doss, 2013). Yet, a few women explained that their husbands would have the final say over the women's own income too.

In general, respondents explained that in the process of joint decision-making, the reason why the man of the household has the last say is because he earns the larger share of the household income, but also simply because 'he is the man of the household; in Malawi, he is the household head' (Miriam), which was explained to traditionally imply greater decision-making power per se. As shown in the section on autonomy in (own) income, many respondents stressed that they needed to exercise agency in a way that would still respect their husbands in their traditional role (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994). Yet, some others explicitly said that they would like to take on their husband's responsibility and have the last say in decision-making over the household's

income. Eliza showed: 'Do you mean that I should have the final say? Do you mean that I should take my husband's responsibility, and I become like the head of the house when making decisions on income? Yes, that would be good (laughing).' (Eliza) She brushed this off with laughter, which could show that while she was aware of the gendered restrictions, changing them as an act of resistance perhaps came at high costs that would not make it a realistic option (Dore et al., 2022; Kabeer, 2024; Lawless et al., 2020).

Interviews then showed that in the process of joint decision-making, disagreements between husband and wife often would arise if a husband did not want to spend his money on household necessities. For example, Rosa showed: 'My husband will usually complain to say: "Should I just be moving around with nothing in my pocket?" And I, as a wife, am looking at it from another angle to say that the home needs to have food.' (Rosa) Then, as explained above, in some cases, a husband would want his wife to spend her own income first, especially on expenses related to the household and children, while holding back his own money or hiding it from her. Respondents perceived this as very unfair and stated that in order to create prosperity for the household, the household's total income needs to be disclosed (FGD 2). Some women complained that their husbands spent money on drinking and extramarital affairs instead of supporting the household. Some respondents would push back in such cases, while others said that they would just have to accept it. Several respondents said that if they had more decision-making power, they would use the money 'more wisely' than their husbands and, according to their own preferences, would spend it on the home, the space they know better than their husbands, or invest it in their businesses. Lecoutere and Chu's (2024) study on intra-household decision-making in Tanzania reported similar findings.

Moreover, as shown in Chapter 5, entering motherhood often enhanced women's ability to make decisions over the household's income as she was met with greater respect and also to be

able to fulfil her mothering responsibilities. At the same time, making sole decisions about household income was something not many respondents desired. While wanting to increase the say they had, they still preferred to make decisions jointly, and ideally in cooperation with their spouses, in order to share the burden and responsibility of making the 'right' decisions. This substantiates findings from earlier studies on household decision-making behaviour in rural areas of the Global South (Doss & Quisumbing, 2020).

While the control over the use of (household) indicator displays adequacy if women have had any input in decision-making on their household's different sources of income, there is a myriad of dynamics in the gendered process of joint decision-making, that determine women's level of input in decision-making over their household's income, if this level is meaningful and if it reflects women's exercise of agency towards empowerment. The findings of the interviews then revealed the nuances of joint decision-making, showing how much input each spouse had, who held the final say, and how this fluctuated depending on factors such as each spouse's contribution to household income and how it was spent. For example, contributing with their own income or entering motherhood often increased women's say in the household. These joint decision-making dynamics highlighted gendered norms around decision-making, showing both the restrictive structures that women internalise and adhere to, and their desire to push back against them, as well as the subtle negotiations they engage in to mediate between the two.

A lot of this information is missing when only asking whether a woman has any degree of input in her household's decision-making processes. It is to note here that the pro-WEAI survey module does ask about the level of input that a respondent has. Qualitative findings then suggest going back to this disaggregated information, which is then dropped in the process of determining indicator adequacy.

Access to and Decisions on Financial Services

Another indicator measuring women's instrumental agency that contributed significantly to women's disempowerment was that of access to and decisions on financial services (Figure 6). For a respondent, this indicator becomes adequate if their household has access to a credit source and they made at least one sole or joint decision about it, if their household could have used a credit source in the last year, or if the respondent has sole or joint access to a financial account (Appendix 1). This held true for just under 60 percent of women, while men's adequacy was more than ten percent higher (Table 4). This could suggest that women were less often than men involved in sole or joint decision-making. At the same time, as per definition, the indicator would become adequate if a household could have used a credit source, without indicating a respondent's input in decision-making.

In interviews, around half of the women reported that they have taken out loans. For those that did not, the reason stated was not the unavailability of a credit source but rather because they felt scared not to be able to pay it back or because they expected to be left alone with that burden without having their spouse supporting.

Many women explained that it is much more common for women, rather than men, to take out loans or to be members of village banks, and some said that even if their husbands would not support them, they would still sometimes take out credit, use it according to their preferences and try to make a plan to pay it back (FGD 1). Still, most women would prefer to consult with their husbands before doing so and to share the burden of payback, especially for bigger loans. Some respondents said that they would only take out joint loans with their spouses.

Women who took out loans did so through their membership in village banks, and two sourced it from the National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF)[57], which, for them, was why they had great decision-making power over the use of the credit. All women who belonged to village banks explained that it really benefited them to overcome monetary issues or that they felt a sense of security to be covered in times of illness or even in the event of death. Women often invested the credits they took out in their businesses or spent them on their homes and children, which could have great implications for their exercise of agency, similar to that of earning an own income, and increase women's ability to make decisions over this money and hence foster their independence.

In other cases, decision-making around the use of credit followed dynamics very similar to those around household income explained above, whereby the wife has some degree of input, but the husband has the last say. This was especially if a credit for a household was taken out by the husband or jointly.

A key factor underlying women's reluctance to take out loans was disagreements between spouses concerning responsibility for loan repayment. This was in particular for those women who took out loans on their own but would need the support of their spouses to pay them back. In some cases, women would explain that even after jointly agreeing to take out a credit, their husbands would leave it to them to take care of the repayment. This was often when the loan was used for household and childcare expenses, since this was regarded as women's responsibilities. For example, Martha explained: 'I was feeling that my child had malaria, at that time, there was no money to get to a private clinic, so what do you do, you go and borrow money for this purpose. When the child gets well, and it is time to return the loan, my husband is not that happy with it,

[57] The NEEF in Malawi is a government initiative designed to provide financial support to Malawians, especially to small and medium-sized enterprises, youth, and women entrepreneurs who lack access to formal banking institutions (National Economic Empowerment Fund (NEEF), n.d.).

and he says that he has no money. Of course, we did not use the money at home; we went and bought medication for the child. He happily tells you that you will return that money alone because the child is now okay.' (Martha)

In addition to being a credit source, village banks were further mentioned as an important group space following the dynamics explained in the section on group membership. For women's empowerment - the changing of established restrictive structures - village banks were an important means to increase access to resources as an important prerequisite for this change, especially if they also provide the potential of collective agency (Giddens, 1979; Kabeer, 1999). At the same time, the extent to which women could make use of financial resources in an empowering way was constrained by intra-household decision-making structures. Interview findings revealed that, similar to dynamics around women's own income, these structures could be challenged when women were the ones to take out the loan. In turn, the act of taking out a loan was complicated by women's fear of being unable to repay it without the support of their spouses.

These findings underscore that it matters who within the household takes out the loan, and whether it is done solely by a woman. The pro-WEAI considers this indicator adequate for a woman respondent if the household has access to credit and if joint decision-making takes place. However, whether she can indeed use this resource in an empowering way remains unclear and would only be revealed through concomitant qualitative research.

Input in Productive Decisions

The pro-WEAI indicator that contributed the least to women's disempowerment and had the highest levels of adequacy, with over 90, was input in productive decisions (Table 4, Figure 6). This indicator considers a respondent adequate if, for all agricultural and non-agricultural activities of the household, they either have some degree of input in decision-making, or feel like they could

make decisions if they wanted (Appendix 1). Hence, from the pro-WEAI findings, the degree to which women are involved in this process remains unclear.

Spouses do farm together, but respondents explained that farming is considered a man's rather than a woman's task (FGD 1). Decisions concerned with the agricultural production of a household were, for example, what crops to grow, when and on what soil to grow them, how to prepare the soil, what farming methods to use, whether to buy fertiliser, and more.

Again, similar to joint decision-making around household or credit income, the most common theme across interviews was that all productive decisions were discussed jointly between spouses, with varying degrees of input from the wife, but the final say was held by the husband. In some households, women could decide on day-to-day farming activities such as planting, weeding or harvesting, but their husbands had the last say on significant financial decisions like purchasing fertiliser, what seeds to purchase, or regarding the hiring of *ganyu* workers (casual workers). This was because men earned higher incomes and women's incomes were often not enough for these purchases or, as explained above, already used for household and child expenditures (FGD 1). Often, when their husbands were away for longer periods to do *ganyu* or other things, women would take on more agricultural decisions.

Women expressed that they would like to have greater decision-making power in their household's productive decisions, while still wishing to consult with their spouses. Similar findings are reported in previous studies examining joint decision-making behaviour in rural areas of countries in the Global South (Doss & Quisumbing, 2020). In interviews, women would highlight that they know their household's needs best in terms of what to grow to provide food: 'As a woman, I am the one who cooks, so I am the one who sees when the flour will end. Leaving it to the man, you may struggle by having no food, so I do get busy telling him what we need to do.' (Miriam) Moreover, as shown in Chapter 5, becoming a mother greatly increased women's ability

to influence their household's agricultural decisions, to ensure that food for the children was available. At the same time, and as explained above, since the husband, as head of the household, was regarded as the main decision-maker, it became clear how strongly the household's food provision depended on the man's decision-making. Martha explained: 'The main thing that we buy in farming is fertiliser, and my husband is the one who buys. If he just decides to say that fertiliser will not be bought, it means that this is a final say, and it will definitely mean that there is less farming produce that year.' (Martha)

Related to this, women elaborated on disagreements that they experience with their spouses in the process of joint agricultural decision-making. Those disagreements often revolved around what crops to plant and what to do with the harvest, particularly the extent to which they should sell the harvest rather than use it as food for the household. Others felt that men left too much of the agricultural work for women and did not participate enough, which was particularly difficult since women already shouldered the main responsibility for household and childcare work (FGD 1). Respondents explained that they could sometimes discuss these matters, but that often, they had to give in.

According to the pro-WEAI input in productive decisions indicator, across the sample, most women had some input into agricultural decision-making. However, the extent to which they were involved remains unclear. Interviews then showed that while women indeed had some degree of input in their households' agricultural decision-making, they rarely ever held the last say. Most often main agricultural decisions of a household, what staple grains to grow, or whether to use fertiliser, were made by the man as the head of the household. Beyond that, in the spaces of agricultural decision-making where women held greater agency, such as day-to-day farming decisions, or growing food to feed their children, women would again have their strategies to more subtly exercise agency to work towards their preferences (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994).

It is to note here that the pro-WEAI survey module does ask about the level of input that a respondent has. Qualitative findings then suggest going back to this disaggregated information, as it is then dropped in the process of determining indicator adequacy.

Ownership of Land and Other Assets

The pro-WEAI indicator of ownership of land and other assets also measures instrumental agency. It considers a respondent adequate if, out of 13 asset types, they solely or jointly own either at least three assets or agricultural land (Appendix 1). This was one of the few indicators where women had slightly higher levels of adequacy than men, who were at 88 percent (Table 4). Here, women had the second-highest levels of adequacy with 90 percent. Whilst for women and men, the proportional contribution to their disempowerment of ownership of land and other assets was very low, the indicator still proportionally contributed slightly more to men's than to women's disempowerment (Figure 6). This could be due to the matrilineal land tenure structures prevalent in Central and Southern Malawi, whereby land is inherited along the female lineage of a family. Different to places that do not follow matriliny, this is favourable for women, for being the main landowners (Kathewera-Banda et al., 2011; Peters, 2010).

This was corroborated by qualitative findings. The majority of women owned land that they inherited from a woman ancestor. These women also lived according to uxorilocal settlement as part of the matrilineal societal system, whereby the husband lived in his wife's community. Women then stayed on their land and used it for farming and residence rather than selling it. This was stated as part of the reasons why parents would give land to women as opposed to men, because men would go and settle somewhere else. For those women who did not follow that custom and lived in their husbands' communities but still owned land, this land was in their home communities

and thus sometimes far away. In interviews, only for two respondents, the land was owned jointly, and in one case, the husband was the sole owner.

Interview findings also showed that land ownership did not equal full control over this land and that the degree to which women had control over their land varied. I found that all women held control in a sense that their husbands could not sell their land. But in terms of what happened on that land, most commonly in terms of farming, the man as the head of the household held significant decision-making power and, in most cases, again, had the last say. This aligns with other studies on matrilineal communities in Malawi (Djurfeldt et al., 2018; Kathewera-Banda et al., 2011).

Regarding household assets, all respondents said that they owned assets jointly with their spouses. Owned to varying degrees, those assets were small livestock, farm equipment and tools, kitchen items, other household items, a phone, or a motorbike. Similar to what Kathewera-Banda et al. (2011) found, some women would report that they own small household and kitchen items, but that other, more valuable assets, such as farming equipment, were owned by their husbands. Around half of the respondents jointly decided over what to do with their assets, but explained that their husbands had the last say. Two women were an exception and reported a high degree of control over their households' assets.

Women's level of control over assets remains unexplored by the pro-WEAI domain. It is however an important resource for their empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Longwe, 1991), and needs to be explored in addition to asking about joint ownership. Moreover, qualitative research helps to understand the gendered meaning ascribed to owning assets of different values. For example, owning kitchen utensils is a less empowering kind of resource than owning more valuable assets such as farming equipment or livestock.

Self-Efficacy

The pro-WEAI indicator of self-efficacy also strongly contributed to women's disempowerment (Figure 6). This indicator, as a measure of intrinsic agency, captures a person's perception of their capabilities and ability to reach their goals (Chen et al., 2001). It asks respondents to think about how different statements about their ability to succeed with personal goals and tasks when facing difficulties and obstacles, conform to their own confidence. The indicator is adequate if a respondent reaches a score indicating that, on average, they believe in their ability to succeed (Appendix 1). About 60 percent of women reached this, yet adequacy for men was more than ten percent higher (Table 4).

In interviews, women elaborated on their personal goals. Many spoke about wanting what they described as a 'brighter future'. This involved matters such as going back to school, finding casual labour, doing business, buying land, or building a house. When asked if they believe that they can obtain those goals and why, the majority of women felt confident about doing so, mostly under the condition that they would be able to earn an income that could provide a budget to pursue their goals. In turn, illness and finding money were the greatest hindering factors for those unsure if they could succeed with their goals. The recent currency devaluation[58] exacerbated that feeling.

When asked whether they felt they could still achieve their goals despite these difficulties, about half of the respondents said they would try to find ways to cope and continue moving toward their goals. This shows that while most women felt confident in their capacities to achieve their goals, this confidence strongly depended on external parameters, with money playing an important role. At the same time, it became clear that this belief was not compromised by low

[58] In November 2023, the central bank of Malawi devaluated the Malawian kwacha (MWK) by 30 percent to bolster declining foreign currency reserves strained by increasing commodity prices and decreasing revenue from the country's tobacco exports. This is the second devaluation since May 2022 (Reuters, 2023).

confidence in their personal abilities, as long as there was a supportive foundation provided by external factors. This may point to women's ability to exercise intrinsic agency.

The pro-WEAI self-efficacy indicator also asks about women's confidence in performing effectively across many different tasks. In interviews, around half of the women felt confident in carrying out various activities such as taking care of the children and household, doing *ganyu*, and farming. The difficulties they mentioned here included not having eaten enough, feeling ill, and, very prominently, the challenge of reconciling work outside the household with childcare responsibilities: 'The most difficult task is farming. You can imagine that I have to drop Prince (my child) at school, at the same time, the garden is waiting for me, and it is difficult to take care of the child and at the same time to go to the garden. If there is money, it is better for us because we employ people to assist us.' (Esther)

According to the quantitative findings, women's confidence in their abilities to succeed with their personal goals was low. Different to this, in interviews, the majority of women believed in themselves. At the same time, the qualitative findings shed light on the underlying and possibly hindering factors that influence women's beliefs, while also showing that low levels of confidence to achieve their goals are due more to external factors, such as a lack of budget income or high workloads, than to a lack of women's confidence in their abilities. This is an important nuance when understanding women's exercise of intrinsic agency.

Work Balance

The lack of work balance contributed strongly to women's disempowerment. This indicator in particular contributed much more to women's disempowerment than to that of men (Figure 6). Work balance measures the time that respondents spent working in the last 24 hours, starting at 4 a.m. of the previous day. The indicator is calculated as the time spent on their primary activities

plus the time (times 0.5) spent on childcare as secondary activities. Adequacy was reached if a respondent spent less than 10.5 hours on combined primary and secondary activities (Appendix 1). This was true for just over half of the women respondents, who had much lower levels of adequacy than men (with almost 20 percent more) (Table 4).

In interviews, women gave insights into a typical day of their lives. This day looked similar across interviews. Women would wake up around 5 a.m. to prepare porridge for the children before they went to school, and then help the younger children get ready for school. Older children would need less support in terms of getting ready or bathing. This was followed by farming work and/or household chores such as sweeping or mopping the house, cleaning dishes, or fetching water. While doing these tasks, they commonly and simultaneously took care of their younger children who were not in school (yet). Often after being fed and bathed, these younger children would go and play outside the house with their age mates. After the farming and/or housework, women would begin preparing lunch, for it to be ready when the children returned from school. Many kept bags of maize stored in their houses for *nsima*, but would go to the market to buy relish to be eaten with the *nsima.*[59]

In the afternoon, women would have some time to rest, meet their friends, or do farming work in their gardens. However, many of them highlighted that this was only possible sometimes, if they had completed all their household chores. Still, about a third of the women said that they always had enough leisure time. A few women fully relied on *ganyu* for an income and did not do farming for themselves at all. They became really busy when they were hired by somebody, but

[59] While most respondents could provide lunch for their children, in some cases food scarcity was a serious problem. Those women had to send their children to school without having eaten before or could not provide an evening meal. This would leave them feel sad and sorry for their children but also weakened them and made their daily tasks more difficult.

otherwise had more free time than others. The *ganyu* carried out most commonly was the provision of farming or gardening assistance, or carrying water for brick moulders.

From the interviews, it was really clear that household and childcare chores were considered a woman's responsibility, whereas the husband would work outside the household as the main breadwinner. 'We never agreed on who should do work inside or outside the household. However, the household duties belong to me as a woman, but we jointly do the farm work.' (Yanhko) This speaks to other studies on gender norms in Southern Malawi (Kululanga et al., 2012; Mudege et al., 2017). In certain cases, women's husbands would help them with some of the household chores. Yet, most women explained that their husbands would only help if their wives fell ill. Only two households in the interviews had set work-sharing agreements. In these, the husband would sometimes take on housework and childcare work during the time his wife was working outside the household.

Moreover, Martha showed that the gendered nature of responsibilities could even be used as a means of showing resentment during a disagreement between spouses: 'When we do not agree, he will make sure that his jeans are dirty so that I find it tough to wash them. It is more like giving me a punishment, and it's a lot of work, even just washing for Sofia (my daughter), it is a lot of work.' (Martha)

When asked if there is time during the day when they can freely decide what to do, the responses varied. In this context, all respondents raised the wish to spend more time doing business, working on their gardens, or on leisure time. Again, as shown above, high workloads were a factor that inhibited women's ability to perform multiple different tasks. This was stated in particular about women's ability to earn their own income (Arora & Rada, 2017; Miedema et al., 2021), which then impacted their ability to make decisions. Carrying out both childcare and paid

work seemed to come at the cost of women's leisure time, which supports literature on care work (Folbre, 1984, 2006; Kabeer, 1994).

Some women could leave their children with women relatives or other women in the community, while they left the house to do business and would come home in the evening to prepare supper. If some of their children were old enough, those would commonly take care of their younger siblings for some hours during the day. In some cases, respondents explained that their eldest daughters would help with household chores, most often if those women did paid work outside their households. Women with younger children who were not yet at school or still needed to be breastfed primarily found it more difficult to reconcile the desire to work with childcare duties. Some did household chores while the child was playing outside, others did business from home, or took their children with them to the market. While pointing at these difficulties and saying that they would like to be able to work more to gain more of their own income, none of the women said that childcare work is stopping them entirely from doing these things outside the household. This speaks to Lentz et al. (2019), who show that 'women may assume that it is understood that many of their daily activities involve children.' (ibid., p. 318)

Interview findings showed that women were expected to do household and childcare chores, but in order to gain a certain degree of independence, they also had to earn their own income. High workloads are then not just arduous; they also prevent women from gaining independence through other means, such as an own income and from possibly resisting gendered norms. Then, the income they earned was often expected to be used to carry out the chores ascribed to them. If they want to generate a surplus to invest in their own business, they needed to work even harder.

The elaborations of Martha were emblematic of these tensions at play in women's lives. According to many external parameters, as well as her own perception of herself, Martha would be regarded as empowered. She ran her own business, was employed, and had input into decisions

regarding her own income. She reported pushing back against her husband if one of his decisions regarding the household did not match what she thought was best. At the same time, she managed different types of workloads on her own and also led the mutual support group *Destiny's Girls*. While she enjoyed some of these works, she almost never had the time to rest and was overworked. Her husband would not support her with childcare or household chores.

These different stories paint a picture of a very complex reality for the women and align with quantitative findings that show that women have very high daily workloads. At the same time, in interviews, all women explained that they really enjoy their mothering duties and that they want to spend time with their children. They also referred to their social identities as mothers linked to conceptions of womanhood and adulthood, group belonging, or fostered levels of respect, just to mention a few of the social dynamics elaborated in Chapter 5.

This strongly emphasises the need to understand how women want to spend their time and if they are able to act on these preferences. Hence, an exploration of the 'quality' of women's time, of how they would like to spend it and what prevents them from doing so, might be a better measure than a certain work hour threshold (Seymour et al., 2017). This is envisaged by Sinharoy et al.'s (2023) concept of 'time-use agency'. In my findings, while women indeed enjoyed spending time with their children and wanted to conduct care work, they also wanted to work outside the household and needed to rest. As shown in the section before, women often felt confident to reconcile both, but this self-efficacy was dampened by their overwhelming workloads, constituted by gendered responsibilities that they could not distribute.

While counting a 10.5-hour threshold for men and women as per the pro-WEAI indicator is useful to compare everyday gendered time disparities, women's exercise of agency over their time remains unexplored. Moreover, women may underreport care work as they consider it normal to carry it out simultaneously with other activities (Lentz et al., 2019). The cyclical and ongoing nature

of care work that is driven by needs rather than measured by clock time also might dissolve boundaries between work and leisure (Bryson, 2008), whilst the origins of clock time itself are a European construct (Chung et al., 2019). This all further complicates the measurement of daily working hours.

To conclude, the qualitative findings provide insights into gendered caretaking roles and the strategies women employ to cope with them. With regard to women's agency over their use of time, the findings illuminate the value women ascribe to different types of chores. Combined with the quantification of the hours women work each day, these insights offer a basis for comparison across genders and locations, while also enabling an examination of the nuances that women themselves identified as important.

Respect Among Household Members

The pro-WEAI indicator of respect among household members was also one of the strong contributors to women's disempowerment (Figure 6). The indicator aims to capture intrinsic agency by asking whether respondents felt respect from their household members, if they trust them to act in their best interest, and if they feel comfortable disagreeing with them. It becomes adequate if the respondent confirms all these conditions (Appendix 1). This was reached by just under 60 percent of women and by about ten percent more men (Table 4).

Qualitative findings revealed that around half of the respondents felt respected by their husbands that that this respect was shown by him, for instance by solving disagreements with their wives in a calm and amicable way, by apologising in a conflict, by using respectful language, by taking on some of their wife's household chores, or, most frequently mentioned, by calling their wife by their child's name. Two-thirds of women said that they trusted that their spouse acted in their best interests, while the other third said that they would not always be sure about this.

In interviews, more than half of the women said that they could bring up disagreements with a spouse and that they could discuss and settle the matter amicably. The other respondents explained that they had to be a bit more careful and that some sort of discussion was only possible after some time, when feelings around the matter had settled more for their spouses.

Based on this, and on the qualitative findings showing that husbands most often held the final say in household decision-making, as well as women's emphasis on the need to respect their husbands, I assume that, in general, men enjoy greater respect within their households than women. This increased respect appeared to contribute to men's ability to openly disagree with women or express their opinions, which, as the findings suggest, was often more difficult for women.

Thus, quantitative and qualitative findings painted a similar picture, but important details about how respect in a household is expressed and felt, and about the dynamics of disagreements, which are an important consideration when exercising intrinsic agency, were revealed only in the qualitative findings. However, while this indicator is part of the pro-WEAI version that I used, it has been dropped from the most recent version of the pro-WEAI (Seymour et al., 2023).

Attitudes About Intimate Partner Violence

Women had high levels of adequacy of almost 80 percent. However, adequacy for men was more than ten percent higher (Table 4). This finding is noteworthy, as it suggests a scenario in which more men than women responded to the pro-WEAI survey questions that violence towards women is not tolerable, although these responses, in most cases, came from married couples within the same households.

This could be due to different reasons. Women may have internalised beliefs around the acceptance of IPV more than men, shaped by prevailing norms and previous experiences, which

is reflected in their adequacy levels. Alternatively, women might express some level of acceptance of IPV to legitimise their own experiences. Both explanations are consistent with what Dickson et al. (2023) found in several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women's lower levels of adequacy in respect among household members could also indicate that the threat of experiencing IPV might make women feel much less respected than men. Moreover, there is a considerable amount of awareness-raising work around IPV in Malawi, especially from external actors such as NGOs. Therefore, I assume that men are aware that IPV is regarded as intolerable by these actors and also by community members. While IPV can still occur behind closed doors within the intimate household space, men may communicate to outsiders and to survey enumerators that, in all scenarios covered by the indicator, violence would not be tolerable.

Across all interviews, respondents stressed that any kind of violence between spouses is intolerable and that there are no circumstances that would change this. They said that if violence occurs, a woman should leave the household. For some of the divorced women, this was indeed the reason they left their marriage. Quantitative and qualitative findings painted a similar picture in this area, whereby most women did not find IPV acceptable. However, for those who were inadequate in this area, it would be important to qualitatively investigate the reasons behind this. In a similar vein, the finding that more men than women regarded violence against women as unacceptable points to the need for further contextual and qualitative research.

Visit Important Locations

The lack of ability to visit important locations did not greatly contribute to women's disempowerment (Figure 6). This indicator measures instrumental agency by counting the number of important locations that a respondent visits each week or each month, and becomes adequate if they visit at least two of three locations once per week (urban centre, market, or relatives), or if

they visit one health facility or one public meeting at least once per month (Appendix 1). Women had slightly higher levels of adequacy than men (Table 4), although for men, this indicator contributed more strongly to disempowerment (Figure 6).

These findings were unexpected since the qualitative data collected to set up the pro-WEAI, across contexts, suggested that women's mobility is restricted due to gendered norms (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019), which would lead to the assumption that men can move around more freely. Several interviews spoke to gendered aspects of mobility when respondents stated that men are more 'moveous' than women in general. Rather than referring to day-to-day mobility, this comment related to how men settle in the matrilineal context and to the fact that they leave their household for prolonged periods to find work, while women tend to stay at home more.

In interviews, respondents mentioned places that they visit frequently. These matched the selection of places included in the pro-WEAI indicator. Only one of the respondents felt restrictions on her mobility coming from her husband. Most women felt content visiting these places, especially a friend's house or a village head meeting. They did not always like going to the market to run errands, and those who had older children would often send them instead. Importantly, it became clear that women faced expectations to carry out gendered tasks that require mobility, such as going to the market for shopping or taking children to the hospital if they fell ill. At the same time, women's mobility also determined their ability to conduct their businesses, which involved the selling and purchasing of produce. This aligns with findings from Rubin et al. (2019), on gender equality in agricultural value chains. Almost all women further highlighted that there were places they could not go as women, such as bars or other spaces where mostly men gather or consume alcohol. They explained that this was out of fear of losing respect or being perceived as a sex worker.

As explained above, qualitative findings showed that paid work outside the household, such as doing *ganyu*, farming, small-scale business, or being employed, was primarily regarded as a man's responsibility. This could involve selling at the market or doing paid work in an urban centre, which would be captured by the indicator, but it could also require leaving the household for a prolonged period to work on someone else's farmland, mould bricks, or engage in other activities in places that the indicator does not capture. Meanwhile, women tended to stay within a closer radius of the home and visited the same places more frequently but for shorter periods of time. This was due to gendered norms around responsibilities, including the restrictive aspects of being the main caretaker of the children, as well as due to monetary constraints. This could point to relevant locations in the research context, particularly in terms of distance and length of absence from the home, that are not included in the pro-WEAI indicator.

Moreover, the pro-WEAI indicator does not differentiate between whether a woman goes to the market to purchase goods or to sell produce. This is an important distinction, as it indicates whether she is carrying out a gendered responsibility or earning her own income, which has empowering implications. Interviews also showed that mobility is only empowering when a respondent wants to be mobile, and not when she is mobile because she has to be, which was often considered a burden.

Finally, while this indicator contributed more to men's disempowerment than to women's (Figure 6), this may reflect men's limited access to places such as urban centres or public gatherings rather than not going to markets or health facilities, which are typically viewed as women's responsibilities and might instead contribute to women's indicator inadequacy. This difference highlights the need for further qualitative research to understand the empowering implications of specific locations and the gendered norms surrounding them, beyond simply counting the number of places visited weekly or monthly.

6.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined whether women's own understandings of empowerment align with the way empowerment is measured in the pro-WEAI framework. I explored the extent to which the 12 pro-WEAI indicators capture women's lived experiences, using a mixed methods approach that compared survey results with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Quantitatively, I found that 30 percent of the women in my sample were considered empowered by the pro-WEAI. In interviews, when respondents were asked whether they regarded themselves as empowered, more than half of the women stated that they did. Quantitatively, the highest adequacy scores were found in input in productive decisions, ownership of land and other assets, and attitudes towards intimate partner violence, while the lowest were in group membership, autonomy in income, and membership in influential groups.

The pro-WEAI findings provide important insights into the status of women's empowerment within the sample, reveal trends and patterns across the different indicators and their proportional contributions to (dis)empowerment, and allow for comparisons across genders, contexts, and over time. Qualitative findings only rarely directly contradicted the quantitative findings regarding adequacy levels within the individual pro-WEAI indicators. At the same time, they added important layers of meaning that illuminated the social and gendered dynamics of the research context and the domains the indicators are designed to measure. This added complexity enabled a critical engagement with how the indicators are conceptualised, how indicator adequacy is achieved, and the extent to which this reflects women's lived realities within each indicator domain.

In the area of instrumental agency, adequacy in the pro-WEAI is achieved when women participate in joint decision-making regarding income use, credit, or productive activities.

However, the indicators do not capture the extent of women's influence in these decisions. Across all three indicators, interviews revealed similar dynamics of gendered norms around household decision-making. Although many women contributed to discussions, the final say was most often held by their husbands, who were viewed either as the main providers or as the traditional heads of household. Women's perspectives were often not equally weighted, and the term 'joint' masked underlying power asymmetries. Measuring only whether women report having any input obscures whether that input carries meaningful influence and may therefore misrepresent women's experiences of instrumental agency within the household.

Qualitative findings further showed that women often relied on subtle negotiations rather than direct resistance when navigating restrictive norms, highlighting forms of relational and negotiated agency that the pro-WEAI does not reflect, as it draws from an understanding of agency as resistance against patriarchal norms (Kabeer, 1999). Forms of agency that are not direct resistance allow women to exert influence without directly challenging established gender roles in contexts where this was not possible or where the price they might pay for resisting was too high (Nnaemeka, 2004; Villareal, 1994). My research therefore supports the argument that the relevance of and social dynamics around women's say in decision-making processes need to be examined to understand empowering effects (Bernard et al., 2020; Seymour & Peterman, 2018).

In the area of intrinsic agency, the pro-WEAI treats self-efficacy as an internal characteristic, yet my qualitative findings showed that women's confidence in achieving their goals was strongly dependent on external conditions. Women frequently described aspirations such as starting a business or returning to school, but their belief in realising these goals depended on financial resources, partner support, and the ability to balance responsibilities. Where confidence was low, it was rarely due to a lack of internal belief, but rather to limited resources or heavy workloads.

This demonstrates the relational and embedded nature of intrinsic agency, which is not adequately captured when self-efficacy is treated as an individual attribute.

Qualitative findings also revealed how closely interconnected the indicator areas are. Workloads influenced self-efficacy, and access to an independent income shaped women's ability to participate in or influence household decision-making. Such interrelations speak to wider research on the complexities of and relationships between areas of women's agency (Quisumbing, Sproule, et al., 2021; Sinharoy et al., 2023).

For the area of collective agency, some groups measured by the pro-WEAI, such as village banks or women's support networks, were described as supportive and empowering, yet not all groups offered the same potential. Experiences of collective agency depended greatly on the purpose, membership, and dynamics of specific groups, which standardised indicators do not capture.

Comparing quantitative and qualitative findings allowed me to assess how adequately the index captures women's lived experiences within the 12 indicator domains. Looking at how these domain areas relate to areas of women's lives that they considered empowering, I was also able to identify which dimensions of empowerment are visible through standardised measurement and which are not.

I found that several of the pro-WEAI indicators across all three areas of agency aligned with what women themselves explained to be important for their empowerment. Multiple indicators used to measure instrumental and intrinsic agency directly corresponded to empowering effects that women associated with being independent or having a greater say in household decision-making. Material resources that respondents mentioned, such as having their own income, farming inputs, assets, and access to credit, were also closely related. This also included the importance of group membership as collective agency.

Qualitative findings also revealed important areas that the pro-WEAI does not address. Women consistently described social achievements as empowering, and, most importantly, highlighted empowering experiences of motherhood, such as gaining internal and external respect, increased influence within their households, or a greater voice in their communities.

Most of these empowering effects occur outside of an understanding of empowerment as resistance against restrictive gender norms, which the pro-WEAI implies. As shown in the previous chapters, while mothering work falls under women's prescribed roles, which has restrictive implications (Kululanga et al., 2012; Mudege et al., 2017), which would reflect in the pro-WEAI workload indicator, this coexisted with women's desire to take good care of their children and a sense of fulfilment that comes with it. Both dimensions shape how women make sole and joint decisions in their households. While not considering these as binary, it is important to understand to what extent these decisions merely fulfil gendered expectations for mothers or reflect women's own preferences.

To make sense of women's empowerment as part of their complex and differing realities, their exercise of agency beyond resistance, such as relational agency or agency enacted in navigating, adapting to, and sometimes upholding cultural norms, needs to be taken into account (Khader, 2011; Mahmood, 2001; Narayan, 2002). Accordingly, since motherhood significantly shapes women's lives and their sense of identity, it is a crucial factor when exploring empowerment. This is consistent with the work of scholars of African feminisms[60] (Amadiume, 1987, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 2000, 2015; Saidi, 2023).

[60] As laid out in Chapter 1.3, I am using the pluralism 'African feminisms', following Nnaemeka (1998) to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of movements, thought and activism across the African continent, shaped by diverse cultural imperatives, historical contexts, and localised realities. Drawing from her concept, I then use the term 'Western feminisms' to acknowledge the pluralism therein too.

Qualitative findings also revealed that the greater decision-making power and household influence women experience when entering motherhood can be interpreted as an exercise of transformative agency, which entails an element of resistance in Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment. This increased power was often grounded in women's authority and social positioning as mothers, and often complemented by increased access to resources. A detailed exploration of these dynamics is provided in Chapter 5.

In the area of collective agency, the empowering dynamics of motherhood became particularly visible because many groups required women to be mothers to participate. These group spaces were regarded as important for empowerment because of mutual assistance and the opportunity to share experiences of motherhood. Here, qualitative findings highlighted how entering motherhood is conducive to the exercise of collective agency (power with) and how it can lead to an increased sense of intrinsic agency (power within), which often translates into greater instrumental agency (power to), the action element of agency (Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). Accordingly, research needs to explore the forms and dynamics of social capital that groups provide and how this translates into empowering potential (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2014), rather than simply asking whether women belong to any group. While the theory behind indicators such as group membership acknowledges the importance of relational agency, standardised measurement often fails to capture the informal and deeply contextual ways in which these dynamics unfold.

Taken together, my findings in this chapter suggest that while the pro-WEAI provides a useful approximation of women's empowerment and includes many relevant domains, it misses relevant lived experiences and values that shape women's understandings of power. Several of the pro-WEAI domains, such as group membership, income generation, decision-making, and access to resources, do align with women's own priorities. Yet the ways in which women act within those spaces, the meanings they assign to them, and the social dynamics at play often diverge from what

is captured in the standardised survey. Key gaps remain, particularly regarding the complexity of joint decision-making, the varying relevance of group participation, and the relational forms of agency that women employ.

Qualitative research is needed not only to capture the nuanced ways in which women experience empowerment in a given context but also to inform development interventions that seek to influence these dynamics, drawing from quantitative measurement findings. Without sufficient contextual understanding, external actors risk overlooking how empowerment is negotiated within women's current realities and may only partially or inconsistently support processes through which women become empowered.

Regarding motherhood, this need is especially pronounced since many women involved in development interventions are mothers, and motherhood is a significant aspect of their lives. Women's lived experiences of motherhood shape their concepts of empowerment and also interact with many of the 12 indicator areas, such as those discussed above. Meanwhile, none of the 12 pro-WEAI indicators explicitly engages with motherhood.

In this light, it becomes important to understand how motherhood and empowerment interact in a given context. I can only tentatively suggest a component that could be added to the pro-WEAI. It would need to investigate to what extent motherhood impacts women's ability to exercise agency, whereby the definition of agency is not bound to resistance against restrictive gender norms, or to understand how motherhood shapes both access to and experience of group membership. Yet, it is most likely that qualitative investigation is required to meaningfully capture these effects, given their contextual nature and dependency on women's emic conceptions of empowerment.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that both qualitative and quantitative methods are needed to understand women's empowerment in meaningful ways. Quantitative tools such as the

pro-WEAI are valuable for tracking trends and comparing across settings, but they risk flattening complex and context-specific experiences. Qualitative insights, by contrast, bring forward the moral, relational, and negotiated dimensions of empowerment that are otherwise obscured. Only by integrating these approaches can development practice move closer to capturing the realities of women's lives and supporting empowerment in meaningful ways that resonate with women's own understandings.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have drawn on Oyěwùmí (2000), who highlights that 'mother is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women' (ibid., p. 1096).

I was reminded of this during a visit to a community north of Zomba. After the village head had been informed of my arrival, he announced my visit to the community and explained that I had come to speak with the mothers. On that day, *Amayi* Felista, a community elder, welcomed me with a broad smile. She proudly pointed to the *chitenge* she had chosen to wear for the occasion, its bright yellow fabric emblazoned with Oyěwùmí's sentiment: the silhouette of a woman in a headscarf, dressed in the style of new mothers and carrying a baby, accompanied by the inscription 'Happy Mother's Day!' Oyěwùmí's words, together with this image of *Amayi* Felista, have accompanied me throughout the writing of this thesis. They served as a reminder of the centrality of motherhood to women's identities and experiences, and of the importance of placing motherhood at the centre of debates on women's empowerment.

However, while much of the women's empowerment literature draws on the accounts of women who are, in fact, mothers, women's lived experiences of motherhood, and how these interact with empowerment, are largely absent from it. In this thesis, I contributed to these debates by exploring the lived experiences of mothers in Central and Southern Malawi. By focusing on women's own conceptions and everyday practices of motherhood, I moved away from narrow definitions that frame motherhood only in terms of prominent discourses or as a preassigned gender role. Instead, I examined how women themselves define and negotiate motherhood, how they experience empowerment within and against structural constraints, and how these two domains intersect in their lives. I then turned to the pro-WEAI to examine the extent to which the areas of empowerment measured in development practice capture the lived experiences of empowerment of mothers who are often the recipients of development interventions.

Theoretical Contributions

My research makes several theoretical contributions that I lay out in the following. I moved beyond conceptualising motherhood as a set of values that revolve around prominent theoretical discourses that stand in a particular relationship with the patriarchy, either being seen as inherently oppressive or as something that has to be defended against it. Much of this debate treats motherhood as such a familiar institution that scholars often do not consider it necessary to look rigorously into women's own conceptualisations of it. The risk of doing so is that women's own conceptions of motherhood are undermined, and their lived experiences misrepresented (Walker, 1995), and that motherhood would be ascribed to a kind of normative authority and to a sense of universalism, which can be strongly criticised for issues of essentialism and exclusion (Bailey, 1997; DiQuinzio, 1993; Lugones, 2003; Lugones & Spelman, 1983).

Hence, in Chapter 4 of this thesis, I grappled with my research sub-questions of what the social, cultural, and economic factors in the lives of women in Central and Southern Malawi are that constitute their experiences of motherhood and their identities as mothers, and, inherent in this, how these intersect with local normative expectations around motherhood.

Rather than using theoretical debates as a starting point, I took mothers' lived realities as the central point of inquiry. Instead of asking whether motherhood might have an impact on women's identities, I showed what this impact is, something that is rarely done. I analysed what motherhood means on the ground for women who are mothers and argued that only by shifting the focus from discourse to mothers' lived experiences can we see the multiple layers through which motherhood shapes both women's own thinking and the ways in which they are perceived by the social world around them.

This way it was possible to understand how women themselves construct social identities, to highlight the importance of the relational aspects of motherhood rather than looking at it only

individually or within nuclear households, and to trace how it unfolds at the intersections of structure and agency, continuity and change, discourse and lived experience.

I showed that mothers' lives are shaped by historical legacies and patriarchal norms that manifest in dominant discourses and construct ideals of the good mother, which often entail restrictive expectations that position women as primary caregivers and moral custodians of their households. Yet women's accounts revealed how they interpreted, stretched, and departed from these discourses in everyday life. This occurred in the space of mothering practice, in the ways women raised and cared for their children, or when they provided for them economically. It also happened in the space of forming a social identity, enabled by the social recognition and legitimacy that came with being acknowledged as a mother by family and community, and as experienced internally by mothers themselves in terms of pride, purpose, and authority. Women forged multiple social identities that encompassed not only being mothers but also, for example, being paid workers and providers or community group members.

I contribute to the literature on motherhood by exploring these different factors that constitute experiences of motherhood and identities of mothers. I show that motherhood emerges as a plural and contested category, embedded in cultural expectations yet continually reshaped through mothers' lived realities. My study thus emphasises that discourses cannot be taken as definitive of these lived experiences.

Drawing from the findings that women, through their everyday individual and collective practices, can influence dominant discourses of motherhood, and that the formation of social identity is not only an internalised experience but also a potential site of activism and mobilisation, in Chapter 5, I explored my research sub-questions of how women in Central and Southern Malawi conceptualise their own empowerment and agency, and which dimensions of motherhood they understand as empowering or disempowering. Central to this analysis was an examination of the

extent to which these conceptions of agency entail forms of resistance to restrictive social and structural constraints.

To understand the channels through which the relationship between motherhood and empowerment takes place, I examined women's emic conceptions of empowerment and how they relate these to their experiences of motherhood. Women identified income generation, a degree of independence, meaningful participation in household decision-making, and the ability to support others as central to empowerment, and pointed to restrictions such as high workloads and men's authority that curtailed their influence.

These understandings of empowerment align with conceptualisations of women's empowerment as structural change towards a society where women are freed from restrictive gender norms (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994, 1999; Rowlands, 1997). This framework implies women's resistance to those norms and was most prominently defined by Kabeer (1999) as gaining the ability to make strategic life choices (ibid., p. 437).

Likewise, women described empowerment in contextual and situated terms. The variety of such elaborations highlighted the challenge of having one comprehensive definition: for some, it meant resistance against restrictive gender norms; for others, it was enacted within ascribed roles through adaptation, negotiation, and the strategic use of existing expectations to create room for manoeuvre. I found that dimensions of motherhood were an integral part of these dynamics and that women often expressed that the ability to be a good caretaker felt empowering to them.

According to the approach of empowerment as resistance, women's desire to be a good caretaker would then be ascribed to their internalised oppression and adapted preferences. However, in my study it became clear that the meaning women ascribe to motherhood goes far beyond surrendering to a preassigned role, and the desire to fulfil these roles can indeed be regarded as agentic behaviour. While the restrictive elements of gendered expectations of

motherhood, such as heightened burdens and responsibilities, were present in women's elaborations, being a mother also conferred forms of power through authority, status, legitimacy, and a heightened sense of agency.

This could, in turn, translate into higher decision-making power in domains of the household that are unrelated to children and can be regarded as empowering in line with Kabeer's (1999) sense, as it translates into 'gaining the ability to make strategic life choices' (ibid., p. 437) from within the sphere of motherhood. Especially important was the space of collective agency, where women mobilised through matrilineal kinship networks and mutual support groups that formed around shared roles as mothers.

Throughout the various strands of this thesis, by mapping theories of motherhood with those of women's empowerment, and by shifting the focus from the theoretical to the individual, my research contributes to the limited literature exploring the complex possibilities and pathways of their linkages. This enabled me to address the central research question of this thesis: How do women in Central and Southern Malawi experience motherhood, and how do these experiences shape their understandings of empowerment and agency?

I found that women in Central and Southern Malawi understand motherhood not as a single, uniform role but as a diverse and actively negotiated, adapted, and contested set of practices and meanings that interact with social, cultural, and economic factors in their lives. I delineated how women's exercise of mothering practices that exemplify a rupture from prominent and restrictive discourses can be a space of empowerment and highlighted the empowering dynamics inherent in women's formation of their social identities as mothers, which are not bound to agency as resistance.

My findings suggest a multidimensional theoretical framework of women's empowerment that moves beyond equating agency with resistance and acknowledges gender normative constraints

while also respecting women's agentic and empowering behaviour within preassigned roles, most importantly motherhood. Such a framework also needs to capture the relational value of women's lives and mutual interdependence, since the ability to make strategic life choices is commonly understood as individual choice. This is important due to the communal ways of being in Central and Southern Malawi, which require negotiations and compromises rather than confrontations (Nnaemeka, 1998, 2004). This framework needs to be intersectional in order to further capture how different socioeconomic factors, such as class or religion, determine mothers' experiences of empowerment.

Overall, it is necessary to keep in mind that the time frame and scope of my study only provide a partial and contextual insight into the complex realities of women in Central and Southern Malawi. In doing so, my findings contribute to wider debates on motherhood, while at the same time cautioning against any generalisation. Perhaps then, looking at individual experiences as the basis of a multi-dimensional account takes seriously the creation of a degree of unifying meaning that can be brought to the theoretical level, such as the idea that motherhood can be empowering, while also acknowledging the workings of difference that women derive from their experiences and from their specific sociocultural and historical contexts.

My theoretical contributions stand in support of literature, mostly coming from scholars of African feminisms[61], that argues that motherhood can have empowering implications (Amadiume, 1997; Arnfred, 2011; Oyěwùmí, 2000) and speak to scholarship that challenges the framing of empowerment solely in terms of resistance against normative structural constraints, as often implied in Western understandings of feminisms, which is not always an adequate lens, particularly

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when exercising resistance against them can have significant negative consequences for women (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Mahmood, 2001; Nnaemeka, 2004).

Furthermore, in Chapter 6, the mixed methods chapter of this thesis, I turned to the research question of the extent to which the areas of quantitative measures of women's empowerment encompass the understandings of empowerment held by women in Central and Southern Malawi, and as part of this, whether the ways in which the indicator areas are measured, and the outcomes they generate, adequately capture the women's lived experiences.

I combined quantitative and qualitative findings to understand how women's lived experiences of empowerment align with its measurement in development practice, as captured by the pro-WEAI, in a context where all women survey respondents were mothers. I found that the quantitative measure encompassed certain areas that women valued, such as decision-making, control over resources, and regarding domestic violence as intolerable. Yet important divergences emerged between indicator measurement and outcomes, and women's lived experiences. For example, if women had any say in joint decision-making, they were regarded as adequate in most pro-WEAI decision-making indicators. However, this concealed the persistent dominance of men in these processes, and women explained in interviews that they often did not regard their input as meaningful. Although many valued joint decision-making, they wished to have a greater say in these processes and did not feel empowered in their current decision-making roles. Another divergence appeared in the domain of self-efficacy. While the index treats self-efficacy largely as an internal trait, women in my study described it as contingent on access to resources, partner support, and the ability to balance care responsibilities. Similarly, regarding the disempowering effects of high working hours, identified by the pro-WEAI, women themselves rarely expressed a wish for more leisure time. Rather, the problem was that they could often not transfer care work to their husbands, since this was perceived very negatively by the community. By assessing the

extent to which the pro-WEAI domains capture these realities, I have highlighted the limitations of standardised measurement tools.

Especially prevalent was the neglect of motherhood as a central dimension of empowerment. This was most visible in the domain of group membership, which, as measured by the index, did not capture the specific empowering potential of groups of mothers that women themselves emphasised, nor the ways in which access to other group spaces is often tied to being a mother.

Methodological Implications

Based on these findings, my study also holds methodological implications. I argue that while the pro-WEAI, as a quantitative standardised measure of women's empowerment, generates a useful overview of the status and contributing domains of women's (dis)empowerment within a given sample, it does not capture many of the social dynamics relevant to those domains of empowerment or the varied and multiple ways in which women experience and conceptualise it.

I emphasise that to gain a comprehensive picture, quantitative measures need to be complemented with a qualitative investigation into how women perceive their own empowerment[62]. More broadly, my findings support scholars who argue that the transformative social dynamics underpinning women's empowerment cannot be adequately captured by the sole measurement through quantitative and standardised indicators (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 1999).

In my study, it was further clear that an additional domain would have been required to measure the empowering effects of social achievements and, most importantly, intersections of motherhood and fostered agency. Currently, women's lived experiences of motherhood are

[62] I am aware that the developers of the pro-WEAI recommend its use in conjunction with qualitative methods (Malapit et al., 2019). However, reviewing multiple studies applying the pro-WEAI to measure women's empowerment in development contexts, suggests that this recommendation is seldomly followed in practice.

entirely absent from quantitative empowerment measures, as these frameworks are not designed to treat motherhood as a relevant analytical category, possibly because motherhood itself remains largely underexplored in much of the prominent literature on empowerment, as discussed in this thesis.

At the same time, many of the women targeted by development interventions are mothers. These interventions directly affect their lives as mothers, not only by shaping how they allocate time and labour, but also by influencing their caregiving practices. This is especially true when women are instrumentalised in their roles as mothers, such as in interventions that promote nutritional components to impact their children's health.

Policy Implications

This links to the policy implications that my study holds. Development practitioners who aim to empower women need to gain a nuanced understanding of the meaning and implications of motherhood, one that goes beyond instrumentalising it for intervention purposes. They need to recognise that motherhood is a complex and fluid identity shaped by both restrictive and empowering dynamics. Such an understanding could enable development actors to promote empowerment in ways that are more closely aligned with women's actual needs, values, and lived realities, which do not always involve the exercise of agency in the form of resistance.

Meanwhile, when aiming to empower women in ways that enable them to resist and challenge restrictive gendered structures, such as gaining greater decision-making power, which women in my study indeed regarded as empowering, development practitioners must take a holistic view of empowerment. This involves understanding the relational and contextual dynamics of power. Such an approach needs to be integrated into intervention planning in order to initiate meaningful and lasting change for women across various levels and spaces over time. Pre-intervention

qualitative research could explore how local gender norms shape women's everyday realities and influence areas relevant to intervention design and outcomes.

Designing interventions that aim to enable the challenging of these norms is not an easy task. There is always a risk of imposing Western ideals and, in doing so, devaluing local cultures. This is problematic in itself, but it may also provoke backlash and negatively affect women's lives. Instead, interventions need to be built from the ground up. Women's own understandings of empowerment, along with the strategies they already use to navigate and challenge restrictive gender norms, must be taken seriously and should serve as a foundation for development planning.

The role of external actors should be to support this process. This includes assisting women along their own paths, facilitating spaces for exchange and mutual assistance, and creating enabling environments rather than directing agendas from above.

For example, my findings suggest that interventions can hold significant empowering potential if they raise awareness about structural inequalities, foster critical consciousness, and nurture a sense of agency, or if they create spaces where women can gather, reflect, and mobilise collectively. Above all, women need to be treated as agents of change, not as passive recipients.

At the same time, such interventions must also take into account the relational and complementary nature of gender roles. Empowerment is not about regarding men and women as the same or assigning them identical everyday tasks. Rather, it is about women gaining the freedom of choice to expand their activities and desires beyond roles ascribed solely on the basis of gender. This may involve awareness work aimed at challenging restrictive gender norms, such as those around caregiving. Promoting the idea that care work can also be carried out by men may help to deconstruct existing stigma around male participation in domestic responsibilities. Importantly,

this also underscores the need to include men in interventions aimed at promoting women's empowerment.

Future Research

This thesis also points to areas for future research. Especially during the mixed methods part of my study, I found that both interview data and quantitative empowerment measures suggested that outcomes for single women may differ from those of married women. While the number of single women in my sample was small, and a detailed analysis of this difference was beyond the scope of Chapter 6, these findings indicate a potential tension between greater agency for single women and greater economic security for married women, a dynamic that would be interesting to explore in future research.

Further, while I do acknowledge that motherhood is neither inherently biological nor necessarily gendered, all the women I interviewed were biological mothers. In future research, it would be valuable to extend my research to include people who identify as mothers but not on the basis of their gender or biology, and to explore how they understand motherhood and its intersections with empowerment.

Another interesting area for future research would be to consider the exercise of agency in the context of empowerment by exploring dimensions of women's lives other than motherhood that could hold empowering potential without necessarily involving direct forms of resistance, such as, for example, religion. It would also be valuable to examine the intersections between these different areas of exercise of agency, including that of motherhood.

It would also be interesting to expand my study to other areas of Malawi, and perhaps Southern Africa more broadly, that are not matrilineal, in order to better understand how matriliny shapes women's experiences of motherhood and empowerment. In Malawi, it will also be

important to observe how ongoing land rights reforms affect women's matrilineal realities and how these dynamics continue to evolve in the near future (Chikaya-Banda & Chilonga, 2021).

Relatedly, it would be valuable to examine how women's experiences of motherhood and empowerment shift and manifest in urban settings, where social organisation, access to resources, and gendered expectations may take on different forms. Urban spaces often represent a convergence of economic opportunity with instability and inequality, where survival can be more precarious, yet where new forms of agency and collective mobilisation may also emerge. Investigating how urbanisation influences gendered roles, including those associated with motherhood, could provide important insights into how women navigate empowerment across changing sociocultural landscapes.

Despite the theoretical and methodological contributions that I have elaborated, some broader implications emerge from my study. These are in line with decolonial feminist thinking (Acholonu, 1995; Amadiume, 1997; Collins, 2016; Lewis, 1993; Maqubela, 2021; Oyěwùmí, 1997), and push back against ethnocentric assumptions and the false universalism embedded in prominent feminist concepts that are often based on the lived realities of white Western women. While I do not argue for a stark or total divide between the conceptual frameworks of Western and African feminisms, I contend that, to adequately analyse the lived realities of women on the African continent, theories developed on the continent itself, or by those in the diaspora, offer a far more fitting and contextually grounded lens.

A key part of this critique concerns the sense of individualism that is often implicit in Western feminist theories. For instance, this is exemplified in the model of the nuclear family, which is frequently treated as the default context for theorising motherhood. However, this individualistic framing does not hold true in many African societies. My findings show that communal and

relational dimensions of motherhood, as well as forms of agency understood through negotiation and interdependence (Nnaemeka, 2004), were especially significant in women's accounts of their lived experiences.

Taking this further, and building on DiQuinzio's (1999) concept of the 'impossibility of motherhood', which describes the inherent contradiction of expecting women to fulfil particular roles as mothers while also conforming to a homogenous masculine rationale that exists in individualist Western societies under neoliberalism, it becomes clear that many mothers in these societies experience this tension acutely. Often, they feel they must choose between motherhood and autonomy, or that they feel isolated in their maternal experiences (Giles, 2014; Hallstein et al., 2019).

Bringing back the importance of communal motherhood and reintegrating a more collective and relational understanding of care into individualistic societies may, in fact, help to address this 'impossibility'. The lived realities of mothers in Central and Southern Malawi demonstrate that support, recognition, and shared responsibility are not only culturally embedded but also potentially transformative, not just for African women, but as an alternative perspective for rethinking motherhood more broadly.

Taken together, my study provides a useful framework for researching the intersections of women's empowerment, motherhood, and development practice in other contexts. In Central and Southern Malawi, while women often thrive in their roles as mothers, considerable work remains to be done before they are able to make strategic life choices, should they wish to do so.

Moreover, ideas about gender roles and norms are constantly in flux. They are shaped both internally by contextual processes and social dynamics in communities, and externally through the influence of actors such as development agencies. Those who seek to support women in initiating change toward a more equal and less gender-normative society can thereby be of valuable

assistance. To do so, it is crucial that these actors learn to understand women's needs and desires, as well as the contexts that frame and influence their lived experiences. Only then can they meaningfully support women, and mothers especially, in their envisioned journeys towards empowerment.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Pro-WEAI Indicator Adequacy Thresholds

Pro-WEAI Indicator	**Definition of Adequacy Threshold**	**Adequacy**
Intrinsic Agency		
Autonomy in Income	The RAI was developed in the context of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2011), to measure a person's motivational autonomy or their ability to act on what they value. Drawing from this, the pro-WEAI indicator sums responses (yes=1, no=0) to four vignettes about a person's internal and external motivations that determine their decisions regarding their use of income generated from agricultural and non-agricultural activities, using a weighted scheme: 0 for vignette 1 (no alternative), -2 for vignette 2 (external motivation), -1 for vignette 3 (introjected motivation), and +3 for vignette 4 (autonomous motivation).	If the RAI score >=1.
Self-Efficacy	The NGSE is a cross-culturally validated scale to measure self-efficacy, or a person's perception of their capabilities and ability to reach their goals (Chen et al., 2001). It follows a five-point rating scale: 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neither agree nor disagree, 4 for agree, 5 for strongly agree, for eight scenarios to assess a person's believes that they can reach their goals.	If 'agree' or greater on average (If NGSE >=32).
Attitudes About Intimate Partner Violence against Women	Captures a respondent's believes regarding tolerance for the use of IPV in five scenarios: 1) She goes out without telling him 2) She neglects the children 3) She argues with him 4) She refuses to have sex with him 5) She burns the food.	If the respondent believes that a man household member is not justified hitting or beating a woman household member in all five scenarios.
Respect Among Household Members*	Captures responses in four conditions of respect related to the spouse, the other respondent, or another household member: 1) Respondent respects relation (most of the time) 2) Relation respects respondent (most of the time) 3) Respondent trusts relation (most of the time) 4) Respondent is comfortable disagreeing with relation (most of the time).	If all four conditions are affirmed by the respondent.

Instrumental Agency		
Input in Productive Decisions	For all agricultural and non-agricultural activities of a household, such as staple grain farming, horticultural or high value crop farming, large livestock raising and processing, small livestock raising and processing, poultry raising and processing, fishing or fishpond culture, non-farm economic activities (small business, self-employment etc.), and wage and salary employment. It measures if a respondent: 1) Makes decisions solely 2) Has input in joint decision-making 3) Feels that they could make decisions if they wanted.	If the respondent meets at least one of the three conditions for all agricultural activities their household performs.
Ownership of Land and Other Assets	Measures how many out of 13 asset types (large livestock, small livestock, poultry and other small animals, fish pond or equipment; Non-mechanised farm equipment, mechanised farm equipment, non-farm business equipment, house or building, large durables (refrigerator, TV etc.), small durables (radio, cookware etc.), cell phone, other non-agricultural land, means of transportation) or agricultural land are owned by the respondent.	If the respondent solely or jointly owns three assets, or solely or jointly owns agricultural land.
Control Over Use of (Household) Income	For all agricultural and non-agricultural activities of a household (captured in same module activities as for 'Input in Productive Decisions'), it measures if a respondent has any input in decisions concerning the use of income and output.	If the respondent participates in decisions on income and output from all agricultural and non-agricultural activities.
Access to and Decisions on Financial Services	Measures if respondent has access and makes sole or joint decisions on credit sources from a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), bank or financial institution, informal lender, friends or relatives, group based micro-finance or lending institution, informal credit and savings group, and their access to a sole or joint financial account.	If the respondent meets at least one condition of: 1) Their household used a source of credit in the past year, and the respondent made at least one sole or joint decision about it 2) Their household did not use any credit source in the past year but could have if wanted to

		from at least one source 3) The respondent has sole or joint access to a financial account.
Work Balance	Counts the number of hours a respondent spends on unpaid and paid work (as primary activities) and childcare (times 0.5, as secondary activity) in the 24 hours since 4am of the previous day.	If the respondent works less than 10.5 hours daily.
Visiting Important Locations	Counts the number of six important locations visited by a respondent.	If the respondent visits once per week: urban centre, market, or family or relative, or once per month: health facility, or public meeting.
Collective Agency		
Group Membership	Captures if a respondent is an active member in a group such as agricultural / livestock / fisheries producer's group (including marketing groups), water users' group, forest users' group, credit or microfinance group, mutual help or insurance group, trade and business association group, civic or charitable group, religious group, or other groups.	If the respondent is active in at least one group.
Membership in Influential Groups*	Captures if a respondent is an active member of an influential group (for same group options as for 'Group Membership').	If the respondent is active in at least one group that can influence the community to at least a medium extent.
Notes: Detailed information on indicator definitions and adequacy have been previously published (Malapit et al., 2019). *Two of the indicators, '*Respect Among Household Members'* and '*Membership in Influential Groups'* have been omitted from the most recent version of the pro-WEAI.		