

Rapid assessment of gender dynamics of cotton and sesame contract farming households

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Executive summary

Cotton is one of the major cash crops in Malawi, ranking fourth as a foreign exchange earner after tobacco, tea, and sugar.¹ Growing good quality cotton requires considerable know-how and good quality farm inputs. Cotton farmers, therefore, frequently enter into contract farming arrangements through which they receive inputs in exchange for a certain proportion of their yields.

Cotton is frequently grown alongside sesame, as both crops thrive in similar conditions. Sesame has been traditionally perceived as a food crop in Malawi, is relatively easy to grow, and requires few inputs. As a result, it is traditionally viewed as a ‘woman’s crop’; while cotton – a cash crop with high input requirements – is commonly considered a ‘man’s crop’ in Malawi. Indeed, some studies estimate that 60% of sesame farmers are female, while only 30% of cotton farmers are.

With new markets for sesame opening up, as well as particularly low cotton yields over the last seasons, the perception of sesame is changing and the crop is increasingly viewed as a cash crop among smallholders. To further encourage the production of commercial sesame, improve yields, and maximise its income-generating potential, the Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation Programme (MOST) is supporting private sector partners to extend contract farming to include sesame alongside cotton.

In the current season (2016/17), contracts for sesame are being mostly signed with the same individuals that have held contracts for cotton in the past, regardless of who is the main sesame farmer in a farming household. As the majority of cotton contracts have previously been signed with men, the majority of contracts for sesame are being signed with the same individuals - the man in the household. This is so, even if sesame is indeed seen as a ‘woman’s crop’ in the same household. In this scenario, what might be the impact of this intervention on the perception of - and actual control over - sesame and the gender dynamics in the farm household more broadly? Moreover, is this likely to impact on the quantity and quality of sesame produced and, ultimately, on repayment rates?

This assessment provides baseline information necessary to track the impact of sesame contract farming on gender dynamics to allow MOST to, ultimately, answer the questions above. It explores the current gender dynamics of mixed-sex farming households who grow both sesame and cotton, have been in contract farming arrangements for cotton in the past, and are in the process of signing contracts for sesame farming. In addition, since all the farming households have already been under contract farming for cotton, the assessment also gauges - to the extent possible - what the likely impact of sesame contract farming mostly signed with men might be on gender dynamics as well as on future sesame production.

The assessment finds that the majority of respondents had already started farming commercial sesame at the time of the field work. This enabled the study to also explore the actual impact of the shift from food crop to cash crop on gender dynamics.

¹ Ministry of Industry and Trade. 2012. Malawi Export Strategy 2013-2018. Ministry of Industry and Trade, Government of Malawi: Lilongwe, Malawi.

The key findings of the assessment are:

- ❖ **Commercial sesame is perceived as a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’**

When sesame was considered a food crop it was mostly intercropped with cotton and indeed perceived as a woman’s crop, with women mainly responsible for its production and processing. When sesame became a cash crop many farm households allocated parts of their cotton field – a crop mostly considered the domain of men – to sesame. The combination of a shift of usage of sesame from food crop to mostly cash crop, coupled with the fact that most land for commercial sesame production had previously been under the control of men, resulted in a shift of perception of the crop from being a ‘woman’s crop’ to being a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’.
- ❖ **The commercialisation of sesame has resulted in increased control over the crop by men**

The shift from food crop to cash crop has led to a significant increase of interest of men in the crop, resulting in increased oversight and control of men over sesame production. This seems particularly pronounced in households where men are the contract holders. Although this implied some loss of control over sesame by women, the vast majority of female respondents seemed to accept this since, traditionally, cash crops are seen as the husband’s responsibility and women did not want to challenge their husbands’ roles or disrespect them by meddling with their domain.
- ❖ **The division of labour has remained the same; pre-harvest work is jointly done by the husband and wife, and post-harvest work is exclusively carried out by women**

The division of labour for sesame production has remained the same, with men and women jointly carrying out pre-harvest work and women exclusively responsible for post-harvest processing.
- ❖ **Commercialisation of sesame has led to a significantly increased workload for women**

The shift to commercial sesame production has resulted in a significant increase of labour for women, due to the impact of higher yields on labour intensive post-harvest work. Ganyu, when used, only seems to be employed for pre-harvest work and does, therefore, not ease the additional burden on women.
- ❖ **Control over allocation of income has remained the same; final decision-making power rests mostly with men**

Control over allocation of income did not seem to be affected by the shift to commercial sesame production. Allocative decisions were reported to be jointly taken, although discussion revealed that in most households, men tend to take final decisions on how to spend cash earnings, regardless of the source of the income.
- ❖ **It matters who signs: the signatory has much greater access to information and knowledge on GAP, markets, prices, etc.**

The individual who signs the contract is at a significant advantage due to increased access to information on GAP, inputs, prices, etc. This advantage manifests itself in the actual difference in awareness and knowledge on cotton and sesame production among contract holders and non-contract holders, thereby significantly empowering contract holders.

❖ **Women tend to have more experience, knowledge, and passion for growing sesame than men**

Women (both contract holders and non-contract holders) have considerably more experience in growing sesame. This is so, not only because many women had grown sesame as a food crop for many years, female contract holders also reported almost four times as many years experience of growing commercial sesame than their male counterparts.

The assessment concludes that, since the perception of sesame has already shifted from being a food crop and thus, a ‘woman’s crop’, to being a cash crop and, therefore, a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’, the signing of contracts for sesame with the man in the household is unlikely to significantly change the overall gender dynamics of sesame production. Indeed household-level gender dynamics of sesame and cotton production seem to be mostly based on the constellation of the household, including the type of work the husband is engaged in and where he is located, and determine who signs the contract rather than being influenced by it.

However, the findings also stress that, since contract holders seem to have much better access to knowledge and information, signing contracts with men further re-enforces men’s privileged status. It further contributes to women’s more limited access to information and inputs, thereby perpetuating entrenched gender inequalities.

Introduction

Cotton is one of the major cash crops in Malawi, ranking fourth as a foreign exchange earner after tobacco, tea, and sugar.² The crop is mostly grown by smallholder farmers on an average plot size of one acre. Growing good quality cotton requires considerable know-how and good quality farm inputs, including seeds and pesticides. Cotton farmers, therefore, frequently enter into contract farm arrangements through which they receive inputs in exchange for a certain proportion of their yields.

Cotton is frequently grown alongside sesame, as both crops thrive in similar conditions. Sesame has been traditionally perceived as a food crop in Malawi and is relatively easy to grow and requires few inputs, making it particularly attractive for poor smallholders. Due to its perception as a food crop and its low input requirements, sesame is traditionally viewed as a ‘woman’s crop’; while cotton - a cash crop with high input requirements - is commonly considered a ‘man’s crop’. Indeed, some studies estimate that 60% of sesame farmers are female, while only 30% of cotton farmers are.

With new markets for sesame opening up, as well as particularly low cotton yields over recent seasons, sesame is increasingly viewed as a cash crop among smallholders. To further encourage the production of sesame, improve yields, and maximise its income-generating potential, the Malawi Oilseed Sector Transformation Programme (MOST) is supporting partners to extend contract farming to include sesame alongside cotton.

In the current season (2016/17), contracts for sesame are being mostly signed with the same individuals that have held contracts for cotton in the past, regardless of who is the main sesame farmer in a farming household. As the majority of cotton contracts have previously been signed with men, the majority of contracts for sesame are being signed with the same individuals - the man in the household. This is so, even if sesame is indeed seen as a ‘woman’s crop’ in the same household. In this scenario, what might be the impact of this intervention on the perception of - and actual control over - sesame and the gender dynamics in the farm household more broadly? Moreover, is this likely to impact on the quantity and quality of sesame produced and, ultimately, on repayment rates?

Answering these questions is critical not just to ensure that MOST’s intervention on sesame contract farming is gender sensitive and responsive, but is also fundamental to ensure that the intervention is effective and sustainable – resulting in increased good quality sesame production and high repayment rates.

This rapid assessment, therefore, aims to provide baseline information by exploring the current gender dynamics of mixed-sex farming households who grow both sesame and cotton, have been in contract farming arrangements for cotton in the past, and are in the process of signing contracts for sesame farming. This will provide information necessary to track the impact of sesame contract farming on gender dynamics in future. In addition, since the farming households have already been under contract farming for cotton, the assessment will also aim to gauge - to the extent possible - what the likely impact of sesame contract farming mostly signed with men might be on gender dynamics as well as on future sesame production. The latter is based on an exploration of what the benefits of being a contract holder for cotton are, as sesame contracts only now in the process of being signed, and the benefits of being a contract holder (if any) can be expected to be similar for cotton and sesame.

² Ibid.

The assessment first unpacks a number of concepts and assumptions, before presenting the empirical findings of the fieldwork, based on Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews with female and male contract holders, and the wives of male contract holders. First, the concept of the farming household as a unit is discussed and the need to open up the ‘black box’ of the household is established to not only ensure pro-poor outcomes, but also to secure optimal productivity gains of the family farm. Second, the concept of ‘women’s crops’ is discussed and it is shown that it is unclear and poorly defined. Indeed, if sesame is, in fact mostly a ‘woman’s crop’ and cotton a ‘man’s crop’, what exactly does this mean? Does it, for instance, mostly refer to the fact that women do most of the work on certain crops or does the concept also involve some level of control over how the crop is grown, what inputs are used, how it is sold, and how the income generated is used? Alternatively, does the term mainly refer to a cultural perception of food crops as ‘women’s crops’ and cash crops as ‘men’s crops’?

The second part of the assessment presents the key findings of the fieldwork, which was carried out in two Sena villages in Chikwawa. It shows that most respondents have grown sesame as a food crop for many years and have recently ventured (or are about to venture) into commercial sesame production.

The fact that the shift to commercial sesame production had already taken place in the community assessed allowed the assessment to explore the actual impact of the shift from sesame food crop to cash crop production in addition to gauging the effect of the gender of the contract holder on gender dynamics and sesame production.

The key findings of the assessment are:

❖ **Commercial sesame is perceived as a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’**

When sesame was considered a food crop it was mostly intercropped with cotton and indeed perceived as a woman’s crop, with women mainly responsible for its production and processing. When sesame became a cash crop many farm households allocated parts of their cotton field – a crop mostly considered the domain of men – to sesame. The combination of a shift of usage of sesame from food crop to mostly cash crop, coupled with the fact that most land for commercial sesame production had previously been under the control of men, resulted in a shift of perception of the crop from being a ‘woman’s crop’ to being a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’.

❖ **The commercialisation of sesame has resulted in increased control over the crop by men**

The shift from food crop to cash crop has led to a significant increase of interest of men in the crop, resulting in increased oversight and control of men over sesame production, particularly in households where men are the contract holders. Specifically, men were now acutely aware of the land area allocated to sesame production and were, indeed, seen to have taken the decision to allocate a specific proportion of land to the crop in a number of households. Men were also very aware of their sesame yields and prices fetched for sesame. Female contract holders had similar level of knowledge, while wives of male contract holders seemed much less aware. Although this implied some loss of control over sesame by women, the vast majority of female respondents seemed to accept this as cash crops are generally seen as the husband’s responsibility and women did not want to challenge their husbands’ roles or disrespect them by meddling with their domain.

- ❖ **The division of labour has remained the same; pre-harvest work is jointly done by the husband and the wife, and post-harvest work is exclusively carried out by women**
The division of labour has remained the same, with men and women jointly carrying out pre-harvest work and women exclusively responsible for post-harvest processing.
- ❖ **Commercialisation of sesame has led to a significantly increased workload for women**
The shift to commercial sesame production has resulted in a significant increase of labour for women, due to the impact of higher yields on labour intensive post-harvest work. Ganyu, when used, only seems to be employed for pre-harvest work and does, therefore, not ease the additional burden on women.
- ❖ **Control over allocation of income has remained the same; final decision-making power rests mostly with men**
There seems to be little actual/anticipated impact of commercialisation of sesame or the introduction of sesame contract farming on household dynamics regarding allocation of cash income. Most respondents stated that decisions on income use are jointly taken, yet, when probed, it became apparent that in many cases men have the final say on spending decisions. A case in point is the refusal of men to hire ganyu for post-harvest work, despite women's requests. The introduction of commercial sesame does not seem to have impacted on these dynamics at all, as any cash income is considered the same, regardless of its source.
- ❖ **It matters who signs: the signatory has much greater access to information and knowledge on GAP, markets, prices, etc.**
The individual who signs the contract is at a significant advantage due to increased access to information on GAP, inputs, prices, etc. This advantage manifests itself in the actual difference in awareness and knowledge on cotton and sesame production among contract holders and non-contract holders, thereby significantly empowering contract holders.
- ❖ **Women tend to have more experience, knowledge, and passion for growing sesame than men**
Women (both contract holders and non-contract holders) have considerably more experience in growing sesame. This is so, not only because many women had grown sesame as a food crop for many years, female contract holders also reported almost four times as many years experience of growing commercial sesame than their male counterparts.

The assessment concludes that, since the perception of sesame has already shifted from being a food crop and thus, a 'woman's crop', to being a cash crop and, therefore, a 'man's crop' or a 'family crop', the signing of contracts for sesame with the man in the household is unlikely to significantly change the overall gender dynamics of sesame production. Indeed household-level gender dynamics of sesame and cotton production seem to be mostly based on the constellation of the household, including the type of work the husband is engaged in and where he is located, and determine who signs the contract rather than being influenced by it.

However, the findings also stress that, since contract holders seem to have much better access to knowledge and information, signing contracts with men further re-enforces men's privileged status. It also further contributes to women's more limited access to information and inputs, thereby perpetuating entrenched gender inequalities.

Last, the findings of the assessment suggest that women tend to have more knowledge, experience, and passion for sesame as they often used to be the main sesame farmer on the family farm.

Methodology

This rapid assessment is based on a short questionnaire, three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and nine Key Informant Interviews conducted with female and male farmers currently under contract for cotton with Afrisian and in the process of signing contract for sesame. Respondents included female contract holders, male contract holders, and wives of male contract holders.

Specifically, the following were held:

- One FGD each with female contract holders (8 participants); male contract holders (8 participants); the wives of the male contract holders (5 participants).
- Three KIIs each with (1) female contract holders; (2) male contract holders; (3) the wives of the male contract holders.
- Questionnaire completed by 40 individuals

FGD participants were identified by Afrisian. Key informants were identified based on a short questionnaire completed with 40 farmers selected by Afrisian. The FGD question guide and the questionnaire can be found in annex 1.

Summary of respondents	
Number of female contract holders	15
Number of male contract holders	16
Number of wives of male contract holders	9
Male-headed households	35
Female-headed households	5
Jointly-headed households	0
Married - monogamous	25
Married - polygamous	10
Not married (widowed, divorced, single)	5

Average profile of respondents	
Average total land holding	1.6 acre
Average land holding allocated to cotton	0.9 acre
Average land holding allocated to sesame	0.2 acre
Average cotton yield last season	86 kgs
Average sesame yield last season	15 kgs

Context

Malawi is a complex and diverse society, including both matrilineal and patrilineal traditions. Overall, women's rights are weak and women score low on all development indicators. Malawi ranks 174/187 on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index and 34/142 on the Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum.

Across the country, women are significantly less educated than men - adult literacy stands at 60.5% for women and 80% for men. Among the poorest, women have on average one year of education while men have on average four years.³ Household-level decision-making is dominated by men, with 68% of women whose husbands have cash earnings reporting that their husbands alone decide on how to use the money.

Women dedicate a highly significant amount of their time to domestic work. The majority of women in Malawi spend around 30 hours per week on domestic work, while only 4% of men do. More than 88% of rural men do not perform any domestic activity. As a result, women have significantly less time to engage in income-generating activities, spending on average 17 hours per week on income generation compared to 27 for men.⁴

Women in Malawi are also a lot less likely to own land, especially in patrilineal societies. Only 32% of women are individual holders of agricultural land.⁵ Women have less access to extension services (14% of women have access versus 18% of men), and less access to improved seeds and fertilizer.⁶

The study site near Nchalo in Chikwawa district is situated in Southern Malawi. Chikwawa is one of the poorest region in Malawi with 81.6% of the population living in poverty and 59% living in ultra-poverty.⁷ It is highly food insecure and fairs poorly on all development indicators, relative to most of the rest of the country. The study sites are inhabited by Sena people, who follow a patrilineal tradition. Although there are many different versions of patrilineage in Malawi, in the study sites patrilineage practiced means that land is owned by men and, upon marriage, wives

³ National Statistical Office Malawi. 2010. Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2010. National Statistical Office: Zomba, Malawi.

⁴ Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division of FAO. 2011. Gender Inequalities in Rural Employment in Malawi: An Overview. FAO: Rome, Italy. p.28.

⁵ Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division of FAO. 2011. Gender Inequalities in Rural Employment in Malawi: An Overview. FAO: Rome, Italy. p.11.

⁶ National Statistics Office Malawi. 2012. The Third Integrated Household Survey. 2010-2011. National Statistics Office Malawi: Zomba, Malawi.

⁷ National Statistics Office Malawi. 2012. The Third Integrated Household Survey. 2010-2011. National Statistics Office Malawi: Zomba, Malawi.p. 208.

leave their village and move to their newly wedded husbands. Polygamy is common and land ownership and inheritance favours men over women.⁸

Background: The farming household and the female farmer

In order to consider intra-household dynamics in farm households, it is important to conceptualise the farming household and define the ‘female farmer’.

Conceptualising the farming household

The majority of farming households in Malawi are mixed-sex, comprising both a husband and a wife alongside other family members. Some research, as well as many development programs, view the mixed-sex household as a unit, thereby presuming collaborative decision-making with a unitary utility function. This conceptualisation suggests that it does not matter if a programme targets the husband or the wife in such a household, as benefits will be shared and used to the best interest of the household as a whole. Along the same lines, in these interventions, targeting ‘female farmers’ is equated with targeting female-headed households only.

Although still fairly wide-spread, mostly due to its simplicity and practicability, the conceptualisation of the unitary household has been widely criticised as masking significant power imbalances, conflict, inequalities, and different priorities, reflected in different spending preferences, within a household.⁹

The household as a problematic unit of analysis

“The household means different things to different people, in different times and places, and by using the household as a unit, researchers and policy makers make a set of implicit assumptions about what takes place within it. Individuals within a household are often thought to be equally wealthy or poor and to have equal access to goods and services. Household models have presented the household as a sharing, altruistic and co-operative body with a unitary utility function. This perception denies the possibility of intra-household inequality, bargaining and conflict, and since the 1970s the unitary model of household collectivity has been widely criticized...”¹⁰

Viewing the household not just as a site of altruism or co-operation, but as a site of “negotiation, bargaining and even conflict, where individuals have differential access to and control over resources and benefits”¹¹ could potentially result in differential levels of wealth and poverty within a given household. Moreover, this suggests that allocative decisions within a household may not always protect the most vulnerable or may not be taken with the best interest of the household or even the family farm in mind. This is of great significance for any pro-poor

⁸ Malawi Human Rights Commission. 2006. A Study into Cultural Practices and their Impact on the Enjoyment of Human Rights: Particularly the Rights of Women and Children in Malawi. Malawi Human Rights Commission: Lilongwe, Malawi.

⁹ Bolt, V. Bird, K., 2003. The Intra-household Disadvantages Framework: A Framework for the Analysis of Intra-household Difference and Inequality. Overseas Development Institute. London: UK.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 8-9.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 13.

intervention, including interventions that focus on family farming as a business, such as MOST's work on contract farming.

The above suggests that household gender dynamics of mixed-sex farming households are complex and might impact on the overall well-being of all household members as well as the productivity and commercial potential of the family farm. It is, therefore, important to explore the current gender dynamics of mixed-sex farming households that grow both cotton and sesame in order to provide MOST with a basis to track the impact of contract farming on these dynamics and, if necessary, advise partners to put in place safeguards to ensure equitable and effective outcomes. To do so, it is imperative to define the 'female farmer'.

The female farmer, women's crops, and female-managed plots

In much literature and development interventions, the 'female farmer' in mixed-sex households is mostly defined by her responsibility for 'women's crops' and focusing on these crops is thought to ensure gender responsiveness of any given project.

Yet, the exact meaning of 'women's crops' is difficult to define. For some, the concept has been taken to mean that women carry out most of the work for a certain crop and/or have control over production, sales, and income generated from a certain crop. The term is particularly problematic as, indeed, very few crops in Malawi are exclusively grown by women and issues of control are very difficult to define and measure. Moreover, crops are frequently named 'women's' or 'men's' crops according to traditional cultural beliefs about gender roles.¹²

In addition to the concept 'women's crops', the notion of 'female managed plots' is equally widely used to describe women's distinct roles on the family farm. Indeed, ample empirical evidence shows that "women and men in Sub-Saharan Africa, including in Malawi, often engage in separate, individually managed production and consumption activities even if they live under one roof."¹³ Thus, although the division of labour, responsibilities and control at farm- and household-level are no-doubt complex and vary across Malawi, evidence strongly suggests that female farmers in male-headed households play an important role in their own right as farmers, as well as providers of critical household-resources, such as food.

Having established that intra-household dynamics matter and that women play an important farming role in their own right, what are the current gender dynamics of cotton and sesame production in mixed-sex family farms? Is there a sense that cotton is a 'man's crop' and sesame a 'woman's crop'? If so, what does this actually mean regarding division of labour and control over the crop, and is this being impacted by a shift towards commercial sesame farming? Does contract farming influence this and does it matter who in a household signs the contract? The following section presents the empirical study findings that address each of these points in turn.

¹² Orr, A., Tsusaka, T., Homann Kee-Tui, S., Msere, H. 2016. What do we mean by "women's crops": Commercialisation, gender, and the power to name. *Journal of International Development* (28). P. 2.

¹³ Farnworth, C. (forthcoming). *The Gender and Equity Implications of Land-Related Investments by Producer Organisations in Malawi: The National Association of Smallholder Farmers in Malawi and the Mzuzu Coffee Planter Cooperative Union Ltd.* p. 41.; UN Women, UNDP, UNEP, World Bank Group. 2015. *The Cost of the Gender Gap in Agricultural Productivity in Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda.* UN Women, UNDP, UNEP, World Bank Group. p. 8. PLUS paper 3 p. 2.

1. Perceptions of gendered-division of control over cotton and sesame

The assessment find that, indeed, there used to be a clear perception of sesame as a ‘woman’s crop’ among all respondents when it was primarily used as a food crop. This perception drastically changed when sesame was starting to be seen as cash crop and a well-suited addition to cotton for income generation. For most respondents sesame, once it became a cash crop, became something other than a ‘woman’s crop’. The majority of respondents, particularly the male contract holders and their wives, perceived commercial sesame to be now a ‘man’s crop’. A number of female contract holders referred to commercial sesame as a ‘family crop’. This view seems to be largely based on the cultural perception that women are responsible for food crops and cash crops are for the ‘man’ or ‘the family’.

However, in addition to this gendered division of responsibility between ‘food crops’ and ‘cash crops’, the increasing perception of sesame as a ‘man’s crop’ also seemed to be rooted in the fact that sesame, when it was a food crop, was mostly grown on either women’s vegetable gardens (viewed as ‘female-managed’ plots) or as a border crop of cotton. In contrast, commercial sesame is mostly grown on a specifically dedicated piece of land that, in most households, had previously been allocated to cotton and used to be overseen by the husband. Thus, the fact that the land used for commercial sesame is land that is perceived to be the husband’s domain also contributed to the perception of commercial sesame as a ‘man’s crop’.

The importance of perceived entitlement of control over a plot a crop is grown on is further illustrated by the fact that, among respondents were the land previously allocated to cotton was perceived to be ‘family land’ - mostly in the case of female contract holders - commercial sesame now grown on this land is viewed as a ‘family crop’. Moreover, one respondent who still perceived commercial sesame as her crop, grows sesame on additional land leased for this purpose, thus, not taking ‘over’ land preciously overseen by her husband.

Thus, although the findings clearly show that in the research area there has been a marked shift in perception of sesame away from being a ‘woman’s crop’, this shift did not seem to be related to whether the husband or wife are contract holders. Instead, it was linked to the shift in usage of sesame from being a food crop (considered the woman’s domain) to being a cash crop (considered the man’s domain) as well as a shift to where the crop was grown – whether on the women’s vegetable garden, as a border crop or on the cash crop field, which is considered the man’s domain.

However, whether commercial sesame is considered a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’ seems to be linked to the gender of the contract holders. The majority of female contract holders considered commercial sesame as a ‘family crop’ while all male contract holders and their wives considered it as a ‘man’s crop’. Importantly, however, this is not to say that the fact that the wife has signed the contract has resulted in the crop being considered a ‘family crop’. Rather, the mixed-sex households of female contract holders seem to consider cash crop production as such as a ‘family responsibility’ and the land where cash crop are grown on as overseen jointly by the family, as in most cases the husband was engaged in income generation away from the family farm. It seems to have been a result of this perception of joint responsibility, coupled with the unavailability of the husband to sign, that women signed the contract, not vice-versa.

2. Division of labour

Has the shift in perception of sesame from a ‘woman’s crop’ to a ‘man’s crop’ or a ‘family crop’ changed the division of labour in the farm household?

The assessment finds that, although most men were somewhat involved in pre-harvest sesame production in most mixed-sex households, when sesame was grown purely as a food crop, women carried out most of the work. In addition, women were widely seen to be responsible to care for the crop, sourced the seeds, decided on where to plant it and how much to plant on the field available for food crops. Men only supported specific activities when asked. All respondents reported that men took no interest in sesame as a food crop, were not aware of how much was harvested, and played no role in post-harvest activities.

Broadly speaking, the division of labour for sesame as a cash crop seems to have remained the same, with men and women jointly carrying out the pre-harvest work and women solely responsible for post-harvest processing.

However, what seems to have changed is the level of interest that men show in sesame production, resulting in increased male oversight over the crop. As it is now a cash crop, men are activity involved - and in many cases lead - decisions on where to plant it, how much to plant, which seed to use, etc. Men now support the sourcing of seed and take an active interest in how much is harvested and where sesame is sold.

Male and female contract holders did not think that men’s increased involvement means that men are now ‘dominating’ all decisions on sesame, and most decisions were reportedly based on discussion. In contrast, wives of male contract holders indicated that it is their husbands who now have final decision-making power on sesame production. Yet, since they had very little information on the commercial aspect of the family farm, including yields, prices of sesame and cotton, etc, and viewed income generation as their husbands’ responsibility, they felt it was appropriate for their husbands to take these types of decisions.

Thus, the move to sesame as a cash crop does not seem to have changed the overall division of labour of sesame production, with women and men roughly carrying out the same tasks as they were when sesame was a food crop. However, the commercialization of sesame seems to have reduced women’s overall level of control over the crop. Interestingly, this shift seems to be less pronounced among female contract holders and overall, mostly accepted as women’s control over ‘their domain’ - food crops - has not been reduced. Moreover, the group that seems to be losing out most - wives of male contract holders - did not seem to be aware of the commercial aspects of sesame, often did not even know what a ‘contract’ is, let alone understand the specifics of cotton and sesame contracts with Afrisian, and therefore did not object to their loss of control over sesame.

3. Workload

The increase in sesame production has resulted in significantly greater labour requirements, especially regarding post-harvest processing, which is very labour intensive. As post-harvest processing is solely carried out by women, the shift to commercial sesame production has resulted in a significant increase in workload for women.

A number of female respondents indicated that this poses a challenge for them. Some had raised this with their husbands, suggesting the use of ganyu to reduce their overall workload. Male respondents confirmed this. However, none of the respondents had actually used ganyu to support post-harvest activities, as, reportedly, husbands were not willing to incur the additional costs. Interestingly, ganyu - although sparingly used by most respondents on their sesame fields - had been used to support pre-harvesting work on some respondents' farms.

This last point sheds additional light on the level of control over cash income among the respondents discussed below. Although most respondents reported collaborative decision-making on cash income allocation, the fact that women had to ask their husbands for money to hire ganyu to support post-harvesting work and were refused, strongly indicates power imbalances in household-level decision making on use of cash.

4. Control over income

The vast majority of respondents reported collaborative decision-making on the use of income. This was so regardless of the source of income (sesame or cotton); and whether sesame was viewed as a 'man's crop' or a 'family crop'. Sales are frequently done by both, the husband and wife, and receipts and the acquired cash are reportedly presented to the other spouse. Allocation of income was reported to be based on discussion and mutual agreement. In polygamous households, the discussion reportedly involves both wives as well as the husband. In case of disagreement, some respondents suggested that arguments are brought forward and the better argument wins.

However, in discussion, a number of male respondents stated that they will listen to their wife's argument and, "if they consider it sensible", will agree to her suggestion. This indicates that, in these cases, the final decision is made by the husband. Indeed, a number of respondents explicitly stated that women can make suggestions but the final decision rests with the husband. This male domination of decision-making on allocation of income is further supported by the finding that men are refusing to pay for ganyu to ease women's post-harvest workloads despite women's requests noted above.

The findings further suggest that there does not seem to be a notable difference in control over use of cash income between female contract holders and wives of male contract holders. Having said that, female contract holders did have considerable more knowledge on how much income their farming business generated, putting them in a better bargaining position than the wives of male contracts holders. (This is further discussed below).

The discrepancy between the formal responses and the findings that emerged from in-depth discussion can be explained by respondents' reluctance to publicly admit intra-household conflict or friction. This is especially so in a cultural context of rural Chikwawa, which is traditionally patrilineal. The assessment confirmed this as it found that respect for the husband as the head of the household is highly valued and polygamy is common. The latter seem to further re-enforce

women's submissive attitude, as challenging a husband's dominant status in the household might risk turning him away from his wife and children towards extramarital affairs or a second wife. Indeed, especially female contract holders strongly emphasised the fact that the contract is in the woman's name does by no means threaten the man's position as head of the household who, as such, is to be respected and obeyed.

5. Does it matter who signs the contract?

The findings of the assessment overall suggest that there is a correlation between whether or not a contract is signed with a husband or a wife and the view of commercial sesame as a 'man's crop' or a 'family crop'. In addition, the gender of contract holder seems to influence the level of control women have retained over commercial sesame production, with female contract holders exhibiting greater control than wives of male contract holders.

However, neither finding seems to be an actual result of women signing/not signing a contract. Rather the gender of the contract holder seems to be a manifestation of a specific household constellation, with husbands either away or otherwise unavailable to be the main farmer. In these households there is a general perception of cash crops as a 'family responsibility' and a view of the land where cash crops are grown as overseen by the family. Thus, sesame is considered a family crop, women retain more control over it, and women are more likely to enter into contractual arrangements for the crop. In other words, women signing contracts seems to be a manifestation of their relatively empowered position, rather than a cause for it.

Moreover, control over allocation of cash income seems to be overall more dominated by men and not significantly impacted by who holds the contract, or which crops the income is generated from.

Despite these findings, the assessment does find that it matters who in a household signs a contract. First, the husbands, who had stated that it does not matter who signs the contract, were asked if they would be happy for their wives to sign this season. The vast majority responded with an empathetic 'no'. In their words, their wives signing contracts would enable them to either 'run away' or 'kick them out'. This suggests that being the signatory for contract farming is indeed viewed as a powerful position that brings with it a certain level of control over the household – control that men are reluctant to relinquish.

In addition, the assessment found a marked difference in awareness on commercial aspects of sesame and cotton, good agricultural practices, and profits, etc between female contract holders and wives of male contract holders. This was noted in the Focus Group Discussions and strongly confirmed through the Key Informant Interviews. While female contract holders could confidently speak about the reasons for why they decided to grow commercial sesame, demonstrating knowledge on the nature of the crop as well as market information; wives of male contract holders did not. Indeed, the majority of wives of male contract holders were not even aware of what a contract is, let alone understood the details of their husbands' contracts.

Key informant interviews with female contract holders also clearly showed that, although some only reluctantly signed the contract as they thought it more appropriate for their husbands to sign, being the signatory of the contract - and attending various meetings that go along with being the signatory - has increased their knowledge on cotton as a commercial crop and has given them a much better understanding of profits generated, etc. One respondent even noted that she is seen as

a 'women's champion' in her community and that more women are expressing an interest to become signatories.

The above strongly suggests that being a signatory for contract farming has a positive impact on women, increasing their knowledge on GAP and commercial farming, including on profits made by their own farm. This, in turn, allows them to play an informed role in discussions on income allocation at the household level. Although not explicitly perceived as such, this increased knowledge is likely to significantly empower women without overtly challenging household-level power structures.

6. Passion for, and knowledge of, sesame

During the fieldwork it became apparent that overall, women were more interested, knowledgeable - in some cases even passionate - about sesame than men. Female contract holders had considerably more years experience of growing cotton as a cash crop (5.8 years versus 1.3 for male contract holders), in addition to many years experience of growing sesame as a food crop. Indeed, almost half of all male contract holders who are in the process of signing contracts for sesame reported no experience with growing sesame at all. Most reported that their wives had previously grown it as a food crop, but they themselves had not 'paid any attention' to the crop.

In particular one respondent clearly noted that in her household her husband grows cotton and she grows sesame. It was her who suggested starting commercial sesame production to her husband who agreed to lease additional land for that purpose. She seemed knowledgeable and passionate about the crop and also stated that her husband was not interested in sesame. When asked about sesame contract farming, she was convinced that the contract would be signed with her as she is the main sesame farmer in her household. According to her, her husband does not care enough about sesame, and 'would not know what to do with the inputs'. Unfortunately, it later transpired that her husband had already signed the contract for sesame a week before the interview with MOST.

This suggests that the approach of simply signing contracts for sesame with the same individual who had previously held contracts for cotton may be problematic. It seems to represent a significant missed opportunity to ensure that the contract holder is the main sesame farmer in the household who is knowledgeable and passionate about the crop, and therefore likely to use the inputs effectively, produce high yields and good quality, and pay back the loan. In addition, signing contract with male spouses in farming households where women are indeed the main commercial sesame farmer, is likely to sideline women, reduce their access to information on GAP, prices, etc; and potentially compromise their actual access to inputs for use on the sesame field. This could have a significant disempowering impact on women in these households.

Conclusion

This aim of this assessment was to explore current gender dynamics of mixed-sex farming households who grow both sesame and cotton and have been in contract farming arrangements for cotton in the past in order to provide baseline information and gauge, to the extent possible, if the gender of a contract holder is likely to impact on household gender dynamics, productivity, and repayment rates.

The assessment found that the majority of respondents had already started farming commercial sesame. This enabled the study to also explore the actual impact of the shift from food crop to cash crop on gender dynamics.

Overall, the assessment found that the shift from food crop to cash crop has had significant impact on the gender dynamics of the farming households assessed. The perception of the crop has shifted from being seen as a 'woman's crop' to being perceived as a 'man's crop' or a 'family crop'. This has led to a significant increase of interest of men in the crop, resulting in increased oversight and control of men over sesame production. Although this implied some loss of control over sesame by women, the vast majority of female respondents seemed to accept this as cash crops are generally seen as the husband's domain.

Division of labour has remained the same, with men and women jointly carrying out pre-harvest work and women mostly responsible for post-harvest processing. Due to increased yields, women's workload has significantly increased, especially as no ganyu is typically hired to support post-harvest work. (The limited ganyu that was used supported pre-harvest work only).

Control over allocation of income did not seem to be affected by the shift to commercial sesame production. Allocative decisions were reported to be jointly taken, although discussion revealed that men tend to take final decisions on how to spend cash earnings, regardless of the source of the income.

The assessment concludes that, since the perception of sesame has already shifted from being a food crop and thus, a 'woman's crop', to being a cash crop and, therefore, a 'man's crop' or a 'family crop', the signing of contracts for sesame with the man in the household might not further change the overall gender dynamics of sesame production. Sesame has already shifted to be more under the control of men before contracts for sesame were being issued. Indeed household-level gender dynamics of sesame and cotton production seem to be mostly based on the constellation of the household, including the type of work the husband is engaged in and where he is located, and determine who signs the contract rather than being influenced by it.

Having said that, the assessment does critically find that the individual who signs the contract is at a significant advantage due to increased access to information on GAP, inputs, prices, and social capital etc. This advantage manifests itself in the actual difference in awareness and knowledge on cotton and sesame production among contract holders and non-contract holders and is likely to have a significantly empowering impact. In that sense, signing men up to sesame contract farming re-enforces their privileged status and further contributes to women's more limited access to information and inputs, thereby perpetuating entrenched gender inequalities.

Last, the assessment notes that women (both contract holders and non-contract holders) have considerably more experience in growing sesame. This is so, not only because they have grown it as a food crop, female contract holders also reported almost four times as many years experience of growing commercial sesame than their male counterparts. Some female respondents also

exhibited a great interest and passion in sesame. Since knowledge, experience, and passion for a certain crop are important prerequisites for successful production, enabling adequate loan repayments, this suggestive finding is critical and should be taken into account by stakeholders engaged in sesame contract farming.

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Annex 1: Assessment Tool – FGD Question Guide

1. Division/allocation of land

- How much land do you allocate to cotton, how much to sesame, and how much to other crops?
Method: Give each participant a number of beans and ask them to indicate the proportion of land allocated to sesame/cotton and other crops (if possible specify the other crops)
- Why?
- How was the decision taken? Did one person decide or was there discussion?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

2. Division of labour and perceptions on responsibility

- Who in your household is mostly responsible for growing cotton? (to get participants' perception, not to take at face value)
- Who in your household is mostly responsible for growing sesame? (to get participants' perception, not to take at face value)
- Who does what on your cotton field?

Method: Cards with key tasks written out; participants are asked to allocate the tasks to different categories of household members written on a poster: Wife; husband; male child; female child; other relative; casual labourer; other.

- Who does what on your sesame field?

Method: Cards with key tasks written out; participants are asked to allocate the tasks to different categories of household members written on a poster: Wife; husband; male child; female child; other relative; casual labourer; other

3. Inputs

- During the last season, which inputs did you use for cotton / sesame?
Method: Cards with key inputs written on them participants are asked to raise their hand if they have used a certain input.
- How did you decide on which inputs to use for cotton?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

- How did you decide on which inputs to use for sesame?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?

- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)
- Who sourced the inputs for cotton?
- Who sourced the inputs for sesame?
- Where were the inputs sourced from?
- Who paid for the inputs for cotton?
- Who paid for the inputs for sesame?
- If you had limited inputs, would you prioritize cotton or sesame?
- Do you think this would change when you receive inputs through IBCF?
 - If yes, how?

4. Sales

- During the last season, how much sesame did you sell and how much did you keep (a) home consumption or (b) other use (gifts, etc)?
Method: Each participant is given a number of beans and asked to indicate the approximate proportion of sesame sold/used for home consumption/other use

- How did you make this decision?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)
- Where did you sell your sesame?
- How did you make this decision?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)
- Did you sell any cotton other than to Afrisian?
- If yes, to whom did you sell?
- How did you make this decision?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?

- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

5. Income

- How did you use the income generated?
Method: Participants are given a number of beans and asked to indicate the approximate proportion of income spent on the following spending categories outlined on a poster: food; school fees/uniform; household goods (blanket, etc); health/medicine; farm inputs; recreation; savings and give participants beans to indicate approximate proportion of income spent on each category
- How did you decide on the use of the income generated?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)

6. Contract

- Who in your household has signed the contract with Afrisian?
- How did you decide who in your household signs the contract with Afrisian for cotton and sesame?

If discussion:

- Who was involved?
- Did everybody speak in the discussion?
- Was there disagreement?
- How was this resolved?

If no discussion, did one person decide?

- If yes, who?
- Why?
- What was the decision based on? (knowledge/information; advice from fellow farmers; tradition; etc)
- Does it matter who signs the contract? Does this person have more say on how the inputs are used? If yes, please give an example.
- If inputs are accessed on credit, is the debt seen as a household debt or a debt of the individual who signed the contract?