

Rapid assessment of the experience of female spray service providers

November 2016

Prepared by Dr. Maxi Ussar, MOST Gender Adviser

Table of contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	5
Methodology	6
Objectives of the assessment	6
1. Perception of ‘unsuitability’ of women to be SSPs	7
2. Recruitment, motivation, reactions from family and community	7
3. Actual operation	8
4. Awareness of health and safety issues	9
5. Croplife	9
Conclusion and recommendations.....	10

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 The crop is mostly grown by smallholder farmers on an average plot size of one acre and has, therefore, considerable pro-poor potential. An average of 30% of cotton farmers are women.

Volume and quality of cotton production in Malawi is strongly affected by insect pests, which can be controlled by spraying the crop with appropriate insecticides. However, many smallholder cotton farmers have limited access to the necessary chemicals and spraying equipment and, as a result, frequently do not spray; do not spray properly; and/or do not use appropriate protective gear.

To address this, the Malawi Oilseeds Sector Transformation Programme (MOST) supports key stakeholders to train Spray Service Providers (SSPs) and provide them with the necessary equipment and know-how to provide spray services to cotton farmers. To date 114 SSPs have been trained and 32 have been operational.

Out of the 32 SSPs that have been trained and have been operational, only 2 are female. Anecdotal evidence suggests that reasons for this are linked to a perception that the tasks involved in spray service provision – walking long distances, carrying a 15 kg spray pack, riding a bicycle, working with men outside the confines of the village – are not appropriate for women. Moreover, since spraying is strictly forbidden during pregnancy and breastfeeding, some consider it more appropriate for women in general to not engage in this type of work at all.

This assessment unpacks this anecdotal evidence and explores how the female SSPs have experienced their first two seasons. Based on Key Informant Interviews with both female SSPs who have been operating and other stakeholders the assessment finds the following:

Perception of ‘suitability’ of women to be SSPs

- ❖ Women are widely considered capable of carrying out the tasks of an SSP by the local community
- ❖ The female SSPs have clearly demonstrated their capability to work as SSPs
- ❖ The cultural perception of ‘unsuitability’ of women to be SSPs exists but seems to be promoted from the outside, rather than being rooted in local culture
- ❖ The cultural perception of ‘unsuitability’ of women to be SSPs is changing due to the positive experience of the female SSPs

Recruitment, motivation, reactions from family and community

- ❖ The first SSP recruitment process in 2013 explicitly excluded women at first
- ❖ Women approached the project manager to ask for permission to join and were admitted
- ❖ Female SSPs were motivated by making money, like their male counterparts
- ❖ Female SSPs experienced no negative reactions from anyone

Actual operation

- ❖ Female SSPs only served a moderate number of clients
- ❖ There does not seem to be any advantage or disadvantage in ‘approachability’ towards female or male clients for female SSPs
- ❖ Female SSPs made considerably lower profits than male SSP as they serviced fewer and smaller farms
- ❖ Female SSPs have limited knowledge of how much profit they made and little understanding of how profit is calculated

Awareness of health and safety issues

- ❖ There is limited awareness of health and safety issues in general, including relating to pregnancy and breastfeeding, among SSPs and the wider community
- ❖ The village chief, as a critical opinion leader in the community, holds a gross misconception on how to prevent the negative effects of chemicals when breastfeeding

¹ NES (2013-2018)

- ❖ Alternative practices to SSPs for the application of pesticides are highly precarious, making SSPs by far the safest way to apply pesticides

Croplife Malawi

- ❖ Croplife International does not officially ban female SSPs but recommends for SSPs to be male
- ❖ Croplife International's Standard Operating Procedures define SSPs as male
- ❖ Croplife Malawi adopts a neutral position regarding the gender of SSPs

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Adopt, as much as possible, a gender neutral position when advertising the SSPs programme or recruiting SSPs;
- Encourage female SSPs to create a group, possibly via whatsapp, to share experiences, and support and empower each other;
- Include more focus on basic accounting skills, such as the calculation of profits, in the SSP training;
- Re-train the first cohort of SSPs, including sufficiently detailed training on safety and health and an explicit inclusion of the specific dangers of spraying when pregnant and breastfeeding;
- Involve opinion leaders, such as chiefs, in the SSP training wherever possible.

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 1 acre and has, therefore, considerable pro-poor potential. An average of 30% of cotton farmers are women.

Volume and quality of cotton production in Malawi is strongly affected by insect pests, which can be controlled by spraying the crop with appropriate insecticides. However, many smallholder cotton farmers have limited access to the necessary chemicals and spraying equipment and, as a result, frequently do not spray, or do not spray on time. Access to protective equipment is also highly limited and awareness of the danger of applying chemical without adequate protection is low. This puts cotton smallholders at significant risk of damaging their health when applying the chemicals.

To address this constraint, the Malawi Oilseeds Sector Transformation Programme (MOST) supports key stakeholders to train Spray Service Providers (SSPs) and provide them with the necessary equipment and know-how to provide spray services to cotton farmers. To date 114 SSPs have been trained and 32 have been operational.

Out of the 32 SSPs that have been trained and have been operational, only two are female. Anecdotal evidence suggests that reasons for this are linked to a perception that the tasks involved in spray service provision – walking long distances, carrying a 15 kg spray pack, riding a bicycle, working with men outside the confines of the village – are not appropriate for women. Moreover, since spraying is strictly forbidden during pregnancy and breastfeeding, some consider it more appropriate for women in general to not engage in this type of work at all.

This assessment aims to unpack this anecdotal evidence in more detail and further explores how the female SSPs experienced their first two seasons: Were they capable of carrying out the work? Did they experience any negative reactions from their family or community? Did prospective clients welcome them and were actual clients satisfied with the service they provided? Did they make much profit? Will they continue working as SSPs and would they recommend this type of work to other women? Are they aware of the dangers of spraying when pregnant or breastfeeding and, if so, how would they handle it?

This rapid assessment is based on six Key Informant Interviews with both female SSPs who have been operating, male SSPs, smallholders who were served by female SSPs, a village chief, as well as Croplife Malawi.

The assessment finds that women are capable and interested to work as SSPs. The tasks involved in working as an SSP seem equally suited to men and women and actual and prospective clients have not shown a preference for male (or female) SSPs. Despite this, there seems to be a cultural perception that working as an SSP is ‘for men’. Yet, the positive experience of the female SSPs has resulted in a shift of this perception and more women are expressing an interest to join the programme.

Although overall a positive experience for them, the female SSPs seem to lack confidence and, during their first two seasons, they perceived themselves to be ‘on trial’. This was so despite the fact that they operated alongside male SSPs who had undergone the same training and had the same level of experience as them. As a result the female SSPs only had a moderate number of clients and chose clients with small plots of land. This resulted in considerably lower profits for female SSPs compared to male SSPs.

Female SSPs are also found to be less aware of the actual profits they had made and had a weak understanding of how to calculate the profit they had made.

² NES (2013-2018)

The assessment further finds that awareness on health and safety in general and the risks of spraying when pregnant or breastfeeding is only moderate among female and male SSP, as well as the chief, and should be improved. Importantly, the assessment points to the importance of including local opinion leaders such as chiefs in training on health and safety as the assessment find that he has gross misconceptions regarding safety and health of SSPs.

Last, the assessment notes that Croplife Malawi officially takes a neutral position towards the gender of SSPs, although it recommends for SSPs to be male.

Methodology

This rapid assessment was based on semi-structured interviews with the following individuals:

- ❖ 2 Female SSPs that have been operating for 2 seasons
- ❖ 1 Male SSP who has been operating for 2 seasons
- ❖ 1 Female cotton farmers, client of a female SSP
- ❖ Village Chief
- ❖ Croplife Malawi

The interviews were held at Somo village, Chikwawa on 14/11/2016 and Blantyre on 15/11/2016.

Objectives of the assessment

The assessment aims to capture the experience of women operating as SSPs, explore why there were so few SSPs in the first round of implementation of the intervention, and develop recommendations on the way forward.

Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

Capturing the experience of women in a male dominated job

- ❖ Is there a perception that women are 'unsuited' to operating as SSPs?
- ❖ What motivated the female SSPs to work as SSP?
- ❖ What was the reaction of their family and friends (especially men); their community, including the village chief; and their actual and potential clients?
- ❖ Did they experience any negative reactions?
- ❖ If so, how did they react to these?
- ❖ Will they continue operating as SSPs and would they recommend other women to engage in this business? If not, why not?

Capturing the attitude of clients/potential clients on women offering a 'man's service'

- ❖ Did some farmers feel that women are not able to provide SSP services? Why?
- ❖ If any still hired female SSPs/or saw other do so: Did they change their mind?

The danger for pregnant/nursing women to spray – and what that means for women operating as SSPs

- ❖ What do the female SSPs think about this danger?
- ❖ What will the female SSP who is pregnant do during the next season?
- ❖ What does the village chief think about this? Does he/she believe that this is a reason to exclude women from the profession or is education/awareness raising on the dangers sufficient?
- ❖ What is CropLife Malawi's/Global official position on this and what are the reasons behind it?

1. Perception of ‘unsuitability’ of women to be SSPs

- *Women are widely considered capable of carrying out the tasks of an SSP by the local community and have clearly demonstrated their capability*

Although the village chief noted that in the very beginning of the SSP programme there was a cultural perception that this work is not for women, this was not based on the actual tasks involved in providing spray services. In his words, it was “simply what people thought; a cultural perception.” Indeed, the assessment found that the tasks involved in being an SSP seem to be widely considered to be equally suited to men and women. This view was clearly expressed by the male and female SSPs as well as the village chief. The question was asked in many different ways to all the respondents giving them the chance, in private, to highlight certain aspects of being an SSP that might be more difficult for women than men. Even though some possible responses were probed, there was a categorical response from all respondents that women in this community commonly carry out very burdensome work, often engaging in more tedious, tiring, and unpleasant tasks than men. Leaving the confines of the village and approaching male clients – both of which are aspects of working as an SSP – were also not considered inappropriate for women to do.

The two female SSPs also clearly stated that they feel themselves to be capable and have, in fact, demonstrated their capability by having successfully operated as SSPs. The chief as well as the client confirmed this.³

- *The cultural perception of ‘unsuitability’ of women to be SSPs seems to be promoted from the outside, rather than being rooted in local culture*

The finding that women are widely considered capable of carrying out the tasks involved in being an SSP suggests that the perception of ‘unsuitability’ is not some much rooted in local culture but rather a perception promoted by the outside/from the top through key messages used to advertise the programme, etc, as will be seen below.

- *The cultural perception of ‘unsuitability’ is changing*

Since the two female SSPs have performed well, all respondents agreed that the cultural perception of female ‘unsuitability’ is changing. Indeed, quite a number of women in the community have expressed an interest in becoming SSPs.

2. Recruitment, motivation, reactions from family and community

- *The recruitment process explicitly excluded women at first*

The SSP recruitment process in Somo village in 2013 explicitly called for “young, strong men” to become SSPs. A total of 30 men registered as SSPs.

However, as the recruitment process was publically conducted in the village two women also expressed an interest to join the programme, believing that they were as capable as men to carry out the tasks involved in being a SSP. In their words, “only lazy people say this work is not for women; it is an excuse.” They approached the MOST programme manager and the village chief and were permitted to join.

³ Anecdotal evidence suggested that some farmers had previously refused to hire female SSPs due to their gender. However, when asked, the female SSPs and the chief stated that this was not true. This response may well be due to the fact that MOST is showing an interest in this aspect and the community / farmers who expressed negative views feel embarrassed, as they suspect that MOST will be critical of this attitude, and thus prefer not to share these views.

➤ *Female SSPs were motivated by making money and experienced no negative reactions*

The female SSPs, like their male counterparts, were mainly motivated by the prospect of earning a cash income. Since starting operating three years ago, they reported not to have experienced any negative reactions from their families, the community, or the farmers they approached. However, importantly, one female SSP is not married and the other's husband lives away from the village. Therefore, neither had a husband close by who could have disapproved or who would have been available to become an SSP instead of her.

3. Actual operation

➤ *Female SSPs served a moderate number of clients*

Both female SSPs have operated for two seasons and have had eight and nine clients respectively. One had four female and four male clients, while the other had four female and five male clients. The male SSP served 15 clients (3F and 12M)

The difference in number of clients between the female SSPs and the male SSP was, according to the respondents, due to the fact that the female SSPs perceived themselves as being 'on trial', and thought it most appropriate to first focus on a few clients before expanding in future.

➤ *No advantage / disadvantage in 'approachability' of female SSPs*

The female SSPs did not feel that their gender made it easier or more difficult to approach female or male farmers and, in fact, one of their female clients interviewed stated that it was her husband who made the decision to hire the female SSP. This suggests that the gender of an SSP does not impact on their 'approachability' – either negatively or positively.

➤ *Female SSPs made considerably lower profits than male SSP as they serviced smaller farms*

The price charged per gallon used was reported to be set by the local SSP group at 100 Kwacha/gallon. Although there seem to have been some variation depending on the total area sprayed and based on whether the service is provided on an ad-hoc cash or seasonal contract basis, there was no difference in price/gallon charged by the female and male SSPs.

However, male SSPs seem to make considerably higher profits, reported at approximately 60,000 Kwacha per season, while female SSPs reported profits of about 15,000 Kwacha per season. The reason for this is that the male farmer interviewed serviced significantly bigger farms and, as a result, made considerably more profit.

The process for selection of clients does not explain this trend, as clients are chosen through an open process by which the SSP group allocates certain sections of the community to a group of six SSPs. This group subsequently calls for a sensitisation meeting with their allocated section and clients openly choose the SSP they would like to spray their farm. Female SSPs were not overtly pushed to service smaller farms. However, their perception of 'being on trial' reported above, might help to explain why they felt it to be more appropriate for them to service smaller farms.

➤ *Low knowledge of how much profit was made and limited understanding of how this should be calculated among female SSPs*

Although respondents had some idea of profits made, overall knowledge of how much profit was made or even how it should be calculated seemed very low, particularly among the female SSPs.

4. Awareness of health and safety issues

- *Limited awareness of health and safety issues in general, including relating to pregnancy and breastfeeding*

The chief stated that the training of SSPs in Somo three years ago, which all the SSP interviewed attended, did not fully cover health and safety topics. Trainees were not sufficiently made aware of the dangers of spraying in general, let alone the specific dangers of spraying when pregnant or breastfeeding.

Despite this the respondents seemed to some extent aware that spraying is not allowed during pregnancy and breastfeeding. However, they could not explain exactly why and, overall, did not seem to fully appreciate the seriousness of the issue.

It was not possible to clearly establish whether one of the female SSPs who has recently given birth operated during pregnancy or not, as her pregnancy could have commenced after most of spraying for the previous season had ended. Equally it was not possible to gauge whether the SSP will engage in spraying while breastfeeding.

Despite a general awareness of health and safety issues, particularly during pregnancy and breastfeeding, the assessment found one critical reason for concern. The chief suggested that spraying when breastfeeding is not a problem as long as the child is not taken to the field and the mother has a bath and a glass of milk before breastfeeding. This is a gross misconception and must be explicitly addressed, including in the training materials.

- *Alternatives when breastfeeding*

SSPs in Somo are organised in a group so the group can easily ensure that the client of a pregnant or breastfeeding SSP is adequately served. However, this does not resolve the problem that the SSP will be left without an income during that time.

- *Alternative practices to SSPs for the application of pesticides are highly precarious*

Last, the assessment noted that, although knowledge on health and safety among SSPs could be improved, application of pesticides through professional SSPs is significantly safer than some of the alternative practices. For instance, farmers either hire a sprayer and spray themselves or pay for someone to spray. In this case spraying is done without any health and safety training or protective gear at all. Another scenario mentioned during the rapid assessment is the application of pesticides with a cloth, a practice highly inappropriate and risky. Thus, the availability of SSPs certainly reduces the risk of farmers and spray service providers to undue exposure to chemicals.

5. Croplife

Croplife International's officially recommends that SSP should be male. Indeed, Croplife's Standard Operating Procedures, which are a document of Croplife International and, thus, not amendable by Croplife Malawi, explicitly define SSPs as male.

However, Croplife is very clear that this position does not constitute an outright ban of female SSPs, as this would constitute discriminatory labour practices. For this reason Croplife Malawi adopts a neutral position towards the gender of SSPs. As a result, any specific references to the gender of SSPs is avoided whenever possible and women are neither encouraged nor discouraged to apply to become SSPs. SSP training also includes explicit information on the dangers of spraying when pregnant or breastfeeding

Conclusion and recommendations

The experience of the female SSPs who have been operating for the last two seasons shows that women are capable and interested to work as SSPs. The tasks involved in working as an SSP seem equally suited to men and women and actual and prospective clients have not shown a preference for male (or female) SSPs. This should allow female SSPs to operate a competitive business alongside their male counterparts.

The positive experience of the female SSPs has resulted in a shift in perception that spray service provision is a 'man's job' by the local community. As a result, more women are expressing an interest to join the programme and the chief is supportive of this development.

Despite this overall positive experience, women seem to lack confidence and, during their first two seasons, they perceived themselves to be 'on trial'. This was so despite the fact that they operated alongside male SSPs who had undergone the same training and had the same level of experience as them. As a result the female SSPs only had a moderate number of clients and chose clients with small plots of land. This resulted in considerably lower profits for female SSPs compared to male SSPs.

Female SSPs were also found to be less aware of the actual profits they had made and had a weak understanding of how to calculate the profit they had made.

The assessment further found that awareness on health and safety in general and the risks of spraying when pregnant or breastfeeding is only moderate among female and male SSP, as well as the chief, and should be improved. Importantly, the assessment points to the importance of including local opinion leaders such as chiefs in training on health and safety as their misconceptions, illustrated by the chief's suggestion on how to handle spraying when breastfeeding, may negatively impact on SSPs' behaviour.

Last, the assessment established that Croplife Malawi officially takes a neutral position towards the gender of SSPs, although it recommends for SSPs to be male.

Recommendations

- ❖ Adopt, as much as possible, a gender neutral position when advertising the SSPs programme or recruiting SSPs;
- ❖ Encourage female SSPs to create a group, possibly via whatsapp, to share experiences, and support and empower each other;
- ❖ Include more focus on basic accounting skills, such as the calculation of profits, in the SSP training;
- ❖ Re-train the first cohort of SSPs, including sufficiently detailed training on safety and health and an explicit inclusion of the specific dangers of spraying when pregnant and breastfeeding;
- ❖ Involve opinion leaders, such as chiefs, in the SSP training wherever possible.