

How *Umodzi* is Changing Women's Lives

Learning Paper October 2021

With an estimated 51.5% of the population living below the poverty line, of which 20.1% are considered to live in extreme poverty (2016/17), Malawi can be considered one of the poorest countries in the world.¹ Additionally, Malawi consistently ranks low on the Human Development Index (174th out of 189 countries in 2019), and ranked 142nd out of 162 on the most recent Gender Inequality Index.² Concern Worldwide recognises the multi-dimensionality of extreme poverty characterised by a lack of assets and the low return on these assets, and that the underlying causes of this are inequality, and risk and vulnerability; our work aims to address these causes, maintainers and obstacles helping people exit extreme poverty. One approach that has been taken is a modified Graduation programme that utilises a multi-sectoral series of interventions (comprehensive targeting followed by consumption support in the form of cash transfers, skills training and coaching, saving and financial access, and asset transfers) to support a pathway out of extreme poverty.

The Malawi **Graduation Programme** (2017-2021), known locally as *Tiwoloke*, was designed to address some of the key challenges faced by people living in extreme poverty by simultaneously boosting livelihoods and income, providing access to financial services, improving people's self-confidence and tackling social exclusion. The intervention in Malawi was an intense, multifaceted intervention over 18 months, comprising training on a specific livelihood asset, an asset transfer, enhancing access to savings facilities, and time-bound cash transfers. Regular coaching visits at household level were carried out by project staff to support participants in their engagement in the programme.

The programme also tested an innovative approach to engaging male and female spouses in a gender transformative dialogue aiming to improve gender equality and ultimately poverty related outcomes amongst programme participants. This gender specific component of the programme, known as *Umodzi*, meaning 'united', engaged couples to reflect upon and discuss issues such as gender norms, power, decision-making, budgeting, violence, positive parenting and healthy relationships.

As part of a comprehensive impact evaluation led by Concern and TIME (Trinity Impact Evaluation Unit) at Trinity College Dublin, the programme was structured into three intervention arms:

Intervention Arm 1	Intervention Arm 2	Intervention Arm 3
Targets male household members as the primary recipients of Graduation inputs	Targets female household members as the primary recipients of Graduation inputs	Targets female household members as the primary recipients of Graduation inputs PLUS she and her partner/ husband participate in 12 gender transformative dialogue sessions .

¹ Malawi profile, World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malawi/overview>.

² Both of these rankings come from the 2020 Human Development Report on The next frontier: Human development and the Anthropocene

The aim of this research was to better understand the barriers faced by women in escaping poverty and examine whether the sex of the Graduation programme recipient and the compounded effect of gender transformative dialogue sessions affected household decision-making, gender attitudes, food security and income. In addition to very detailed quantitative survey tools, a Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP) study was also used to collect evidence on the household-level impacts of the intervention. This information is gathered directly from intended beneficiaries and based on their perceptions of what has changed in their lives over a set period of time and across a series of domains related to the project's theory of change. The interview data was collected by a team of local researchers who are fluent in local dialects. The researchers were 'blindfolded' in that they had no knowledge of the programme and the hypotheses being tested and worked completely independently of the project team.

Where We Started

Formative research conducted in Mangochi and Nsanje Districts provided in depth guidance on the priority areas for *Umodzi* to focus on. This looked into localised concepts of gender norms and masculinity and the consequences for men who fail to live up to traditional expectations. It looked at prevailing marriage practices (polygamy), matrilineal and patrilineal systems, attitudes to sex within marriages as well as household dynamics, the division of household labour, control of money within a household and intra-household decision making. Findings described rigid traditional gender norms where men are considered the breadwinner and the main decision maker in the home, and failure to live up to this role resulted in mockery and outcasting. Early programme data showed that 96% of men believed men should decide on the priorities for spending money while over 60% of men agreed that they made the final household decisions on finance. Women were expected to fulfil a primarily reproductive role, as women earning more than men would be emasculating. Over 39% of women were found to rarely or never spend small amounts of money on their own and 68% of women rarely or never purchased clothing for themselves or their children with their own earning, without the permission of someone else. In addition, violence against women was found to be high with 32% of female spouses interviewed experiencing emotional / physical / sexual violence from their partner; 24% had experienced physical and / or sexual violence.

The *Umodzi* Curriculum

Building on Concern Worldwide's organisational approach to gender transformative programming, and informed by the formative and baseline data, a curriculum was developed to work with couples in both mixed and single sex groups. A 12 session curriculum was developed along with a Case Worker manual, to guide follow up visits in between group sessions.

Central to delivering this curriculum was ensuring that Concern's staff were trained on, understood, and believed in the content of this material and the concepts behind it. Concern, with support from its global partner, Sonke Gender Justice, facilitated a five day gender transformative workshop for all staff to support them to challenge their own beliefs and attitudes. Following this, the Gender Programme Support Officers who facilitate *Umodzi* at community level also underwent a 10-day comprehensive Training of Trainers workshop on the *Umodzi* curriculum and associated training tools. Regular reflective conversations among staff on various gender issues, such as sexuality and healthy relationships, as well as monitoring, coaching and support to those facilitating were ongoing since the initial training to ensure continued momentum and quality.

THE MODULES OF *UMODZI*

Family Vision

Gender Roles

Household Dynamics and
Decision Making

Power

Household Budget Management

Violence Against Women

Working together as Partners

Men as Fathers

Healthy Relationships

At community level, couples' dialogue sessions were facilitated by one male and one female staff per group with up to 12 couples per group. The messages conveyed in the *Umodzi* sessions are also reinforced by Concern's Graduation Case Workers, who follow up with beneficiary households using regular reflection and discussion questions during their bi-monthly home visits.

Initial Findings

While the full findings from the RCT will not be available until early 2022, a number of studies carried out throughout implementation provide an insight into the changes that are taking place for programme participants. A QUIP was carried out in October 2020 to better understand participants own interpretation of the impact of the programme on their lives. In particular this focused on differences in the experiences between women who were enrolled in the programme, and those who were also enrolled in the *Umodzi* sessions, along with their partners. During the same period, a quantitative survey was also carried out after the onset of COVID-19 in July 2020 to document its impact on Graduation households, and case studies on a small number of *Umodzi* participants (Treatment Arm 3) were also collected in February 2020.

Figure 1: Overview of the impacts of *Umodzi*

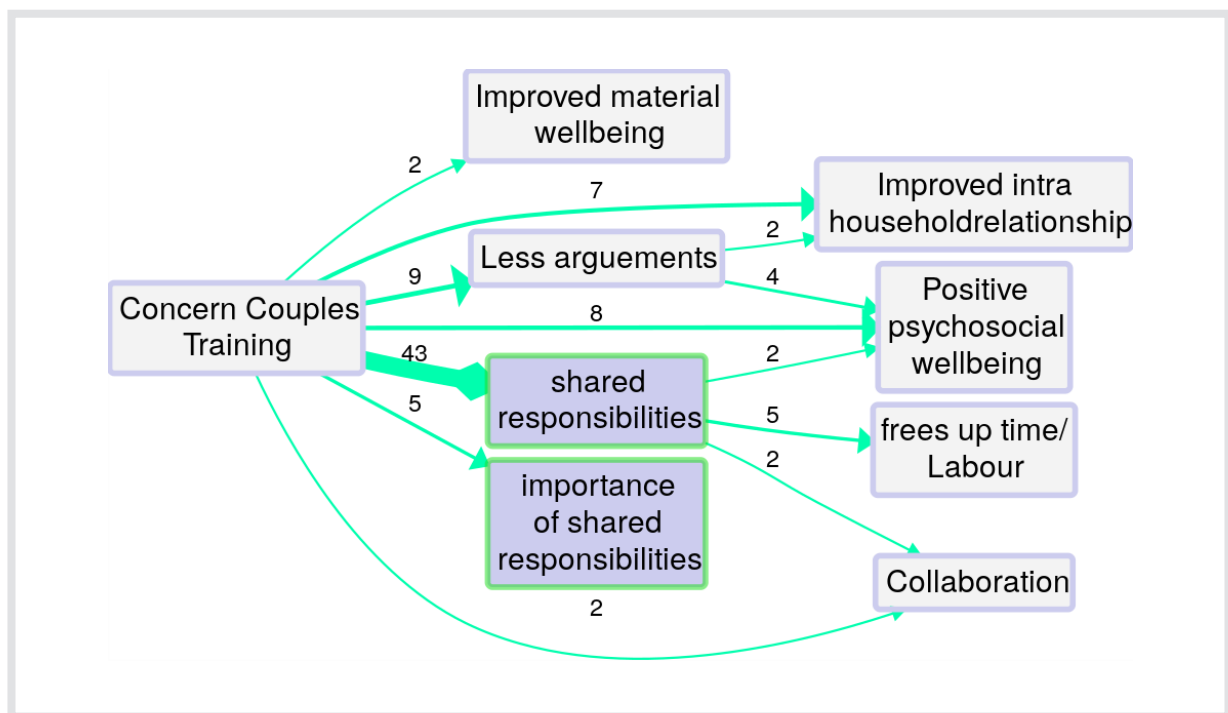


Figure 1 is taken from the QUIP and shows some of the causal pathways observed and the strength of the linkages (the numbers and thickness of the arrows representing the amount of respondents giving this answer). This figure shows, for example, that *Umodzi* led most prominently to an increased sharing of responsibilities, which led to more free time, as well as positive psychosocial wellbeing and collaboration between couples. It also led to a reduced number of arguments, which improved wellbeing and intra-household relationships. The impact of these changes on income generating activities, spending, division of labour, intra-household relationships and decision making are described in the following

Income generating activities

Due to the Graduation programme as a whole, many women have been more able to buy and own small livestock, start businesses, undertake farming, and invest in productive assets such as iron sheets for home improvement, utensils and blankets, aided by the cash transfers provided. Being able to purchase livestock was viewed as an improvement in status and a form of empowerment. Traditionally men in this context own larger livestock and the shift towards women owning larger livestock may suggest a change in gender norms. One woman noted,

“This money boosted my income and I managed to buy goats, chickens, a bicycle and iron sheets. I now live in a better house and the livestock provide a steady source of income in times of shocks. As a woman, I own blankets and clothes but have recently acquired livestock and Iron sheets due to the cash transfer from Concern Worldwide.”

(Woman, treatment arm 3, interviewed in QuIP October 2020)

The QuIP also showed that out of the 36 respondents that reported an increased ability to acquire a range of productive assets, 23 of these women had taken part in *Umodzi*, indicating that *Umodzi* was a positive factor in this change.

Spending

Many women enrolled in the programme reported how they had been able to diversify their household expenditure as a result of the cash transfer Village Savings and Loans (VSL) groups, and asset transfers. This means that rather than only being responsible for food purchases, women were now also able to buy other items, with many explaining that being able to own and spend money themselves was empowering.

“Before *Tiwoloke*, we were buying food but now we have also bought iron sheets and livestock since we received some money from the project. Previously, it was my husband who was chiefly responsible for determining how to spend money but now he involves me because of the training on gender that *Tiwoloke* provided us with. I have been able to buy things like livestock which was not possible before *Tiwoloke* came into the picture. I used to just buy food because with the money we were earning, that is all we could manage.”

(Woman, treatment arm 3, interviewed in QuIP October 2020)

The QUIP exercise shows that twice as many women who had taken part in *Umodzi* reported these positive changes, compared to those that only received the Graduation package.

Division of labour

While women continue to bear the greater burden in respect of domestic tasks, there have been notable changes in the division of labour between men and women, with men taking on an increasing role within the household, allowing women to rest, or engage in more productive tasks. One woman said,

“Before Concern Worldwide trained us on gender, I would do all household chores alone and my husband would still shout at me for leaving out some tasks even with fatigue at play. He was very insensitive, and he would just sit at home and watch me work. If there was no fence to fix, he would just fold his arms at home and not help me at all. Now we share chores and he even helps me with the children all thanks to the gender equality training.”
 (Woman, treatment arm 3, interviewed in QuIP October 2020)

The main driver of this change is attributed, by participants, to *Umodzi*.

At the onset of COVID-19, the programme was conscious not to reinforce gender inequalities through its COVID-19 prevention messaging, in the expectation that traditional gender norms would mean a disproportionate amount of the preventative actions would fall to women. Gender transformative IEC materials (see an example opposite) were used with *Tiwoloke* programme participants who were already taking part in *Umodzi*. In 2020, our research looked at the impact of COVID-19 on Graduation participants, and found that 32% of households that received the gender training held more egalitarian beliefs regarding the division of labour between genders within the household, compared to 21% holding the same beliefs in the control arm. This suggests the inclusion of the messages is going some way to change deeply held beliefs.



Figure 2: Example of gender transformative COVID-19 prevention IEC material

Intra-household relationships

Case studies with couples that participated in *Umodzi* suggest that intimate partner violence had decreased as a result of the intervention. The cash transfer has been a positive driver of change for some couples, particularly if limited household resources were a source of tension within the household. This had allowed parents to afford school materials and food for their children which eased intra-household relationships. As Jackson and Margaret’s case study below indicates, the budgeting session in *Umodzi* also contributed to increased trust between couples, while others referred to increased peace and love in their homes as a result of the sessions.

Decision making

Small changes to decision making power have taken place on the use and sale of assets, property and income earned with women having more participation in such decisions. One programme participant interviewed identified how,

“When you are making decisions, as women we were thinking of smaller things as if we could not think of bigger decisions. I used to look down on myself. Previously I thought I could not make decisions on bigger things.”

(Hawa Master, Mangochi, treatment arm 3, case study collected February 2020)

She specifically referred to moving out of the ‘woman box’, a concept introduced to participants to represent gendered social expectations during *Umodzi*. One male participant also mentioned that participating in *Umodzi* has taught participants that “your wife is your partner” and greater consultation of women in decision making was cited frequently. These important changes have happened at the individual and household level, but change also needs to come at societal level, where deep-rooted patriarchal sociocultural norms mean that men firmly remain the main decision-makers.

CASE STUDY: Jackson and Margaret

Jackson Adam and Margaret Kamwendo, from Mawgde village, Mangochi district are Graduation programme participants who have taken part in *Umodzi*.

One of the areas addressed in the *Umodzi* training is decision making. Margaret found the sessions very helpful in clarifying her role in decision-making. Before *Umodzi*, she would make suggestions but her husband would say, ‘you cannot make decisions for me’. *Umodzi* addressed this issue, covering how both spouses have a role in decision-making. While Jackson remains the main decision-maker in the household, particularly on health care, family planning and childcare, now when Margaret makes suggestions, he considers them before making the final decision.

For Jackson, the most interesting learning he took away from *Umodzi* was on financial planning. He learnt that it is important to discuss it with his wife, so when Margaret receives her monthly cash transfer, they sit down, discuss and agree how to spend it. Margaret confirms this, though from her point of view, what changed as a result of *Umodzi* is that he no longer hides money from her. Instead, he tells her about money he has and together they make decisions about how to use it for the family. For her, the discussions about budgeting during the dialogue sessions has made things easier in their relationship.

Both Jackson and Margaret feel that the training has encouraged them to do more things together and be more united as a couple, and has brought peace to the family. He has also started to help more with household chores, including sweeping and childcare. According to Jackson, these changes have led others to admire him in their village.

While the couple have not discussed what they have learned with others in the village, Margaret wishes that the whole village would be able to take part in such a training, “If the whole village was involved, there would be a great impact”.



CASE STUDY: Hawa and Master

Malsiatu (Hawa) Master and her husband, Master Budala, live in Kwitambo village, in Mangochi district. They both attended the *Umodzi* sessions as part of Graduation.

Hawa feels that *Umodzi* has brought peace into the household. For her, the training taught them that gender-based violence is not good. She sees violence occurring in other households, but not from her husband. Other wives come to her house and say, "You are living peacefully." Master agrees that he is no longer emotionally violent to his wife. Before *Umodzi*, when he got angry because his wife was not giving him the response he wanted, he would ignore her or shout at her. Now as a result of the training, when she does not answer in the way he wants, he stays calm and considers the situation and then they discuss it.

One of the main impacts for Hawa has been on how she parents. The training has helped her understand the importance of schooling for her children and has changed how she disciplines them. Before, when the children misbehaved, she would have ignored the bad behaviour or responded with force. Now, if they misbehave she talks to them about their behaviour.

While *Umodzi* has not changed how they make decisions, Hawa feels that *Umodzi* has helped her to move away from traditional gender norms. She has realised that she can contribute to the big goals that they want to achieve as a family. The decision for the family to invest in constructing a new house and purchasing burnt bricks for instance was her idea. Previously she would not have thought that these family goals were within her domain to suggest and decide on.

Both spouses discuss the information they learn in *Umodzi* with each other, as well as with other households in the training. They both also share this information with their friends, which is an important change for Master, as he never talked about these issues with his friends before *Umodzi*. For Master, his friends have reacted by saying such information is useless and have laughed at him. For Hawa, on the other hand, she feels that her friends can learn from her and feels comfortable sharing and explaining the materials and how to bring the change. She shows them that her husband cleans, and cooks, and says 'maybe you can talk to your husband have the same happen'.



Conclusion

While we await the final outcomes of the RCT, the indicative findings to date show some very promising and positive changes brought about by *Umodzi* and the programme as a whole, particularly in terms of the intra-household dynamics and the array of benefits that a peaceful and loving home brings. The early results from our monitoring system suggest that many of these changes have lasted well beyond the programme intervention, and the 2022 round of data collection will be able to look into this in more detail. The research component meant that the programme was designed so that the gender transformative aspect was focused only at the household level. Going forward, a community level approach will also be included in Graduation programme design to address gender norms more widely and create a more supportive enabling environment for change. Further questions to look into include the minimum and optimal intensity and duration of an effective *Umodzi* approach as well as how scalable it is within the Graduation programme in general. However, what is clear already is that *Umodzi* is having a remarkably positive effect on participants' lives.

This report is one of a series produced in November, 2021 that look at the impact of Concern's graduation programme in Malawi on (i) participant's resilience (ii) the impact of the gender transformative approach (*Umodzi*) being adopted (iii) employment outcomes and (iv) social impacts.

The full set is available from chris.connolly@concern.net or at Concern Insights page, using the following [link](#).