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‘Gender hates men’: Untangling gender and development discourses in food security fieldwork in urban Malawi

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Abstract

This article examines the social construction and contestation of gender and gender roles in the city of Blantyre in Malawi. In fieldwork on gendered household roles related to food security, interviews with men and women revealed a distinct set of connotations with the word gender, which reflected Malawians’ historical and contemporary engagement with concepts of development, modernity, and human rights. We denote the Malawian concept of gender as *gender* in order to distinguish the word participants used in interviews from the more widely accepted conventional definition. We then use this distinction to highlight the ways in which ideas of gender equality have been introduced and received in the Malawian context. The urban setting of the research is key to drawing out the association of *gender* with Westernization, bringing into focus the power dynamics inherent in the project of translating global discourses of gender rights and gender equality into meaningful social change in developing countries. *Gender* in Malawi denotes a top-down (and outside-in) process of framing Malawi’s goals for gender equality. This creates political constraints both in the form of resistance to *gender*, because it resonates with a long history of social change imposed by outside forces, and in the form of superficial adherence to *gender* to appear more urban and modern, especially to a Western researcher. Local understandings of gender as *gender* undermine efforts to promote gender equality as a means to address Malawi’s intense urban poverty and household food insecurity.

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1. Introduction

This article is the outcome of our attempts to disentangle the implicit meanings embedded in interviews conducted with men and women in Blantyre, Malawi, about their gendered household roles and responsibilities for food security. The interviews had been designed to ascertain information about who was performing food-related tasks in households *and why*. Drawing on postcolonial feminist writing, our research design and field data collection were conducted with the acknowledgment that gender roles and identities are dynamic, negotiated, and contingent with place, and also that responses to the questions would be shaped by the fact that the primary interviewer was a foreign, white, male researcher (Mills 2005, Mohanty 2003). Thus the research did not seek to generalize or categorize, nor to make claims about ‘typical’ practices or ‘normal’ households in Blantyre. Instead, interviews yielded insight into the ways in which gender as concept and in practice has been constructed, reworked and resisted in urban Malawi, captured in the intriguing statement from a male interviewee that ‘*gender* hates men.’

We use the italicized form *gender* to denote the distinct set of local associations with the word gender that our analysis of interview transcripts brought to light. The *gender* that hates men is an idea about changing gender roles, rights, practices, and identities in Malawi. It is partly ‘gender-as-knowledge’ (Kaler 2010: 24), embedded in the mundane activities of purchasing and cooking food and negotiating over the use of household resources. It is also part of a national political discourse introduced to Malawi in the 1990s in conjunction with socially transformative concepts like democracy, freedom and human rights (Englund 2006, Semu 2002). Particularly among urban men interviewed, their claims to be practicing gender equality do not translate to equitable

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sharing of responsibilities within households. There is a dissonance between, on one hand, acts that superficially indicate allegiance to *gender* for political and social reasons, and, on the other, a lack of substantive change in the configuration of intra-household power relations, attitudes or practices that could improve both gender equality and household food security.

Our efforts to unpack and read into the interviews has been guided by feminist postcolonial theory in development studies, in particular how this foregrounds the significance of communication and representation in advancing tangible social progress (McEwan 2009). Power dynamics pervade the construction of knowledge throughout social research, presenting inevitable dilemmas for Western researchers seeking to represent the views of marginalized groups even as they themselves are in vastly more powerful positions than those they are researching (Ostebo 2015). The notion of ‘giving voice’ in academic discourse to marginalized people is fraught with problems, but it is essential to continue to work through these problems rather than to circumvent them by bracketing out complexity or ignoring power disparities. In this sense, we take as our guide Radcliffe’s (2006: 524) statement in a review article on gender and development that ‘the best work deftly brings together debates at the core of (feminist or other) geography with sensitivity to context, histories and the performance of identities that successfully reframes mainstream policy approaches.’ In keeping with this vision, our analysis seeks not only to present reflexive insights into the meanings embedded in the interviews, but also to mobilize these insights to critically address key problems with gender and development in practice.

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The following section provides background information about the original dissertation project that inspired this article and outlines the methods employed. Subsequently, we provide an overview of how ideas about gender rights and equality have been introduced and deployed in Malawi since the country's transition to multi-party democracy in the 1990s. Our main findings and analysis are presented in section four, in which we tease apart the local meanings of *gender* that emerged from the interviews in terms of participants' references to *gender* as something threatening and desirable, practical and idealistic, and overall a fundamental component of an urban life and identity. Finally, we suggest how this analysis might inform understanding of gender change in Malawi, present lessons for gender and development research, and provide insights into the limitations of 'gender and development' in practice.

2. Constructing *gender* in urban Malawi: Approach

The research presented in this article was produced as part of Liam's doctoral dissertation project, under Belinda's supervision, investigating how gender roles and relations between men and women within households shape household vulnerability to food insecurity. The research was inspired by feminist critiques aimed at deconstructing the idea of the household as the standard unit for measuring food security ([Agarwal 1997](#)). Inter-related with the question of intra-household differences in vulnerability were questions about how received notions of household gender roles shaped the way that household members coordinated their activities and resources in order to reduce vulnerability, for example by pooling resources or by supporting each other's economic activities ([Haddad et al. 1997](#)). A key question in this regard was how flexible *urban* gender roles are when changing gender roles could allow households to reduce

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vulnerability through adaptation to evolving economic conditions. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide that covered a range of open-ended and more specific questions about food, gender, and urban life in Malawi.¹

Our construction and analysis of gender/*gender* is based on interview transcripts produced through multiple people's input and interpretations. The gap between abstract theoretical and local everyday language and discourses, in conjunction with the problem of translation and the contingencies of the interview encounter, mean that our interpretations are necessarily based on our own interpretation and partial representations of what people 'really' think (Raghuram and Madge 2006). Anticipating these challenges, the interviews were conducted as openly and responsibly as possible, while balancing the need to provide a platform for participants to express their views with the need to contribute to academic literature on gender and urban food security. In all of the research activities, Liam was accompanied by two Malawian research assistants, Patson and Gertrude, who interpreted during the interviews, conducted some interviews themselves, and transcribed and translated most of the interview recordings. Three interviews were conducted entirely in English and four in ChiTumbuka; the remaining interviews were conducted in ChiChewa, the most commonly spoken language in Malawi. Before the first interview, Patson and Gertrude translated the interview guide separately and then collaborated on a final version, which Liam validated with a third party. The original English version referred often to 'gender roles and relations,' which translated awkwardly into the local languages and was simplified in 'translation' to the single word 'gender', in accordance with Malawian popular usage. The term 'gender' has effectively evolved as a ChiChewa word in its own right, even appearing in a dictionary

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as a ChiChewa word ‘jenda’ with an annotation that it is originally an English word (Paas 2009). Whereas this dictionary entry defines ‘jenda’ simply as ‘gender equality’, our analysis demonstrates a much more layered and significant set of meanings.

These linguistic challenges and discoveries were an important, but not the only clue either to that complexity or to its symbolic and substantive significance. While still in the field, Liam compiled a preliminary report of his findings to distribute to research participants. It included a tabulated record of who within each household ‘usually does’ each of several food related tasks (cooking food, buying food, allocating food, deciding what food to buy). This information was based on what people had told him (or one of the research assistants) in interviews. The initial impression was that men were more involved in domestic chores than anticipated; for example, in half of the households represented, either ‘both parents’ or ‘anyone in the household’ was reported to usually buy food. This preliminary ‘finding’ accorded with the sense during the interviews and in general conversations with people during fieldwork that many urban men were involved in domestic chores. In subsequent, post-fieldwork analysis of interview transcripts, responses were disaggregated by gender and household position of the interviewee in conjunction with the gender and nationality of the interviewer, and more thoroughly picked apart in terms of content and meaning. It became apparent that male respondents were far more likely than women to have included men among the people reported as doing domestic chores. No married woman said that her husband normally buys food or cooks or allocates food. Far from suggesting a simple gender binary, further analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts revealed a diverse, complex and contradictory set of ideas about gender roles and identities, including contradictions within individual

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transcripts, that provide instructive insight into the linkages between gender, place, poverty, and development, both in general and in the particular Malawian context.

3. Constructing *gender* in urban Malawi: Context

The process by which human rights and gender equality were institutionally introduced and legally codified in Malawi in the 1990s provides important context for untangling the multi-stranded construction of *gender* that emerged from our analysis of the interview transcripts. Our analysis of *gender* is built on a feminist postcolonial reading of social change in Malawi, resonant with the documented ways in which colonial power relationships have shaped and continue to shape the course of social change (McEwan 2009). The most salient of these broad trends is that colonialism created and reinforced crude dualistic understandings of social reality, with the effect that African women became associated with ‘tradition’ rather than ‘modernity’ and the ‘rural’ rather than the ‘urban’ (McFadden 2002). Legacies of these ideas continue to influence popular discourses about social change in urban Malawi and are intrinsic to the construction of *gender* as a foreign concept associated with urbanism.

The formal colonial period ended in 1964 when Malawi gained independence. During the first thirty years of independence, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) held power and introduced a single-party system with Kamuzu Banda as President for life (McCracken 2012). The notion of ‘traditional’ gender roles was a key feature of Malawi’s conservative political culture under Banda. The nation was conceived according to a metaphor of an idealized Chewa² Village. Banda was the *nkhoswe* - the head of the Village who is also older brother of the matrilineal sister group, the *mbumba* (Semu 2002). The regime’s successful use of discourses of ‘tradition’ facilitated their

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justification of extreme political repression and persecution of political opponents through ‘traditional’ courts and centralized control over ‘traditional’ authorities at the local level ([Power 2010](#)). This framework sustained the dualities created in the colonial system and, as bearers of ‘tradition’, women were more constrained in their ability to control their own lives and to influence social change ([Gilman 2009](#)).

The single party system ended in the early 1990s following a referendum in favor of a new system of government. The ‘multi-party’ era was ushered in with multi-party elections in 1994 and a new liberal democratic Constitution. Many of the Malawians involved in drafting the new Constitution had been imprisoned, exiled or both during the Banda regime and thus civil and political rights featured prominently in the reform process. The Constitution also recognized economic, social, and cultural rights (such as the right to economic activity and the right to education) and solidarity rights under the broad ‘right to development’ which states: ‘Among other things, this right imposes on the state an obligation to take all necessary measures to provide people with equal opportunities to access basic resources, education, health services, food, shelter, employment, and infrastructure’ ([Kanyongolo 2009: 40-44](#)). The right to development addresses the most pressing issues for the majority of Malawians, who experience chronic lack of resources to meet their basic needs. The right to gender equality is stated as a distinct right, although gender equality is evident throughout the document’s emphasis on the equal rights of all citizens. The Constitution also recognizes gender equality as a ‘Principle of National Policy’ and binds the State to actively promote policies aimed at achieving gender equality in all spheres of Malawian society ([Government of Malawi 2013](#)). In conjunction with the Constitution, Malawians’ right to

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gender equality is recognized in several international treaties signed by the Government (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the African Union Women's Protocol, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Declaration for Action).

One of the key advocates for gender equality in Malawi was Vera Chirwa, a woman whose personal experiences as a lawyer and civil rights activist follow the major political changes in Malawi.³ Chirwa had been a prominent anti-colonial activist in the 1950s but after independence she was forced into exile because of her and her husband's opposition to the ruling regime (Chirwa 2007, Power 2010). She returned in the 1980s, was charged with treason and spent years as a political prisoner before being released in 1993. Upon her release, Chirwa left Malawi to visit her children who lived abroad, before again returning to Malawi. Her personal account of why she chose to move back to Malawi to fight for human rights after her release from prison captures the sense - shared among many of the people who had struggled against the Banda regime - that the new dispensation required a new mission to bring 'justice' to the people of Malawi (Chirwa 2007: 142):

I had been away from my country for nearly 30 years, exiled and imprisoned, and nothing was going to keep me out of Malawi again. I had a calling to teach Malawians about their rights. The fight for justice had guided my whole life, and in prison I promised myself that if I ever got out I would dedicate my life to the people of Malawi. How could I take a fancy job in Geneva? And I felt protected by the international community and all the good people who had fought for my release.

The above excerpt illustrates Chirwa's enduring sense of mission, but it also sheds light on her exceptional position relative to the vast majority of Malawians, especially women, who do not have the option to take up a 'fancy job in Geneva'. It highlights a practical

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reality of international development and human rights discourse, whereby the most prominent activists draw support and camaraderie from the international community of activists, supporters and donors that can lead to alienation from the people in their own countries who are most in need of rights protections and development assistance (Mawdsley *et al.* 2002, Mwale 2002, Amadiume 2000).

The challenge of drafting and gaining consensus on documents such as the new Malawian Constitution and international treaties on human rights is distinct from the challenge of translating the inherent values, protections, and entitlements into actual social change (Banik 2010). At the outset is the challenge of translating key concepts from English into local languages. In comparing the translations of the UN Declaration of Human Rights into ChiChewa in Malawi and in Zambia through separate but parallel processes, Englund (2006) identified important nuances and gaps in the Malawian translation that foregrounded individual freedom of expression while overshadowing entitlements and group rights. An emphasis on individual political freedom makes sense in light of the fact that many of the people in the position to translate the document – that is, people fluent in both English and ChiChewa – were by definition part of the educated class of Malawians that had suffered disproportionately from political repression under Banda's regime. For the majority of Malawians who do not speak English, let alone the large segment of the population who are entirely illiterate, the translation of human rights as freedoms rather than entitlements reduced the potential for them to make claims to the Government based on their right to development (Englund 2006). The literal, linguistic problem of translation is central to the communication problems we encountered when

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discussing *gender*, but is also helpful in illuminating how gender rights are perceived and understood by many ‘ordinary Malawians’ as externally imposed, Western and modern.

In conjunction with the politics of translating rights discourse is the problem of how to disseminate concepts like human rights and gender equality within Malawi’s highly unequal society. Englund (2006) argued that outreach programs to disseminate ideas like democracy and human rights were compromised by the elitism embedded in Malawian society, such that most human rights activists adopted paternalistic approaches to raising public consciousness. Like the people in a position to translate documents from English into ChiChewa, the people hired to explain these concepts to the rural populations rarely identified with the people receiving their messages; rather, they identified with their own class of educated, relatively materially comfortable people. They also identified with the international community of development workers and human rights activists, for reasons both pragmatic and ideological. These included a shared sense of democratic and developmental mission, as expressed by Mrs. Chirwa; the prestige associated with foreign ideas; and the need to ensure funding from international donors in an international development industry that had coalesced around an established set of goals and values such as gender equality and human rights (Mawdsley *et al.* 2002). In Malawi, the politics of development and the association of gender equality with a set of liberal democratic values seen to be imposed from outside the country has been central to the particular local construction of gender that we designate in this paper as *gender*. To most Malawians, gender equality is part of an externally and abruptly imposed package of reforms centred on individual political freedom and the right to vote in a multi-party democracy, marking the end of decades of a politically repressive and socially restrictive

regime under Banda in which ‘traditional’ gender norms were rigidly defined and tightly policed.

4. Constructing *gender* in urban Malawi: Interviews

Malawi’s distinctive post-colonial experience produced a particular social form in which gender norms and practices played a central role. As the ‘multi-party’ era has unfolded, with ideas of gender equality embedded in that larger corpus of socio-political reform, change to gender norms and practices has been uneven and contested. This section of the paper outlines the multiple, competing and contradictory qualities associated with *gender* that were revealed in people’s personal accounts during in-depth interviews. We present interview excerpts to convey the sense of *gender* as a power-laden concept imbued with patriarchy, postcolonial identity constructions, and geographically expressed sensibilities. We identify and describe five dominant narratives about *gender* that emerged in our study: men’s anxiety about *gender*; men’s paternalistic orientation even when they do claim to be practicing *gender*; women’s emphasis on *gender* as having the potential to enhance cooperation in the household; the association of *gender* with urban life; and the connections between urban life, practicing *gender*, and being more ‘civilized.’ These ideas demonstrate the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which participants constructed *gender* based on their own experiences and information they have received, and also how they chose to represent their own identities in relation to *gender*. The section concludes with a reflection on how the researcher’s own identity and positionality may have acted to elicit particular responses and performances, with respondents wishing to represent themselves as modern, egalitarian and Westernized, and thus to be ‘practicing *gender*’ in their everyday lives.

4.1. 'The agony of being a bachelor'

The quotation used in the title of our article, '*gender* hates men,' conveys a common perception of *gender* as a threat to men. It was from an interview that Gertrude conducted with two young men in the low-income informal settlement of Ndirande. One of the young men, Mr. Msiska⁴ said: '*Gender* favors women and not men; *gender* hates men. When there is a good thing and that thing is meant for male and female, people usually bring the issue of *gender* to favor women.' When Gertrude then asked him if he sees a big change in Malawi in terms of *gender*, he replied: 'Yes, most women are doing carpentry, driving, and men cooking, taking care of children.' Mr. Msiska is part of a new generation of young Malawians⁵ who grew up with the idea of *gender* as a core social development goal for Malawi, and yet his lack of opportunities for meaningful employment or a stable urban livelihood appears to have shaped his negative attitude toward *gender*. His perception that women were doing jobs conventionally done by men presents an apparent threat to his economic security, and yet there is no evidence that women are advancing into these careers.

While Mr. Msiska feared that women would displace men in the workforce through *gender*, another of our participants Mr. Nyirenda feared that *gender* would create lazy women and lead to increased work burdens for men in the home. He told Patson: 'You can have a wife but you could be doing the cooking and all kitchen work while she is just staying.' When asked about his male friends' views on *gender*, he said: 'They cannot accept to go into the kitchen to cook. They would think they are being tortured just like when they were bachelors. They say they married in order to have a helper and get rid of the agony of being a bachelor.' This statement partly represents what men say

to each other about *gender*; the ‘performative act’ (Kaler 2010: 25) of a man telling a male Malawian researcher about what other men would say about *gender*. Mr. Nyirenda, a banana seller in an informal market, was divorced and living with his younger brother who did most of the household chores. The ‘agony of being a bachelor’ could be interpreted either as the embarrassment of doing a woman’s job or the actual time and effort it takes to do the work. We can only speculate about the reasons Mr. Nyirenda’s marriage failed as it was not addressed in the interview, but his bitter attitude toward *gender* suggests that the division of labor in the household had been difficult to negotiate. Male alienation is a recurring theme in research on gender and development, usually indicative of a general sense of insecurity or frustration at an interpersonal level as the social context for male-female relationships shifts (Cornwall *et al.* 2011), and this is likely to be the case in the Malawian context too.

4.2. ‘I do help (my wife) in wisdom when I see her wisdom is somehow little’

The sense that *gender* posed a threat to men, while strongly expressed by those who held it, was a minority opinion. Many more men were either indifferent or even claimed to be actively embracing *gender* in their domestic lives. Yet this proved to be within a very particular and narrowly defined understanding, as many of the men who expressed views embracing *gender* noted explicitly or implicitly that they did so because there were limitations on women’s abilities. A popular concept among men and women was that a man could practice *gender* by doing domestic work on an exceptional basis, for example when his wife is sick. This arrangement was not a sharing of responsibilities so much as a man supporting a woman in meeting *her* obligations to the household. Mr. Mpunga, a community activist living in a squatter settlement, was very conscious of the

need for *gender*. He indicated to Liam and Patson that he and his wife shared work, but it was clear that *she* helped *him* in income-earning activities and *he* helped *her* in domestic chores. Mr Mpunga was earning a living by crushing rocks to sell as gravel for construction sites. He said: ‘My wife can help me push a rock [assist him in moving a large rock to the roadside site where he would break it up] . . . she is one of the people I know who does some of the men’s jobs. Even myself, sometimes I cook but only when she is sick.’ While Mr. Mpunga seems to be proud of his wife’s ability and willingness to help, his statement reconfirms that the rock crushing business is *his* responsibility and cooking is *her* responsibility. In this sense, gender roles and responsibilities are not redrawn by *gender*, but rather they are consciously and temporarily transgressed under conditions of extreme poverty or short-term incapacitation.

In another example of a man ‘practicing *gender*’, Mr. Moyo told Liam and Patson that he would feed the children when his wife was late coming home from work. This particular interview was conducted in ChiTumbuka, Patson’s home language, and English. Partly due to the relative ease of language, and partly due to the fact that Mr. Moyo’s mother lived in a small town where Liam had previously lived in Malawi, there was a heightened level of rapport. He was enthusiastic about participating in the research project and appeared to want to be seen as more educated, more urban, and more Western. Even as Mr. Moyo was eager to be seen as practicing *gender* to present a sophisticated image of himself, the paternalism in his attitude was also evident. For example, in response to the question of whether he ever discussed with his wife how food should be shared, he said: ‘Yes, sometimes I do help in wisdom when I see that her wisdom is somehow little.’ The paternalism evident in this statement illustrates the gap

between signifying one's allegiance with *gender* through actions that constitute 'practicing *gender*', and shifting one's mindset to one that regards women and men as equally capable.

4.3. 'People misunderstand gender'

There was a marked difference between the extent to which men and women chose to expand on their opinions about *gender*.⁶ Women tended to expand less on what *gender* means, but they generally spoke about *gender* in a positive light. Unsurprisingly, most women's commentaries emphasized that better cooperation between men and women could improve household food security. Echoing the men's views described in 4.2 above, most women saw *gender* as a means of getting more support from their husbands with household chores. Unlike men's accounts that highlighted their own positive *gender* practices, many women spoke of men's failures to provide assistance or meet even their 'traditional' obligations. In an interview conducted by Patson and Liam, Mrs. Chipeta revealed that her husband demanded the lion's share of food at dinner and because of his selfish demands, and her fear of being abandoned with four young children to support, she and her children experienced chronic hunger. The household relied entirely on the little money that she and her husband could earn in a day from piecework. Often her husband contributed no money and she was solely responsible for finding a way to feed the entire household. She defined *gender* as a positive social change: 'Gender is where a man can do chores. When maybe you are sick, he can prepare *nsima*,⁷ when maybe you are away a man can work very well.' Mrs. Chipeta's point of view was shaped by her experiences of extreme poverty due to a lack of education and social support, exacerbated by her dependence on a husband unwilling or unable to support his

family. Her understanding of *gender* is similar to the men's emphasis on daily domestic activities, primarily an instrumentalist view, rather than a politically motivated disruption of gender norms.

Among women in households with extremely low incomes, women in female-headed households were often actually *more* food secure than married women in nuclear households. In many of these cases women had access to non-financial resources that allowed them to be food secure. One such case was Mrs. Malenga, an elderly woman in an informal settlement who lived in a multi-generational household of women who worked seasonally processing tobacco, grew maize on customary land, and shared domestic work. In an interview with Liam and Patson, Mrs. Malenga commented directly on the cultural politics of *gender*. She noted that a problem in many households was that men would spend their money on beer and prostitutes rather than food, and that the increase in prostitution is because women are permitted to wear trousers.⁸ When asked about when this change happened, she said: 'During the transition to the multi-party system, since during the one-party system there was no such freedom of dressing; now democracy has destroyed the norms and values of people.' Mrs. Malenga separated her views on morality from her views on *gender*, which she framed in terms of cooperative and harmonious relationships within households to reduce poverty. She said: 'People misunderstand *gender*. My view is that *gender* is when both men and women work together.' The harmony implied by Mrs. Malenga's view of *gender* does not appear to fundamentally reconfigure household roles or power dynamics, and is therefore lacking in transformative potential, but it presents basic values of respect and cooperation that are forward-looking relative to the patriarchal and unequal *status quo*. Mrs. Malenga took

aim at the same group of elites that Englund criticized when she added, ‘Those people who introduced *gender* did not know what it was and as a result they misled a lot of people.’ Mrs. Malenga and Mrs. Chipeta share a view of *gender* that is less impassioned and ideological than the views of the men quoted above; their *gender* prioritizes cooperation and respect between men and women that can help to reduce poverty and domestic violence, but still without fundamentally challenging gender norms.

4.4. ‘Gender is so much here in town’

There was broad consensus among men and women that *gender* was more commonly practiced in the city because urban people are more educated and progressive. Many participants used *gender* in normative terms to demonstrate the superiority of urban society, pointing to the lack of *gender* in rural communities to reinforce a relatively positive image of the urban. In some cases, people had had negative personal experiences with rural relatives related to property grabbing from widows, orphans, or divorced men in matrilineal villages.⁹ Mr. Kadzamira, a recently married young man, had been born and raised in Blantyre. When he was a teenager his parents died and he received no support from his rural relatives even when he found himself destitute. A sense of bitterness against his relatives was evident when Patson asked if gender roles were changing more rapidly in rural or in urban areas:

There is no *gender* in the rural areas . . . Most of the people in the rural areas are not educated. They are stubborn. They follow ancestral traditions, old traditions. *Gender* has just come, it is new, and we do not even know where it came from. People know it now and hence it should come from here in town to the rural areas. If people see me cooking *nsima* in the rural areas, they would be surprised. They would think I have been made stupid by the love potion. *Gender* is so much here in town.

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His reference to the ‘love potion’ was a common refrain among men explaining why they would be embarrassed to be seen practicing *gender* in the rural areas; it resonates with the widely cited use of herbs and medicines by women seeking to control men ([Goebel 2002](#), [Keller 1978](#)). Practising *gender* for Mr. Kadzamira appeared to help him define himself in opposition to his ‘stubborn’ rural relatives. His statement reiterated colonial notions of rural backwardness and a chain reaction whereby urban Malawians lead social change and rural areas follow, or perhaps are incapable of advancement due to their lack of education and stubborn adherence to tradition. Mr. Kadzamira’s use of *gender* and geography is remarkable in light of his material circumstances, hoping day by day to find temporary manual labor on construction sites and struggling to buy food and pay the rent. His perspective is not one of an urban educated professional looking down on his rural relatives, but rather that of a precarious urban informal worker who in spite of his economic insecurity can demonstrate his urbanity through adherence to *gender*. This sentiment is reinforced by his depiction of rural Malawians’ backwardness as evident in their ignorance of *gender*.

Many people cited access to education and cultural influences from outside Malawi in their explanations of why *gender* was urban. Mr. Kaunda was an older man in a low-income household in a formal housing area. He noted: ‘maybe this gender equality thing will work only for the people who went to school, who understand it. Otherwise, villagers, no. They can’t accept that I should be cooking food while the woman is staying.’ Mr. Kaunda was one of the few participants to turn the tables and ask Liam about *gender*:

They [gender equality activists] say we are all equal and so nobody is above somebody . . . To those people like you [Liam] who have known *gender* for some time it can work but because here it is just coming, it will take some time. We should ask, ‘those who brought *gender*; where is it working better, without causing confrontation in the household?’

Liam told him that the same tensions exist in Canada, that divorce is common and that there is tension between the generations and between men and women like in Malawi. Mr Kaunda then asked, ‘What made them bring about *gender*?’ Liam briefly described the Western feminist movement for equal rights under the law for men and women, including the right to vote. The exchange revealed that Mr Kaunda had the impression that *gender* worked easily in Western countries and that the difficulties that men and women in Malawi faced in adapting to *gender* were unique. The association of *gender* with the relatively advanced state of Western society highlights the link between practicing *gender* and being Westernized, invoking all of the power-laden baggage of Western hegemony in development discourse.

4.5. ‘People in town are more civilized; they have knowledge of gender’

A clear echo of colonial discourses of a ‘civilizing mission’ runs through the meaning of *gender* and emerges through discussions about gender and place. This was apparent when Mrs. Lamba, a widow who sold vegetables at the roadside for her livelihood, claimed that practicing *gender* indicates that people in town are more ‘civilized.’ When asked to compare gender roles and relations in the villages and in town, she replied: ‘They differ; in the village you cannot find a man doing women’s work while here in town men cook, wash, take care of children. People in town are more civilized; they have the knowledge of *gender*.’ The association of *gender* with being urban and civilized is partly based on the observation that practicing *gender* is far easier for middle

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class households who can afford to hire domestic staff, pay for conveniences such as electricity and indoor water sources, and easily access food. Women in middle class households can afford to attend school and pursue professional careers, whereas low-income households face far more difficult choices in whose school fees they pay. These middle class households are a small minority in Blantyre, but they continue to represent urban society in many Malawians' minds in part because of colonial ideas that cities were places for settlers to live in affluence and comfort. Mrs. Lamba's material circumstances were even more precarious than Mr. Kadzamira's, and yet her comments suggest that even from her point of view practicing *gender* connected her to 'civilized,' cosmopolitan urban society.

Colonialism is not limited to historical memory in Malawi. For many living Malawians and the people raised by them, their life histories were shaped by their own experience of formal colonial rule up to 1964. Mr. Banda shared many of his personal experiences with Liam and Patson in an especially long and informative interview conducted in English that lasted an entire afternoon. Mr. Banda was born in the 1930s and when he was a young boy he worked for a European family near his home village in Zomba. He went on to have a successful career as a journalist and as a human rights activist in his retirement. He said he modelled his marriage on the European family he had worked for as a child. In discussing the origins of his liberal views on *gender* and human rights, he said:

When I was a young boy [in the 1940s], when I started work I was staying at my boss's at their boys' quarters¹⁰ in Zomba and I used to see the way they were living and so I grew up slightly different from the way other people grew up. Other people used to discuss with their wives while in the village, 'whatever the man says is law.' But the whites were flexible, they

used to give freedom to their wives and their wives could decide that this is good. So while living in their quarters, I was studying the way they were living.

Mr. Banda's story shows that the link between colonial society and the introduction of human rights (including gender rights) in the 1990s was not limited to the realm of international development discourse and geopolitics; it was also shaped and embodied in tangible ways by the people who explicitly emulated Europeans in colonial society and then later became active in promoting gender equality and human rights.

Gender is at least partly constructed as an impulse to emulate Europeans, which ultimately serves to reinforce the perception that it is definitively un-Malawian and part of a top-down, external imposition of socio-political reform and modernization. In some ways, this leaves *gender* open to resistance from the position of nativism. The less troubling but equally problematic alternative is that it compels people to adopt *gender* as part of the adoption of other Western cultural influences, rather than because of an endogenously recognized need to reconfigure the balance of power between men and women in Malawi.

4.6 Performing gender for a foreign researcher

The finding of men overstating their role in domestic work and support for *gender* was counter-intuitive in terms of the accepted wisdom about African masculinities, which has tended to find that men are likely to be biased in overstating their masculine traits (Kaler 2010). The explanation we put forward in this article lies in expanding the view of people's positionalities 'beyond the usual 'race', class and gender mantra' (Puwar 2003, 23). Liam's identity as a white, male foreigner posing questions about gender roles and relations seems to have elicited men to represent themselves as practicing *gender* in order

to align themselves with attributes of being urban, modern, and progressive. This representation of masculinity was rooted not in traditional gender roles but rather in the new power dynamics enabled by discursive regimes of development, human rights and progress in Malawi's multi-party era. This shaped the conversations in such a way that practicing *gender* (for example by buying food or cooking when one's wife was sick) constituted the performance of a modern, urban Malawian masculinity, performed in part for the benefit of a Western male researcher. Participants had every reason to assume that this Western-oriented masculinity would be compatible with the values of the *mzungu*¹¹ researcher and provide him with the answers he was seeking.

5. Constructing *gender* in urban Malawi: Conclusions

Discourses of *gender* in Malawi demonstrate that research and practice aimed at advancing gender equality are inevitably entangled with contextual collective experiences and understandings. As elsewhere, people in Malawi have been the recipients of policies and interventions rooted in global development and human rights discourses. In our research, ostensibly mundane questions about how households access food in urban Malawi opened up a series of questions and issues that led to an enriched perspective on the meaning of *gender*, including its spatial connotations as something exogenous to Malawi and specifically associated with urban life. The case of urban Malawi reveals the continued significance of historically rooted insider/outsider, urban/rural and modern/traditional dichotomies in postcolonial societies' conceptualizations of gender roles and identities. Being urban in Malawi entails adopting, or at least mimicking, Western values and ways of life. For many of our participants, this involved practicing *gender* to signify a social as well as spatial distancing from traditions sited in rural areas

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and associated with women's subordination and rigid gender roles for men and women. *Gender* is adopted, adapted, and reconstructed in this context, resulting in a uniquely Malawian conceptualization that amalgamates the historical experiences of colonial re-ordering of society and political constructions of women in the post-colonial era with global discourses of gender equality and human rights.

In the embodied encounter with a white male foreigner asking questions about gender roles and relations in Malawi, this amalgamation evoked conversations about a narrow set of ideas about gender seen to originate from outside of Malawi, which participants could reasonably assume matched the foreign researcher's point of view. Understanding these discourses as part of a field of power relations allows for contradictory positions to hold equal validity, depending on the situation. Several examples emerged in the interviews. For example, *gender* is a threat to men but also espoused by some men as a positive sign of progress in urban communities. Another example is that white colonial settler employers provided an example of relatively egalitarian gender relations in domestic life that inspired a career in human rights advocacy, even though colonialism fostered dehumanizing social divisions on race and gender lines. These contradictions, familiar to postcolonial feminists working in many different geographical contexts, open a window to understanding how social pressure for men to practice *gender* can paper over gendered power imbalances in the household rather than helping to resolve them.

These observations highlight both limitations and possibilities for qualitative research related to gender and development (as well as other topics). The limitations are

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obvious: this article can barely scratch the surface in explaining the depths of meaning inherent in being a man or woman in Malawi. Furthermore, the notion that there is an ‘authentic’ knower of what it means to be a man or woman in Malawi needs to be continually challenged, particularly in light of the politics of representation of tradition and authenticity central to postcolonial feminist theory (McFadden 2002). Meanings of gendered identities and social categories shift with the situational context of the research encounter and the layered translations of research materials, even within a single interview. The possibilities are less obvious, but they can be found in the insights that emerge from coming to terms with the inevitability of multiple, contradictory positions within a person’s accounts of themselves, their society, and their daily practices. Critical engagement with these positions in full light of the field of power relations in which they are produced is a productive alternative to attempts to over-simplify reality and downplay contradiction and complexity.

These lessons for research methodology extend to the practices of implementing gender rights in development practice. The particular construction of *gender* in Malawi suggests that the very efforts designed to achieve gender equality through establishing, standardizing, and monitoring linked development and human rights goals have obfuscated rather than clarified the problems and their solutions (Tiessen 2004, 2008). An over-reliance on top-down interventions, usually implemented by the bilingual, educated class of people in a position to ‘understand’ gender as it exists in global development discourses, appears to have contributed to misunderstandings about gender equality. One can speculate at the enhanced benefits of a more dialogical approach to disseminating

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messages about gender equality, and also of foregrounding the benefits of gender equality to entire households and communities and avoiding conflation of *gender* with individual women's interests. We are in no position to criticize the efforts of Malawians acting to change their society for the better, nor are we in the position to criticize individual Malawian men seeking to treat women more fairly in their daily lives. Rather, our critique is aimed at the global discursive production of human rights and gender equality that frequently fails to connect global ideals with the grounded reality of people's daily lives and experiences or the social contexts that structure their identities and relationships. Ultimately, in practical terms, local understandings of gender as *gender* undermine efforts to promote gender equality as a means to address Malawi's intense urban poverty and household food insecurity.

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¹ Thirty-seven interviews were conducted representing the views of twenty men and twenty women; in some cases two people were interviewed simultaneously at their request. These cases are noted in the discussion of the interviews when applicable.

² The Chewa are the majority ethnic group in Malawi. Banda was a Chewa and many of the symbols he adopted to represent the new nation have been criticized for being overly focused on Chewa tradition and marginalizing the many other ethnic traditions in Malawi.

³ Chirwa's contributions to the struggle for human rights in Malawi is evident in many accomplishments, including being the first female lawyer in Nyasaland, co-founding the Nyasaland Women League in the 1950s, organizing a series of public consultations on gender equality and human rights that contributed to the drafting of the 1994 Constitution, and working as an advocate on human rights cases in the 'multi-party' era.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for all research participants to protect their anonymity.

⁵ Nearly three quarters (74%) of Malawi's population was under the age of thirty in the most recent census, conducted in 2008. See Malawi National Statistics Office. 2008. *Population and Housing Census Results*. <http://www.nsomalawi.mw/2008-population-and-housing-census/107-2008-population-and-housing-census-results.html>. Accessed 12 December 2014.

⁶ It is worth noting that the original intention of having a male and a female research assistant was that Patson would interview the men and Gertrude would interview the women. This approach soon proved impractical and unnecessary, but in the end Gertrude interviewed more of the women and Patson more of the men. To some extent, Patson's tendency to probe more into people's opinions influenced the effect that men tended to expand more on their opinions of *gender*.

⁷ *Nsima* is the staple food made from maize that is served at virtually every meal in Malawi.

⁸ Women were banned from wearing trousers under the 1973 Decency in Dress Act. The ban was lifted in 1993 but the issue continues to be a point of contention on public morality, especially in the context of intergenerational tensions.

⁹ Malawi is a culturally diverse country and it is therefore impossible to generalize about 'rural' societies. There is a long-standing and widely recognized problem of inheritance rights for widows and orphans after the death of a male household head. The HIV/AIDS epidemic heightened the effects of this problem in recent decades. Several men explained in interviews that in matrilineal societies, men who are not first born usually marry out of their natal villages and in their wives' villages their claims to property are through their wives. In the event of divorce, these men can be dispossessed of their homes and farmland. Some men said that it was for this reason that they chose to move to town, so they could have freehold title to property and not face dispossession through divorce. See Malawi Human Rights Commission (2007).

¹⁰ 'Boys' quarters' refers to on-site housing for adult domestic staff.

¹¹ *Mzungu* is a term primarily used to refer to white people in Malawi and other countries in Southern and Eastern Africa. It can also refer to people with high wealth or status who are not white.