



WHAT AGGREGATE MEASURES CONCEAL. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND COUPLES TRAINING IN MALAWI

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Summary

Rebekah Avard, Tara Bedi, James Copestake, Michael King and Fiona Remnant have published a Trinity College Dublin working paper on women's empowerment in Concern Worldwide's Graduation programme in Malawi. The study puts a randomised controlled trial of 2,934 women alongside two rounds of QuIP interviews, and uses causal maps built from the coded narratives to trace the pathways of change the women themselves describe. Its argument is that the aggregate empowerment indices used in trials of this kind hide as much as they show.

The programme allocated support to the female spouse, to the male spouse, or to the female spouse with the couple attending Umodzi, a twelve-session economic cooperation and empowerment training. Resources rose in all three arms. Decision-making told a different story: financial decision-making improved where the woman was targeted, while targeting the man reduced her influence over productive activities. In the interviews, women put the change down to the gender messaging rather than to the transfer, and described decisions in income generation as something the couple now did together.

The method

The design is the quant-led mixed-methods model. Ninety-six semi-structured interviews and sixteen focus groups were run six months after the programme ended, with local researchers partially blindfolded to the treatment arms and to the hypotheses. Respondents were drawn from the trial sample, so the two datasets can be read against each other. The analyst merged the factor labels from both QuIP rounds and read the causal maps for stories of change relating to empowerment, using the Surprise measure to check whether any one arm showed up more strongly as a driver of a reported change.

Abstract

Raising women's empowerment through economic inclusion and social protection programmes has proved challenging. Women's access to resources improves but across many studies measured decision-making agency barely moves. Part of the weakness in evidence may be measurement as composite indices may

conceal change that occurs unevenly across domains. Within the context of a multi-faceted anti-poverty, or Graduation, programme in Malawi, we investigate the women's empowerment impacts of gender targeting, and the additive effect of a 12-month couples economic cooperation and empowerment training. We combine the results from a randomised control trial with 2,934 women from poor married households with findings from qualitative research in which researchers collect unprompted accounts of change from the participants' perspective to challenge and substantiate the quantitative findings. Female resources rise in all three treatment arms. The aggregate decision-making index moves only where the couples training is added, and only marginally, but beneath it financial decision-making rises in both female-targeted arms while male targeting reduces women's say over productive decisions, the very activities the programme creates. Qualitatively, women across arms describe more collaborative decision-making over income generating activities, the essential realm of the Graduation programme, more than over budgeting, and budgeting moves mainly where the couples training addressed it directly; the driver they name unprompted is the programme's gender messaging rather than the cash. We show that participant-led and unprompted qualitative evidence can identify which components of composite indices merit attention, independently of researcher priors.

Keywords: social protection; intra-household; gender empowerment; measurement

[Read the working paper](#)

Reference (APA): Avard, R., Bedi, T., Copestake, J., King, M., & Remnant, F. (2026). *What Aggregate Measures Conceal: Mixed-Methods Evidence on Women's Empowerment, Gender Targeting, and Couples Training in Malawi* (Trinity Economics Papers, No. 1526). Trinity College Dublin, Department of Economics.

The earlier [BSDR evaluation of the same programme](#) is also in this chapter.