



Impact of Gender Transformative Dialogue in the Graduation Programme

CONCERN
worldwide

Findings from Research in Malawi
October 2024 / Updated July 2026

CONTENTS

Summary: Key Findings & Next Steps	1
Malawi Graduation Programme (2017–2021)	2
Gender Research Design	2
Gender Transformative Approach	4
Findings	4
Income	4
Livestock and Assets	5
Food consumption	6
Empowerment	6
Spending	7
Division of Labour	8
Wellbeing	8
Intimate Partner Violence	9
Couples Staying Together	10
Effect of Targeting by Sex	10
Cost Benefit Analysis	10
Conclusion	11
Case Study	11

Key Findings

Integrating couples' gender transformative dialogue sessions into a Graduation programme that targeted women had additional benefits for both spouses compared to simply targeting either women or men.

Targeting women while also including gender transformative dialogue sustainably improves:

- Livestock value (36% higher than simply targeting women)
- Household income (18% higher than simply targeting women)
- Asset value (8% higher than simply targeting women)
- Women's economic agency (40% higher than the control group)
- Men's mental wellbeing (higher than when simply targeting women)
- Couples staying together (6% higher than the control group)
- Harmony between couples
- Division of household labour
- Reduced emotional violence (by ~6% for all Graduation households, regardless of who is targeted or whether gender dialogue sessions are included)

Investing more in Umodzi reaps greater returns in terms of poverty reduction than targeting more households with Graduation only.

Including Umodzi generates a return of \$2 dollars for every \$1 invested.

Next Steps

- Simply targeting women is not enough. ***Integrating a gender transformative approach is a necessity for achieving better and more sustainable outcomes in Graduation and similar livelihoods programmes.***
- Essential steps include properly planning and resourcing the approach, including sufficient contextual analyses and adaptation, staff, training and support.
- It is strongly recommended that this approach is a standard and integral component within Graduation or livelihoods programmes and adapted to and trialled in fragile and conflict affected contexts as well as more stable contexts.
- We encourage governments to include gender transformative approaches, such as Umodzi, into their social protection programmes, which can improve the enabling environment for women's economic agency and enhance the impacts and sustainability of the social protection intervention.

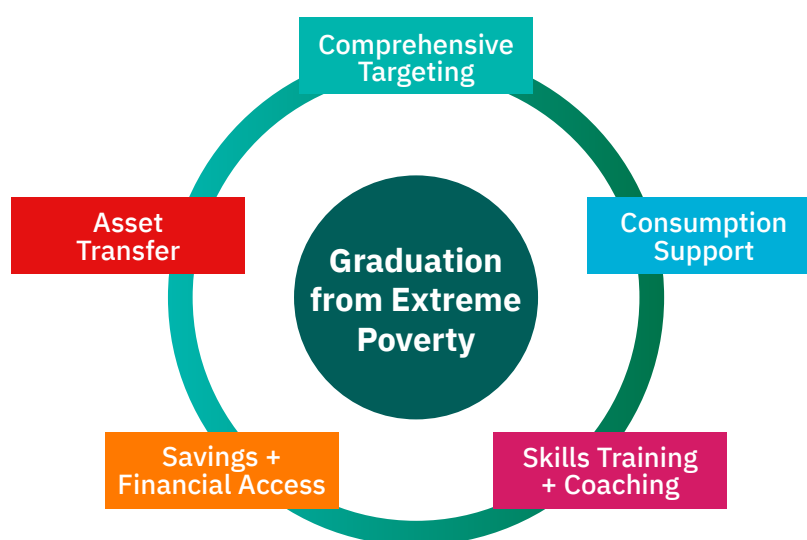
Malawi Graduation Programme (2017–2021)

Concern has been implementing Graduation programmes since 2007. Since then, we have adopted and tailored the approach, aiming to improve social and economic inclusion in nine countries (Bangladesh, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Malawi, Somalia, Rwanda and Zambia) directly reaching 110,971 people.

Graduation programmes are intended to target individuals or households living in extreme (and often chronic) poverty. Targeted interventions are designed to address the root causes of poverty. Therefore, while programme design is context specific, the approach contains a number of core pillars – social protection, livelihood promotion, financial inclusion and social empowerment, with well-documented evidence of its effectiveness.¹ Following a comprehensive and community-based targeting process, participants are enrolled into the programme and provided with an integrated and sequenced package of support.

The Graduation programme² was implemented in Malawi 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 took place over 18 months per cohort, comprising of training on a specific livelihood asset, an asset transfer, enhancing access to savings facilities, and time-bound cash transfers, as shown in Figure 1. Regular coaching visits at household level were carried out by project staff to support participants in their engagement in the programme.

Figure 1: Key components of the Graduation programme



Gender Research Design

The programme also tested an innovative approach engaging male and female spouses in gender transformative dialogue aiming to improve gender equality and livelihoods

- 1 See Concern's website for evidence [Research from the Graduation Model | Concern Worldwide](#) and see, for example, Banerjee, Abhijit, Esther Duflo, Nathanael Goldberg, Dean Karlan, Robert Osei, William Pariente, Jeremy Shapiro, Bram Thuysbaert, and Christopher Udry. 2015. "A Multifaceted Program Causes Lasting Progress for the Very Poor: Evidence from Six Countries." *Science*, May. Annex 1 of the volume contains detailed discussion concerning the graduation impact analyses to date
- 2 For more information on the Graduation model see our website: [Graduation Programming | Concern Worldwide](#)

outcomes amongst programme participants. The research was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the effect of gender targeting (male or female) on Graduation outcomes?
2. What is the additional impact of the gender transformative dialogue sessions on the same outcomes?

As part of a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) impact evaluation led by Concern and TIME (Trinity Impact Evaluation Unit) at Trinity College Dublin, the programme was structured into three treatment arms and a control group, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2:
Research Design

CONTROL GROUP	TREATMENT ARM 1	TREATMENT ARM 2	TREATMENT ARM 3
No intervention. 1500 households.	Targets female household members as the primary recipients of Graduation inputs. 600 households.	Targets male household members as the primary recipients of Graduation inputs. 600 households.	Targets female household members as the primary recipients of Graduation inputs PLUS she and her partner/ husband participate in gender transformative dialogue sessions . 600 households.

The following data was collected to inform, monitor and evaluate the outcomes:

- Formative research (Qualitative)
- Baseline (Quantitative)
- 5 months post-intervention using the Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP) (Qualitative)
- 5 months and 17 months post-intervention (Quantitative)

The 17 months post-intervention data allowed us to track the sustainability of the outcomes achieved.

Forty and Chrissy Sakha started a tailoring business after completing the graduation programme, and have been experiencing better outcomes at home after finishing the Umodzi course in gender equality.

Photo: Chris Gagnon/ Concern Worldwide 2021



Gender Transformative Approach

The gender specific component of the programme, known as Umodzi, meaning ‘united’, was informed by the formative and baseline data. It engaged couples to reflect upon and discuss issues such as gender norms, power, decision-making, budgeting, violence, positive parenting and healthy relationships. A curriculum³ was developed to engage couples in both mixed and single sex groups at the same time as engaging in Graduation activities, along with a Case Worker manual to guide follow up visits in between group sessions. See below for details of the approach.

Central to delivering this curriculum was ensuring that Concern’s staff were trained on, understood and believed in the content of the material and the concepts behind it. Concern, with support from 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 Officers who facilitate Umodzi at community level also underwent a ten-day Training of Trainers workshop on the Umodzi curriculum.

Figure 3

UMODZI IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW	UMODZI MODULES
• 12 Graduation couples meet together as a group • 12 sessions held over 12 months • 2–3 hour sessions facilitated by Concern Gender Officers • Sessions were both mixed sex and single sex • Household visits were made by Case Workers in between sessions to reinforce messages and follow up • Rapid catch up sessions held for absentees	• 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

Findings⁴

Income

The total income is 18% higher in Umodzi households than in female-targeted households. Figure 4 shows that Umodzi households had higher total income sources, household income, total number of businesses, and household and female business income compared to the female-targeted group. For example, **business income of female spouses in Umodzi households was 61% higher than women in female-targeted households and 78% higher than female spouses in the male-targeted households, at 17 months.** It was observed that Umodzi households had a more collective strategy to generate income and couples provided each other with practical help while women are more likely to move into types of business that women were not previously engaged in.

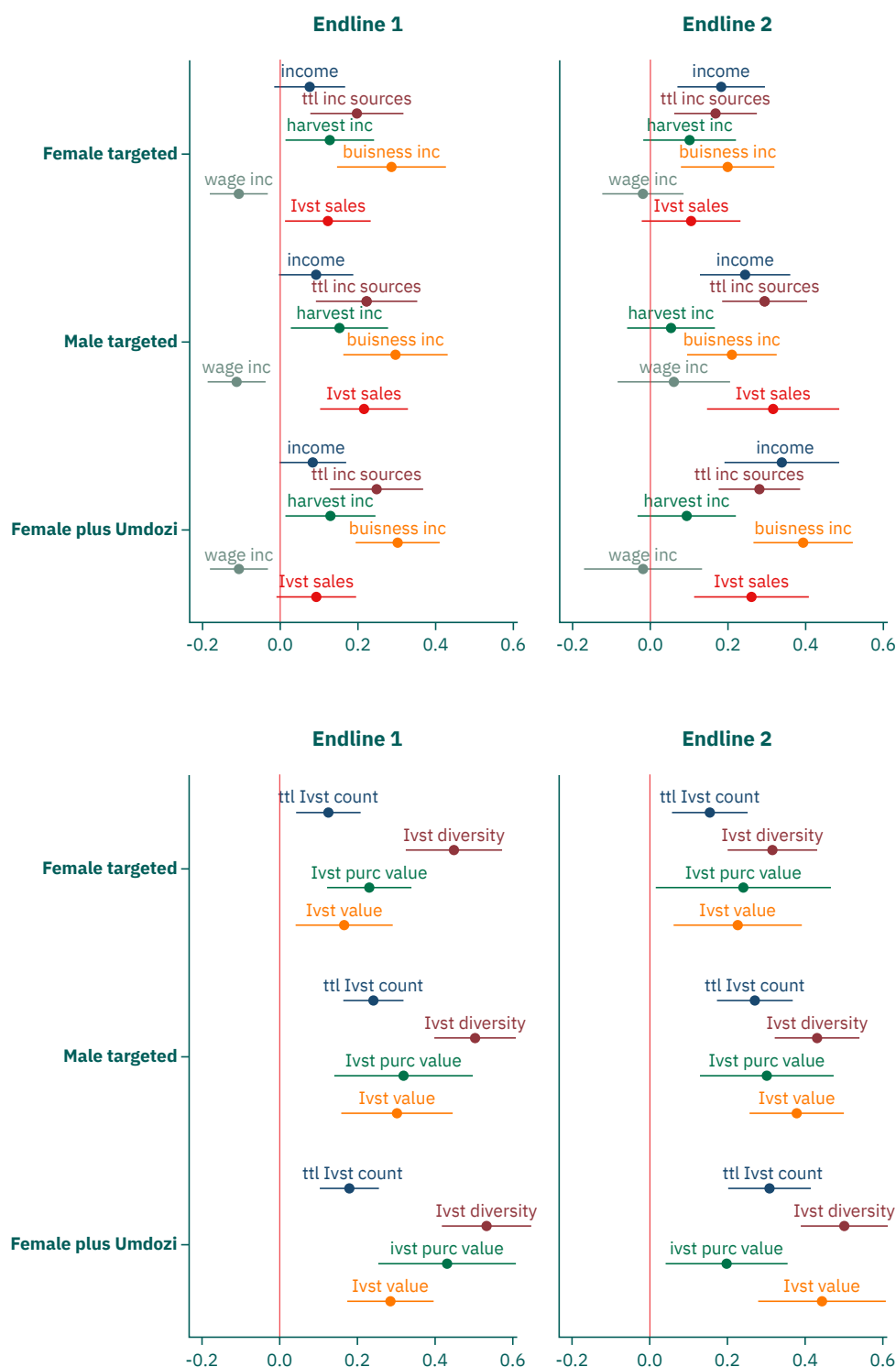
3 See the Umodzi manual on Concern’s website [here](#)
4 All findings are from analysis carried out by Trinity College research team

Livestock and Assets

As shown in Figure 5, while male targeted households had the highest increase in livestock value, in keeping with gender norms where men tend to own the more valuable livestock, **Umodzi households had a 36% higher livestock value than the female targeted arm at 17 months** compared to a 26% increase at five months. This means that livestock value increased with time.

In addition, **Umodzi households had an 8% higher increase in their asset value compared to the gains by the female-targeted arm at 17 months.**

Figures 4 and 5 show outcomes at 5 months (Endline 1) and 17 months (Endline 2) post intervention where the red line represents the Control group. Results to the right of this line indicate an increase compared to the Control while results to the left indicate a decrease.



Food consumption

The results show a 14% increase in annual household food consumption for all three treatment groups combined compared to the control group at 17 months and there was no significant difference between each treatment group. This suggests that **neither the sex of the recipient, nor Umodzi, had a differential impact on household food consumption.**

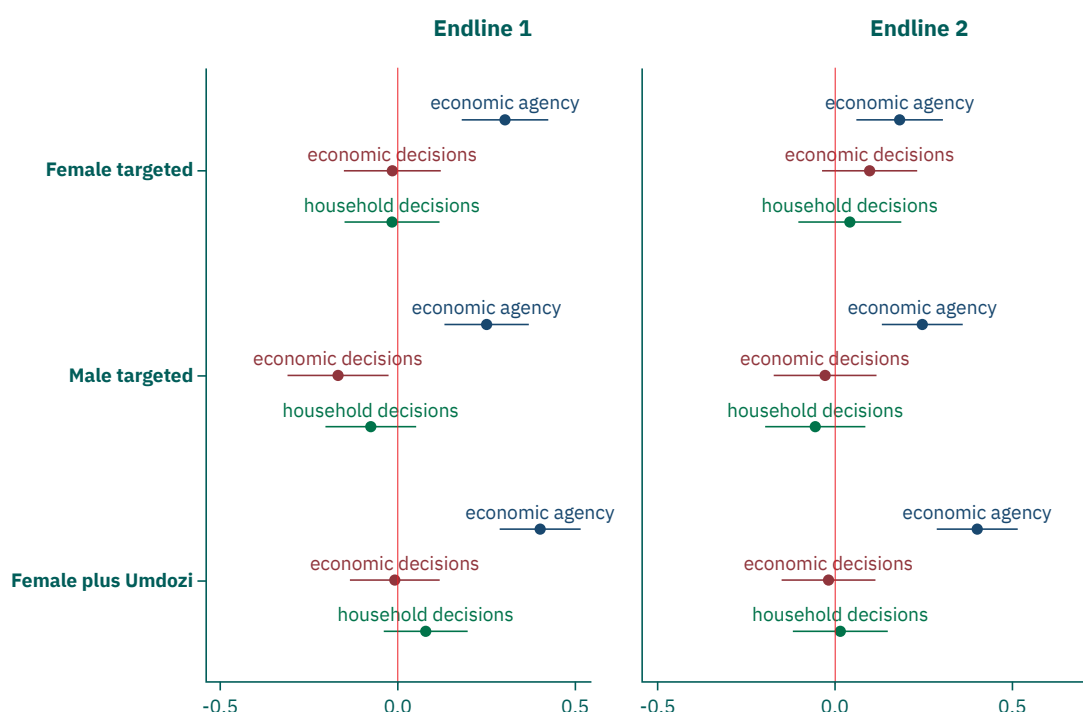
Empowerment

The empowerment index is made up of three indices measuring women's productive ability and control of resources related to savings, credit and income earned:

- Household decision-making: The role of the female spouse in savings and credit decisions.
- Economic decisions: The role of the female in decisions related to income and productive assets, such as livestock.
- Economic agency: The female's participation in income generating activities and whether income from these activities go to her.

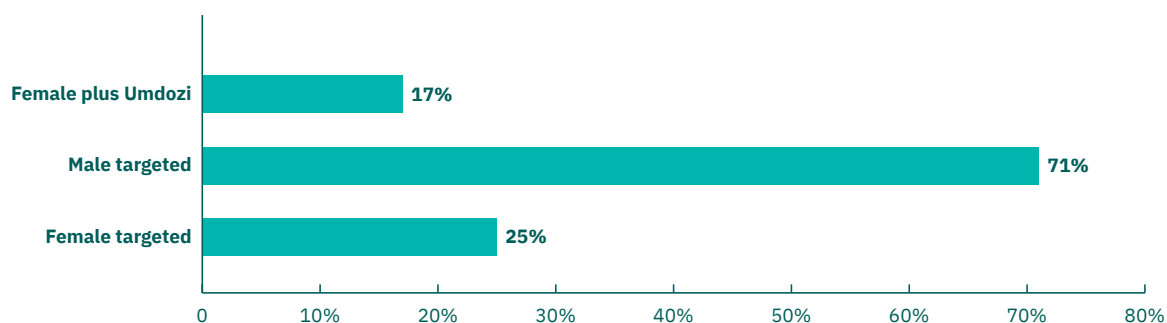
Out of these three indices, there was significant improvement in economic agency. **The economic agency index for women increased most for women in Umodzi households – 40% more than control households.** Specifically, women's economic agency increased by 18% in the female targeted arm, 24% in the male targeted arm and 40% in the Umodzi arm compared to control households at 17 months post-intervention.

Figure 6:
Empowerment
outcomes at 5
months (Endline
1) and 17 months
(Endline 2) post
intervention



Additionally, Figure 7 shows that there was most change in women's decision-making power for women in Umodzi households, and the least change in the male-targeted households.

Figure 7: Qualitative findings showing no change in women's decision making at 5 months



Spending

Many women reported that they had diversified their household expenditure as a result of the cash transfers, Village Savings and Loans groups, and asset transfers. This means that rather than only being responsible for food purchases, women were now also able to buy other items too, and many women felt that being able to own and spend money themselves was empowering. One woman from an Umodzi household said,

“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 [Graduation] provided us with. I have been able to buy things like livestock which was not possible before [Graduation] came into the picture. I used to just buy food because with the money we were earning, that is all we could manage.” (QuIP)

Twice as many women (20 out of 29) who had taken part in Umodzi reported these positive changes, compared to those that only received the Graduation package.

Landen and Eliza Manjolo started a motorcycle taxi business as a part of the Graduation programme.

Photo: Chris Gagnon/
Concern Worldwide
2021



Division of Labour

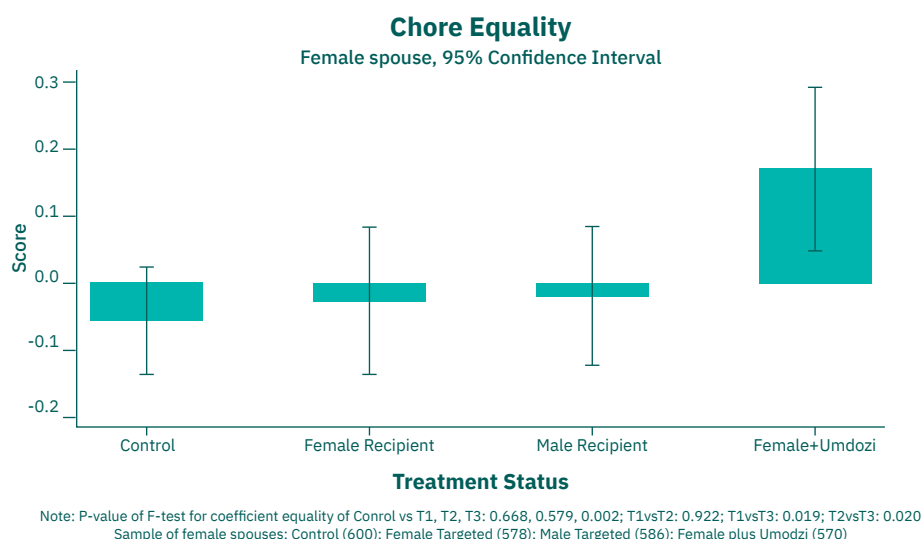
While women continue to bear the greater burden for domestic tasks, there have been notable changes in the division of labour between men and women, with men taking on an increasing role within the household, allowing women to rest or engage in more productive tasks. Figure 8 shows that **Umodzi female spouses are more likely to report male spouse engagement in ‘female’ household activities.**

One woman from an Umodzi household 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 help me with the children all thanks to the gender equality training from Concern Worldwide.” (QuIP)

Participants attributed the main driver of this change to Umodzi.

Figure 8: Chore equality outcomes between treatment arms at 5 months post-intervention

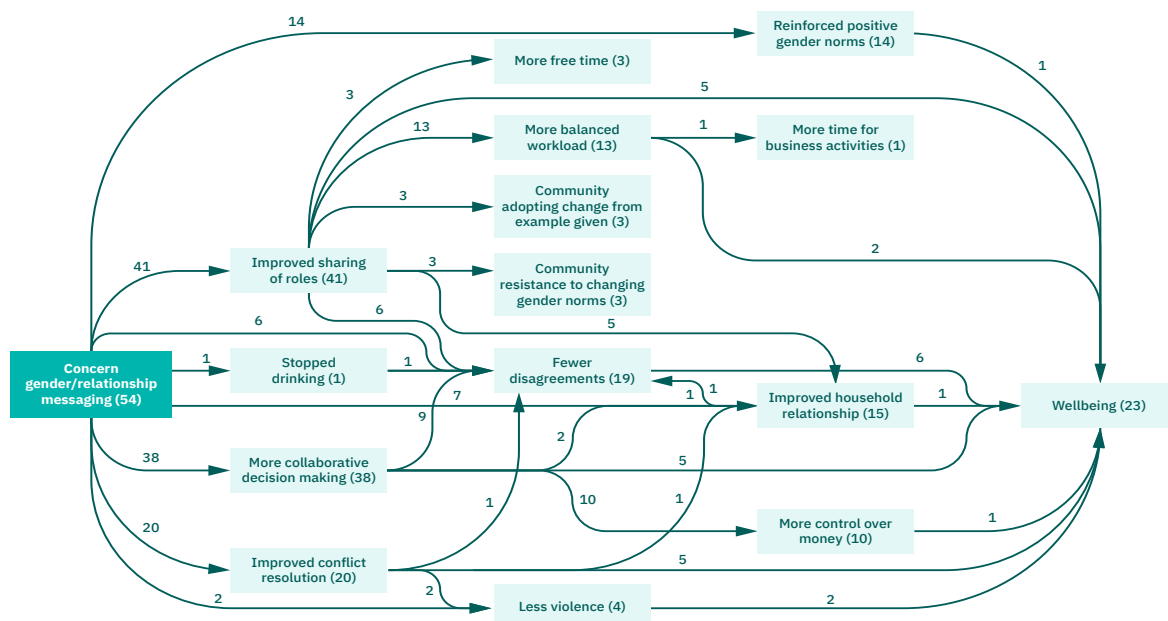


Wellbeing

Female wellbeing (measured by wellbeing, social worth, social cohesion and political/community involvement) increased similarly across all three treatment arms, with no significant differences between any treatment arm. However, Figure 9 is taken from the qualitative QuIP survey and shows the causal pathways that were observed and the strength of the linkages (the numbers and thickness of the arrows representing the amount of respondents giving this answer). This shows that **female spouses in all treatment arms experienced improved relationships, sharing of roles, and more collaborative decision-making. These changes led directly and indirectly (via fewer disagreements and improved conflict resolution) to improved well-being.**

Mental health and social worth for male spouses increased to a similar level in both the male-targeted and Umodzi arm, more than for those in the female-targeted group. Umodzi also increases social cohesion for males compared with the male-targeted group. There was an increase of 22-23% of the SD of the mental health index for men in the male targeted and Umodzi households compared to control households.

Figure 9: Female wellbeing Causal Map, five months post-intervention (QuIP)



Intimate Partner Violence

In the short-term (at five months post-intervention) physical violence in the prior six months decreased by 3.6% in the Umodzi arm. Qualitative research collected at five months suggested the reduction in disagreements improved household relationships and collaboration were directly linked to Umodzi, rather than to greater income and purchasing power. **At 17 months post-intervention, all three treatment arms experienced a reduction in emotional violence in the prior six months (by between 5.4 and 6.4%).** However, the positive changes in physical and sexual violence (at five months post-intervention) were not sustained at 17 months.

The qualitative findings suggested that the way partners resolve differences had changed because of Concern's gender interventions and that intimate partner violence had decreased. The cash transfer was also 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. One woman commented,

“Relationships have changed for the better. We solve our conflicts within the household through contact and dialogue. We do not fight. In the past, my husband would slap me when offended. He stopped doing that. [Graduation] encouraged us to stand up against abusive partners by reporting gender-based violence to authorities. Men are now scared of beating their partners and marriages are more peaceful than before.” (QuIP)

However, **since all treatment arms increased their income and all experienced reduced overall IPV by 6.4% at 17 months, it is possible that the reduction in violence was mainly because the household had more resources available and that this was a stronger influencing factor by this point in the programme cycle than Umodzi.**

Couples Staying Together

Umodzi couples had a 6% higher likelihood of remaining together and a 3% lower likelihood of separation compared to the control group (84% of Umodzi couples were still together three years post-baseline, compared to 78% in other treatment groups), suggesting that the couples in Umodzi who remained together did not experience a decline in relationship quality.

Effect of Targeting by Sex

Simply targeting women versus men leads to improved female income, female relationship quality index, and decision-making on economic activities at five months post-intervention, though these gains are not sustained by 17 months. Simply targeting men versus women leads to a higher livestock count and value, better male mental health, and women doing more of the household chores than men. There is no difference in income or consumption between simply targeting men or women.

Cost Benefit Analysis

The cost-benefit analysis suggests a return of \$3 dollars for every \$1 invested in gender transformative training for Graduation households.

Figure 10:
Comparison of cost-benefit for funding Graduation programme only versus Umodzi only, in addition to Graduation programme.

INVESTMENT	
10,000	10,000
NUMBER OF HOUSHOLDS COVERED	
2 – Graduation only	12 – Umodzi
BENEFITS	
\$13,000	\$21,000

This means that on top of initial Graduation programme costs, with every additional \$10,000, we could cover the costs of Umodzi for approximately 12 Graduation households OR we could target approximately two additional households with Graduation only.

A \$10,000 investment in Graduation could cover approximately two households, achieving a benefit of \$13,000, whereas the same investment in Umodzi, on top of Graduation costs, could cover approximately 12 households, achieving a benefit of \$21,000.

Therefore, **investing more in Umodzi reaps greater returns (2:1) in terms of poverty reduction than targeting more households with Graduation only.**

Conclusion

The findings from this research, the first of its kind to measure the impact of a gender transformative approach within Graduation, present a strong argument to incorporate gender transformative dialogue into programmes such as Graduation.

The investment of integrating gender transformative dialogue led to multiple benefits that were sustained or even increasing with time, including an improvement in women's economic agency, male mental health as well as higher household assets, income and livestock value. The couples' dialogue improved the household division of labour and couples are more likely to stay together. Livelihoods programmes such as Graduation can contribute to a decrease in the rate of emotional violence for women through lowering household conflict due to economic stress. Furthermore, investing in Umodzi as part of the Graduation model generates significant returns compared to not including it.

When integrating a gender transformative component such as Umodzi into any programme, it is essential that formative research is carried out in the early planning stages in order to understand the gender and social norms in the context and to inform the design of the gender transformative curriculum and approach. Also essential is to budget sufficiently for human resources, training and support to Concern or partner staff who will be facilitating sessions with couples and single sex groups.

The evidence we now have from this research tells us that addressing gender in a Graduation programme through integrating a gender transformative approach is not a luxury but a necessity for better and more sustainable outcomes. While we do not yet have the same level of evidence for more emergency, crisis affected or fragile contexts, we have promising examples of its adaptation to these contexts as well as in long-term development or stable contexts. Therefore, Concern aims for this approach to become a standard and integral component within all Graduation or similar livelihoods programmes.

Jackson Adams and his wife Margaret Kamwendo.

Photo: Tara Bedi, 2020, Mangochi

Case Study

Jackson and Margaret were participants of Umodzi in Mangochi District. 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.

