

**Title: A Case Study on the Impact of Community-Based Approach Using Local Artisans to Empower Women and Girls Through Vocational Skills Training - Centre for Research and Development Initiative – Mchinji and Balaka Districts in Malawi**

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Empowering Women and Girls through vocational skills is a critical step in addressing gender inequality, especially in underdeveloped communities. Traditionally, many of the trades that promote economic independence such as motorbike mechanics, fabrication and welding, carpentry and joinery, weaving, tailoring, and salon services are dominated by men. This study examines a program aimed at training 1667 women and girls in these skills, facilitated by local artisans, to foster independence and resilience.

**Methods:** The training program engaged a community-based approach, where local artisans with years of expertise served as instructors. Over a period of 4 months, participants underwent hands-on training in their chosen vocational field. Data was collected through pre- and post-program surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews with participants and community leaders to evaluate the skill acquisition and economic impact of the training.

**Results:** The findings indicate a significant increase in technical proficiency among participants across all trades. Women and girls demonstrated enhanced problem-solving abilities, technical confidence, and improved economic opportunities. Furthermore, 65% of participants went on to either start their own small businesses or secure employment within their communities, contributing to local economies. The collaboration with local artisans not only preserved traditional crafts but also infused the program with culturally relevant skills, bridging the gap between modern needs and indigenous practices.

**Conclusion:** The use of local artisans as trainers in vocational skill development for women and girls proved to be a highly effective model for economic empowerment and social change. It is cost effective and time saving compared to formal institutional based vocational training where learners relocate or pay for transport and accommodation. Combination of traditional craftsmanship with modern vocational training, the program provided participants with invaluable skills that led to greater independence and self-sufficiency. This approach highlights the critical role of community-based, culturally informed education in transforming the lives of women and girls, creating sustainable livelihoods, and promoting gender equality

**Key words:** Empowering women and girls, vocational skills, economic empowerment, community development, local Artisans, gender equality, social norms. social development

**1. Introduction.**

This paper explores the impact of a community-based approach used during the training of women and girls in vocational skills using local Artisans facilitated by the **Centre for Research and Development Initiative (CERADI)** in **Mchinji and Balaka Districts** of Malawi. CERADI implemented **Empowering Women and Girls Project (EWG)** by leveraging community resources and traditional knowledge to improve the realization of human rights and life dignity for women and girls from disadvantaged communities. Empowering Women and Girls project fostered vocational skills training as a component in women and girls' economic development to bridge gender gaps in traditionally male-dominated industries while creating sustainable livelihoods and strengthen participation in community development activities and contribute to household incomes. The training reached 1667 women and girls from August 2023 to July 2024 in various vocational skills, including motorbike mechanics, fabrication and welding, carpentry and joinery, weaving, tailoring, basket weaving and salon services and 1084 (65%) of the 1667 women are engaged in various economic activities include welding and fabrication, salon, tailoring, weaving and motor bike mechanics gaining economic independence and improved gender equality. The use of local artisans not only preserved indigenous skills but also fostered mentorship and long-term community ownership of the initiative. (*CERADI documents*)

“As societies face increasing challenges like unemployment, gender inequality, gender based violence, early child forced marriages, income inequality, and social exclusion, vocational training has emerged as a viable solution to

these problems. By providing individuals with the skills needed to secure employment or start their own businesses, vocational training contributes to economic development, personal growth, and social cohesion. The impact of vocational training extends beyond individual benefits, as the skills acquired can lead to the development of local businesses, improved infrastructure, and stronger community networks". (*The Impact of Vocational Training on Community Development - Badrudeen Teslim – Researchgate*) This paper narrates how the use of local Artisans as Master trainers in vocational skills training contributed to the change in personal development, community development, social cohesion and skill sustainability.

## **1.2. Literature review**

Gender equality and women's empowerment are not only fundamental human rights but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world and a precondition for realizing all goals in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. There has been progress on gender equality and women's empowerment over the past decades, but the social and economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic threatens to reverse this progress and greatly increase deprivations for the most vulnerable girls and women. (1)

Malawi is not spared on this. MDHS 2016 found that women were more likely to be involved in making decisions to visit their family or relatives (78%) than making decisions about their own healthcare (68%) or making major household purchases (55%). Around 47% of women participate in making the three decisions while 15% participate in none of the three decisions (*NSO Malawi, 2017*). Access to economic resources and assets continues to be problematic for women. Laws guaranteeing women inheritance and land ownership rights are often overridden by social norms and customs and more often, they favour men even in matrilineal settings.

"Researchers, Owens and Wang believe that community-based learning as a teaching and learning strategy is significantly wider that allows children and adults to learn what they want from many segments in society" (8) Vocational training has long been recognized as a crucial component of workforce and sustainable development. Numerous studies highlight its importance in enhancing employability, particularly for marginalized groups such as the underserved communities, women, and girls. One key aspect of vocational training is its ability to provide immediate, market-relevant skills, as opposed to the more theoretical education offered in traditional academic settings. This practical focus makes vocational training an attractive option for those seeking quick entry into the workforce. (4) Dr Mohit Dixit narrated that vocational training is a powerful tool for empowering women in India, equipping them with the skills and confidence to thrive in the job market and contribute to the country's economic growth. By breaking down societal barriers and providing accessible, industry-aligned training, vocational programs are transforming the lives of women and catalyzing a more inclusive and prosperous future for India. (9).

Therefore, training women and girls in vocational skills using local artisans does not only provide women and girls with opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship but also contribute much on the country's economic growth and development

## **2. Methodology**

The study used mixed methods approach to assess and analyze the effectiveness of a community-based approach, leveraging local artisans, in empowering women and girls in Mchinji and Balaka Districts of Malawi, providing vocational skills training. The study aims to understand the impact of this initiative on enhancing the economic independence, social inclusion, and overall well-being of women and girls in the rural communities. The study used both qualitative and quantitative data to provide the comprehensive understanding of the issue through pre and post program surveys, focus group discussions and interviews. Artificial Intelligent generation of facts was also used to get a clear understanding of issues in the discussion section.

The quantitative aspect of the study includes data collection from CERADI’s intervention field reports, data base and government offices. Employment and income levels statistics were collected from beneficiaries of the vocational skills training program and was analyzed to measure the economic impact on the individual household level and on the community. The baseline data was sourced from the organisation data base collected during implementation of the previous project. On the qualitative side, interviews were conducted with beneficiaries of vocational training program, community leaders, and trainers. These interviews aimed to gather insights into the personal experiences of individuals who had undergone vocational training and the perceived changes in their communities. This approach not only provided the necessary skills but also promotes the use of local knowledge and traditions in the process. The approach is highly participatory, involving the community at every stage of the process. The local artisans were responsible for mentoring women and girls in practical skills, such as tailoring, weaving, carpentry, motor bike mechanics, welding and fabrication and hair dressing. The approach also included provision of ongoing mentorship and networking opportunities to help the trainees access markets for their products.

## 2.2. Problem Identification and analysis

Lack of economic empowerment opportunities, low realization of human rights and life of dignity for women and girls from disadvantaged communities in the Mchinji and Balaka Districts of Malawi. While the area has a high number of young women and girls, they lack marketable skills, which prevented them from securing stable livelihoods due to deep-rooted cultural attitudes and gender inequality. In addition, women and girls in Mchinji and Balaka face numerous challenges that hinder their full participation in society. These challenges include limited access to education, poor economic opportunities, gender-based violence, early marriage, and societal norms that restrict their freedom and development. Women and girls with disabilities face even more significant barriers, including exclusion from mainstreaming in education, economic activities, and social integration, exacerbating their vulnerability.

However, the availability of qualified local artisans with different vocational skills and who are willing to support women and girls within their community, paused a significant sign for the women to attain what has been missed for decades to empower them with practical and sustainable skills they could use for self-reliance. In addition, the use of local artisans challenged the existing training programs which were not tailored to the local context, the skills demanded and lack of mentorship and continuous support for women and girls after the training.

## 2.3. Stakeholders engaged and their roles:

1	<b>Centre for Research and Development Initiative (CERADI)</b>	Lead organization coordinating and implementing the program worked with community leaders, local support groups and government Officers during the entire project cycle.
2	<b>Local Artisans:</b>	Provided the vocational training skills and acted as mentors to the women and girls.
3	<b>Community Leaders</b>	Supported the program by promoting and raising awareness within the community to overcome cultural barriers.
4	<b>Government officers</b>	Assisted in providing technical and policy support to ensure the sustainability of the project
5	<b>Beneficiaries (Women and Girls)</b>	The direct participants taking part in the training and skill development.

## 3.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study has shown that use of local Artisans as master trainers in vocational skills at community level to women and girls is very effective, **culturally relevant and practically applicable**. Local artisans bring valuable, community-specific knowledge and techniques that are rooted in tradition and local needs. This practical, hands-on learning ensures that women and girls acquire vocational skills and understand how to apply them in real-life. In addition, as artisans are from the same community and live within their culture, their presence challenge Gender Stereotypes through ongoing dismantling of dominant gender norms related to women’s roles in society and

workforce in collaboration with community leaders. This has brought lasting shift in community attitudes towards the importance of women's education, vocational training, and economic empowerment in the rural communities.

A key finding on this study is that it is **cost effective and accessible**. Using local artisans, deliver vocational skills training at a lower cost compared to formal institutions, making it more accessible to people in underserved communities. This form of training reduces barriers to education; as high tuition fees and transportation costs, as the learning take place within the community. It serves time for travel to and from centres, married women care for families before and after sessions.

1084 women and girls acquired vocational skills in various trades which include; tailoring, carpentry, basket weaving, motor bike mechanics - taught by local artisans. Participants report increased sense of personal achievement, autonomy and self confidence among women and girls as their vocational training was coupled with life skills training which included topics on human rights, gender equality, business plan development, financial literacy and how to break dominant gender norms to deal with gender based violence. The approach helped women to become more active in social circles like being members of table banking (Bank Mkhonde - where they save money through buying of shares and access small loans which also helps to boost their small scale businesses), starting small scale businesses and getting employment. This community based approach did not only empower women and girls but also impacted largely on the community members on recognizing the value of women in economic and vocational roles.

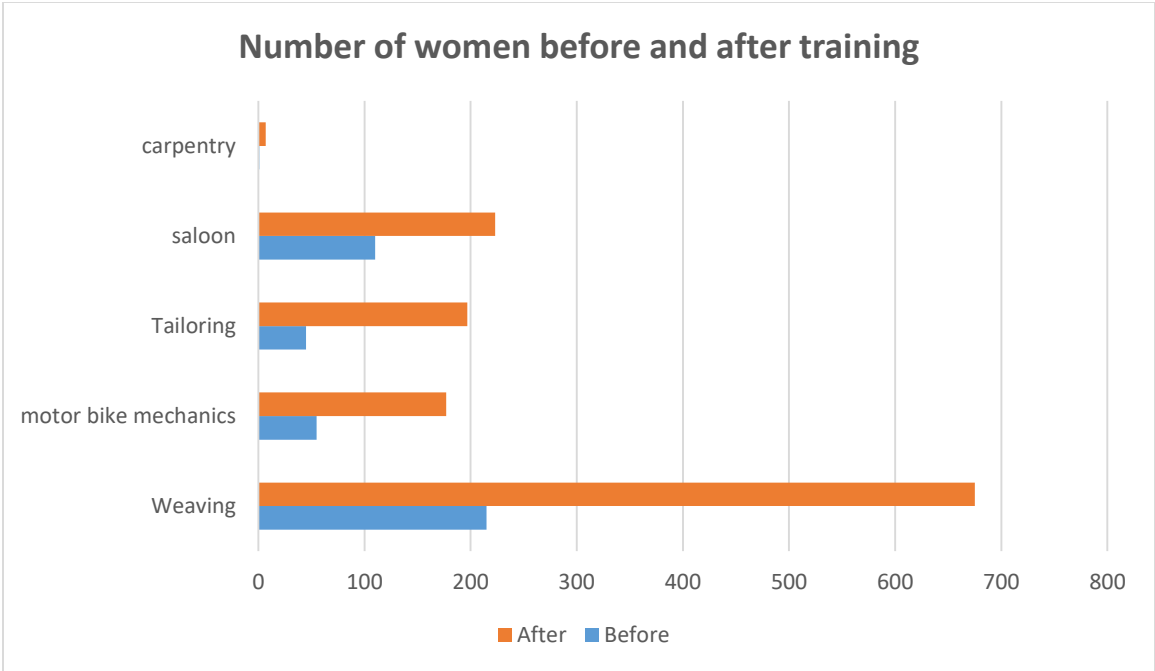
In addition, the approach built a strong linkage between the Artisans and learners which enhanced personalized mentorship and skill development. Learning directly from experienced local artisans allows individualized mentorship, where students receive tailored guidance basing on their specific needs and interests. Artisans focus on skill mastery, learning by doing, and sharing years of accumulated expertise.

## **QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESULTS ACHIEVED**

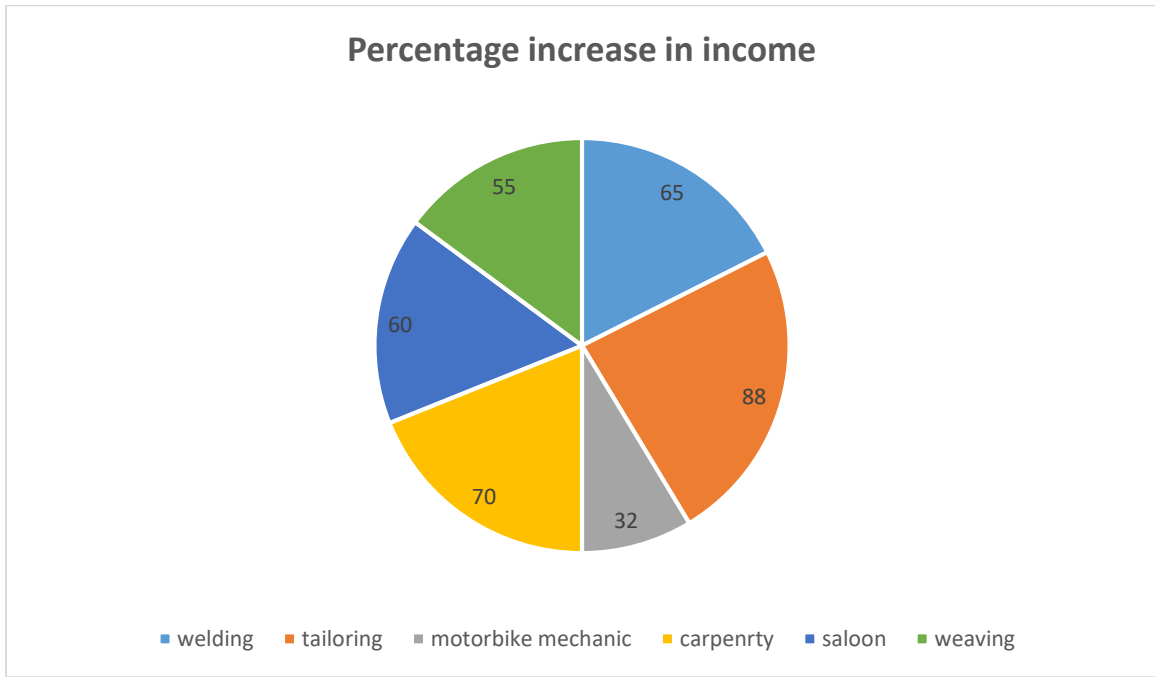
1667 women and girls were recruited and enrolled for six months into vocational skills training program attached to local Artisans with different skills which included motor bike mechanics, welding and fabrication, hair dressing, weaving, carpentry and joinery and tailoring. This number represents women and girls from three intervention areas in two districts. 1503 (90%) women and girls who participated in the training expressed satisfactory with the training and felt more confident in their abilities. Out of 1667, 1084 finished the training presenting 65% of the total enrolled women and girls. 812 (88%) women and girls from the 1084 who completed the training - have started their own businesses and some secured employment. 690 (85%) of 812 women and girls reported an increase in income from self - employment /entrepreneurship and hired employment.

### **Data visualization**

#### **Before and after the training**



**Impact on income levels**



## **Qualitative:**

Participants reported an increase in self-esteem and confidence as they gained new skills and became economically independent. One of the learners from Kapondo - Mchinji said ***“The program has made me to be counted in my community. Now am employed as a welder in a big company and live a life of my own “– Fauster Banda– Kapondo Mchinji.*** Many expressed gratitude for the opportunity to change their lives and contributes to their households’ income. ***“I have started my own tailoring business and now I am financially independent. I support my children and contribute to the family economy.” – Milliam Erasmus - Simphasi - Mchinji.*** Acquisition of vocational skills has built a platform for women who initially were considered not valuable and cannot contribute effectively to decisions making of the community or their families but now are being elected into reputable positions and are sitting side by side with men in decision making positions. ***I was not even counted in my community but after acquiring tailoring skill am respected and valuable in many forums - Patuma John - Kalembo Balaka***

In addition, community leaders expressed their appreciation and gratitude’s on the programs impact that now they look at women on a different perspective, not only housekeepers but agents to engineer economic development in their area. ***“The project has changed our mindset, as community members we used to see women as housekeepers but now we are in forefront encouraging our daughters and wives that its their time to act and take over in business as well as industry - GVH Chiluzi – Kapondo - Mchinji”***

## **Impact and benefits**

The program has inaugurated economic independence and stability among women and girls as they developed their own businesses and gained employment based on vocational skills which enhanced sustainable livelihoods. There is also significant long term shift in economic empowerment among community members’ perceptions on women’s roles in economic development and decision-making. Women and girls who have completed the training programs act as mentors, sustaining the skills developed and sharing experiences, passing on their skills to other women and girls in their communities. In addition, the program empowered women and girls by equipping them with skills that enabled them to become financially independent, improving their status in the community. The ripple effect of the program spread throughout the community, as communities benefited from the economic activities started by women and girls. Use of local Artisans in training the women and girls led to increased social participation, women gained confidence and became more involved in decision-making within their households and communities. There is significant impact of return on investment by the program by increased the social capital of women, 1084 women trained, have all joined Bank Mkhonde (table banking) bringing positive change to their families and community through their social interactions.

The program helped improving relationship of the implementing organisation and community members through consistent engagement and addressing local needs. It also added on the organisations visibility and credibility as women and girls were trained using local Artisans which was coupled with involvement of local community leaders in raising awareness and dealing with dominant social norms at community and district level.

## **SUCCESS STORIES**



**Fauster Banda a form 4 graduate** from Chiluzi village T A Kapondo in Mchinji district. After her secondary school education, she did not manage to secure a job or any formal course, without losing hope she joined a local community group of savings and loans where women, men and girls contribute money on the agreed amount weekly to save and borrow.

The group was being supported by Centre for Research and Development Initiative – local NGO working towards improving lives of rural communities (CERADI). CERADI announced the opportunity for women and girls to acquire vocational skills through a project called Empowering Women and Girls funded by Global Affairs Canada through Commonwealth of Learning - CoL.

Fauster showed her interest and during screening she was picked along with other girls and women. She was attached to a local artisan who trained her welding and fabrication skill for six months. She graduated with credit. In addition to the technical skills, she also gained important soft skills like communication, teamwork, financial literacy, entrepreneurship and problem-solving — all of which are vital in the workforce.

The next chapter of Fauster’s life was her being hired in a machinery manufacturing company that helped farmers in Malawi based in the capital city of Lilongwe.

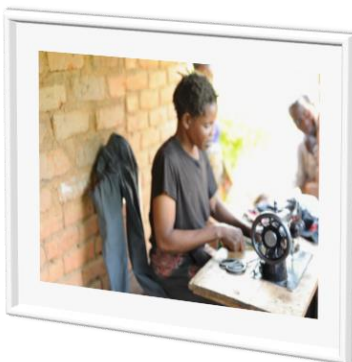
But even as her professional life flourished, Fauster never forgot her roots she realized how far she had come. She thought back to the girl who had once jobless, feeling like her future was uncertain. Now, she was not only financially independent but also contributing to the development of her community. She had gone from a jobless to a key player in one of the biggest agricultural equipment making companies in Malawi.

**Milliam Erasmus** is a middle aged women from Kolakola village in TA Simphasi who was privileged to be the women who were selected to acquire vocational skills at Chiosya. She was the oldest among the women who were selected to acquire skills training at Chiosya trading centre.

Her age did not limit her as she was determined to acquire the skill and change her life. Her dream was realized as soon after training she rented a sewing machine from a fellow village member and started her tailoring businesses.

In course of her business she trained her husband who was a mere farmer and had no dream of becoming an entrepreneur as getting resources was very challenging in his household.

Upon acquiring the skill Mr. and Mrs. Erasmus are running their tailoring business in their village and fellow villagers are very proud of them as they have been rescued from the next village’s tailor who used to sell their pieces of clothes or sometimes took long time to get their clothes done.



**Ireen Phiri** a middle aged woman with four children. She was left devastated when her husband married another woman. She stayed alone with her children for five years being supported through piece work from neighboring homes. this made her life very miserable as she did not have anything to support her children's school. She was a member of a community savings and loan groups.



One day she got a message from the group chairlady that CERADI is looking for women who are willing to learn basket weaving. She felt relieved and encourage the chairlady to add her name on the list. The training was for five days and after the training she asked CERADI staff if they can help her get some strips for her businesses.

After getting her strips she started weaving baskets on her own and more women in her community are buying form her. In addition, she is now one of the master trainers of basket weaving in Mthunzi Village TA Simphasi in Mchinji.

She is able to pay her children's school fees

and get enough food for her family.

If that is not enough she also participate in Village Development Committee meetings and contribute constructively to the development of her area.

### **CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION**

The program implementation did not go unchallenged. Some key challenges encountered included:

**Cultural barriers:** In some communities, there was resistance to women and girls taking part in vocational training especial skills which are considered male dominated, hence high dropout numbers (.583 did not finish the training representing 34.9%

**Resource Constraints:** No funding to purchase materials for participants start up own businesses. The training drew more women from rural communities, who had high expectations that after the training they will be provided with start up parks despite the organisation explained to them clear outline of their benefits.

**Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure, hindered smooth execution as it was difficult for women and girls to have sessions during the rainy season as classes are mostly conducted at open spaces., which taught us the importance of establishing safe learning centres.

### **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION**

**Future plans**

Expanding the vocational skills training to other districts and work with local artisans and other business community to create sustainable employment for women and girls. Building strong partnerships with governments, NGOs, and other likeminded players is vital to ensure sustainable. Digitalizing training materials will help to reach more women and girls in rural areas using APTUS devices.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

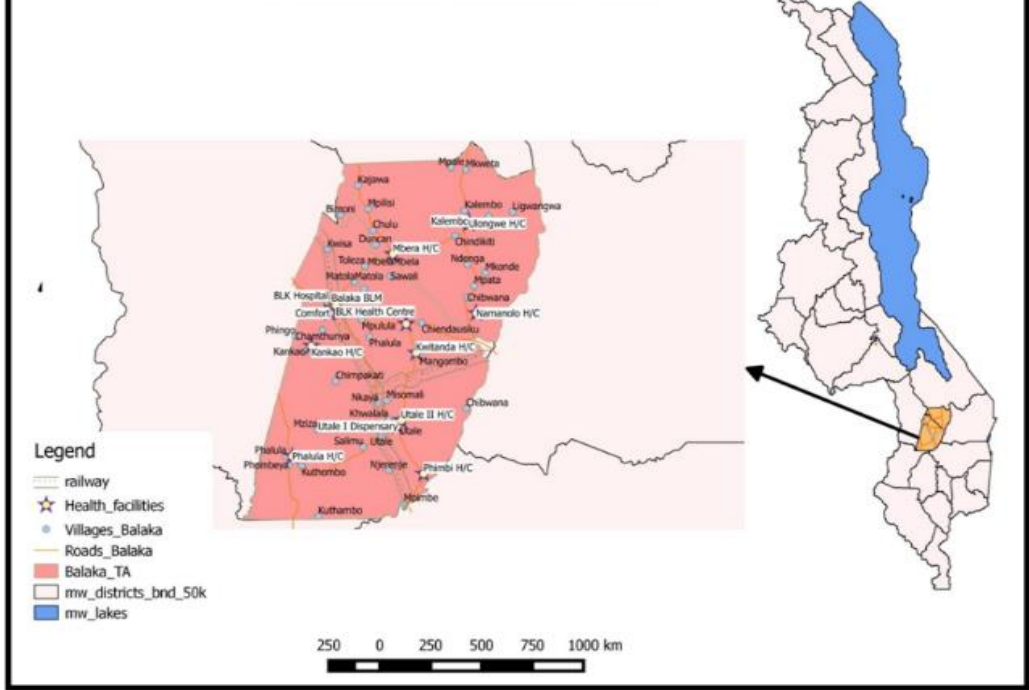
Mentorship programs are very important to strengthen and support women and girls who have acquired the vocational skills therefore it is important to institute mentorship where women who have completed the vocational training can mentor newer participants for continued support and strengthen community networks. There is need to help women set up and sustain their businesses after completing vocational training by linking them to finance institution or for employment to employers and business community.

### **CONCLUSION**

Using local Artisans to train women and girls is very cost effective, time saving and sustainable as both the learner and trainer are within the same community, mentorship and on spot coaching is inevitable. The results of this study has shown significant shift on **culture** and challenged Gender Stereotypes through ongoing dismantling of dominant gender norms related to women's roles in society. The approach has brought lasting shift in community attitudes towards the importance of women's and girls' education, vocational skills, and economic empowerment Scaling up the initiative will enable more women and girls access vocational skills through engagement of the graduates to train fellow women and girls who will contribute to the economy of their families, community and the nation.



MAP OF BALAKA SHOWING SETTLEMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE



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