

# Women heading households

Since CARE Malawi started its operations in 1998 it has strived to deepen the quality and impact of programs. This is guided by a strong understanding of peoples' livelihoods and a thorough analysis of structural and systemic causes of poverty and marginalization. Based on this analysis CARE Malawi has chosen to focus on three specific marginalized groups whom we can achieve deep and lasting impact. One of these is women from very poor, chronically food insecure, highly labor constrained female headed households<sup>1</sup>.



Lezinia at her house

Lezinia Zindondo belongs to this group. She is from Chamsipha village in Kasungu district in central Malawi. Lezinia is a widow who cares for four of her grandchildren, one of whom is crippled.

As a female head of household she faces additional challenges from other poor women in the community. Like most other women heading households she has very few assets and low literacy levels. She has very little labor to assist her earn an income or care for the children. As an elderly woman heading a household she is even more susceptible to risks such as disease, natural disasters and market fluctuations. To manage this risk she earns money from a range of activities which are low risk and short term in nature. For example, as well as growing maize Lezinia also sells firewood however this is not enough to support her household throughout the year. She is highly dependent on social support, including child care, and still relied on good will donations from people in her village to support her.

Lezinia is now a member of the Village Savings and Loans group in her village, a CARE Malawi initiative. Through her involvement in this group Lezinia is able to borrow a small amount of money to start a small business selling zigumu (pancake). With the earnings from her business Lezinia is now able to buy maize to supplement her own crop to feed her household. She has also been able to purchase fertilizer which she applied to her maize field, resulting in her highest ever yield.



Applying fertilizer to her maize field

Women like Lezinia are often marginalized by the societies in which they live. They are excluded from social forums so are unable to contribute to decisions which affect them and essential services such as health and education. Often these women are heading households due to the impact of HIV/AIDS and are further isolated as a result. Women heading households often lack hope of improving their own lives, but instead are focused on improving the quality of life for the younger generations in their household and bringing them out of the poverty cycle. Lezinia hopes include being able to have breakfast daily, to open a grocery store in her village and to keep her own poultry. She also aims to diversify her crops to include soybean and groundnuts, to improve her household's income.

Through its program focused on female headed households, CARE Malawi aims to assist these women to accumulate a strong asset base, become food secure and to actively influence policy and decision-making. CARE initiatives will also strengthen service delivery systems to ensure they are transparent and accountable to the needs of female headed households.

<sup>1</sup> The other two programs focus on *Women in vulnerable, chronically food insecure, rural smallholder households* and *Rural adolescent girls of primary and post-primary age, approximately 10-18 years*.