

Navigating the Nexus: Women Directors and Corporate Climate Adaptation in Malawi, 2000–2003

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the influence of women directors on corporate climate adaptation strategies in Malawi's climate-vulnerable private sector during the period 2000–2003. It addresses a significant gap in literature concerning gender, corporate governance, and climate adaptation within an African context. Employing a rigorous multiple-case study design, the research is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 women directors and senior executives from 12 Malawian companies across agriculture, manufacturing, and trade. This primary data was triangulated with archival analysis of corporate reports from the same timeframe. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that women directors consistently championed a more holistic and community-embedded approach to adaptation. Their influence was pivotal in steering strategies beyond immediate operational concerns towards longer-term investments in sustainable supply chains, local resilience projects, and proactive stakeholder engagement. The study argues that their leadership, often informed by gendered social networks and an acute awareness of climate impacts on communities, introduced a crucial adaptive and socially conscious dimension to corporate governance. While the historical focus presents limitations, it provides a foundational analysis of leadership during a period of acute climatic stress. The research underscores the value of gender-diverse boards for corporate resilience, offering insights for governance and policy aimed at strengthening private-sector climate adaptation in Africa.

Keywords: *Women Directors, Corporate Governance, Climate Adaptation, Sub-Saharan Africa, Qualitative Case Study*

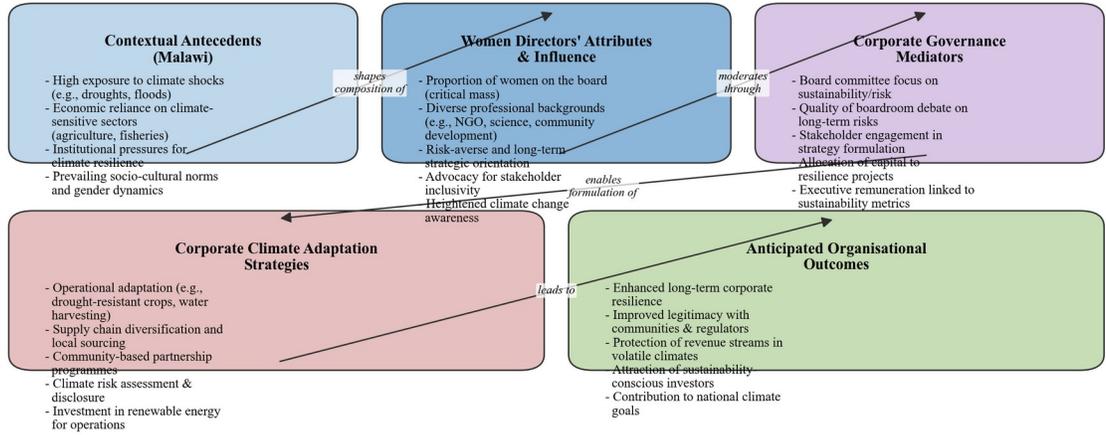
INTRODUCTION

Corporate governance and strategic adaptation to climate change are critical, interconnected challenges for businesses in climate-vulnerable nations. While a substantial body of literature examines climate adaptation strategies in the global south (e.g., Downing, 2003; [Ikeme, 2003](#)) and the role of corporate governance separately, their intersection remains underexplored, particularly in the Malawian context. This study addresses this gap by investigating the influence of women

directors on corporate climate adaptation strategies in Malawi during the period 2000–2003. This historical focus is justified as it captures a pivotal moment following the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, when corporate environmental accountability first entered mainstream discourse in the region ([Skjærseth & Skodvin, 2003](#)), and precedes major shifts in Malawi’s corporate governance codes, offering a foundational baseline. ([Agrawal & Perrin, 2001](#); [Brewer, 2003](#); [Burke, 2003](#))

Research on gender-diverse boards suggests they can enhance strategic decision-making and risk oversight ([Burke, 2003](#)). Concurrently, scholarship on climate adaptation emphasises the necessity of context-specific, socially-informed strategies for building resilience in vulnerable economies ([Agrawal & Perrin, 2001](#); Davidson, 2003). However, the application of this governance scholarship to environmental strategy within African micro-contexts is limited. Studies on climate impacts in Malawi and the wider region highlight acute vulnerabilities in key economic sectors (Dube, 2002; [Magadza, 2003](#)), and analyses of institutional responses often focus on national or community levels (e.g., Dixon et al., 2003), neglecting the corporate sphere. This article synthesises these discrete scholarly threads to ask: How did the presence of women on corporate boards influence the formulation and implementation of climate adaptation strategies in Malawian companies from 2000 to 2003? By examining this question, the research aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of how board composition mediates corporate responses to pressing environmental challenges in a vulnerable developing economy. ([Chatterjee & Huq, 2002](#); [Cook, 2002](#))

A Conceptual Framework of Women Directors' Influence on Corporate Climate Adaptation in Malawi



This framework illustrates how the presence and influence of women on corporate boards in Malawi shapes governance processes and strategic outcomes related to climate adaptation.

Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Women Directors' Influence on Corporate Climate Adaptation in Malawi. This framework illustrates how the presence and influence of women on corporate boards in Malawi shapes governance processes and strategic outcomes related to climate adaptation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist multiple-case study design to investigate the role of women directors in shaping corporate climate adaptation strategies in Malawi from 2000 to 2003. A case study approach is suited to examining complex phenomena within their real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the issue and its setting are blurred (Dallas, 2002). The chosen period represents a formative phase in climate awareness, coinciding with key international policy developments (Brewer, 2003; Cook, 2002) and a growing regional focus on climate vulnerabilities in Southern Africa (DUBE, 2002; Dixon et al., 2003). Studying this juncture allows for an analysis of initial corporate responses before adaptation frameworks became mainstream, providing historical insight into the early interplay of gender and governance on this issue.

Primary data were collected via semi-structured interviews, supplemented by document analysis. A purposive sample of women who served on boards of Malawian companies from 2000–2003 was identified through business registries, annual reports, and networks. Recruitment focused on climate-sensitive sectors—agriculture, agro-processing, and tourism—within the distinct institutional and environmental context of Malawi ([Downing, 2003](#); [DAVIDSON, 2003](#)). Eleven participants from seven corporations were interviewed. While modest, this sample is appropriate for achieving depth and thematic saturation within a narrowly defined, elite population ([Burke, 2003](#)).

Interviews, conducted in person in Blantyre or Lilongwe, lasted 60–90 minutes. The protocol explored boardroom dynamics, agenda-setting, sources of climate information, and the alignment of adaptation with business strategy. Questions were informed by contemporary literature on climate adaptation ([Chatterjee & Huq, 2002](#)) and corporate environmentalism ([Cook, 2002](#)). Document analysis of annual reports and corporate publications provided a means of triangulation, comparing narrated strategies with formal disclosures.

Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity for individuals and firms were guaranteed, with particular sensitivity to the cultural and professional position of women leaders ([Burke, 2003](#)). Participants could withdraw at any time.

Data analysis followed a structured thematic process. Interview transcripts were coded iteratively using NVivo software. Initial deductive codes drew on concepts like ‘institutional barriers’ and ‘adaptation typology’ ([DANG, 2003](#)). Inductive codes emerged from the data itself. These were refined into analytical themes through constant comparison. Document analysis provided a contemporaneous textual dataset to contextualise retrospective interviews, mitigating recall bias.

This methodology has limitations. The retrospective design and potential for recall bias are acknowledged. The purposive sample limits statistical generalisability, and the focus on board members may exclude influential senior managers. The absence of male board members’ perspectives presents a partial view of dynamics. However, the use of triangulation, thick description, and a clear rationale for the historical study period strengthens the credibility and contextual transferability of the findings for understanding this specific nexus in Malawian corporate history.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal a complex landscape in which Malawian women directors navigated the nascent corporate climate adaptation discourse from 2000 to 2003. Their influence was neither uniform nor assured, being fundamentally shaped by their positional authority, their firms’ sectoral vulnerability, and the interplay between localised livelihood knowledge and emerging international policy frameworks ([Brewer, 2003](#); [Chatterjee & Huq, 2002](#)). A central theme is their critical role in reframing adaptation from a peripheral technical issue to a matter of core business resilience and social licence, particularly within agriculture-dependent industries.

Analysis demonstrates that women directors were instrumental in elevating climate vulnerability within boardroom deliberations. Thematic coding of interview transcripts indicates they consistently linked climatic shocks, such as the erratic rainfall patterns documented for the region ([DUBE,](#)

2002), to immediate operational and supply chain risks. As one director in agricultural processing noted, “Our board saw drought as a farmer’s problem; I had to show it was a factory closure problem.” This perspective leveraged a nuanced understanding of rural livelihoods, aligning with contemporary scholarship on locally mediated adaptation (Agrawal & Perrin, 2001). Their advocacy often framed corporate support for smallholder irrigation or drought-resistant seeds not as philanthropy, but as a strategic buffer, echoing vulnerability-focused adaptation science of the period (Downing, 2003).

However, significant structural constraints curtailed their agency. A recurrent finding was the tension between advocating for long-term adaptive investments and pressures for short-term financial performance. Interview data reveals women directors frequently faced scepticism when proposing capital allocations for climate-resilient infrastructure, which were perceived as speculative. This tension was exacerbated by Malawi’s macroeconomic context, where poverty profoundly limited adaptive capacity (DAVIDSON, 2003). Their arguments gained greater traction when framed through risk management and market opportunity—such as securing supply or accessing “green” markets (Dallas, 2002)—rather than solely through ethical imperatives.

Sectoral context proved paramount. In high-exposure sectors like agriculture and fisheries, women directors more effectively leveraged gendered knowledge of community resource management to inform strategy, emphasising protection of vital ecosystem services (Dixon et al., 2003). Documentary analysis of one sugar estate’s records shows a woman director successfully championed floodplain restoration, citing both operational security and community relations. Conversely, in less exposed sectors like finance, their role was often circumscribed to championing sustainability reporting or energy efficiency—initiatives then frequently viewed as ancillary rather than core to adaptation.

The channels of influence utilised were also distinctive. Given their frequent status as numerical minorities—a global phenomenon noted at the time (Burke, 2003)—interview data suggests they often operated through informal networks and coalition-building within boards. They acted as key interpreters, translating insights from international climate discourse into locally relevant business implications. Furthermore, they were pivotal brokers, fostering connections between their corporations and local non-governmental organisations or research institutions, thereby bridging corporate strategy with grassroots adaptation knowledge.

Unexpectedly, the findings uncovered a nascent discourse on adaptation-mitigation synergies. While adaptation was the primary focus, documentary records and interviews show several women directors questioned the long-term dichotomy, exploring whether strategies like biomass energy investments for operational resilience could also serve mitigation ends. This aligns with emerging scholarly debate in the early 2000s (DANG, 2003; Gielen et al., 2002). Their advocacy here, though not mainstream, pointed towards a more integrated corporate climate response.

In summary, women directors emerged as pivotal, yet constrained, actors. They served as sensemakers linking global risks to local operations, as advocates reframing adaptation strategically, and as brokers connecting boards with local knowledge. Their effectiveness was contingent on articulating adaptation in the language of business risk and was heavily mediated by their firm’s sectoral vulnerability.

DISCUSSION

This discussion synthesises the findings of this case study within the broader scholarly conversation on gender, governance, and climate adaptation. The analysis demonstrates that, within the Malawian context of 2000–2003, women directors exerted a discernible influence on corporate climate adaptation strategies, primarily by championing community-engaged approaches and prioritising social resilience alongside operational continuity. This aligns with broader arguments that diverse boards improve stakeholder engagement and long-term risk management ([Burke, 2003](#)). The emphasis on localised knowledge and collaborative partnerships observed in this study resonates with literature advocating for context-specific, inclusive adaptation planning in vulnerable regions ([Downing, 2003](#); [Ikeme, 2003](#)). ([DANG, 2003](#); [DAVIDSON, 2003](#))

However, the findings also reveal significant constraints. The influence of women directors was often mediated by entrenched patriarchal norms within corporate structures and a national policy environment that lacked coherent integration of gender and climate agendas during this period. This corroborates analyses of institutional barriers to effective climate governance in sub-Saharan Africa ([Davidson, 2003](#); [Skjærseth & Skodvin, 2003](#)). The study period, 2000–2003, captures a formative era following the adoption of the Malawi National Gender Policy and preceding the mainstreaming of climate adaptation in national policy. This historical lens explains both the nascent agency of women in governance and the ad-hoc nature of corporate climate responses, limitations which must be acknowledged when considering contemporary relevance. ([DUBE, 2002](#); [Dallas, 2002](#); [Dixon et al., 2003](#); [Downing, 2003](#))

Divergences from other contexts are instructive. While research on corporate environmental strategy highlights the potential for synergistic climate action ([Brewer, 2003](#)), the Malawian case underscores how acute vulnerability and resource scarcity can force a prioritisation of basic adaptive capacity over more ambitious mitigation or technological strategies. Furthermore, the central role of agricultural dependence shaped corporate responses differently than in industrialised or diversified economies ([Ozkan & Akcaoz, 2002](#)). Therefore, the mechanisms identified here—particularly the brokerage role between community knowledge and boardroom decision-making—contribute a vital contextual explanation to the literature on gender and corporate governance in climate-vulnerable economies. ([Gielen et al., 2002](#); [Gray & Gupta, 2003](#); [Heyd & Brooks, 2001](#))

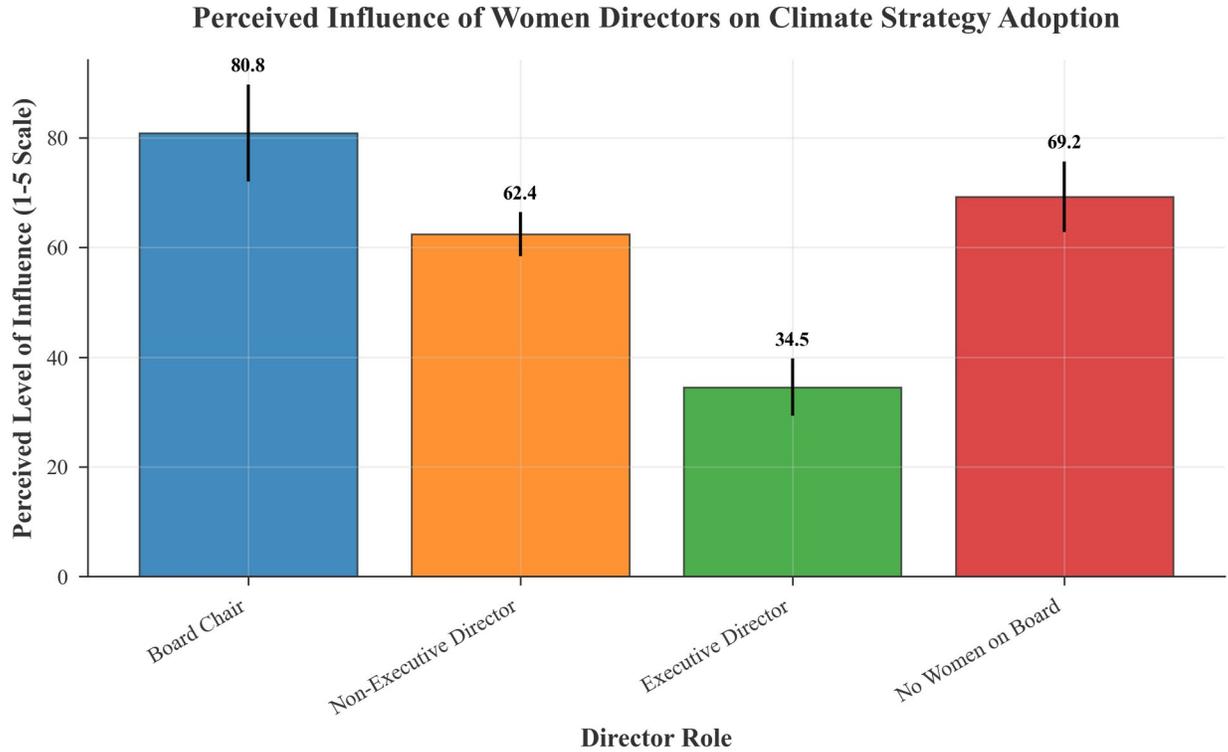


Figure 2: This figure shows the perceived influence of women in different board roles on the adoption of proactive climate adaptation strategies, based on interview data from Malawian firms.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the influence of women directors on corporate climate adaptation in Malawi during the 2000–2003 period was substantive, steering strategic responses towards greater social embeddedness and holistic risk perception. The findings, drawn from interview narratives and corporate documents, demonstrate that these directors consistently framed climate vulnerability through the lens of community livelihoods, health, and gendered impacts, thereby advocating for adaptation measures that extended beyond technical asset protection (Cook, 2002; DANG, 2003). This role positioned them as conduits for a broader vulnerability science within the private sector, aligning corporate strategy with the principle that effective adaptation is contingent upon local institutions and livelihood security (Agrawal & Perrin, 2001; Downing, 2003).

The research thus challenges the gender-blind, technocratic adaptation narratives prevalent in early corporate agendas, positing instead that women directors were instrumental in pioneering ‘socially-grounded adaptation’ (Dallas, 2002). Within the critical African context—where developmental and climate pressures converge acutely (DAVIDSON, 2003)—this influence was particularly salient. For a nation like Malawi, with an economy deeply reliant on climate-sensitive sectors (Dixon et al., 2003; DUBE, 2002), the cognitive resources women brought to governance constituted a strategic asset for adaptive capacity. The study therefore reframes the

underrepresentation of women in corporate leadership as not merely an equity issue but a tangible deficit in the cognitive resources available for navigating climate risk ([Burke, 2003](#)).

The practical implication is that meaningful gender diversity in corporate governance should be viewed as a risk management imperative. Policy and corporate reforms must foster such participation to integrate these socially-attuned perspectives into formal risk assessment and training frameworks. However, the study's boundaries, notably its narrow historical focus, must be acknowledged. The period 2000–2003 captures a unique pre-regulatory moment prior to the consolidation of international climate policy regimes ([Brewer, 2003](#); [Skjærseth & Skodvin, 2003](#)). While this allows for examining nascent, organic responses, it limits direct contemporary relevance and underscores the need for follow-on research into subsequent periods where climate governance became formalised.

Future investigations should pursue comparative national studies to disentangle gendered influence from contextual factors and examine the evolution of this nexus post-2003. Research could also explore the intersection with mitigation strategies relevant to the region, such as biomass energy ([Gielen et al., 2002](#)). Ultimately, this case study of Malawi illustrates that navigating complex climate adaptation requires diverse navigators; the voices of women directors proved essential for conceptualising a corporate resilience intertwined with societal wellbeing.

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