INTRODUCTION

Scramble for space is the everyday experience among the low income households in Malawi’s urban areas. Malawi’s urban population is growing at an alarming rate of about 6% per annum and this has added pressure on housing space. In spite of this increasing rate the housing supply is lagging behind demand therefore contributing to overcrowding in the households. There no much data to back up the extent of overcrowding and the experiences of the urban households in overcrowded housing. There has been voluminous literature on access to land or housing by gender and quantity and quality aspects of housing problems but there is very scanty information on the implication this has on individual members of the household.

According to various sources there has been high influx of youth to urban areas and overcrowding in the households (Kawonga Et al 1996). Many Malawians according to various sources live below poverty line. About 65% are poor and a fourth of all households are female household head (Malawi Government 2000a and 2000b). These poor households have large families with a high dependency ratio (Malawi Government 2000b). While their families are large the average salaries are relatively very low compared to the increasing rent of a decent house for example, in 2004 rentals increased twofold in six months because of influx of people from rural areas which were hit by poor harvest (IRIN News 2004). This means the poor have to make do with what space is available within their house as they cannot afford a bigger expensive house. This paper therefore unravels the everyday urban living experiences of men and women of different generations in the low and middle income household in Blantyre, with to respect to overcrowding and a culture of spatial separation of space.
Malawian family structures

There are two schools of thoughts that have developed to explain the living arrangements within the household in Africa. One school of thought claims that in recent years, there has been transformation from extended family types to nuclear due to modernization and urbanization (Thomas 1999; Mba 2001 as quoted by Zimmer (2003). These scholars subscribe to the notion that because of modernisation and urbanization the traditional solidarity network particularly the extended family system is disintegrating ’ Hughes (2002) concurs and has observed that, while in the past, Malawian social relations were close and cohesive, it is currently fragmenting and moving towards nuclear families. The other school of thought believes that the traditional extended family still exists despite urbanization and modernisation. Amogteng (2004) in his study of South Africa found that ‘African cultural preference for extended family living continues to be important despite the onslaught of modernisation and urbanization’. Chirwa (2003) argues that the social relations in Malawi are not breaking down but overstretched. Although there no much data in Malawi to subscribe to the debate, evidence of overcrowding in urban household is an indicator that the extended family system is stills the norm. It should be mentioned that in Malawian families it is difficult to identify whether the children are one’s real children or some are relatives’ because a child has several fathers and mothers. Ones sister or brother is regarded as a mother or father therefore unless otherwise most families are not nuclear families by western definition (Chirwa 2003). This means that everyone can be welcomed in the family sometimes this extends to people from neighbouring villages and this contributes to congestion in houses.

Traditional Gender and generation dimension of sharing Space in Malawi

There is agreement among sociologists, anthropologists, human geographer, architects and historians that space refers to its physical, social state (practices or active being in the world). By conceptualizing space in terms of both practices
that uses and creates space, geographers firmly establish the spatial analysis as a form of social analysis and that it is also a means of control, therefore social construction of space can maintain and reflect social inequalities and power relations, especially gender relations (Robson 2000). Space in this research refers to the physical space available within the home and immediate environs because ‘for individuals, home is a theatre of domesticity with front and backspaces that call for different types of action and interaction according to indicators of family status, gender and age.. Sydie (1996).’ The physical space within the house is gendered in Malawi; there are unwritten rules and regulations as regards the use of space within and outside the household. However these rules and regulations are not rigid they are changing and spatially determined. The situation is such that:

In community events, women and men are spatially separated, standing in groups according to age, seniority and gender. Even in the tragedy of the funeral, there are two separate fires outside the house of the deceased that first night; one for men and one for women. Christian churches in Malawi practice separation of men and women, divided by the center aisle of the church. Boys and girls in villages adhering to traditional practices have separate initiations in separate huts, and separate knowledge which they are encouraged keeping secret from the opposite sex and the uninitiated (Aguilar I Mario, 2004).

This applies at household level where men have their own place known as Mphala where they spend evenings or leisure time after the days work or weekends or where village serious issues are discussed. This is a no go area for the women, it is only the boys and men that can share those areas. Similarly women and girls have their own designated places especially on Khondes (veranda) or mpanda (Grass fence) where they spend time during their leisure time socializing and this is a no go area for the boys especially older boys. If either sex is found in these places are ridiculed called names such as Chili pa akazi (feminine) or Chili pa amuna (tom boy). In this case different sexes spend
very little time together. Similarly in terms of sleeping arrangement, the girls and boys within the village have their own separate sleeping places known as Nthanganene (girls hostel) or Mphala\(^1\) (boys hostel) respectively. Interpretation of the location of these spaces that men and women occupy, gives an indication of differences in the gender roles. For instance the verandas are within the house surroundings which means the women have easy access to the young ones, playing around and near the cooking place. The fenced area means protection of the girls and women within the enclosures. It is in these areas that women also socialize the girls on household issues like cooking taking care of children as well as the husband. However the men’s Mphala is located away from the domestic space at a distance sometimes under a tree. Here it is an arena where men exercise their masculinity socializing the boys in hunting and other survival techniques. This has been the case in many developing countries for example Spain’s (1992) observes that:

> In developing countries ceremonial men’s hut has been used for informal education of boys. In them boys have been taught survival strategies such as hunting, fishing, warfare and religious rituals but girls have not been allowed into those spaces therefore excluded from avenues of formal education.

While agreeing with Spain (1992) one notes that girls’ informal education in Africa has been restricted to those activities that improve their sexual performance and reproductive activities. These activities mode the girls thinking that their basic role is that of serving the men. We can therefore conclude that spatial segregation is a mechanism which a dominant group has maintained its power over the less powerful such that by controlling space, the powerful group’s ability to reinforce it position has been reinforced...

**General rules for sharing of space and relationship**

Malawi has diverse ethnic groups with its unique rules for sharing space but we can generalize some of common unwritten rules applied in rural areas. One

\(^1\) Refers to the village court, men gathering place or boys sleeping place
common rule is that after puberty the girl is not allowed to share space with the father or but could share space with their grandfathers as they were regarded as their husbands\(^2\). This means the girls cannot access the parent’s bedroom neither can they share a bathing room. This is also applicable to daughter in-laws although she has more restrictions in patrilineal societies. For example she is not supposed to talk to her father in-law (initially the mother in-law but after sometime can talk to each other) and any one older than her husband. She is restricted to the kitchen and has to cook for all the people in the village. As for the boys there are no hard rules applied to them except for maintaining social distance with their mother in-law. In terms of access to certain spaces, fathers and brothers are not allowed to access the girls’ bedrooms. There is flexibility in accessing other spaces like the living room and the kitchen although men rarely use the kitchen but there are no restrictions. This is therefore the context of my study to try to find out whether these relationships in sharing of space still applies in the advent of urbanization and modernization and if there has been transformation what are the factors have influenced the change.

**Gender and Housing in Malawi**

In Malawi many studies have focused on issues of access to land, the physical condition of urban housing, inheritance and have not examined the gender and generations’ everyday experiences in relation to available space within the house. Issues of gender contract in relation to house ownership have been discussed by Binauli et al (2003) in the study of South Lunzu where majority of houses were legally owned by men and that majority of women went into gender contracts with the assumption that they jointly owned the house. They were astonished after the husbands’ death that the house was legally owned by their spouse. This is because most women are unaware of the processes of land acquisition and actual ownership due to lack of information. The issues of women marginalization in accessing financial resources and inheritance problems have

\[^2\] In Malawi culture the grandfather is jokingly the husband to granddaughter are in joking status.
been highlighted by Kishindo (2003). She revealed that issues of inheritances were not discussed between spouses; she also questioned the traditional belief that men are providers and owner of housing and everything in the family which reduced women to be part of the property. In all these studies the everyday living experiences of the men and women and boys and girls as regards space sharing within the house has not been highlighted. This paper therefore explores how the culture of spatial separation is adapted to conditions of overcrowding and how this affects gender and generation everyday living. Specifically the paper examines how the housing problems affect women and men of various generations. Secondly it assess how different groups cope with the housing problems particularly how space is shared within the house, and what factors influence sharing of space. It also highlights how the coping strategies affects individuals in the household. The gender and generation relations in terms of sharing of responsibilities in the home, participation & decision making power relations and conflicts from generation gap or solidarity are highlighted.

**Study Area and Methodology**

**Study sites**

The city of study, Blantyre, established in 1876 by the Scottish Missionaries, is located in the southern part of Malawi serving as both a cultural and commercial capital. Blantyre has a population of about 500,000 (NSO 2000) with men and women, in almost equal proportion. The town was selected because it is one of the oldest well established towns in Malawi and a pull of migrants because of its industrial and commercial enterprises. Three housing areas were selected to represent a variety of age and quality and location of low and middle income earners and more centrally located (see fig 1).

*Zingwangwa and Ndirande*

The two traditional housing areas of Ndirande and Zingwangwa are very old African Housing Estates, (popularly known as site and service) which were developed by the colonial government for low income workers, hygienically
without investing large amount of capital. Funding was for sites (plots and boundary plotter) and services (water and roads) for self built and owner occupation but later translated into creating small scale landlords (Pennant 1984). In these areas, low minimum building standards were recommended during the colonial period through to independence period to date to allow labourers to build their own houses within their means. In these two areas most houses are low cost, built of unbaked bricks, poorly plastered with mud and corrugated iron sheets. The house types are varied in quality and sizes. There are isolated cases of permanent houses. Some landlords have incrementally improved their houses for subletting. In these areas, 60% of the inhabitants are tenants and about 40% of the landlords do not stay in Blantyre. The Estates were managed by Malawi Housing Corporation from 1964 to 1996 when the city of Blantyre took over. The plots are subleased on month to month basis but those that are under permanent materials are leased up to 23 years. The city collects ground rent and minimum rates for the services and infrastructure. The area has electricity and water but most houses are not connected to electricity and water inside the house but each has plot has a stand pipe. Most plots have more than one house despite the regulation of one house per plot. Sanitary facilities are in adequate and shared amongst several families. Majority of the residents use firewood or charcoal for cooking and do not have kitchens but cook on open air or in the house. During rainy season they cook inside the houses. Some of the access roads are impassable due to poor maintenance.

**BCA**

BCA which stands for British Central African Company is one of the oldest housing estates built by the colonial government for the top civil servants and chief executives. These houses were handed over to MHC for management after Independence. It is located near Limbe commercial center a twin town of Blantyre. The Estate comprises of different types of housing, some are of very high quality and privately owned (where the previous president resides) and the study area comprises of public housing under MHC. Through privatization some
of these houses have been bought by individuals and well maintained but some are still being rented out to private and public servants and are in state of disrepair. This area is resided by medium income households living under different tenure system, some living in houses rented by their employers (work attached houses) others renting from MHC as retirees whiles others are owner occupier (after having bought them from MHC) almost all households have TVs and radios and other electric gadgets like cooker and fridge but frequently supplements electricity with charcoal for cooking.

The housing estate is well serviced with good roads, electricity and running water. Although the area experiences a lot of erratic water supply because the water reticulation systems are very old. However, the houses are spacious and have big gardens around where most households grow vegetables and other crops for consumption.

The data was collected through fourteen focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with 29 people comprising of 6 male and 9 female of age group between 29 and 60; 7 boys and 7 girls of ages 16-25. Some boys and girls were accessed through schools. This was to allow each one of them to narrate their experiences in the daily urban living conditions specifically related to housing and highlight on the coping strategies in times of shortage of housing space and problems they face from the adopted strategies.

In order to solicit their views on supply of housing and social facilities key informants were also interviewed these included local authorities and government officials dealing with housing and planning. These interviews were supplemented by careful observation of the situation in relation to quality, size and design of the housing, the infrastructure and services, the household structure, informal economic activities. The interviews were taped and written on flip charts and some of the observed situations photographed. Literature was consulted to supplement some missing information. The data was transcribed manually isolating the major emerging themes which forms the basis for the discussion of the results.
Fig 1 Blantyre city map showing study sites
Ms Kalira in Zingwangwa is a 50 years old woman. She had lived all her life time in town and was married to husband who had a good job. Upon marriage in 1975 she joined her husband and they rented a house in Zingwangwa. She and her husband have lived in the same township for about 29 years. Initially they lived in a small house before their family expanded. In 1984 they had four children and moved into a bigger house of about two bedrooms and living room. They lived in this house until her husband was retrenched in the 2000. They moved to a smaller house of two rooms since they could not afford the high rent. The husband is unemployed but depends on piecework. The second time I visited them they had moved houses to at a slightly bigger house with three rooms but in a very bad shape (see plate 1) Ms Kalira supplements the household income by selling farm produce from the garden that they own some 20 kilometers away from Blantyre. She has two sons, two daughters and a niece, of about 16, 26 and 24 years respectively that are all unemployed therefore depend on the family income. The niece is handicapped and an orphan (although orphans are usually those under 18 but this is a special case because of the handicapped situation) therefore Ms. Kalira has to take care of her and cannot work away from home. Sometimes the niece helps by selling farm produce by the nearby roadside. She also takes care of 3 grandchildren between the ages of 3 and 5. These moved in with their mother after their father died and all the property was grabbed by the father’s relatives.

In total there are 10 people in a house of 3 small rooms which double their uses as bedrooms and storerooms at night and living rooms during the day. This involves shifting household items during the day to give room for easy circulation and move them back at night for safety. Ms Kalira explained that in this household there were emotional problems emanating from sharing of space and competition over meager resources. From observation the house was in dilapidated situation walls peeling off
and I was told the house leaks as well. There are 6 households sharing a
bathing room and one pit latrine, there is rubbish pit, no domestic waste
collection service, therefore they dispose by the nearby drain.

Mr. & Ms. Chinkhwangwa are 50 and 57 years old respectively
and live in BCA in employment attached house. The family has lived in
the area for almost 24 years interspaced by going to other places due to the
nature of the husband’s job of policeman. The house had 4 bedrooms, a
lounge, a dinning room a kitchen and toilet and bathing room. There is an
articulated water system although sometimes it can be very erratic. There
are 7 people of three generation sharing the house comprising of 1
daughter and her two sons, and 2 sons plus the mother and father. Sharing
of sleeping space is in such away that the main bedroom is for parents, one
room for the daughter and the other for the sons, and one is a guest room.
According to Chewa culture, sharing of space between daughter and father
is not socially permitted, if they want anything from the father it should be
communicated through the mother but there is no restriction with the sons.
Children above 15 are not allowed entry to the main bedroom.

In this household assignment of the chores is flexible but women
are assigned to cook, clean plates, wash clothes, clean the house while the
boys clean the outside surfaces and can cook and wash if the sisters are not
there. The wife’s main duties are to fetch water, wash, and clean plates
especially when the children are at school. The chores are shared equally
but the boys tend to refuse to do certain work they label them as ‘women’s
work.’ This is the main source of conflict between the mother and the
boys sometimes girls as well is that they refuse to do household chores.
Ms. Chinkhwangwa said ‘since I am the owner of the house I work but
sometimes I slap if they are rude’.

Mr. Chinkhwangwa does not do any house chore he said ‘I am the
bread winner should I bring in money and cook again then what I am I
doing in this world’. He said in the house he had an earmarked chair
(dad’s chair) for him where no one dare sit on. He gives the money to the
wife who does all the budgeting for household maintenance including school fees but keeps some for savings and his pocket money. He said ‘I don’t have time to do that, and after all women are good at budgeting’. Moreover he said he trusts his wife especially that she is his uncle’s daughter she cannot cheat him. He explained that at his village it was advised not to marry very far, that’s why he married his cousin so that all wealth should be kept within their clan. He said it is easy for the wife then to inherit everything upon death ‘in fact ‘ I have already written my will and all will be inherited by my wife I don’t think she would get drunk and marry someone else’. The house they live in is roomy but the main problem has never been maintained, there is evidence of dilapidation such as leaking roof, peeling off paint from wall, falling ceiling and leaking pipes, peeling of cement, doors have been damaged by termites the water system not working properly, sometimes there are underground pipes leakages even if they report, the MHC does not respond so they adjust accordingly.

Maria is 16 years old and in standard eight and lives with her parents, (her step father) her two brothers (12and 14years) a sister (10years) in a 2 roomed house in Zingwangwa. The parents sleep in the main bedroom. Maria shares the living room with her 2 brothers and her sister. The house has no kitchen they cook outside, there is stand pipe outside the house which they share with four other families, there is one toilet and on bathing room which they also share with the above families. Her step father is self employed running a hawker in central market and her mother sales cooked food by the roadside near their house. Maria’s father is a drunkard and comes home late at night. Maria sleeps in at the lounge with her sister and brothers but the father has attempted several times to sexually harass the girl while coming back late from his drinking sprees. As she sleeps at the lounge he deliberately ask her to open the door for him. She has tried to tell her mother about it but she is so afraid to confront him.
Housing conditions and experiences of men and women boys and girls

Poor quality Housing

The everyday experiences of the men and women of different ages varied greatly especially depending on the income and position of the members in the household. Both the low and the middle income households experienced deteriorating housing conditions, the only difference was that in middle income, the houses were built of permanent materials and had adequate space. Almost all the respondents rated the housing conditions as bad. In the middle income, the respondents highlighted more on the physical degradation resulting from lack of maintenance and the function of age. The also highlighted the inefficiency of the MHC. One respondent ‘I have reported to MHC severally times but never responds and I have no money to do the repairs’. ‘The present condition of the house threatens our lives as the ceiling may collapse and hurt us’.

The problems mentioned by low income households were multifaceted, which included the quantity and quality of housing which is manifested by overcrowding physical dilapidation and insufficient sanitary facilities. Most of households had very small houses and suffered multiple problems from inadequate space. For example Ms Kalira had to share her 3 roomed houses by 9 household members of different sex and age. From observation the rooms were very small and she said, ‘I have to pack the children of different sex in a small room together with household property. According to another informant the house he lives in very small house with very tiny windows and very dilapidated with leaking roof and falling off purling as they have been damaged by termites. This was the situation in most houses in the low income housing areas but they were isolated cases of good houses. Observation confirmed these problems where in Ms. Kailira’s house some wall plaster was peeling off from the bricks (see plate 1). They also mentioned unemployment and poverty as their main cause of their housing problem. An informant Ms khonjela indicated that
‘our children are not employed and just lingering in town therefore the most important thing we need is employment’

*Insecurity of Tenure*

Almost all respondents were tenants, but those in middle income were in more secure position as they rented their houses from the MHC and paid for by their employers or from their pension and rentals from their properties elsewhere(for pensioners). However, those in low income housing rented their houses from private landlords and complained of insecurity of tenure and threats from eviction as a result of delays or non payment of rent. For example Ms. Kalira’s said ‘we had to change houses due to threats for eviction from landlords due to delayed payment of rent’. In these areas controls are imposed by landlords such as amount of water a household is allowed per day and number of children allowed per household therefore large families with children was victims of these controls. In fact according to Ms. Kalira, the family had problems to be accepted as tenants because of the big family with young children. Most landlords with reasonable good houses did not want tenants who had children as they were regarded as a nuisance and also a threat to the condition of their property
Coping strategy to shortage of housing and household space

Coping strategies in this paper refer to the ways in which individuals have responded to housing problems in general and to the shortage of space within the house. The strategies are examined at both general and household level. The general coping strategies that the youth have adopted included sharing of accommodation and continuing living with parents upon employment. On household level, the strategies include sleeping in the lounge/kitchen or storeroom; sharing main bedroom with younger children, sending the children to their neighbours’ or relatives houses over nights or sending them on longer period to their relatives and to the village to their grandparents. The respondents highlighted some of the problems associated with each of this strategy and will be discussed.
**Sharing of housing**

In the focus groups with working class youth, the study learnt that the respondents shared the houses with colleagues upon employment. This was common among boys especially from low income parents. The young men indicated that it was very expensive to stay in town with their parents because one would almost take over the responsibility in the home. Therefore they shared with a couple of friends and helped the parents sparingly. This strategy was ideal before individuals accumulate a lot of property. In this arrangement they share the rentals and other bills including food. One of the problems that the young men mentioned was when one of them had too many visitors and who would share the contributed food and space. These young men and women were not related by blood; they shared space for convenience sake and therefore were not willing to extend their sharing to members outside their contractual agreement. This was evident among those employed but unemployed youth shared sometimes a room of about 9m² between about 5 boys housing. One of the informant explained that ‘I am not employed but survive on petty trading and share a room with 4 colleagues who also depend on petty trading, we have no bed no property therefore we just sleep on a mat in a congested room’ We don’t make enough money to get a good house, the only money is enough for a daily meal and accommodation.’ This category of youth faced a lot of problems in such arrangement. The housing was so congested and vulnerable to contagious diseases and discomfort in sleeping.

**Postpone marriage and Living with parents**

While those from low income families adopted the strategy of sharing accommodation, the youth from the high income families decided to postpone marriage and stay with their parents until they have worked for at least two years. For instance James, a resident in BCA indicated that I am not in hurry to move out of my parents’ house until I get married'.
Similarly the father indicated that he would not allow his son to go and live in poor quality housing area if he cannot get a good house. This attitude was common among most high-income households but for different reasons. Other parents who were well to do allowed their children to stay on because they wanted them to get prepared before moving into their own houses or get a good house. These parents did not expect their children to contribute to household maintenance but gave the children a chance to buy their own necessities in preparation for their departure. However, from the discussion with the some parents it was learnt that they never bought anything in preparation for their departure. Other parents, allowed their children to stay on in order to assist in the maintenance of the household. One girl in BCA indicated that ‘I cannot move out of my parent’s house because they need my support as they are retirees and have very little income’. In this case, while she benefits from accommodation she supplements the father’s pension. One would agree with Schlyter (1998:299) to assume that girls would like to stay closer to their mothers probably due to need for protection. The above experience also confirms Gwagwa (1998:35) findings where girls are said to contribute higher proportion of their income, especially in women headed relatives to their counterparts in nuclear households.

*Multiple uses of Rooms*

The study revealed that multiple use of a room was adopted as a coping strategy. This strategy involves converting rooms not intended for bedrooms into bedrooms at night and converts them back to the intended use during the day. When I visited Ms Kalira’s living room I could see the disorder in the room indicating that household items were not static but keep on moving. When I inquired how space was shared in the house she told me that some of the children used the living room as a bedroom. According to the women they indicated that this contributed to extra work of moving furniture now and again and reduced their valuable productive
time. This strategy affected both boys and girls because they are the ones who used these rooms. Maria narrated that ‘it is so disturbing to sleep at the living room because there is no privacy’. In some cases space was share between different sex and age group. In case of Mr. Kalira, since her house has two bedrooms shared between 10 people it is inevitable for the different sex to share a room. In fact she and her husband had to share room with the younger grand children.

Spending nights at neighbours house
The study found out that in extreme cases parents would send their children to their neighbours or relative overnight, especially those who had slightly smaller families and bigger houses than theirs. This included son/daughter switch or daughter/son switch. This strategy is sparingly used especially that most of the houses in the neighbourhood are very small. This confirms Ann Schylter (1998) findings in Lusaka who observed that as coping strategies, young boys spent the night in the house of an uncle or aunt with their male cousin while the girls stayed at home probably with female cousins. In low income housing areas sometimes neighbours are like your relatives and in Malawi sometimes communal tendency are visible in situations where the neighbour is stranded but one may not rule out the possibility of subjecting the children to abuse. In the focus group discussions men and women, girls and boys mentioned sending children to the relatives especially to the village to the grand parents as one solution to relieve pressure of space. However some argued that this strategy was not suitable for school going children because schools in the rural areas are of low standard therefore it was used sparingly.
The impact of the poor housing and coping strategies on gender and generation

The impacts of housing quality and are multifaceted these range from psychological to physical impacts such as health. One of the major problems identified in the study was the physical deterioration of the housing. All respondents in the study area indicated that they were affected by this for example in Mr. Chinkhwagwa’s household their daughter indicated that ‘in times of water disruptions, I have to fetch water for the toilet and domestic use and my mother has to ensure that the toilet is cleaned every time my dad uses it’. Other respondent both in medium and low income housing indicated that the physical condition of housing increased the labour among women of different ages for example in cleaning the rubbles from the partial collapsing roofs, ceilings or walls. In Ms Kalira.s household labour was increased in shifting of household item to create room for sleeping at night and to keep the living room in order during the day for common use.

Poor quality housing has both health and emotional impacts on all members of the household. However women’s health is more likely to be adversely affected, given that women spend longer periods of time in the household environment because of their responsibility for house-work and childcare. In the low income housing areas almost all household indicated that they use firewood or charcoal for cooking. This is because they either have no electricity or cannot afford electric appliances; women are therefore exposed to pollution in the kitchen. Women’s exposure to indoor air pollution because of poor ventilation, over-crowded living environments may also affect women disproportionately more than men. Although there is no disaggregated quantitative data to substantiate this fact, it was evident from focus group discussions that most women were selling cooked food to supplement their livelihoods; this informal business involves exposure to poorly ventilated kitchens. Problems such as incest
and violence in the home, affecting disproportionately more girls and women (than boys and men), may also be associated with overcrowding (WHO 1998). For example, Maria, due to shortage of sleeping space, sleeps in the living room and has had experiences of sexual advances from her drunkard step father. There could be several cases of abuse within the study area but people do not talk about this especially if it involves close relatives.

Poor housing sometimes affects individuals’ pride for example during the interview with Mr. Kalira, he said that ‘I feel so embarrassed to stay in this house (see plate 1) especially when my in-laws visit us’. Mr. Kalira’s self esteem is affected is regarded as failures of obligation to provider good accommodation for the family. One major problem of poor housing is deprivation of privacy this is the everyday problem in the low income housing area. Most people live under crowded conditions for example one informant, Nagama, shared a room with her sister and her twins; she indicated that ‘there is no privacy in this house my boyfriend cannot sleep here’. In this case, Nagama’s privacy is violated by sharing a room with her sister and this affects the way she relates with her sister as well as to her boyfriend. The case where the house was shared by many people as the case of Nagama was common among the low income households regardless of whether the household head was male or female. Lack of privacy was also evident in the use of common spaces as bedrooms and sharing of sleeping space between sexes.

Strategies adopted to deal with housing problems affected boys and girls differently for example the strategy of sending children to neighbours impacted both boys and girls. The girls complained of vulnerability to sexual abuse by the male neighbours while the boys indicated they were inconvenienced in their studies. This however does not rule out sexual abuse of boys. Both viewed this strategy as an impingement on the privacy of the host. Other strategies such as sending children to the village were described by the children who had
experienced that, as the worst because it had cut them off from their family and subjected them to more hostile environment than in the urban area.

**Scramble for Space / Sanitary facilities**

Scramble for space and facilities were one of the indicators of overcrowding. Most of the households in the low income housing indicated that this was their everyday experience. Overcrowding is defined as personal lack of territory and invasion of personal space which created the sensation of overcrowding. Overcrowding can also be a determinant of interpersonal relationship whether it is present by choice or by compulsion thus whether there is a common purpose or there is control over contact (Szokolayas 1980). In the low income household overcrowding is not by choice but compulsion as the individuals cannot afford big houses. This therefore created tension between household members for example in Ms Kalira’s household there was uneasiness in the sharing of the three roomed between 10 people. One would therefore agree with Szokolay (1980) that overcrowding in human increases social disorder. Although these respondents’ main problem was shortage of space in the house, they could not move to houses suitable for their households because of financial constraints. In low income housing the indicators of overcrowding have been expressed in number of people sharing available space in the house and a sanitary facility for example 3-5 families in Ndirande shared a toilet/bathroom. This confirms Kawonga’s (1996) findings in Zomba squatter settlements where about 6 – 10 families shared one pit latrine. Most of the respondents live in very houses with small amount of usable space per person indicating very high levels of overcrowding which has different impacts on different gender and generation groups. Ms Kalira indicated that ‘my house has tiny windows and small rooms shared between 10 people and very hot at night especially in summer. They could not open the window at night because they were afraid of thieves and
mosquito bite causing malaria.’ The youth who share a room between 5 people indicated that they were deprived of their privacy and vulnerable to contagious diseases but ‘we have very little choice as we cannot afford a good house the income we earn is hand to mouth’

Similarly the inadequate sanitary facilities inconvenienced women and girls more because in terms of hygiene they needed the bathing room more than men especially when they were in their periods. In this case it was clear that girls were affected more than boys and in order to deal with this problem the girls indicated that they had to wake very up early in the morning to queue for the bathroom. This was more serious in the families especially where there were school going children and working people who have to rush to school and work in the mornings.

Most of the households indicated that they wished they could acquire their own plots to build their own houses to their requirement but land was not easy to acquire. The low income housing areas are under the jurisdiction of the Blantyre city assembly as landlords and can sublet the land on temporary basis at a cheaper rate, through allocation system based on first come first save. However the men focus group discussion indicated that the estate managers within the housing areas were so corrupt such that it was difficult for the poor to afford payment for bribes. This means that plots were allocate to those who had money and built houses for rent. Acquiring land on the open market was more expensive that the publicly owned land.

**Myths about sharing of space**

*Architectural design vs sharing of space*

The problem of architectural design was mentioned in the middle income housing for example Mr. Chinkhwangwa complained that the house had only one toilet and that he is uncomfortable to use the toilet especially when his older daughter is around and when there is no water. He said ‘it
is very embarrassing to use the toilet when there is no water and immediately you go out your daughter comes in and notices the mess in it’. Girls also were in the same position as their fathers they were not comfortable to share the toilet and bathing room with their father. One girl Rose also complained that the location of the rooms and sanitary facilities in her parent’s house did not provide enough privacy. This reflects the way individuals have been socialized through a culture of separation of space between men and women of different generation. In most villages pit latrines or bushes are located away from the immediate environs of the house therefore provide some privacy. However in middle income housing water closet toilets are located inside the house therefore alien to Malawian culture. They don’t provide much deserved privacy especially when there’s water shortage. This implies that age and gender differences are critical in arrangement of rooms and sharing of space. This is a problem where western culture in housing design dominated postcolonial housing structure. The architectural design did not take into account the culture of Malawians which emphasizes separation of space between gender and generation especially separation of spaces used by father and daughters. This problem could be visualized in terms of gender and generation ideology embedded in Malawian culture, which emphasizes on privacy. These sentiments show how one would wish to preserve the traditional culture in housing design but the question would be: Is it possible to maintain the traditional architecture in modern times? One notices that in rural areas land for housing is abundant and life is more communal as all people are related while in town there is social and personal isolation, a shift from community association to subordination to organizations, individualism and also the market economy predominates. Therefore houses that have been developed by corporations may not take into account the cultural needs of everyone.
‘Men are sexually aroused more quickly than are women.

I was interested to find out why girls should not enter their parents bedroom. All the key informants indicated that the main bedroom was one of the sacred places where only the parents and probably young children below 15 could access. Particularly girls at puberty are not allowed to enter their parent’s bedroom. When the respondents were quizzed on why culture forbids girls access’ one respondents explained that it was to protect the girl from being sexually harassed by their fathers. ‘Ndimuja mumamva kuti mwana wamkazi wachimwitsidwa ndi bambo wake’” (That’s the situation when you learn that the father has impregnated his daughter). It is not the accepted norm for these two to share space to avoid of incest. The avoidance of intimacy between daughters and fathers is based on the speculation that ‘Men are sexually aroused more quickly than are women. This fact, combined with the tendency for men to have more physical power than women have, may explain the existence of porn, prostitution and other shunned social activities, mostly male interests (Barash & Lipton, 1997) quoted by canfield. This restriction of sharing space was not only applied to daughters and fathers but even stricter with daughter in-laws and father in-law and even between mother in-law and son in-law. One of the explanations given by one of the elderly women was ‘fathers and sons normally tend to have similar likes so it is possible for the father to get attracted to the daughter in-law therefore it is better to prevent the situation’. This in turn translated to why fathers do not spend much time in the kitchen because that is the women’s space, where their daughters spend much time especially week ends. However the situation is different between mothers and sons, these can share space and freely, interact. One mother commented that ‘since men are weaker in mind”, a son needs motherly advise that’s why we can comfortably share space with him so that he should be able to be counseled’. Traditional rules as expressed earlier apply in this case.
Gender roles/protection vs allocation of space

The study found different views between men and women on allocation of sleeping space for boys and girls within the house in cases where space was inadequate. The women preferred to allocate space to girls depending on the household chores they performed in the morning. Therefore one key informant indicated that ‘our house has two bedrooms therefore, with little space the boys sleep in the other bedroom while the girls sleep in the lounge because they wake up earlier to do household chores’. While allocation of space here was based on gender roles men had different reasons for allocating girls to certain spaces. One informant Mr. Banda, said ‘in case of inadequate space ‘the girls sleep in the bedroom and the boys in the lounge, this is because girls need more privacy’. In the first case the allocation of space depended on what household chores one performs therefore the girls are allocate a lounge on the assumption that they will wake up early and reconvert the room to the lounge before everyone wakes. This is the perception of the mothers that reinforce women subornation and emphasizing the culturally accepted norm of preparing the girl child for reproductive roles as well as submissiveness to the future husbands. This puts girls at a disadvantageous position with the boys in the household.

Mr. Banda gives a different perception in allocation of space to boys and girls; he allocates girls to the bedroom and boys to the lounge. He indicated that it was safer for the girls to sleep in the bedroom because they would not be too exposed in the lounge and vulnerable to sexual abuse. In this case the reason for allocation space to the girls was more protective. This is a perception where by girls are regarded as feeble and insecure and require protection whereby boys are strong and can be able to protect themselves. This reinforces the idea of dependence, among women but at the same respect for the girl’s privacy. The reasons for allocation of space to girls in the two cases show variations in how individual parents visualize their responsibility over them. In the first
case the woman who has been brought up in a tradition of serving, views allocation of the space related to assigned household chores while the father in the second case is more concerned with the protection of the girl child this shows gender differences in the way children are treated, men being concerned more of protecting.

Sharing of chores in the house

One of the most sensitive arenas through which to explore the way women organize their relationship inside and outside the household is that of work. The intensely social nature of housework becomes clear when looking at how women spend their days and fulfill their obligations (Shami, 1996). Sharing of chores is one determinant of sharing of space, as chores may be spatially determined, however the sharing of chore is not by accident but within each society tasks are assigned to women and men according to social rules that are subject to negotiation (Kalabamu 2003). In both the focus group discussion and in-depth key interviews it was clear that tasks are assigned to girls and boys according to the culture and norms of the society.

In the low income housing the stereotype job allocation were evident. For example most of the males were engaged in productive activities thus bringing income into the home while the females did much of the chores related to household servicing. Similarly among the youth the gender roles done by the girls and boys were also sexually determined for example in the study the girls mostly clean the house, laundry, fetch water, wash plates and take care of the children, while the boys do the so called masculine chores such as sweeping outside the house, gardening, building maintenance, mowing the grass, polishing fathers shoes, washing the car, watering plants, washing fathers clothes, helping in father’s business. When asked as why assigned such roles, one of the key informants had this to say “Girls should be cooking and take care of the children because it is their duty as cooks and home makers and carers.”.
This attitude has been embedded and is reinforced by the women themselves for example during the bridal showers\(^3\) they emphasize the importance of taking care of the husband with expressions like \(^4\) *mwamuna pammimba* (give him a meal). Such expression socializes a Malawian woman for reproductive activities. However, Malawian women expect the men to provide that food. For example during the labour migration of men to either Zimbabwe or South Africa they women protested through sarcastic songs. If these men migrate during farming season and come back after harvest with clothes, they would sing *mwamuna wanji ochoka pososa adzadya telerine* (what type of a husband goes out during farming season he will eat the clothes he brings) and sometimes would put the clothes in a covered plate for them as a meal. From the above stories one learns that individuals in society had predetermined role i.e. the men to do productive roles and women reproductive roles and the study show that attitude prevail.

Although the above situation is implanted in Malawian society but in urban areas women apart from these household roles they are also engaged in small scale businesses which bring in money in the home. In BCA one woman actually contributed a substantial amount of income to the household through cross border trade and baking scones for sale. The contribution was even higher than what they husband contributed but all this was not regarded as employment. However, the woman never disclosed such kind of information because it would mean demeaning her husband.

In the study when men were asked why they do not perform household chores. A Mr. Chisale in low income housing said “Our culture has defined roles and if we happen to be doing women’s work we are regarded as weak and under Petticoat government.” This was not only common in the low-income housing but also among, the middle-income

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\(^3\)*A ceremony done one week before the wedding day normally women give the bride some tips before wedding. Its women only party but now men are invited 

\(^4\)*An expression which says a man should be adored by giving him food.
communities. The pretext of defending culture has been used as an instrument for subordination of women. However, it was clear that these roles were not static therefore there is room for negotiation in assignment of chores. These relationships are continually renegotiated and redefined as women and men maneuvered within the socially defined space. Tasks assigned to members of households are in terms of whether they fit the male or female domain (Mjoli-Mcube 2003). For example the men in low income housing indicated that they have no problems assisting their wives in cooking but they were constrained by the expectations of the neighbours. One man had this to say: ‘I wouldn’t mind cooking but my neighbours would laugh at me I wish we had a cooker and an inside kitchen I would cook no one would see me, when I was in Johannesburg I used to cook’. One also notes that it seems some of the chores are not performed by the men because of embarrassment from their neighbours due to cultural belief that if you do so called feminine chores you are weak and controlled by your wife. However there is an opportunity for change depending on environment. Here the chores done by individuals are indication of power relations, for example another key informant said ‘I don’t cook even if my wife is not around I have nanny’ and when my daughters are around they cook’. In this case the patriarchal domestic idea assumes that the existing gender division of labour within the family is relatively immutable (Gwebu 2003). However it was observed that among the young generation there were more fluid gender roles than those that were in the 40+. Similarly, among the high-income groups all children were assigned similar duties regardless of sex while in low income groups there were still strong division of labour between sexes. One would conclude that gender activities take place in space therefore there is tendency that women will utilize the space where they work such as the kitchen while men will spend their time where they also work. In this case we may conclude that sharing of space may also be determined by the assignment of roles in the household.
Conclusion

One of the major questions this paper tried to address is how the women and men of different ages in the low and middle income housing experience the everyday living. The second question was how a culture of separation of space between genders is sustained in urban areas. One can conclude that there are similarities and differences on how the low income and middle income household experience the everyday living. They all have been affected by the problems of deterioration of the economy and housing but they low income households have been affected more. This low income households experience multifaceted problems of extreme poverty manifested in poor housing, poor sanitation and insecurity of tenure. Most of the low income housing households were concerned about poverty, issues of unemployment was highlighted. This means that their housing problems were not of major importance but what to eat. Those in middle income housing were concerned with design impact on their privacy while that was not an issue among low income households, space was more important to them. The coping strategies to housing adopted by the low income households also show that they were need in a very disadvantaged position to the extent of exposing their children to sexual vulnerability. The youth themselves also adopted coping strategies that differed between the two income groups and gender. While those from middle income households delayed forming their own households those in low income housing were desperate to get out of their parents’ poverty by forming alliances of conveniences with their friends.

Despite these differences one notes that there were similarities in how all the households visualized the importance of separation of space by gender. Because social construction of space and gender are intimately connected, ideological assumptions about gender roles and relations partially determine the actual design and daily use of space, similarly relations contribute to maintaining historically and culturally specific ideas of appropriate gender behaviour. (Robson 2000) In most Malawian
culture it was learnt that sharing of space is culturally defined as well as
determined by gender roles. This was expressed in how roles were assign
between genders. The girls were assigned replica duties their mothers
perform which means there was likely to be solidarity in sharing in space
for instance in the kitchen. While the boys were assigned roles outside the
house and spent much time in the living room with their fathers modeling
father’s role. However, it transpired that in the middle income households
the boys were encouraged to do what was regarded as women duties but
performed them with resistance. All households maintained that their
culture emphasizes spatial separation of space between gender and even
used it as an excuse not to cook since they would share the kitchen with
their daughters. But what is clear is that the strict spatial separation of
space may not be adhered to in urban areas where space is so limited and
communal systems are not the norm. There is evidence of overcrowding
in low income housing areas and it is difficult to maintain the traditional
social distance. Even in the middle income housing, where the houses are
spacious it is not easy to maintain the spatial separation of space. For
example the sanitary facilities are shared in all cases and multiple use of
rooms means that there are no special space where individuals may not
access. Probably the only sacred place that has maintained in accessibility
is the bedroom; in some cases the parents have shared the bedroom with
the younger children. It is important to note that society around the world
assigns gender roles which direct activities and govern behaviour for
women and men, girls and boys. Mediated by factors such as socio-
economic level and other status differences between women and men in a
given society, these gender roles exert various degrees of constraints. In
general, the more rigid the gender role in a society, the sharper the gender
division of labour and the lower the status accorded to women. The roles
are rooted in rational responses to a lifestyle no longer adapted to the
forces of social change sweeping the world. These forces, such as
globalization and urbanization, are altering the pace and style of life in
even the remotest corners of the world. This requires role changes and adaptations in home and working life which have differential gender impacts, particularly as the changes needed may be significant, and the pace of role adaptation is often slow. This disjunction has a tendency to leave resource-poor women caught between two worlds, the new and the old, with responsibilities in both. Any attempt to understand the social dimensions of health and illness must therefore include a systematic analysis of the impact of gender roles on daily life, both inside and outside the home.

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