

# Improving girls' education in Malawi

A holistic and collaborative evidence-based approach is needed to address educational gender disparities in Malawi, as **Sally Robertson** explains.



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Enhancing girls' access to high-quality education is a global priority that is articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It is also a national priority in Malawi.

ACER was contracted to conduct a sector review of girls' primary and secondary education in Malawi for UNICEF and Malawi's Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST). The review aimed to:

- outline the current context and challenges relating to girls' education in Malawi
- identify the key factors contributing to gender inequalities in educational access and outcomes
- provide an overview of the policies and strategies currently in place to enhance girls' education
- provide recommendations to help feed into future policy and program decisions.

ACER gathered comprehensive information about the context of girls' education in Malawi through consultations with key stakeholders who work in girls' education in Malawi in addition to information presented from relevant literature.

Despite major progress in increasing the number of girls who attend primary school, girls in Malawi continue to be disadvantaged, particularly in terms of their access to secondary school and in their educational outcomes. Both boys

and girls also have high levels of grade repetition and school dropout, and often commence school later than the official starting age of six years.

The literature review identified three overarching factors that contribute to educational gender disparities in Malawi: sociocultural factors, school infrastructure and facility factors, and economic factors.

## **Sociocultural factors**

In 2016, the ratio of students to qualified teachers in Malawi was 80:1. The student-teacher ratio was lower in urban schools (67:1) than in rural schools (82:1). By comparison, UNESCO's Education for All recommended target is 40:1. Malawi has lower numbers of female teachers compared to male teachers, particularly in secondary schools and in rural schools.

Ensuring there are sufficient numbers of female teachers who can act as role models for girls is a priority for Malawi. Steps to reduce student-teacher ratios and to increase the numbers of female teachers in Malawi are already being undertaken. In addition to recruiting and training additional teachers, particularly female teachers, effort is being made to provide grants for teachers to work in rural areas and to increase the number of schools offering both morning and afternoon shifts.

Malawi has historically had one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with a 2015 study reporting that 50 per cent of girls are married before age 18. In 2015, marriage was said to account for 16 per cent of school dropouts, making it the third most common reason for girls dropping out of secondary school after school fees (27 per cent) and pregnancy (27 per cent).

In February 2017, the Malawi Government adopted a constitutional amendment that raised the legal age of marriage from 15 years to 18 years, and efforts to annul customary marriages are ongoing.

## **School infrastructure and facility factors**

Many students in Malawi have to travel long distances to school. A walk of 30 minutes or longer to the nearest primary school was experienced by 38 per cent of households, and to the nearest high school by 80 per cent. Compounding this is the fact that a significant number of schools become inaccessible during the rainy season. Constructing additional schools and girls' hostels, and providing bicycles have been identified as ways to reduce travel times. This in turn reduces opportunities for gender-based violence against girls while they travel to and from school, which is another issue affecting their attendance.



A lack of adequate sanitation facilities can have an impact on girls' attendance rates, particularly once girls reach puberty. While not unique to the education of girls, other resource constraints in Malawian schools include shortages of classrooms, desks, stationery and instructional materials, with two or three students often sharing one textbook. Ensuring the quality and appropriateness of school resources is also important, including ensuring that curriculum and textbooks portray positive female role models.

### Economic factors

Recent studies indicate that around half of the population in Malawi live below the national poverty line and around a quarter do not consume the minimum recommended daily food requirement. This can make it very difficult for families, particularly large families, to afford to send all of their children to school.

While primary education is free and school feeding programs have been introduced in some schools, there remain the associated costs such as transportation and school supplies. Secondary school fees are often not affordable for families without the assistance of scholarships. It is estimated that around 23 per cent of primary students and 39 per cent of secondary students drop out of school for financial reasons.

It has previously been observed that opportunity costs rather than direct costs contribute to challenges in school attendance for girls. Studies have shown that girls in Malawi are more likely than boys to spend over 28 hours a week doing household chores and that girls are twice as likely to drop out of school because of household duties.

### Recommendations

The government of Malawi along with donors and NGOs have already taken important steps in enhancing girls' education. Seven priorities to further enhance girls' education in Malawi were identified as part of this research.

1. Build the evidence base about what works in girls' education in Malawi.
2. Develop a database of girls' education programs and organisations that support girls' education to enhance collaboration and identify gaps in support.
3. Focus on supporting school completion and transitions between all levels of education and into the workforce.
4. Focus on enhancing the quality of education through the provision of well-trained teachers, as well as high-quality curriculum and assessment practices and learning resources.
5. Continue to focus on addressing inequality, particularly for girls with special needs and from families with a low socioeconomic status.

6. Review current government structure for coordinating girls' education programs to ensure efficiency and prioritisation of supporting girls' education.
7. Prioritise initiatives that support community and government ownership and build capacity.

Among those consulted as part of this research, there was a strong common drive from government stakeholders, NGOs and donors to implement evidence-based initiatives to provide holistic support to girls. The importance of working in a collaborative manner and involving the community, district and national-level stakeholders cannot be overstated. ■

### Further information:

To read the 2017 report *Girls' Primary and Secondary Education in Malawi: Sector Review* by Sally Robertson and Elizabeth Cassity (ACER) and Esthery Kunkwenzu (University of Malawi) for UNICEF and the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, visit [https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring\\_learning/31](https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/31)

For more on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, visit [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education)