



African Population and
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POLICY BRIEF

FROM ACCESS TO ACHIEVEMENT: ACCELERATING GENDER-RESPONSIVE EDUCATION REFORM IN MALAWI

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Executive Summary

While Malawi has achieved near gender parity in primary school enrolment, substantial disparities remain in secondary completion, learning outcomes, and long-term opportunities for girls. Persistent structural barriers, including poverty, early marriage, inadequate school infrastructure, and weak policy implementation, continue to undermine progress. Evidence demonstrates that integrated interventions combining financial support, gender-responsive pedagogy, safe school environments, and community norm change are most effective. This brief outlines progress to date, identifies persistent systemic gaps, and proposes targeted, evidence-based reforms to accelerate gender-responsive education and ensure that parity translates into meaningful achievement.

Situation Analysis

Although Malawi has implemented numerous policy measures to promote gender equity in education, meaningful and sustained progress remains elusive. Despite decades of reform efforts, gender disparities persist across key education indicators. While near gender parity (1.0) has been achieved in primary school enrolment, significant gaps remain at the secondary level, where the Gender Parity Index declines to **0.93** (Nkhokwe et al., 2023) and further drops to **0.92** by Form 4 (Government of Malawi, 2024). A deep crisis in foundational learning compounds

this challenge. Only **18.9%** of children aged 7–14 demonstrate basic literacy skills, and just **12.6%** achieve basic numeracy proficiency. Weak early learning outcomes undermine long-term academic progression and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable learners. Although girls are slightly better represented in primary school, their transition to secondary education is slightly lower than that of boys (**47% vs. 47.4%**), and their completion rates are substantially lower (**20.6% vs. 24%**) (Government of Malawi, 2024).

In 2023, overall dropout rates for both boys and girls stood at **4%**. However, girls are more likely to leave school during adolescence due to intersecting pressures, including poverty, early marriage and pregnancy, long distances to school, gender-based violence, and inadequate school infrastructure (Silver & Morley, 2019; Zahra, 2020; Kapasula & Kumar, 2020). The learning crisis is therefore not gender-neutral. When foundational skills are weak, girls from low-income and rural households face compounded risks of dropout, early marriage, and long-term economic exclusion.

Evidence across sub-Saharan Africa shows that each additional year of secondary schooling for girls is associated with higher lifetime earnings, lower fertility rates, improved child health outcomes, and stronger national economic growth. Failing to close gender gaps in secondary school completion thus carries high social and economic costs for Malawi.

What Has Been Done to Promote Gender Equity?

Malawi has demonstrated considerable political commitment to advancing gender equity in education. A range of legislative reforms, financial incentives, and school-level interventions have been introduced to improve girls' access, retention, and learning outcomes. However, while these initiatives reflect strong intent, their impact has been uneven due to implementation variability, limited financing, and weak monitoring systems. Scaling what works will require stronger cross-sector coordination, predictable financing, and robust school-level accountability mechanisms.

1. Supportive Legislative and Policy Reforms

Malawi has enacted several policies to promote equitable access to education, though implementation remains inconsistent. Key reforms include:

- **Free Primary Education (FPE):** The elimination of tuition fees significantly boosted enrolment, particularly for girls from low-income households. However, rapid expansion strained infrastructure, teacher capacity, and learning quality.
- **School Readmission Policy:** This policy guarantees the right of teenage mothers to return to school after childbirth, helping to mitigate the long-term educational consequences of early pregnancy.
- **National Girls' Education Strategy:** This strategy prioritizes menstrual hygiene management, prevention of gender-based violence, and increased girls' participation across all education levels.
- **Malawi Partnership Compact (2023–2027):** The Compact emphasizes equitable foundational learning and coordinated financing to scale interventions such as girls' hostels, school feeding programs, and targeted scholarships.

2. Financial and Economic Incentives

Financial support mechanisms have demonstrated a strong impact on girls enrolment, attendance, and completion.

- **Scholarships and Cash Transfers (Conditional and Unconditional):** Girls receiving monthly stipends demonstrate higher academic aspirations and improved well-being. Scholarship recipients recorded graduation rates of 94–100%, compared to 19–50% among non-recipients (Hunsaker et al., 2022).

Beyond covering school-related costs, financial incentives reduce household economic pressure, lowering the likelihood that girls are withdrawn from school due to poverty-related risks such as child labour or early marriage. These interventions also generate spillover benefits, including improved health outcomes and psychosocial well-being.



3. Structural and Pedagogical Interventions

Efforts to improve the quality and safety of school environments have also contributed to advancing gender equity.

- **Female Teacher Recruitment and Retention:** The presence of female teachers is associated with higher retention rates and improved academic outcomes for girls. Female teachers often provide mentorship and contribute to reducing school-based violence, harassment, bullying, and sexual exploitation.
- **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM):** Access to sanitary pads and girl-friendly sanitation facilities significantly improves attendance. A community-based intervention reported a 113% increase in girls' enrolment following improvements in MHM facilities and community sensitization (Woods, 2023).
- **Gender-Responsive Pedagogy:** Inclusive teaching practices—such as using gender-neutral language, forming mixed-gender learning groups, and actively challenging stereotypes encourage girl's participation and help address gender-based violence in classrooms.

Persistent Gaps And Challenges

Critical gaps still exist, limiting the full realization of gender equity in education in Malawi:

Implementation and Resource Gaps

Policies exist, but many schools lack the financial resources, trained personnel, and community-level support required for effective implementation. For example, the implementation of the school readmission policy has been constrained by limited operational funding, weak monitoring mechanisms, and inconsistent enforcement at district and school levels. Many teenage mothers return to school without adequate childcare, transport, psychosocial support, or financial assistance, which undermines sustained re-enrolment and contributes to continued dropout.

In addition, school leaders and teachers often lack clear operational guidelines and training on how to support re-enrolled adolescent mothers, resulting in stigma, informal exclusion practices, or inconsistent application of policy provisions.

Overburdened Schools and Quality Constraints

Free Primary Education has increased enrolment and expanded access; however, it has also strained already limited infrastructure and human resources. High pupil-teacher ratios, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate sanitation facilities, and shortages of teaching and learning materials reduce instructional quality and individual learner support.

When classrooms are overcrowded, girls—particularly those who are shy, menstruating, or experiencing gender-based harassment—may participate less actively, further widening learning gaps. Without parallel investments in teacher recruitment, classroom expansion, and foundational learning reform, access gains risk masking declining quality.

Neglect of Intersectionality

Interventions often treat girls as a homogeneous group, overlooking compounded disadvantages faced by those living at the intersection of poverty, disability, rural isolation, and early motherhood. Girls with disabilities from ultra-poor households or remote rural areas remain disproportionately underserved.

Limited availability of disability-inclusive infrastructure, assistive devices, trained special-needs educators, and transport support further marginalises these learners. Moreover, national data systems do not consistently capture disaggregated information on disability, rurality, and socio-economic status, constraining targeted policy responses.

Persistent Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

Deep-rooted gender norms that prioritise boy's education and assign domestic responsibilities to girls continue to fuel early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and reduced family support for girls' schooling. In some communities, girls' education is still perceived as yielding lower economic returns compared to boys', reinforcing unequal household investment decisions.

School-related gender-based violence, transactional relationships, and social stigma toward adolescent mothers further discourage sustained participation. While policy reforms exist, lasting change requires community-level norm transformation, male engagement, and stronger accountability systems to prevent abuse and discrimination.

Fragmented and Project-Based Approaches

Many gender equity interventions remain donor-funded and project-based, limiting sustainability, scale, and integration into national systems. Short funding cycles often result in pilot successes that are not institutionalised within Ministry structures. Without predictable domestic financing and system-wide coordination, effective initiatives risk remaining isolated rather than transformative.

Weak Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Although enrolment parity is tracked, less consistent attention is paid to attendance, learning outcomes, transition rates, and post-school trajectories. Weak monitoring and limited school-level accountability mechanisms make it difficult to assess whether gender equity policies translate into meaningful educational outcomes and long-term empowerment.



Recommendations

Advancing gender equity in education in Malawi requires integrated, evidence-based, and system-level action across policy, schools, and communities. The focus must shift from achieving parity in enrollment to ensuring equity in learning, completion, and life opportunities. Key priorities include:

1. Scale and Institutionalise Integrated Support Packages

Scale and integrate proven supports, including cash transfers, scholarships, and school feeding programmes with mentorship and psychosocial services that engage girls, families, and schools to support sustained participation. These interventions should be bundled into coordinated national programmes rather than implemented as stand-alone projects, to ensure continuity across primary and secondary education. Integration should include menstrual hygiene management, safe transport solutions, and structured mentorship networks led by trained female role models.

2. Strengthen Policy Implementation and Accountability

Strengthen the implementation of existing policies, particularly the school readmission policy for young mothers, by providing adequate resources and school-level support. Establish clear accountability frameworks at district and school levels, including monitoring indicators for re-enrolment, retention, and completion of adolescent mothers. Provide operational guidelines and training for headteachers and teachers to reduce stigma and ensure consistent enforcement of policy provisions. Dedicated budget allocations should accompany policy mandates to avoid unfunded implementation gaps.

3. Balance Access with Quality Through Foundational Learning Reform

Balance access with quality by investing in foundational learning, teacher training, and manageable class sizes, ensuring that increased enrolment leads to meaningful learning outcomes. Prioritize early-grade literacy and numeracy reforms that incorporate gender-responsive pedagogy, classroom participation monitoring, and continuous teacher professional development. Investments in infrastructure, particularly safe sanitation facilities and adequate classroom space, should accompany enrolment expansion to prevent dilution of quality.

4. Address Intersectional Disadvantages Through Targeted & Inclusive Approaches

Address intersectional disadvantages faced by girls with disabilities and those from ultra-poor households through targeted support and improved data systems. Develop disability-inclusive infrastructure standards, provide assistive learning devices, expand special-needs teacher training, and introduce transport or boarding support for rural girls. Strengthen education management information systems (EMIS) to collect and utilize disaggregated data by gender, disability status, socio-economic background, and geographic location to inform targeted policy responses.

5. Transform Harmful Gender Norms Through Community and Male Engagement

Adopt a gender-as-equity approach that actively engages boys, families, and teachers to challenge harmful norms and strengthen inclusive school and community environments. Institutionalize community dialogue platforms involving traditional leaders, religious institutions, parents, and youth groups to address early marriage, school-related gender-based violence, and discriminatory practices. Integrate gender equality education into curricula and teacher training programmes, ensuring boys are engaged as allies in promoting respectful and supportive school environments.

6. Strengthen Sustainable Financing and System Integration

Create dedicated gender equity budget lines within the national education budget to reduce reliance on short-term donor funding. Align gender-responsive interventions with the Malawi Partnership Compact (2023–2027) and broader education sector plans to ensure long-term sustainability, coordination, and national ownership.



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Conclusion

Malawi has made important progress towards gender equity in education. When financial barriers are removed, when schools are safe and supportive, and when policies are effectively implemented, girls succeed. However, parity in enrollment alone is not sufficient. The true measure of equity lies in sustained learning, successful transition to secondary education, and meaningful completion outcomes.

The next step is to scale proven strategies while addressing persistent gaps in quality, accountability, and sustainability. This requires moving from project-based interventions to system-wide reform—anchored in predictable financing, strengthened monitoring systems, and community-driven norm transformation.

With sustained political commitment, coordinated sectoral action, and inclusive engagement of families and communities, Malawi can build an education system where every child, regardless of gender, disability status, socio-economic background, or geographic location, has the opportunity not only to access school, but to learn, thrive, and contribute to national development.

Achieving gender equity in education is not only a matter of social justice; it is a strategic investment in Malawi's human capital and long-term prosperity.