

Tackling girls dropping out of school in Malawi: is improving household socio-economic status the solution?

Lana Chikhungu, Esme Kadzamira, Lizzie Chiwawula & Elizabeth Meke

Abstract

This study used primary data from rural primary schools in Malawi and administrative data from the Malawi Education Management Information System to explore the impact of school bursaries and socio-economic status on girls dropping out of school. Lack of money to pay for school fees was a major reason for the high girl school dropouts. School bursaries appeared to help keep more girls in school and girls from households with better socio-economic status were less likely to drop out of school. The Malawi Government and its development partners should extend bursaries to needy girls in all secondary schools. Promotion of programmes that enhance household socio-economic status in rural areas should enable households to be financially capable of schooling their children.

Key words: Girls, Education, Dropouts, Schooling, Malawi, Child-marriage

Introduction

Despite basic quality education being a fundamental right for every child as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, not every child in Malawi accesses basic education and for those that manage to do so very few complete the primary cycle of education as they drop out before even attaining the basic competencies in reading and numeracy. It has been reported that only 58.5 % of school going children in Malawi finish the first 4 years of primary education (UNICEF, undated). Literature indicates that girls across the country at all levels of education are at higher risk of dropping out of school than boys. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, one in every three children, adolescents and youths are out of school. The majority of these are girls. Research has revealed that for every 100 boys of primary school age out of school, there are 123 girls who are denied the right to education (Unesco-Institute-of-Statistics, 2016). Similarly, the Malawi Demographic Health Survey (2015 - 16) reports that 12 % of women have no education compared with 5% of their male counterparts (NSO-Malawi & ICF_International, 2017). The problem of girls dropping out of school in Malawi is serious and this has been an issue haunting the education system in Malawi for a long time. Literature points out that Malawi has one of the highest school dropout rate in Southern Africa with 15% of girls (three in every twenty) and 12% of boys (three in every twenty-five), dropping out between Standard¹ 5 and 8 of primary school (Gondwe, 2016). Participation of girls in upper primary especially in Standard 8 continues to be lower when compared against that of boys such that completion rate of girls was estimated at 51 % while that of boys was

¹ The word standard in this paper is synonymous to grade. Primary school education in Malawi starts from Standard 1 and ends in Standard 8 (under normal circumstances, it takes 8 years to do primary school education in Malawi).

55%. This low participation of girls continues even at secondary school and tertiary levels where statistics indicate that boys outnumber girls (Malawi-Government-MoEST, 2018a).

The most commonly reported reason for girls and boys dropping out of school in the 2018 Malawi Government's Education Management and Information Systems (EMIS) survey collected by heads of schools was family responsibilities followed by lack of interest. About 7% girls dropped out to get married while it was only in 2% of boys where the reason of marriage was given. Slightly over 5% of girls dropped out due to pregnancy.

It has been argued that both school related and out of school factors contribute to girls dropping at different levels of schooling (Arko, 2013). Specifically some of the school related factors are poor academic performance, grade repetition, over age, poor quality of education, lack of role models and long distance. Out of school factors are poverty, early and forced marriage, pregnancy, parents' negative attitudes towards the education of girls and household chores (Gondwe, 2016). Different authors have given an account on how these factors contribute to learners dropping out from schools. For instance, on academic performance, it has been reported that girls who fail exams lose interest to continue with school and eventually drop out of school and children with low achievement are more likely than those with higher achievement to drop out of school (Mzuza et al., 2014). Similarly, lower scores on measures of cognitive ability and learners being too old for their grade have been associated with higher rates of dropout (Bacolod et al., 2008; Dimas, 2013; Hunt, 2008a; K.M. Lewin, 2007).

In Malawi, the official starting age for primary education is six years but more often learners especially in rural settings start school when they are older than the official age and this contributes significantly to overage learners in the school system which puts them at a high risk of dropping out (Chimombo, 2005). In addition it has been suggested that

learning in overcrowded classrooms or in open air classrooms with insufficient learning materials and managed by under-qualified teachers, may lead to boredom which eventually influences learners to drop out of school (Alexander, 2008; Chimombo, 2005). Large classes compound the problem and make it difficult to realize gains in learning outcomes as the classes become unmanageable and this consequently culminates in learner dropout as some learners feel left out (Gondwe, 2016; Meke, 2012).

Global literature also points to lack of role models in schools as an important factor for keeping girls in schools. In a study on assessing the impact of female teachers in rural primary schools, it was found out that dropout rates for girls were lower in schools that had at least a female teacher when compared with those without female teachers (Meke, 2015). In that study it was noted that female teachers who also act as role models to girl learners help to retain girl learners in school. It has been noted that schools without female teachers may be less attractive to parents on the ground of safety of female students and lack of role models to motivate girls continue attendance (Hunt, 2008b).

Long distance to school is another major factor affecting girls' participation in education in Malawi. The problem affects girls more than it does boys. The greater the distance from home to school, the less likely it is that a girl will attend (Gondwe, 2016). Potentially the long distance to school may explain why most pupils start school late, and girls reach puberty before completing their primary school cycle and eventually drop out from school (Mzuza et al., 2014).

Poverty also remains one of the most common reasons for learners dropping out of school (Orkin et al., 2014). Lack of money to pay for school expenses has been found to be one of the hindrances of not only girls but also boys to participate in education (Malawi-Government-MoEST, 2018b). The Malawi Government has recently abolished fees for secondary education but there are still other costs that learners are required to meet

towards their secondary education. Similarly, although there are no fees for primary school education, there are some indirect costs to education that still have to be met such as uniforms, exercise books, pens, textbooks and any other school supplies. Poor households tend to have lower demand for schooling than richer households, because for them, it is more difficult to meet costs to education than it is for the richer households (C. Colclough et al., 2000).

Early and forced marriage has always been and continues to be a prevalent cause for girls dropping out of school (Grant, 2012). This is a common practice and occurrence in African countries, Malawi inclusive. In Malawi, nearly one in every two girls (47%) marries before the age of 18 but only 8% of men marry at that age (NSO-Malawi & ICF_International, 2016). One contributing factor to early marriage is that parents may force their children to marry soon after reaching puberty to prevent pregnancy out of wedlock (Chimombo, 2005; Mzuza et al., 2014). According to literature, pregnancy is one of the major reasons that contribute to girls dropping out of school in Malawi. Unfortunately, reproductive health education is often inadequately taught in Malawi's schools and does not prepare young people with the knowledge to make well-informed choices before becoming sexually active (Gondwe, 2016). Culturally, parents are also not willing to talk to children about how to protect themselves, often due to taboos. This puts girls at risk of getting early pregnancy due to lack of information. Teen pregnancies increased from 26% in 2010 to 29% in 2015 and 11% of those that dropped out of school in 2015 were attributed to teenage pregnancies (NSO-Malawi & ICF_International, 2017). It is therefore no wonder that a large proportion of women in Malawi are either illiterate or have no qualification and are at risk of encountering poor maternal health in motherhood and potentially continuing the cycle of poverty.

Other writers have stated that parents' negative attitude towards the education of girls is one of the drawbacks of girl child education not only in Malawi but also in most African countries and this contributes significantly to learner dropout. Culturally, a boy's education is more valued than a girl child's education according to community perceptions in Malawi (Hunt, 2008a; Johnson, 2006; Malawi-Government-MoEST, 2018b). Research has established that for many parents, educating boys is a better investment because they tend to see boys' education bringing greater future economic reward, which is not to be the case with girls whose future is expected to lie in family care and marriage as they are normally married off and leave home (Boyle et al., 2002; Gondwe, 2016). Such attitudes more often influence parents to engage their girl children in household chores rather than sending them to school. The girl child is more vulnerable to this trend than the boy child and is likely to take on a heavier workload within household settings than the boy (Gondwe, 2016; Malawi-Government-MoEST, 2018b). The importance of education to a population's socio-economic development is well established. It is estimated that if every child had access to education and skills needed, GDP could increase by 28% in low income countries (Brende, 2015). Increased levels of women education improves women's productivity in the home and potentially increases family health, child survival and investment in children's human capital (Hill & King, 1995). It is within this framework that goal 4 of the 17 United Nations sustainable development goals is on ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning. The emphasis is on increasing access to education at all levels and increasing enrolment rates in schools particularly for women and girls (United-Nations, 2018).

Through the Malawi Government's commitment on education, especially that of girls, there have been several initiatives in Malawi aimed at improving girls' education and

addressing the obstacles that limit girls' access to, progression and completion of education. The initiatives include the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) project which was implemented between 1991 and 1998 (Burchfield & Kadzamira, 1996). The GABLE project capitalized on social mobilisation campaigns and worked with communities to create action plans to address deep-rooted socio-cultural practices that act as barriers to girls' schooling. The major component of the GABLE project was the school fee waivers for all non-repeating girls from Standard 2 to Standard 8, which was carried out between 1992 and 1994. Other components targeting girls were Gender Appropriate Curriculum and Gable Scholarship Programme at Secondary School level targeting girls from 1994. The introduction of the Re-admission/ Pregnancy policy in the education system in 1993 facilitated an environment where girls can still access education in spite of situations that would have otherwise prevented them from accessing education and the development.

Current initiatives are the Radio programmes on gender issues that broadcast country-wide gender-sensitive curricula and role model literature production; Malawi child-friendly schools programme, Promoting girls' education initiative, Promoting girls' education through Mother-Groups, Providing gender –friendly school facilities, Providing cash transfers and bursaries to girls to address household poverty and family responsibilities and Keeping girls in school (KGIS) project.

In addition to these projects and programmes, the Malawi Ministry of Education Science and Technology in 2001 introduced the Secondary school bursary programme (SSB) as continuation of activities that were undertaken by the Girls attainment of basic literacy education (GABLE) project with full implementation taking place from 2009 (Malawi-Government, 2018). Through the SSB, the Malawi Government provides bursaries to both needy boys and girls, but there are many other Non-Governmental Organisations

that only target girls. According to the second Education Sector Implementation Plan (ESIP II), the secondary school bursary program had a total of 14,846 girl beneficiaries across all grades (form 1 to 4) in 2012/2013 (Malawi-Government, 2013). Latest figures show that the number of girls on the bursary programme has gone up to 33,948 in 2018 representing a 129% increase (Mulima, 2018).

Noteworthy is the fact that many multilateral institutions and donors have joined the Malawi Government in its efforts to improve access and the quality of basic education in the country. In addition, Malawi has seen an increase in the number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations in education. Apart from Malawi Government, other key providers of girls' bursaries include UNICEF, Campaign for female education (CAMFED), Improving secondary education in Malawi (ISEM) project, Press Trust and many other organizations. Unfortunately other institutions that provide bursaries for girls education do not share their data with MoEST (Mulima, 2018). The development and launch of the National girls' education strategy (NGES) in 2014 was a great step towards the realization of various programmes and projects. The new revised NGES outlines various interventions aimed at ensuring that all girls in Malawi access, participate in, complete and excel at all levels of education that empowers them to effectively contribute to the country's sustainable social economic development (Malawi-Government-MoEST, 2018b).

It is not known however, to what extent the provision of bursaries and other school expenses can reduce girls dropping out of school but also tackle child marriage in Malawi. This study undertook a desk analysis and conducted school and community level studies to investigate the extent to which provisioning for school expenses including school fees in primary and secondary schools can reduce the number of girls that drop out of school and help tackle child marriage in Malawi. The main aim was to recommend a long-term

strategy to be taken by Malawi Government and development partners in reducing the number of girls that drop out of school but also curb child marriages.

Methodology

The study involved a desk analysis of 2016 and 2017 Malawi Education Management Information System (EMIS) data on girls dropping out of school, questionnaire administration and focus group discussion in selected schools and a literature review. The desk analysis of EMIS data focused on exploring the trends in the girls dropping out of secondary schools and primary school enrolment trends at each grade within the same period when the bursary and cash transfer programmes were implemented. Fieldwork was conducted in four primary schools with high levels of girl dropouts to obtain primary data. Data were collected in primary schools rather secondary schools because more girls drop out of primary schools than secondary schools. Furthermore, the problem of child marriage is more associated with girls dropping out of primary school than secondary school. Low girl enrolment rates at each Standard were used as a proxy for dropout rates. The expectation was that the percentage of girls enrolled should be similar to that of boys in which case the percentage of girls should be 50% or close to 50%. Analysis of 2016 and 2017 EMIS data indicated that Nsanje, Chikhwawa, Mulanje, Phalombe, Balaka, Nkhotakota, Dedza and Nkhatabay districts had the lowest girls' low enrolment rates in Standard eight as compared to boys indicating high girl dropout rates (Table 1). Based on data provided in Table 1 the districts of Nsanje, Phalombe, Dedza and Nkhatabay were chosen for the identification of study schools.

Year	Nsanje	Chikwawa	Phalombe	Nkhotakota	Mulanje	Dedza	Nkhatabay	Balaka
2016	36.5	37.8	41.8	42.4	43.3	44.7	45	46.8

2017	37.7	40.4	42.9	42.7	44.1	45.9	44.4	46.3
-------------	-------------	------	-------------	------	------	-------------	-------------	------

Table 1: Percentage of girls enrolled in Standard 8 compared to boys, Eight Districts with lowest levels in 2016 and 2017

Within the four districts two zones that had schools with highest dropout rates for girls were identified and each zone provided one school. One school was conveniently chosen from the two zones to make four study schools. Ethical approval for fieldwork was obtained from University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee and the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Malawi.

We administered a questionnaire to 156 learners across the four districts in senior primary schools; Standard 6, 7 and 8 that were present on the day. All learners were provided with a pen and questionnaire to complete. The research team began by introducing themselves to pupils and explaining the purpose of the study and how the learners should complete the questionnaire. The learners were advised to put their hand to get clarification if any question was not clear. In cases where a clarification sought could be of benefit to the whole group, the research team requested the attention of the whole group to clarify. Out of the 156 girls that were interviewed the biggest percentage was Standard seven girls as shown in Table 2.

District	Nkhatabay		Dedza		Phalombe		Nsanje		Total	
Grade	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Standard 6	8	17.4	28	60.9	0	0	10	21.7	46	29
Standard 7	6	6.9	21	24.1	52	59.8	8	9.2	87	56
Standard 8	6	26.1	15	65.2	0	0	2	8.7	23	15
Total	20	12.8	64	41	52	33.3	20	12.8	156	100

Table 2 Distribution of girls that completed questionnaire by standard

We held twelve focus group discussions (FGDs), three in each selected district to investigate further the factors that influence girls dropping out of school. One FGD was for primary school pupils, another was for dropouts and the third one was for parents of school age children. Across the four districts, 36 learners, 25 dropouts and 39 parents participated in focus group discussions. The demographic characteristics of all study participants is presented in Table 3. The study did not obtain data on age of parents that participated in the FGD. The 36 learners that participated in the FGDs were part of the 156 girls that completed the questionnaire. The dropouts had dropped out of either primary or secondary school from villages surrounding the study school. Each FGD had a facilitator and a note taker. Dictaphones were used to capture each FGD.

Quantitative data from 2016 and 2017 EMIS and data obtained from questionnaire was analysed through production of summary statistics presented in tables and graphs. Data from FGDs was analysed by using an FGD matrix and then identifying the emerging themes within each FGD as shown in appendix 1.

Type of Study	No of schools	Number of participants		Age range	Standard/Standard dropped out
		Female	Male		
Questionnaire	4	156	-	10 -18	
FGD Learners	4	36	-	12-17	Standard 6=8 Standard 7=20 Standard 8=8
FGD Dropouts	4	25	-	16-23	Standard 5=1 Standard 6 = 4 Standard 7 = 6 Standard 8= 4 Form 1= 7 Form 3= 3
FGD Parents	4	18	21	-	-
Total	4	79	21		

*In Malawian secondary schools each year is referred to as Form. Pupils complete four years of secondary education: Form 1, Form 2, Form 3 and Form 4.

Table 3 Demographic characteristics of all study participants

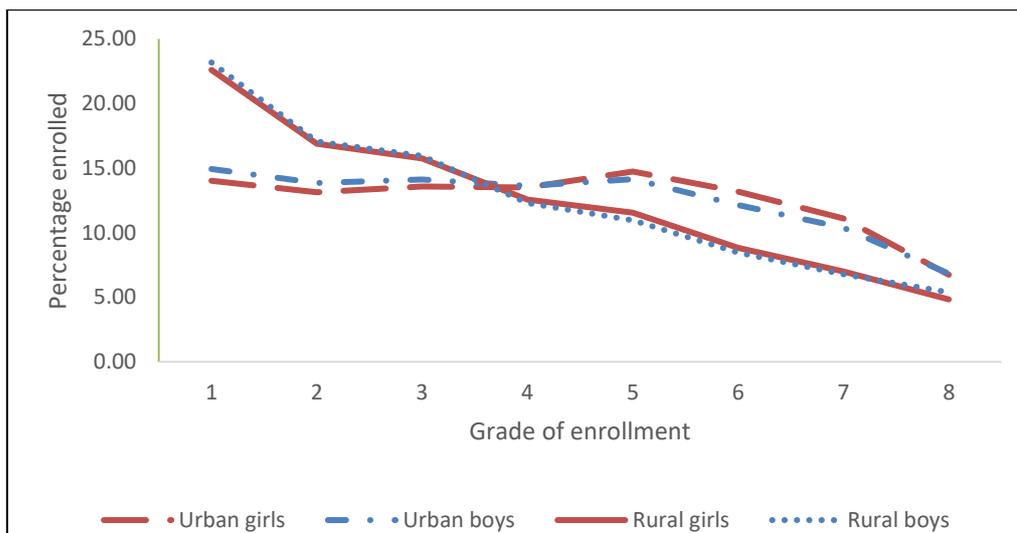
Study Findings

Findings from the Analysis of Education Management Information System Data

Socio-economic circumstances as a determinant of girls dropping out of school

Urban/rural residence is a commonly used indicator of socio-economic status in developing countries because those in paid employment and on regular income tend to reside in urban areas. Another indicator of socio-economic status is type of school attended by pupils. Pupils with a relatively higher socio-economic status can afford to pay for their education and attend private schools while attendance of public schools especially at primary school level is associated with inability to pay for school fees in private schools. In general, pupils from urban areas and those that attend private school are better off socio-economically compared with those from rural areas and those attending government schools.

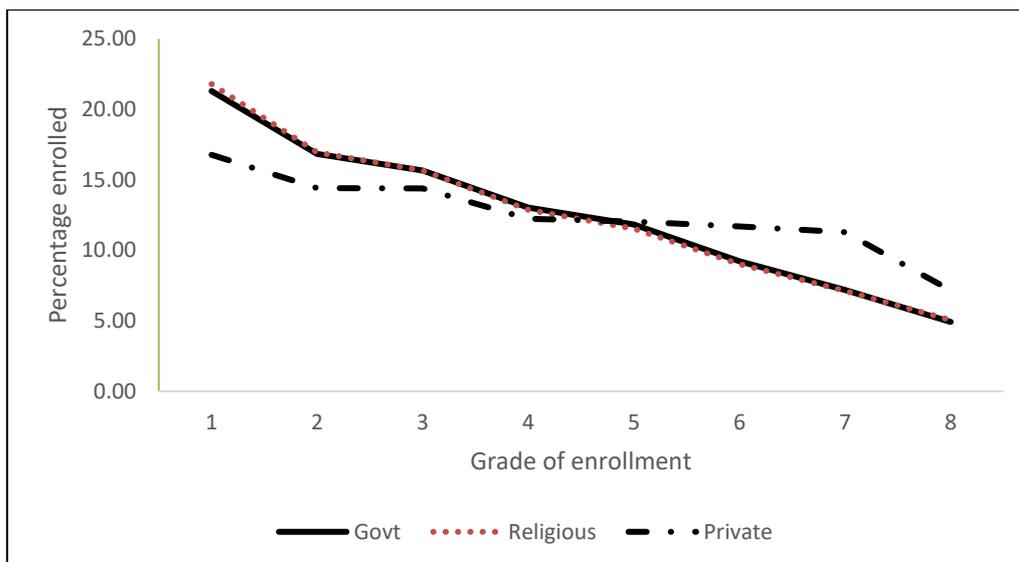
Enrolment rates can be used to proxy dropout rates because lower enrolment in a succeeding year compared to the year before is indicative of high dropout rates for pupils in the previous year. An analysis of girls enrolment at each grade comparing urban and rural districts using the 2017 Education Management Information Systems data shows that for rural girls and boys the percentage enrolled in each grade is highly skewed towards the lower grades but fairly distributed in urban schools. In urban schools, the drop in enrolment is largely noticeable in the senior classes (Standards 6, 7 and 8) but in rural schools, there is a sharp decline from Standard 1 all through to standard 8 as shown in figure 1. There are no significant gender differences in enrolment at each grade at national level in both rural and urban areas.



Source: 2017 EMIS data

Figure 1 Percentage of pupils enrolled on each grade by gender and Rural/urban residence

A comparison of enrolment rates for each standard and type of school indicates that the drop in enrolment is much sharper in government and religious schools compared with private schools (figure 2). Pupils have to pay fees in private schools but not in public and most religious schools. For this reason, pupils from a relatively higher socio-economic background attend private schools. The sharp drop in enrolment in rural, government and religious primary schools compared to urban and private schools suggests that household socio-economic status is important for ensuring that girls do not drop out of school.



Source: 2017 EMIS data

Figure 2 Percentage of pupils enrolled on each grade by type of school

Impact of bursary provision on girls dropping out of secondary school in Malawi

The analysis on the impact of bursary provision on girls dropping out of secondary schools was based on EMIS data. It was expected that as the number of girls getting bursaries has increased over time, the percentage of girls dropping out of school should drop in line with literature that propagate the role of better socio-economic status in keeping girls in school.. While it was possible to get annual estimates of girls' dropout rates from 2012 to 2017, the estimates for the number of girls on bursaries was only available for 2013 and 2017/2018. The number of beneficiaries went up from 14,840 in 2013 to 33,948 in 2017/2018 representing a 129% increase. An analysis of dropout rates between 2012 and 2017, shows that the dropout rate declined from an average of 7.3% in the period 2012 to 2014 to 6.3% in 2017 (figure 3). Interestingly the dropout rate was at its lowest in 2015 (5.5%) before going up in 2016 and 2017. It was however not possible to explain whether the sharp decline in the dropout rate in 2015 was due to increased level of bursaries because of lack of annual data on bursaries.

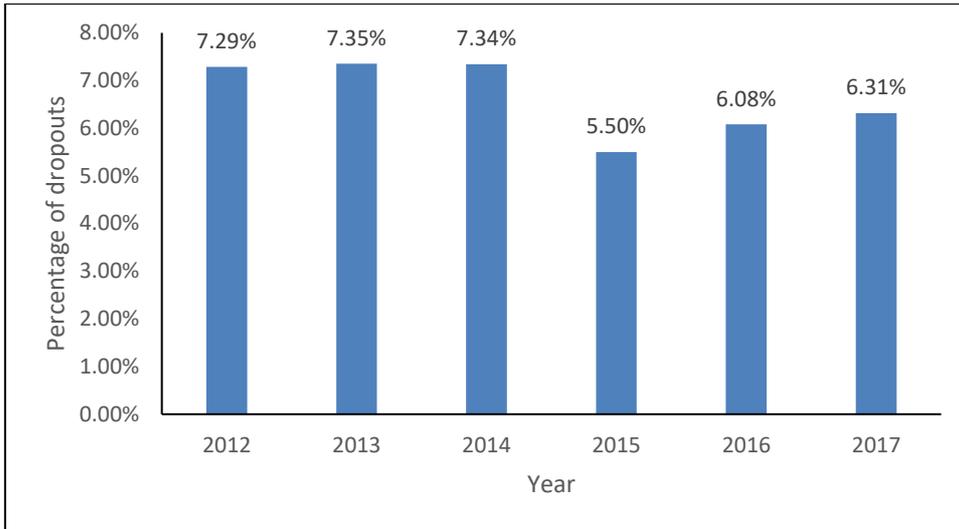


Figure 3 Trends in girls' secondary school dropout rate, 2012 to 2017

During the period 2011 and 2017 the number of girls enrolled in secondary school increased by 53.5% from 116,154 to 178,348 (figure 4). The increase could be attributed to an increase in the number of girls that are selected to secondary schools, expansion of secondary school places or an indication that more girls can afford secondary education, which may suggest a positive impact of girls' bursaries programmes or possibly a general improvement in people's socio-economic status.

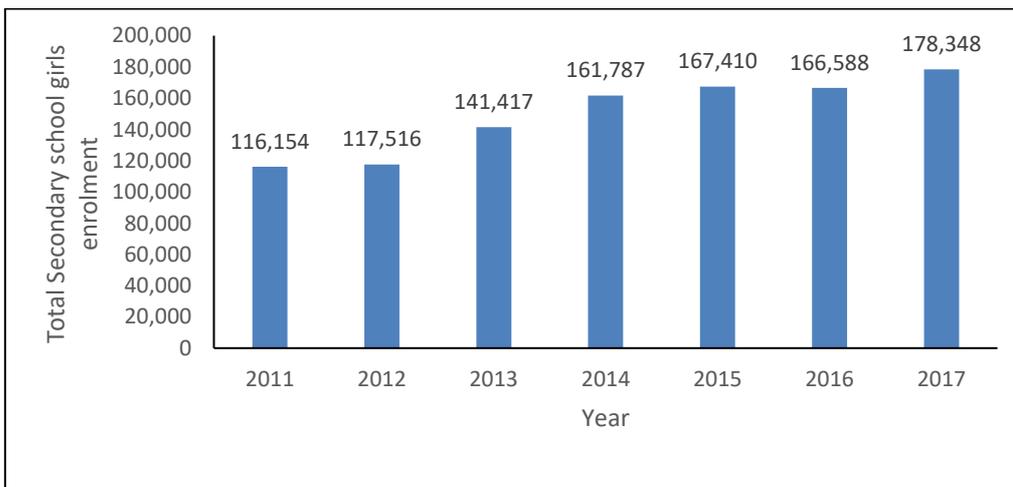


Figure 4 Girls secondary school enrolment 2012 to 2017

The increased enrolment rate shown in figure 4 suggests an increase in the number of girls attaining secondary school education in Malawi between 2012 and 2017. Although on average at national level the girls' dropout rate declined between 2012 and 2017, each year there were districts with a dropout rate of at least 10%. The highest dropout rate in the period 2012 to 2017 was Ntchisi (15.06%) in 2016. In 2017 the following CAMFED target districts; Zomba Rural, Mzimba South, Phalombe, Mchinji and Thyolo were amongst top ten districts with the highest dropout rate.

Field study findings

Demographic characteristics of pupils in the quantitative study

The average age of the pupils that responded to the questionnaire was 14.19 years and the youngest girl was 10 while the oldest was 18 years old. For Standards 6 and 7, a larger percentage of girls were aged 14 and for those in Standard 8 the larger percentage of girls were aged 15. Based on the appropriate ages of 11, 12 and 13 for Standard 6, 7 and 8 respectively, it was found that 92 percent of the girls were over aged for their class and 6 percent were of appropriate age. Table 4 shows the detailed age appropriateness by grade.

Age Appropriateness	Standard 6	Standard 7	Standard 8	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Under age	1 (2.2)	1(1.2)	1(4.4)	3(1.9)
Appropriate age	1(2.2)	8(9.2)	0(0)	9(5.8)
Over age	44(95.7)	78(89.7)	22(95.7)	144(92.3)
Total	46(100)*	87(100)*	23(100)*	156(100)*

*The percentage does not add up to 100 because of rounding to one decimal place

Table 4 Age Appropriateness by grade

Other Background characteristics of pupils in the quantitative study

On average, there were about 5.06 children per household. The average number of girls per household was 3.12, which was greater than that of boys 1.95. The majority of the respondents (59%) stated that they lived with both their biological parents, 12% lived with their grandparents while 10 % of the respondents stated that they lived with their biological mother and stepfather. The remaining 19% lived with either their biological father only (8%), or their biological mother only (7%) or biological father and stepmother (4%) or their Uncle/Aunt (1%).

The education levels of the respondents' guardians was generally low; 73% of the respondents' female guardians and 62% of the respondents' male guardians had only attained some primary education. The proportion of respondents whose guardians had secondary education was 13.9% and 33.3% for female and male guardians respectively and tertiary education was 3.3% for male guardians, and 2.5% for female guardians. Approximately 17% of the respondents' female guardians had some secondary education or higher compared to 36% of the respondents male guardians. A higher proportion of respondents (9.9%) mentioned that their female guardians had no education compared to 1.7% of respondents who indicated that their male guardians had no education.

Occupation of Respondents Parents/Guardians

More pupils reported that their guardians are engaged in farming and not employed (see figure 5). The percentage for female guardians in farming was 48%, higher than that of males at 36%, and the percentage for the not employed was 33% for women and 17% for males. More males were in paid employment (18%) than females (1%) and more male guardians owned a business and engaged in casual work than female guardians.

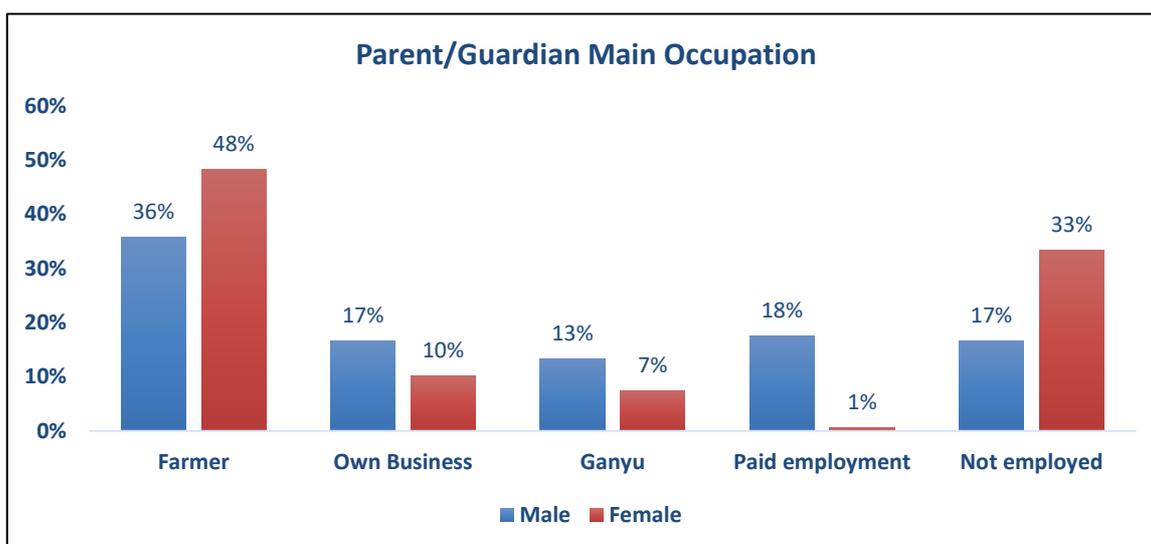


Figure 5 Main occupation of male and female guardians

Characteristics of FGD participants

The FGD for learners targeted girls in Standards 6 to 8 aged between 12 and 18 years in the 4 study schools. Thirty-six girls participated in the learner FGDs altogether and twenty-five girls participated in FGDs for dropouts. The dropouts were aged between 14 and 23 and had dropped out of school either before completing primary, at the transition from primary to secondary or before completing secondary school. The majority of the participants had recently dropped out of school i.e. between 2016 and 2018 with the exception of Dedza where two of the participants had dropped out of school in 2004 and 2012. The majority of the dropouts in the four districts were aged between 16 and 18 years, but in Nsanje, one participant was 20 years old and in Dedza, five of the six participants were between 21 and 23 years of age. The majority of the participants (fifteen out of twenty five) had left school before completing their primary education and ten of the girls dropped out from secondary school. Among the secondary school dropouts, five girls from Nsanje reported that they dropped out of school at the point of transition from primary to secondary school. After successfully completing primary school the girls failed to secure a place in public secondary schools and therefore dropped out of school

as their parents or guardians could not afford paying fees in private secondary schools. The rest of the secondary school dropouts dropped out from public secondary schools with majority dropping out in Form 3.

Thirty-nine parents participated in the FGDs; sixty-one percent (twenty-four) of whom were female. The number of participants across the four schools ranged from two to fourteen. In Dedza, only two participants turned up for the parents FGD. The low turnout could be attributed to the fact that the study was carried out when many villagers were busy working in their fields. Some of the participants were active participants in school committees but had no children at the school.

Factors that contribute to girls dropping out of school

Economic (School fees and school expenses)

The topic of school expenses and school fees was explored in both the questionnaire that was administered to senior primary school learners and in the focus group discussions with pupils, dropouts and parents. In the questionnaire, pupils were asked to identify the main reason why girls drop out of school out of the following reasons: lack of money to meet school expenses, cultural reasons, pregnancy, getting married, getting a job, helping parents with farming and helping parents with household chores. As shown in figure 6, a majority of the girls that completed the questionnaire (63%) cited “lack of money to meet school requirements” as the main reason for why most girls drop out of school. The issue of pregnancies was the second main reason (23%) followed by getting married (8%). The remaining 6% were split among the reasons of helping parents with household chores (3%), helping parents with farming (1%), getting a job (1%) and cultural reasons (1%).

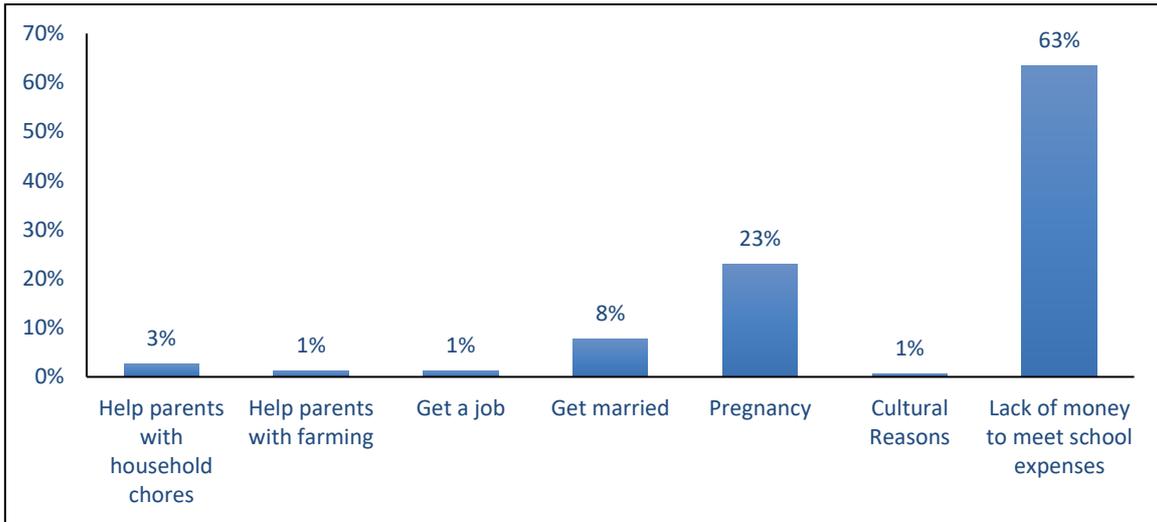


Figure 6 Main reason for dropping out of primary school

With respect to secondary education, a majority of the girls (70%) stated that lack of school fees is the main reason girls do not proceed to secondary school. Lack of finance to meet school expenses was the second most common reason; 23% of the respondents chose this reason. A small number (6%) cited long distance to secondary school as a factor why some girls fail to attend secondary education.

Table 4 presents the estimated cost for school expenses reported by the senior primary school girls. In the table, the item labelled “Other” includes mathematical instrument boxes and sweaters. Sweaters were reported in Dedza because it is relatively the coldest district amongst the four that were studied. Due to the heavy presence of outliers for this question, a column labelled “median cost” was included to capture the middle cost of an item to give an unbiased average of the cost incurred. The estimated average cost of educating a pupil at primary school level in one year was \$14.90. The most expensive school item was a school bag, followed by school uniform and school shoes. Expenses such as the development fund, examination fees, exercise books, pens and pencils and mathematical instruments were relatively lower but a requirement for attendance.

SN	ITEM	AVERAGE COST (MWK)	Average cost in US\$	MEDIAN COST (MWK)	Average cost in US\$
1	Development Fund	653.41	0.90	400	0.55
2	Examination fees	1,178.90	1.63	750	1.03
3	Uniform	2,112.27	2.91	2,000.00	2.76
4	Exercise books	590.07	0.81	700	0.97
5	Pen/Pencils	472.37	0.65	155	0.21
6	School Bags	6,701.95	9.24	5,000.00	6.90
7	School Shoes	1,884.77	2.60	1,000.00	1.38
8	Other	1,213.16	1.67	800	1.10
	TOTAL	14806.90	20.42	10,805.00	14.90

Table 4 Average and Median costs of school expenses per year

The importance of school fees and school expenses in girls' participation in primary school was further explored through focused group discussions amongst learners, those that dropped out of school and parents. Respondents were not directly asked if school expenses is one reason contributing to girls dropping out of school but instead were asked to deliberate on; reasons for girls dropping out of primary and secondary schools or why they failed to enrol to secondary school and what should be done to reduce girls dropping out of primary school . The key themes emerging from each of the FGD are shown in appendix 1. Lack of finance/money to meet school expenses was mentioned as one of the main reasons for girls dropping out of primary and secondary schools and in response to the question, *what should be done to prevent girls dropping out of school?* Respondents mentioned that girls need to be provided with all what is needed to go to school. Dropouts in Nkhatabay and Dedza and all learners and parents emphasized the role of government in providing resources and paying for school expenses while dropouts in Nsanje and Phalombe considered this a role of parents.

Contextual factors (school facilities, location, distance, teacher behaviour)

School dropouts reported that some students drop out due to long distances to community day secondary schools (CDSS). Some of the routes to schools were described as scary and dangerous, which discourages girls from continuing with their schooling. Distance to school was cited as one of the major reasons for learners dropping out of school by parents from Phalombe and Nkhatabay and all learners.

These findings were supported by findings from the questionnaires where the majority of learners reported not having a secondary school nearby although only 6% cited long distance to secondary school as a factor contributing to girls dropping out of secondary schools. . According to reports from head teachers of the schools, the estimated distance to the nearest secondary schools for the study schools ranged between 7km and 10km.

This probably suggests that although distance to school may discourage some girls to attend secondary school, lack of school fees ranks higher than distance to school amongst reasons why girls drop out

Learners from Phalombe and Nsanje mentioned that some girls drop out of school due to teacher behaviour especially when teachers would like to have a sexual relationship with them. In some cases, schoolteachers have impregnated girls. The same issue was reiterated in the parents FGD at Phalombe. Parents stated that on several occasions teachers have impregnated girls but have not been punished but instead, the girl has been quietly sent to live away from the area after the teacher negotiated with the girls' parents. Lack of washrooms for older girls and those in senior classes to take care of themselves during menstruation was also mentioned as a reason contributing to girls dropping out of school. Girls stated that with no washrooms, boys tend to laugh at them when they mess up their clothes and some girls decide to leave school.

Poor performance was also cited by parents, learners and dropouts as one of the reasons that leads girls to drop out of school. Some parents alleged that the poor performance was due to lack of nursery/ kindergarten schools to give learners a good foundation for primary school while others said it was due to shortage of teachers who do not manage to teach huge number of learners and eventually leading to learner drop out. It is noteworthy that one of the dropouts who participated in the FGD at Phalombe School explained that she dropped out of school because she was tired of repeating Standard seven due to poor performance.

Parents reported that both boys and girls get demotivated when they see Malawi School Certificate of Education holders or other educated people just loitering around the villages with no jobs, so they feel like school is not important. Other contextual reasons for pupils dropping out of school were lack of school feeding programs, presence of explicit content in Life skills curriculum which leads to girls indulging into the sexual behaviour and eventually dropping out of school, shortage of teaching and learning materials and the introduction of self-boarding schools at both primary and secondary level by some schools' administrators, which provide opportunities for girls having sex leading to pregnancies.

Socio-cultural factors

Evidence on the adverse impact of cultural factors on schooling was obtained through FGDs with girls in school, girls who had dropped out of school and parents of school-aged children as well as through questionnaires administered to girls in school.

Key socio-cultural factors that were mentioned as contributing to girls dropping out of school were early marriage and pregnancies. Other socio-cultural factors that were mentioned in the FGDs were substance abuse (alcohol and Indian hemp), lack of parental

support, engaging in intimate relationships with boys and men and demand for girls' labour.

It was alleged that early marriages are sometimes encouraged by parents. Girls from Phalombe, Nsanje, and Nkhatabay schools and parents from Nsanje, Nkhatabay and Dedza cited pregnancy as one of the factors contributing to girls dropping out of school. Amongst dropouts, the reason of early pregnancies was mentioned in all schools with the exception of Nsanje. Out of the eight dropouts that participated in the FGD in Nsanje, five dropped out due to lack of school fees to pay for private secondary school after passing their primary school leaving certificate exams (PSLCE) but not being selected to go to a public secondary school while in the other three sites, most of the girls dropped out due to pregnancy.

Nearly all pupils interviewed 155 (99 %) stated that they intend to proceed to the next grade in the following academic year. Only one respondent had plans to drop out in the following year. Upon completion of primary school, 153 (98 percent) of the respondents stated that they were planning to proceed to secondary school while three (2 percent) respondents are planning to stop schooling. This indicated that for the majority of girls dropping out of school is not planned.

Perceptions on the differences in reasons for dropping out of school between boys and girls

Participants were asked whether boys and girls drop out of school for the same reasons. Largely participants from all the schools visited were of the view that the reason of school expenses was applicable to both boys and girls but that some socio-cultural reasons for dropping out of school differed between boys and girls. The FGD findings suggest that the reasons for dropping out of school reflected the gendered division of labour within

the households. Participants mentioned that girls were more likely than boys to drop out of school because they had to perform household chores, which place heavy burden on their time and energy, get married or become pregnant. On the other hand, boys were more likely than girls to drop out of school because they are required to assist households in herding cattle, cultivating gardens and engaging in seasonal paid work. Boys were also more likely to drop out of school than girls because of alcohol and drug abuse.

Perceptions on what needs to be done to curb girls' school dropouts

In all schools, girls that had dropped out of school and those still in school pointed out the need for parents to step up in their roles of making sure that they are providing their children especially girls with all the necessary materials that are required for proper learning. Parents from Phalombe School specifically mentioned that girls should be provided with all what is needed for school like pens and exercise books. Girls in school pointed out that organizations should provide notebooks, pens, uniform and bicycles as these would attract those who dropped out to go back to school. Dropouts pointed out that the Malawi government should be subsidizing school fees for students in secondary schools especially girls and that organizations should come forward to assist needy girls with school needs. The role of government in helping to curb learner dropout was also emphasized by parents and girls in school in almost all the primary schools visited. In addition, some parents observed that secondary school fees is very expensive and they expressed their wish for Malawi government to increase the number of female teachers that would be acting as role models to school girls and pointed out the need for chiefs, teachers and parents themselves to work together in encouraging learners especially girls to remain in school. In addition, parents from Nkhatabay and Dedza felt that the government should sensitize parents on the importance of sending children to school and sensitize girls to encourage them to remain in school. While parents from Phalombe,

Nkhatabay and Dedza mostly focused on what the government, the teachers and the learners ought to do to reduce dropouts, parents from Nsanje School mostly dwelt on what the school-based committees and the parents themselves could do. For instance, they suggested that all committees should hold meetings with parents to encourage girls to stay in school and that Mother groups should visit girls at home more and encourage them to be in school. From their experience, they felt this works because in the previous year the head teacher submitted a list of dropouts from the school to the village heads for Mother groups to visit them and it really helped to bring some dropouts back to school. On the other hand, learners suggested that the Malawi government should build more toilets at the school including washrooms for girls.

In relation to early marriages and pregnancies, parents from Nkhatabay school suggested that the Ministry of Health or NGOs should sensitize girls about the dangers of early pregnancies while in Dedza school, parents suggested that government should enforce by-laws that will bar boys or men from playing around with girls. Additionally, learners suggested that the community should enforce some rules or develop by-laws that should bar some individuals organizing gigs that attract girls because these provide an environment for girls indulging in bad behaviour. Girls should also be encouraged to work hard at school and be discouraged from engaging in relationships at a tender age.

Discussion

The study sought out to explore the perceived impact of school expenses and school fees on girls dropping out of primary and secondary school prematurely. The results from both the questionnaire administered to girls from senior primary schools and FGDs for learners, dropouts and parents of school age children confirm the evidence from previous research that school fees and school expenses are major contributing factors leading to

both girls and boys dropping out of both primary and secondary school levels. Although at primary level, the government is still implementing a policy of ‘free’ schooling, the study shows that households are still required to pay other school expenses such as the school development fund and examination fees. In addition to the school levies, at both primary and secondary levels, households have to meet other school expenses such as purchase of books, notebooks, pens, pencils, rulers, mathematical sets that are costly for most households. Households with pupils in secondary schools were faced with additional costs of paying rentals and providing other living expenses such as food for children staying in ‘self-boarding’ facilities. Lack of money to pay for school fees was frequently cited as a major reason why girls drop out from secondary schools or fail to transition from primary to secondary. The evidence from the study suggests that there has been little change in costs faced by households in educating their children. Previous studies had shown that households’ spending on educating their children was substantially higher than government spending (Kadzamira et al., 2004).

The importance of socio-economic status in influencing girls continuous participation in school was further supported by the findings of the EMIS data analysis showing sharp declines in enrolment in girls from poorer schools (rural, government and religious) compared with those from richer schools (urban and private). According to a study of sub Saharan African countries that included Malawi, children from poorer households are less likely to reach higher grades than those from richer households (K.M. Lewin, 2009; Orkin et al., 2014). Interestingly the reason of family responsibilities did not emerge as an important factor although this reason was identified as the most common reason based on the 2017 EMIS data which is based on interviews of heads of schools (Malawi-Government-MoEST, 2018a).

This study established that other issues that have been commonly reported in previous studies such pregnancy, early marriage and demand for girls labour at home contributed to girls dropping out of school (C. Colclough, Al-Samarrai, S., Rose, P., and Tembon, M., , 2003). Some cultural practices allow girls to be married off once they reach puberty often because of the fear that their daughters may be impregnated outside marriage (Grant, 2012; Mzuza et al., 2014).

Other issues related to lack of adequate sanitation facilities for use by girls when menstruating and lack of secondary schools within a good walking distance. Across all study sites, the majority of the girls were over the age that is appropriate for the class that there were in. Previous studies have shown that late entry into school and grade repetition are the major reason why children in Malawi especially girls are older than the appropriate age for their Standard (Kadzamira & Chibwana, 2000). Repetition and being over age entail that most girls reach puberty before completing primary school which may make girls feel too old for their class and drop out (Gondwe, 2016; Mzuza et al., 2014).

It should be noted that data on bursary provision is not comprehensive because not all bursary providers share their data with the Ministry of Education Science and Technology. Caution should also be taken in the interpretation of the study findings, as they are only representative of senior primary girls in the four schools from the four districts that were studied. Similarly, the findings from the focus group discussions are purely opinions of those that participated in the discussions and were most likely influenced by the circumstances affecting them. Nevertheless, the field study findings are complemented by the national level EMIS data and literature review to provide a national perspective and enhance national validity. The schools studied were amongst those with the highest dropout rate from each of the three regions in Malawi and these results may

speak for schools of similar culture and socio-economic characteristics and provide an outlook of experiences and perspectives from pupils and communities that are worst affected by the problem of girls dropping out of school.

Conclusion and Policy recommendations

Lack of money to pay for school fees and school expenses is a major reason for why most girls drop out of school or fail to participate in education in the first place. Provisioning for bursaries seem to help keep more girls in school. The Malawi government in partnership with donors and NGOs should therefore continue providing school bursaries to girls and should consider providing bursaries to and meeting school expenses for girls that pass their Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations but fail to get a place at a public secondary school. The Malawi government should promote programmes that increase employment opportunities to enhance household socio-economic status such as small businesses as these will enable households to be financially independent to take care of the needs of their children.

References

- Alexander, R. (2008) Education for all, the quality imperative and the problem of pedagogy. *Create pathways to access*. University of Sussex: University of Sussex.
- Arko, A. D. (2013). Causes of Female Dropout in Junior High School in Kassena-Nankana West District of Upper East Region, Ghana. *Journal of education and practice*, 4(16).
- Bacolod, M., xa, P, & Ranjan, P. (2008). Why Children Work, Attend School, or Stay Idle: The Roles of Ability and Household Wealth. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 56(4), 791-828. doi: 10.1086/588165
- Boyle, S., Brock, A., Mace, J., & Sibbons, M. (2002). Reaching the poor: the costs of sending children to school. London: DFID.
- Brende, B. (2015). Why education is key to economic development. 2018, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/authors/borge-brende>
- Burchfield, S. A., & Kadzamira, E. C. (1996). Malawi GABLE Social Mobilisation Campaign Activities: A Review of Research and report on Findings of KAP Follow-up Study Washington D.C.
- Chimombo, J. P. G. (2005). Quantity versus Quality in Education: Case Studies in Malawi. *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, 51(2/3), 155-172.
- Colclough, C., Al-Samarrai, S., Rose, P., and Tembon, M., . (2003). *Achieving Schooling for All in Africa, Costs, Commitment and Gender*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Colclough, C., Rose, P., & Tembon, M. (2000). Gender inequalities in primary schooling: The roles of poverty and adverse cultural practice. *International journal of educational development*, 20(1).
- Dimas, K. A. (2013). *School factors contributing to learners dropping out of school in selected primary schools in Solwezi district: doctoral dissertation, university of Zambia*. (PhD), University of Zambia, Zambia.
- Gondwe, C. (2016) Factors influencing rural femal pupils drop out from primary schools. *Culminating projects in education administration and leadership*.
- Grant, M. J. (2012). Girls' schooling and the perceived threat of adolescent sexual activity in rural Malawi. *Cult Health Sex*, 14(1), 73-86. doi: 10.1080/13691058.2011.624641
- Hill, M. A., & King, E. (1995). Women's education and economic well-being. *Feminist Economics*, 1(2), 21-46. doi: 10.1080/714042230

- Hunt, F. (2008a) Dropping out of school: a cross country review of literature. *Consortium for research on educational access, transitions and equity. Create pathways to access*: University of Sussex.
- Hunt, F. (2008b). Dropping out of school: a cross country review of literature *Create pathways to access*: University of Sussex.
- Johnson, J. (2006). *Female education in Africa*. England: Longman.
- Kadzamira, E. C., & Chibwana, M. (2000). Gender and primary schooling in Malawi *IDS Research Report, 40*, . Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.
- Kadzamira, E. C., Nthara , K., & Kholowa, F. (2004). *Financing Primary Education for All: Malawi*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.
- Lewin, K. M. (2007) Improving access, equality and transition in education: creating a research agenda. *Create pathways to access*: University of Sussex.
- Lewin, K. M. (2009). Access to education in sub-Saharan Africa: patterns, problems and possibilities. *Comparative Education, 45* (2), 151-174. doi:
10.1080/03050060902920518
- Malawi-Government-MoEST. (2018a). Malawi Education Statistics 2017.
- Malawi-Government-MoEST. (2018b). The National Strategy for Girls Education in Malawi. Lilongwe: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
- Malawi-Government. (2013). Education Sector Implementation Plan II (ESIP) Lilongwe: Ministry of Education.
- Malawi-Government. (2018). *State of Girls Education Bursaries*. Ministry of Education. Lilongwe.
- Meke, E. S. (2012). *An Assessment of the implementation of continuing professional development programmes in Malawi: a case of Zomba rural education district in Malawi*. (PhD), University of Fort Hare.
- Meke, E. S. (2015). Assessment of the impact of female teachers on the retention and performance of girls in schools. A research report submitted to Action Aid Malawi.
- Mulima, M. (2018). [Situation of Girls Bursaries in Malawi].
- Mzuzza, M. K., Yudong, Y., & Kapute, F. (2014). Analysis of Factors Causing Poor Passing Rates and High Dropout Rates among Primary School Girls in Malawi *World Journal of Education, 4*(1). doi: 10.5430/wje.v4n1p48
- NSO-Malawi, & ICF_International. (2016). *Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2015-2016 Key indicators Report*. Zomba, Malawi and Rockville, Maryland USA.

NSO-Malawi, & ICF_International. (2017). Malawi Demographic and Health Survey Report 2015-2016. Zomba, Malawi and Rockville, Maryland USA: NSO and ICF.

Orkin, M., Boyes, M. E., Cluver, L. D., & Zhang, Y. (2014). Pathways to poor educational outcomes for HIV/AIDS-affected youth in South Africa. *AIDS Care*, 26(3), 343-350. doi: 10.1080/09540121.2013.824533

Unesco-Institute-of-Statistics. (2016). Leaving no one behind: How far on the way to universal primary and secondary education? Montreal: UNESCO.

UNICEF. (undated). Quality basic education. Retrieved 30th October, 2018, from https://www.unicef.org/malawi/development_15943.html

United-Nations. (2018). Sustainable development goals : 17 goals to transform our world. 2018, from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

Appendix 1 Results of FGDs from Phalombe, Nsanje, Nkhatabay and Dedza

Question	Learners	Drop outs	Parents
<p>Main reason for girls dropping out primary school</p>	<p>Lack of financial help emerged as the main reason for girls dropping out amongst pupils in Phalombe, Nsanje and Dedza. However in Nkhatabay and Dedza early marriages and early pregnancies were mentioned as additional reasons for why girls drop out of school</p> <p>Household chores (Phalombe), lack of parental support and substance abuse (Nkhatabay)</p>	<p>Amongst the drop outs, the girls indicated that school expenses, lack of school fees, too much repetition and lack of food, early pregnancies and early marriage are the reasons why girls drop out of school.</p> <p>Two of the girls in Phalombe had babies and it appeared that they dropped out due to pregnancy although they indicated that they had dropped due to lack of finance.</p> <p>The main reason for dropping out of school was given as pregnancy in Phalombe, Nkhatabay and Dedza. Dande only cited lack of fees as the main reason why girls drop out of school.</p> <p>Lack of parental support; Nkhatabay</p> <p>From Phalombe, it was reported that some girls drop out of school due to marriage,</p>	<p>Lack of money to meet school expenses was reiterated by parents in the parents FGDs in all four study sites as one of the reasons why girls dropped out of school. The major reason was given as poverty of parents, at Dedza and Nsanje. In Nkhatabay, Dedza and Phalombe, parents also mentioned pregnancy as a factor that contributes to dropping out of school. Parents from Nkhatabay provided more detail to further elaborate the extent to which parents' poverty contributes to girls dropping out of school.</p> <p>Demand for child labour ; Phalombe and Nsanje.</p>

	<p>their parents forcing them to get married. In standard 8 there quite a few expenses that need to be met like examinations fees, paying for an ID and these cause more girls to drop out. In secondary school girls drop out because of pregnancy because their fees is paid for.</p> <p>Engaging in love relationships (Dedza)</p> <p>It should be noted that out of the 8 dropouts that participated in the FGD in Nsanje, 5 dropped out due to lack of school fees to pay for private secondary school after passing their PSLC exams but not being selected to go to a secondary school. And this may have influenced the general opinion while in the other three cites, most of the girls dropped due to pregnancy.</p>	<p>Engaging in love relationships; Phalombe and Nkhatabay</p> <p>Lack of parental support; Phalombe and Nsanje.</p> <p>Girls not taking heed of advice from parents Nsanje and Dedza.</p>
--	---	---

<p>Main reason for girls dropping out secondary school or failing to enrol in secondary schools</p>	<p>Lack of money to pay for school fees contribute to girls dropping out of secondary school. This opinion was shared amongst pupils in all school except for those in Nkhatabay who cited early marriages and pregnancies as the main reason</p>	<p>Across all schools the opinion was that girls drop out of secondary school due to lack of resources but also pregnancy.</p>	<p>Lack of school fees, early marriages and pregnancies contribute to girls dropping out in secondary schools. The issue of pregnancy was not mentioned by parents in Nsanje and Nkhatabay.</p>
<p>What should be done to reduce girls dropping out of school?</p>	<p>Girls should be provided with adequate financial help . Government should provide school fees and those in primary schools should be given school uniform and exercise books. The response from Nsanje included solutions that did not directly address the problems dropping out of school e.g. building more classrooms, building more school toilets</p>	<p>Drop outs also observed that for girls to remain in school they should be provided with all that is needed by their parents. In Nkhatabay and Nsanje some were of the opinion that government could help.</p>	<p>The role of government in provision of school expenses was emphasized amongst all parents. In Nkhatabay parents suggested that government should remove all school related fees. Some parents also observed that boarding fees are very expensive</p> <p>Apart from stating that government needs to provide financial help to girls, parents also mentioned solutions that required themselves, teachers and other key people</p>

			<p>within the community to take part to help girls dropping out of school. For example in Phalombe parents felt that teachers have a bigger role to play in promoting good dressing and avoiding engaging in relationships with girls.</p> <p>With respect to financial requirements for school projects. Some parents thought it was unfair to exclude pupils when fail to pay. Instead teachers should engage in a dialogue with parents</p>
--	--	--	---