

At the Interface of Policy and Cultural Change

Engaging Communities in Support of Girls' Education in Malawi

Madalo Samati



The government of Malawi has over the past two decades demonstrated an increasingly strong commitment to expanding equitable access to education for all children and youth in Malawi. This has included the adoption of a range of policies and measures specifically targeting girls, particularly those in rural communities who continue to face acute disadvantages. Despite ongoing efforts, widespread gender disparities in education persist indicating that existing policies have been limited in their impact. This paper argues that a key factor influencing the impact of girls' education policies is the extent to which such policies, and the programming that supports them, address cultural dimensions of gender inequality in Malawi in their design and implementation. Gendered cultural constraints affecting girls' lives, which stem from dominant patriarchal beliefs and norms, act as significant barriers to girls' educational opportunities

and outcomes. Engaging communities in dialogue about such norms and practices and their effect on girls' education and development provides an opportunity for communities to act as agents of change.

In order to examine the interface of policy with cultural constraints, this paper uses Malawi's Re-admission Policy as a lens into issues confronting girls' education policies in the country in general. Enacted in 1993, the Readmission Policy allows school-aged mothers in Malawi to resume their studies after giving birth, reversing the prior policy that banned such students from reenrolling. Although passing this important policy was a necessary condition for gender parity, it has been insufficient. In fact, many communities and schools still have not implemented the provisions in the policy and more recently issued government guidelines. In addition, many adolescent

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girls in Malawi fail to return to school for a variety of reasons that the policy does not adequately address.

The analysis of cultural constraints—at community, school and household levels—to the implementation of the Readmission Policy is used here as an entry point to discussing opportunities for advancing adolescent girls’ education in Malawi more generally. This paper focuses on the importance of cultural constraints as a factor that affects adolescent girls and on the potential of community members to act as agents of change. While the focus of this paper is on social norms and practices prevalent in many communities in Malawi, it recognizes that culture, values, and social norms not only affect community members but all actors, including policymakers at national and global level (box 1). Moreover, culture is not inherently or uniformly negative or positive. It is a powerful and multifaceted force in human society that is subject to change and can be channeled in support of girls’ education. How such change can be facilitated in the context of education policies and programming in Malawi and the implications of not doing so are central to this paper.

Building on Malawi’s positive policy framework for girls’ education and the significant legacy of past programs, this paper emphasizes the importance of a robust and inclusive vision for education that works at both policy and program levels and adequately addresses the cultural context. This paper argues that to better serve Malawi’s girls key policy gaps must be addressed. This includes the need to build greater community ownership, to engage informal institutions and traditional authorities, to include girls’ voices and facilitate empowerment, and to appropriately match resources with policy on girls’ education.

Box 1: CULTURE: A WORKING DEFINITION

Culture may be defined as “systems of shared ideas, systems of concepts and rules, and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways humans live.”¹ Culture thus shapes the meaning and form of gender identity in particular contexts, as well as its unwritten rules that are passed from and transformed over generation to generation.²

Culture influences both the makers and implementers of a particular policy as well as its potential beneficiaries. Studies indicate that cultural context has significant implications for policy implementation, especially gender related policies.³ Some researchers call attention to the fact that policy implementers are affected by moral discourses that affect the way that policies are implemented.⁴ Other researchers encourage examination of the role of context in implementation of policies on the ground.⁵ Culture is not inherently negative or positive but a powerful aspect of human society that is subject to change.

In order to address these gaps, the Malawian Ministry of Education, Science and Technology needs to partner with civil society and funding partners to launch a new program, the Malawi Adolescent Girls’ Learning Partnership (AGL), to confront the challenges facing adolescent girls’ education, with a special focus on addressing harmful social norms. AGL emphasizes the need to focus attention on the issue of culture and the potential of community members as agents of change for girls’ education and learning. AGL’s six priority areas for action are:

1. Community based solutions to change cultural practices contributing to the exclusion of girls from school.
2. Engagement with traditional authorities to enact changes in support of girls’ education.
3. Empowerment of girls and women through support networks and the development of key competencies to enhance individual and collective agency.

4. Implementation of participatory monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track changes in cultural practice and girls' empowerment.
5. Long term commitment of resources by government and funders together with capacity building in support of organizations providing girls' education.
6. Improving girls' learning outcomes by further enhancing community involvement.

To make the case for this new program, this report reviews the education system in Malawi and the challenges faced by girls at upper primary and secondary level, including pregnancy. From there, the paper analyzes the Readmission Policy. This case study surfaces enduring lessons learned about what is needed in order to address deeply rooted cultural barriers to girls' education. These lessons learned are reflected in the recommended priority action areas of the Malawi Adolescent Girls' Learning Partnership (AGL).

EDUCATION IN MALAWI

As a part of a commitment to achieving gender parity, the government of Malawi with the support of major funders has adopted a range of policies and programs designed to increase girls' access to school.⁶ In 1994, the government introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) and eliminated the school uniform requirement, drastically reducing cost related barriers to education. Other programs and policies that have specifically aimed to promote gender parity include the Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) program and the

Readmission Policy, both of which were implemented in the early 1990s.

The current National Education Sector Plan includes various proactive, supply side measures, including upgrading school facilities, building hostels for girls in Community Secondary Day Schools (CDSS) to limit the distance they must travel, and instituting a 50:50 enrollment quota system for girls and boys in all government run CDSSs (table 1).⁷ More recently, in February 2013, the Malawian Parliament passed the Gender Equality Law, which criminalizes harm-

TABLE 1. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAWI

Primary (standard 1–8)	The official primary school entry age is six years. Since the introduction of free primary education in Malawi in 1994, public primary school is free of charge. According to the constitution primary school is compulsory, although there is no enforcement mechanism to ensure that all children are in school at primary level.
Primary examination	At the end of primary school, students take the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination, which determines their eligibility for entry into secondary school.
Secondary (forms 1–4)	There are 1,015 secondary schools, 84 percent of which are public and 16 percent of which are privately owned. There are two categories of public secondary schools: Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS), and Conventional Secondary Schools (CSS). Selection to CDSS is based on a 50:50 quota system for boys and girls. The schools are mostly located in rural areas and, given that they are highly subsidized by the government, students pay comparatively lower tuition to attend CDSS compared with CSS, although the tuition for CDSS and CSS are both prohibitive for many families in Malawi. CSS are owned by the government and/or religious institutions and exist only at the national or district levels. CSS have historically been of higher quality, for example in terms of classroom equipment and teacher qualifications, than most CDSS. Selection is based on merit, although limited boarding space for girls means that for every two boys selected, only one girl is admitted to CSS.
Secondary examination	Two years into their secondary studies, students take the national Junior Certificate of Secondary Education (JCE). Students that fail this exam do not continue on to form 3 (although some may elect to repeat form 2 and take the exam again). Students take a second examination, the Malawi School Certificate Examination (MSCE), two years later at the end of form 4. This exam determines whether or not they will receive their Secondary School Leaving Certificate and also if they are eligible to take examinations for further education.
Tertiary	Tertiary education is provided by a range of education institutions, including primary and secondary teacher training colleges, technical and vocational training schools and university colleges. University education is typically four years, although tertiary studies can range from two to five years, depending on the area of study. An MSCE certificate is required for university entrance, as well as for primary and secondary teacher training. Students can enter technical and vocational training with either a JCE or MSCE certificate.

Note: The formal education system in Malawi follows an 8–4–4 structure: eight years of primary, four years of secondary, and typically four years of tertiary-level education.

Sources: Malawi Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST), *Education Statistics 2012* (Lilongwe: Education Management Information System, Department of Education Planning, 2013); SACMEQ, "Malawi: Education Fact Sheet," <http://www.sacmeq.org/sacmeq-members/malawi/education-fact-sheet>; Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, Chapter III, Section 13f ("Education"), ii.

ful traditional practices and promotes equal access to education. The government has also demonstrated its commitment to prioritizing girls' education through the Millennium Development Goals Acceleration Framework for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Malawi (MAF) (2013–15). The MAF aims to fast-track the achievement of lagging Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by focusing on interventions for the girl child as a key entry point. The MAF outlines interventions to accelerate the achievement of MDG 3 ("Promote gender equality and empower women") by supporting the girl child in gaining life skills through education, access to sexual and reproductive health services and economic empowerment.

Despite these efforts, widespread gender disparities manifest at upper levels of primary (table 2). Female students drop out at higher rates and complete school at lower rates than their male counterparts. Malawi has achieved gender parity and almost universal enrollment in primary school (51 percent of all students who are enrolled in primary are girls versus 49 percent boys).⁸ Yet, according to Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) data, girls' survival rate from the first to eighth grade of primary school is only 31 percent, compared to 45 percent for boys.⁹ In 2010, gross enrollment for girls in secondary school was 17 percent compared to 22 percent for boys.¹⁰ By the time students reach upper secondary (form 4), girls comprise approximately 42 percent of enrolled students while boys comprise 58 percent. This indicates a drop in the gender parity index (GPI) from 1.04 at the beginning of primary to 0.72 by upper secondary.¹¹ Older data from 2006 reveals that only 7 percent of girls complete upper secondary versus 15 percent of boys.¹² The cost

and limited provision of Community Day Secondary Schools and Conventional Secondary Schools are important barriers that keep both boys and girls out of school.¹³

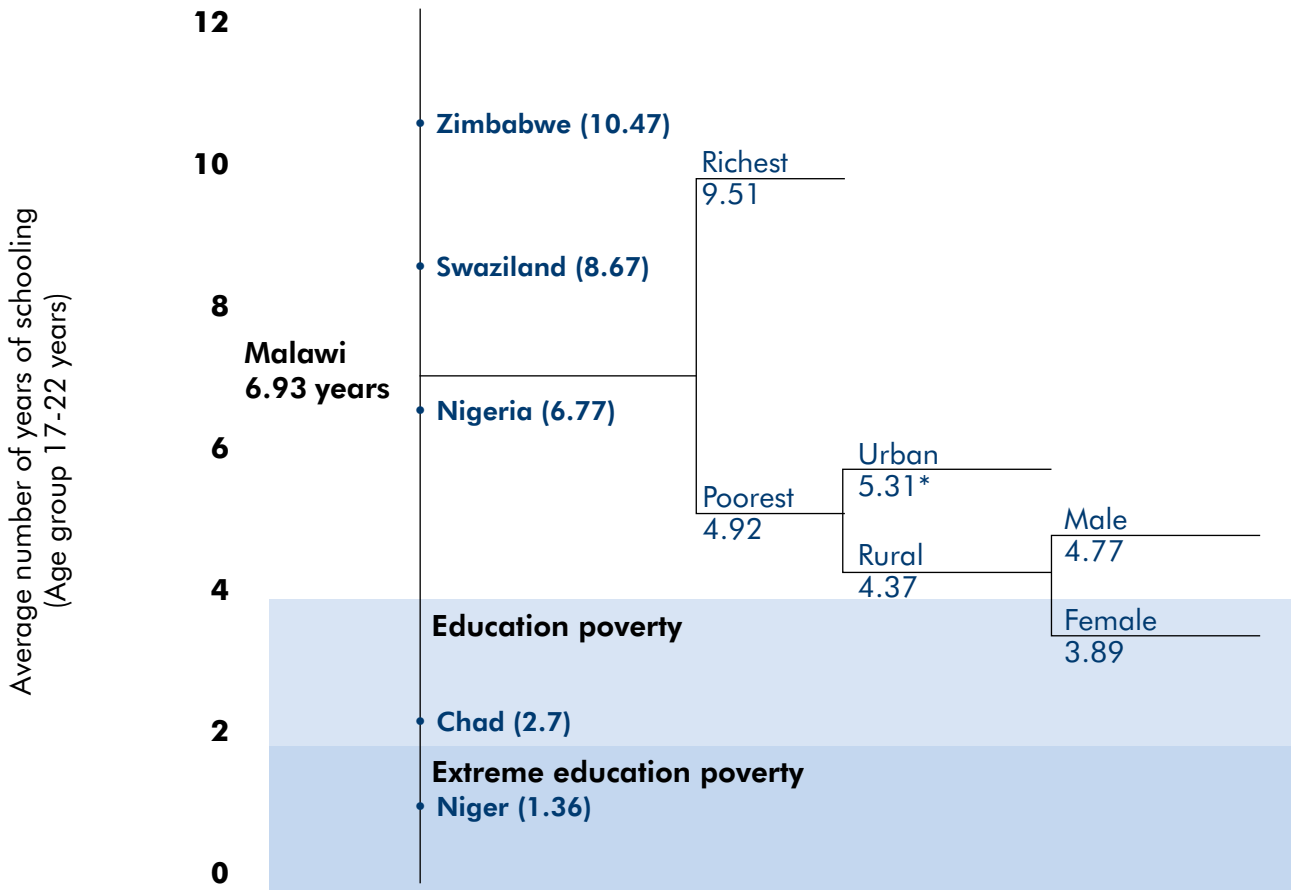
TABLE 2. SCHOOL ACCESS AND COMPLETION BY GENDER (PERCENT)

Measure	Girls	Boys
Access to primary (standard 1)	101	97
Primary completion (standard 8)	31	45
Access to lower secondary (forms 1–2)	22	30
Lower secondary completion	17	27
Access to upper secondary (forms 3–4)	10	22
Upper secondary completion	7	15

Sources: Malawi Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST), *Education Statistics 2012* (Lilongwe: Education Management Information System, Department of Education Planning, 2013); World Bank, *The Education System in Malawi*, World Bank Working Paper 182 (Washington: World Bank, 2010).

Girls from rural and poor households face the greatest barriers to school access and retention (figure 1). Because 84 percent of Malawi's population lives in rural areas¹⁴ and 50.7 percent of the population lives in poverty,¹⁵ rural and poor girls constitute a significant portion of Malawi's school age population. Primary and secondary school data indicate that the children from the poorest households are underrepresented at the primary level and are close to absent at the secondary level. Primary school completion among rural students is 34 percentage points lower than those of urban students. Similarly, the completion rate for students in the poorest income quintile is 44 percentage points lower than the richest income quintile. This reflects the "triple handicap" of being poor, rural and female, which is the situation for the majority of women and girls in Malawi.¹⁶ These overlapping forms of disadvantage impact educational attainment, as shown in the following graph.

FIGURE 1: EDUCATION DISPARITIES IN MALAWI



Data source: Global Monitoring Report World Inequality Database on Education.

Source: The World Inequalities Database on Education. 2010 Data.

*Reflects average number of years of schooling for urban poor. Data for urban poorest not available.

Not only are girls struggling to stay in school, they are struggling to learn while in school. Girls' pass rates are 13 digits lower than boys at the end of primary school.¹⁷ This implies that fewer girls receive Primary School Leaving Certificates than boys and fewer girls are accepted to merit based, higher quality Conventional Second-

ary Schools. The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) 2007 regional testing results reveal that learning is poor across the board but worse for girls. Only 22 percent of girls in grade six, for example, achieved basic competence in literacy, compared with 31.3 percent of boys.¹⁸

MALAWI'S READMISSION POLICY

Since the early 1990s, the government of Malawi has worked to improve gender equality. Free Primary Education was passed in 1994, which marked a sea change in government policy and also in girls' access to education. A number of partners of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology working in girls' education in the early 1990s recognized the need not just for programming for girls but also for a parallel policy response. One of the policies adopted during this period as a result of coordinated advocacy was the landmark Readmission Policy (box 2). This responded to the issue of pregnancy as a cause of girls' exclusion from school (box 3).

The Readmission Policy reversed the practice of expelling girls who became pregnant. This policy was adopted in 1993, during the time that FPE was being formulated. The policy came about as a result of civil society efforts and research on adolescent girls. GABLE project staff, Creative Associates International, Inc., and staff at Creative Associates (who later founded the Creative Centre for Community Mobilization) worked on social mobilization campaigns promoting girls' education in communities across Malawi in the early 1990s. They saw first-hand the problem of girls' dropping out of school due to pregnancy.

Some of the girls they reached through the mobilization campaigns were inspired to return to school but were not permitted to do so. These groups, together with the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi (FAWEMA), advocated for a policy that would allow child mothers back into school. At the same time, in 1991 a Ministry of Health report brought attention to the increased number of girls dying due to unsafe abortions.¹⁹ As a result of all these efforts, and based on her own inquiry into the matter, the minister of education put the policy in place, making Malawi one of the first African countries to officially allow school age mothers to return to school.

The analysis of the Readmission Policy provided in the next section highlights certain patriarchal cultural practices and beliefs that act as impediments to girls' education in Malawi today. Indeed, the need to address cultural constraints at the community level has been recognized by key actors working on girls' education in Malawi. The complementary programming in support of the Readmission Policy implemented under GABLE, however, was not enough and was not sustained for long enough to facilitate lasting change in cultural practices and was not sustained after 2002 when funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) ended. The policy has therefore been limited in its effectiveness and impact.

CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS TO GIRLS' EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE READMISSION POLICY

The Readmission Policy aims to address the problem of girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy, which is in part a symptom of deeply rooted cultural discrimination against girls. Social norms that privilege males over females, along with cultural practices such as initiation ceremonies, powerfully shape girls' lives in Malawi.

It should be noted that such gendered cultural practices in Malawi have varied in prevalence, form and function over time. A historical contextualization that adequately accounts for the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the role of religion, growing economic inequality, and other broad influences in Malawi cannot be offered here. Neither is it being suggested that culture is inherently negative or something only "traditional" rural communities possess.

As described in the following sections, the culturally informed attitudes and actions of key actors, such as local community leaders and head teachers, influence how policy is received and implemented on the ground. Similarly, gendered cultural norms and values deter both households and girls themselves from seeking readmission. Furthermore the cultural constraints faced by girls are not restricted to the school. Girls are part of the broader community, and the cultural biases that impede their education cut across multiple sites. Therefore, this section examines the cultural constraints operating at the community, household and school levels that limit the implementation and potential impact of the Readmission Policy and other girls' education policies.

The Community Level

The tendency for community level cultural institutions in most rural areas²⁶ to inculcate a deep value for marriage and to encourage sexual activity at an early age pose a barrier to girls' re-enrollment in school after becoming pregnant.²⁷ Indeed, 20 percent of school age mothers in Malawi interviewed in a UNICEF study pointed to community pressure as an obstacle to their return to school.²⁸ A central paradox in the Malawian context is that patriarchal cultural beliefs and practices shape sexual behaviors and constructions of gender identity that often lead to pregnancies, while at the same time they contribute to the stigmatization of unmarried teenage mothers and their exclusion from school.²⁹

The role of initiation in Malawi is a central aspect of many communities' culture, and in rural areas, a majority of girls undergo either traditional or church based initiation. This takes different forms but is basically a rite of passage that marks entry into adulthood, for either males or females. In the absence of formal educational institutions, initiations were historically meant to teach children life and survival skills, home and community care, sexual and reproductive health, and personal hygiene. However, during initiation girls are taught that their femininity is based on their sexuality and on their continuing to abide by patriarchal norms. They are prepared for marriage and are often initiated into sex by an older man or boy at the end of their initiation period, after which their chances of becoming pregnant and then dropping out of school are significant.³⁰ Christianity is also a strong influence in Malawi and churches offer a parallel initiation institution in many communities to the traditional one. While girls are instructed not to engage in sex

outside of marriage in these church based initiations, they still receive strong messages about the subservient role of females in society.

While the age at which initiation takes place varies among different tribal groups within Malawi, overall the age has decreased over the years because of financial pressures on families that want to ensure the marriageability of their girls, and initiation counselors who receive remuneration for their services. The rise in the number of young girls (some as young as 8 or 10) undergoing the ceremony has increased the potential harm of this practice. Initiation counselors play a heavy role in gender scripting and are highly valued by Malawian society, given their perceived role in grooming girls into good wives, mothers and caretakers. Initiation institutions also involve mystery and recreation and thus appeal to youth and adults, a feature that creates an additional barrier to confronting the negative aspects of this practice. It is common for parents to willingly absent their children from school in order for them to attend initiation ceremonies (box 4).³¹

While cultural institutions encourage girls to have premarital sex, often with older men, a girl's reputation is nonetheless tarnished if the sex results in pregnancy but not marriage and she will likely be subject to ridicule and sexual harassment by male peers and adults.³² If a girl becomes pregnant, whether as a result of an initiation ceremony or for any other reason, the dominant message she and her family receive is that marriage should occur immediately, taking precedence over school. If the girl does not marry, in addition to the stigma of being an unwed mother, it is generally believed that returning to school will increase the chances of her

Box 4. MARY'S STORY

The story of Mary, a 14 year old mother whose pregnancy resulted from her participation in initiation practices, is a common story of adolescent mothers in the southern part of Malawi. At a young age, Mary shouldered the responsibility of heading her family's household and taking care of her three siblings. Her father died when she was only a toddler, and her mother left their home to work at a tea estate. In Mary's village, girls traditionally undergo a first initiation ceremony, *chiputu*, before menstruation. After her first menstrual cycle, a girl participates in a second initiation, *chinamwali*. On both occasions, girls are instructed to have sex as a practice to sexually satisfy their future husband.

"At the age of 10, I underwent *chiputu* initiation," Mary recounts. "Upon graduation, I was told to practice sexual intercourse. A boy from [a nearby household] approached me to have sex." Her first sexual experience did not result in pregnancy, as Mary had not yet reached sexual maturity. Mary continues:

"When I reached puberty at the age of 13, I underwent *chinamwali* initiation. Upon graduation, the 22 girls being initiated and I were instructed to have sex. A fishmonger from the village approached me. Though he was old and married, I was not afraid because I had been instructed to accept any man that comes my way. I had sex with him twice. Later I realized that I was pregnant. When I told him that I was pregnant, he did not respond. My baby is now four months old, but [the father] has never provided any support."

Within the two years of undergoing initiation ceremonies, over 70 percent of girls in Mary's village drop out of school due to pregnancy and marriage. Of the 23 girls in Mary's initiation camp, 61 percent became pregnant within two years. A total of five are now married, and nine have children out of wedlock.

falling pregnant again and reduce the possibilities for marriage even further.³³ It is notable that the category of unwed mothers in Malawi has grown significantly in numbers in recent years. In the past, it was much more likely that a man would marry the girl he impregnated. As men's

marriage practices have changed, in part due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and economic considerations, many more girls who become pregnant remain unmarried. Unmarried mothers lack social standing, suffer from stigma, and are still often unable to return to school.

In addition to initiation ceremonies, other cultural practices in local communities have an impact on the lives of adolescent girls and shape sexual behavior and feminine identity in detrimental ways. These include arranged (often early) marriages and dowry in the northern patrilineal areas, and sexual cleansing and wife inheritance or levirate marriages in some tribes.³⁴ Although these practices have historical justifications—for example, wife inheritance was designed to protect women and children from destitution after the death of the husband/father—they deepen gender stereotypes that portray girls and women as sexual objects and define their primary role as caretakers. Such stereotypes and beliefs discourage parents from allowing their daughters to continue with school after pregnancy.

The School Level

The school environment may play a role in both reinforcing the gender stereotypes found in the wider society and in socializing students through the informal rules and norms it upholds. Discriminatory attitudes and practices toward girls shown by teachers in the classroom, by school administrators, and by peers in the wider school environment have an adverse effect on girls' performance and participation in Malawi's schools.³⁵ Girls are often ridiculed and harassed by boys hindering their participation and learning.³⁶ Girls report that teachers often mock and insult them in class, especially as they reach puberty, making comments that are sexual

in nature about their appearance or age. For example, postpubescent girls unable to answer questions in class may be asked by a teacher questions such as: "What are you doing here, failing to learn? You are old enough now, why don't you just go and get married?"³⁷

Inside schools, girls also experience abuse committed by both male students and teachers.³⁸ The International Center for Research on Women reports that 85 percent of interviewees in one community in Malawi believed that sexual abuse toward children, mostly girls, is common in and around schools, and that teachers are sometimes the perpetrators. Long distances to Community Day Secondary Schools render girls vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault when they are on their way to school and when they have to stay in rented accommodation closer to school.³⁹ There were no reporting mechanisms in schools or villages for any sort of gender based violence until recently, when mother groups were instituted in schools.⁴⁰ Where mother group institutions are well trained, girls more often report gender based violence. However, due to inadequate funding, only a minority of public schools—fewer than 30 percent—have trained mother groups.⁴¹

While there is often ignorance or ambivalence on the part of head teachers and teachers toward the Readmission Policy,⁴² some are strongly opposed to it because they believe it would encourage promiscuity and immoral behavior.⁴³ Most schoolboys are not disciplined when they have impregnated a girl, and some teachers even sympathize with those male teachers who are dismissed for impregnating a girl, stating that just as the girl should be given another chance so should the teacher.⁴⁴ Though fe-

male teachers can potentially serve as role models and counselors to girls, they generally do not take on this role and may instead act aloof or unsympathetic to girls. In part because gender based discrimination is not regulated, whether or not girls and child mothers are supported and encouraged varies a great deal depending on the head teacher at a school (box 5).

BOX 5. THE IMPACT OF HEAD TEACHERS

Whether or not a head teacher advocates for a girl has a significant impact on the ability of that girl to reenroll and remain in school after childbirth. The support system for school age mothers is not institutionalized but is rather dependent on the whims of school leaders, who have different views and approaches when addressing pregnancy and readmission. For example, in one school, a girl was six months pregnant when she sat for her Primary School Leaving Certificate and delivered right when the results were published. The primary school head teacher contacted the secondary school to which the girl was selected and asked for her place to be reserved until she could enroll the following year, which she successfully did. At another school, however, the head teacher was unsympathetic to the difficulties facing school age mothers and prevented a mother enrolled in the school from nursing her baby on school grounds because doing so would have “a bad influence” on other girls.⁴⁵

The Household Level

Household and family level attitudes about the value of female education have significantly influenced the implementation of the Readmission Policy. A 2000 UNICEF study reports that over 50 percent of teen mothers interviewed a year after dropping out of school were not allowed by their parents to go back to school and many of them were forced instead to marry. While in some rural families, girls’ pregnancy is viewed as a source of pride—especially for mothers, because it reflects the maturity of their daughters and increases their

standing in the community—girls can also face harsh criticism from parents and guardians for becoming pregnant.⁴⁶ Parents may feel the money spent on sending their daughter to school has been wasted if she becomes pregnant.⁴⁷ Girls may find they have little support in terms of child care from parents if they wish to return to school, either preventing their return or leading to them drop out when it becomes too much to manage both schoolwork and caring for a young child. Given that there is no state support for child care and mothers are typically expected to take care of children, often with little or no support from the child’s father, the only option for most girls is to turn to their families to provide support (box 6).⁴⁸ This situation is one which clearly demonstrates the intimate link between cultural and structural constraints in girls’ lives.

BOX 6. RETURNING STUDENTS STRUGGLE TO FIND CHILD CARE: ONE MOTHER’S EXPERIENCE

“I was eight months pregnant when my mother realized what had happened. I was totally rejected by my mother and sisters. They were disgusted and could not believe what I had done. I had no reason to become pregnant. ... I struggled to go back to school because my mother refused to help with the baby. I was determined and went to the division office to be readmitted. With the assistance of an elderly lady who looked after my baby, I went back to school. It was only after I passed the Junior Certificate Exams that my mother slowly began to assist me.”⁴⁹

Given the burden that a child places on household resources, allowing a teenage mother to return to school requires conviction about the value of educating girls. However, parents often prioritize investment in the education of their sons over that of their daughters.⁵⁰ When a girl becomes a mother, the purpose of her being educated is brought even more into question. Such preferences are rooted in gendered norms

and stereotypes that emphasize females' roles as wives and mothers. Some parents maintain that school is for young girls and that after the age of 13 their breasts begin to grow and they are old enough to get married. By contrast, boys are encouraged to receive an education as they are the future providers for their families. It is also widely believed that boys are smarter and stronger than girls and can therefore persevere in the long years of schooling.⁵¹

As a result of these definitions of masculinity and femininity, pregnancy is generally seen as a girl's "problem." While a pregnant girl stays home waiting for delivery and marriage, the boy is in practice often able to return to school

because he has not been identified as the father or because he faces far fewer repercussions and challenges than his female counterpart in returning to school after a suspension.⁵² In many cases, the father of the child is older and is not in school. Girls more often lack control over their lives and their future, which are instead dictated by their elders, parents and husbands. This structural position of subordination and vulnerability is reflected in and deepened by sexual violence.⁵³ The cultural practices described here lead to high levels of forced sexual encounters,⁵⁴ which in itself is hugely detrimental to girls' well being, but then the stigma for these encounters is also placed on the girls.

GABLE'S SOCIAL MOBILIZATION CAMPAIGNS

As described in the previous sections, the Re-admission Policy came into effect because of coordinated government, civil society and

funder support. At the time, there was also programming that recognized the vital importance of addressing cultural constraints and mobilizing communities in support of girls' education. Key among these efforts were the GABLE program and its social mobilization campaigns (box 7).

Box 7. THE GABLE PROGRAM, 1991-2002: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

The Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) program aimed at improving girls' learning outcomes by removing system inefficiencies. Jointly funded by the government of Malawi and USAID with a budget of \$82 million,⁵⁵ GABLE's combination of policy initiatives, project activities at the school and classroom level, and social mobilization contributed to its success. GABLE, which has been cited as "one of USAID's most successful projects," helped set the impetus for successful girls' education programming in Malawi.⁵⁶

The key tenets of the GABLE approach include: an emphasis on community participation; the development of local and international partnerships for girls' education; the implementation and continuous review of system wide reforms; and a reduction of the private costs of schooling. These tenets are all critical and set the stage for future programming for adolescent girls in Malawi. GABLE's main areas of activity were:

- *Reducing cost of schooling for girls* through scholarships for secondary school girls from poor families and the abolition of compulsory school uniforms.
- *Policy reforms aimed at increasing girls' survival in and completion of school.* A component of the GABLE program worked with the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) on policy reforms; including: the Re-admission Policy and the School Repetition Policy, that allowed girls to repeat years of schooling without being forced to drop out, and by reinforcing the importance of all children entering primary school at six years of age.
- *Reducing gender bias in schools* by providing a gender appropriate curriculum, spearheaded by the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), gender balanced community schools, and gender mainstreaming in mathematics lessons in coeducational primary schools. There have been "mixed results from these initiatives" as

school related, gender based violence has remained prevalent and girls' learning outcomes are below their male counterparts, pointing to continuing challenges in the learning environment.⁵⁷

- *Increased infrastructure and budgetary support* to the sector overall and for the construction of classrooms, teacher training and learning materials. As a result of the launch of GABLE and the implementation of Free Primary Education, budgetary allocations to primary education and to the education sector overall increased, although the construction of classrooms and teachers' houses and the number of trained teachers did not keep pace with increasing enrollments.
- *Social mobilization campaigns* addressing attitudes that placed a low value on girls' education. Using action research and theater for development, GABLE sensitized communities to identify constraints on girls' education and mobilized communities to find solutions. Participatory meetings and community based workshops were held with community members and community leaders like village heads, school management committees, and initiation counselors to map a way forward for girls' education and to develop community action plans. Female role models were also identified and utilized to inspire girls for education.

The MDGs Acceleration Framework notes that GABLE's results were impressive, initially raising girls' enrollment as a proportion of total primary enrollments from 45 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 1993–94, and again to 49.8 percent in 2000⁵⁸ (the launch of Free Primary Education in 1994 likewise influenced increased enrollment). Most notably, girls' enrollment as a proportion of standard 8 enrollments increased from 36 percent in 1991, to 39 percent in 1996,⁵⁹ and again to about 40 percent in 2000⁶⁰—a considerable achievement in a context where girls often leave school before completing early grades.

The GABLE Social Mobilization Campaign, together with the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi (FAWEMA) initiated a campaign shortly after the Readmission Policy was adopted to raise public awareness about the policy's provisions. The campaign included radio announcements about the policy, community meetings that used theater in each district, and a series of meetings with district education officers and primary education advisers in half the districts. At the heart of these efforts was the message that all girls, even those who were pregnant or new mothers, should go to school.⁶¹

These efforts, together with those that led to the adoption of the policy in the first place, were extremely important. Despite its promising results and the recognition that further work is needed to solidify gains for gender equity, GABLE came to an end in 2002. The program was funded by USAID for over a decade but when the project cycle ended USAID shifted funding toward teachers, the government of Malawi could not sustain the work. This left a vacuum in community mobilization for girls' rights, which was filled by local organizations, including the Creative Centre for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM), although at a much smaller scope given the scarcity of funding.

During the time that GABLE was implemented, the community mobilization work was an important aspect, but it was only one of five components of the program and did not go far enough to tackle initiation and other harmful sexual practices and dominant patriarchal norms. GABLE did not systematically engage traditional authorities and community members in critical examination of these practices. Ongoing sustained capacity building also proved difficult. When individuals trained to carry out community mobilization work completed their service period, those who took their place lacked adequate training to sustain activities. The awareness campaign related to the Readmission Policy lasted for one year in each district which was not long enough. While the radio campaign took place for the duration of GABLE's eight years, it did not include details about the policy guidelines because they had not yet been issued.

Cultural constraints to girls' education in Malawi continue to stymie the implementation of the Readmission Policy and reveal gaps in its design. The next sections highlight key lessons learned about these gaps and what is needed to expand girls' learning opportunities and outcomes in Malawi.

THE NEED TO BUILD GREATER COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

The Readmission Policy was created when Malawi's education minister at the time circulated a memo stating that girls would be readmitted after child birth. There was no attempt to invite discussion with traditional leaders or at district or school leadership level before making this policy or to promote ownership over the policy through dialogue. Now, after the almost 20 years since the policy has come into effect, many parents, students and teachers are still not aware that the policy exists; and among those who are aware, there remains confusion about its stipulations.⁶² However, the issue of community ownership goes much deeper than basic awareness. Despite the sensitive nature of the policy, actors have not been given adequate opportunity to voice their concerns about it. This has led to the perception that the policy is imposed from above.⁶³ Some religious agencies, teachers and school administrators have tended to see the policy as promoting immorality in

schools.⁶⁴ Because it is not punitive in nature, it is perceived by some to be condoning pregnancy outside wedlock and therefore is seen as a threat to the social institution of marriage.

The policy also suffers from a lack of ownership at the district level. While progress has been made toward devolving the National Education Sector Plan into district education plans and school improvement plans, girls' education—and, by extension, the Readmission Policy—is rarely addressed in the district planning process. Furthermore since the inception of policies to decentralize the administration of education in Malawi in 1998, little attention has been given to developing structures for girls' education at the grassroots level (e.g., area development committees, area executive committees and village development committees). As a result, these governing institutions at the community level have not prioritized the delivery of quality education for girls and these institutions have not grappled with the implementation of the re-admission policy.

THE NEED TO ENGAGE INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS AND TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES

The GABLE program made efforts to engage informal cultural institutions and the traditional authorities—that is, tribal chiefs and village heads—with the Readmission Policy and girls’ right to education. However, given the limitations of programming and ending of funding for community mobilization discussed above, many traditional institutions remain unsupportive due to the unchanged attitudes of cultural duty bearers, such as initiation counselors and traditional authorities.⁶⁵ Initiation counselors, for example, see their role as upholding traditional culture, and many of them fear offending the spirit of their forebears if they fail in their duties. Some worry that the traditional information taught during initiation ceremonies becomes too diluted if sexual teachings are moderated.⁶⁶ Initiation counselors also receive material benefit from their activities as payment in the form of money for each initiate. While initiation institutions can be nurtured to positively support girls’ education by utilizing their power, appeal and dynamism, they currently act as a hindrance to girls’ remaining in school.⁶⁷

As custodians of cultural institutions, the traditional authorities are particularly influential players in perpetuating those practices, beliefs

and customs that curb girls’ educational attainment. Chiefs are highly respected and very powerful, with a number of village heads reporting to them. They govern through unwritten rules and have great influence on their subjects, including girls, as custodians of culture. Chiefs and village heads also enjoy a number of benefits from practices that perpetuate pregnancies among school age girls. They receive cash and in-kind incentives from rites of passage such as marriages and initiation ceremonies; and a chief’s seniority is determined by his villages’ population size, which further encourages marriages and pregnancies among girls. In some areas, visiting chiefs are given a girl overnight (known as the “chief’s blanket”).

Efforts to work with chiefs have not systematically addressed early marriage and pregnancy or engaged the traditional authorities in a sustained manner. The concerns and interests of chiefs, like those of initiation counselors, need to be addressed if their powerful agency is to be directed toward genuine support of girls’ education. Because chiefs and village heads are key to effective implementation of reforms, greater alignment is needed between incentives for traditional authorities and the interests of girls, which requires bringing more attention and voice to girls’ issues and greater accountability for traditional leaders’ actions.⁶⁸

THE NEED TO INCLUDE GIRLS' VOICES AND FACILITATE EMPOWERMENT

A mechanism does not exist for the concerns and voices of girls to be heard with respect to the Readmission Policy. Teenage mothers are the primary focus of the policy but the realities of their lives, the specific challenges they face, and what works and does not work for them are not adequately incorporated in the design or implementation of the policy.

Moreover, given the cultural barriers adolescent girls face, particularly as young mothers, a

great deal rides on their conviction and exercise of agency to pursue an education. Yet, the Re-admission Policy stands in isolation from efforts to empower girls to resist prevalent practices or to help them persist in their efforts to return to school. The limited provisions in the policy for counseling are rarely fulfilled and girls are often left without knowledge of alternatives or the support they need to pursue them.⁶⁹ Many girls make choices about sex and marriage from vulnerable or subordinate positions. Girls' attitudes toward sex and sexuality, and their access to knowledge and resources on issues such as reproductive health require far greater attention than they have been given to date.

THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION PLANS AND MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The Readmission Policy has also faced a number of obstacles arising from a lack of institutional coordination at all levels. For example, the absence of an implementation plan and a lack of necessary resources, leadership, planning, and monitoring and feedback mechanism hindered the policy's effective implementation in the early stages.⁷⁰ The only specifically established policy in place in 1994, was a single written memorandum to all district education offices. Guidelines as to how the policy was to be implemented, particularly at the school level, were not issued until 2006.⁷¹ The lack of a well defined plan for execution and coordination continues to pose huge problems.

Despite a well set up administrative system, teachers point to a lack of institutional support for policy implementation as a major challenge.⁷² Teachers likewise have not been sensitized to the rationale for the policy, nor have they received training on psychosocial counseling, which has left them ill prepared to cater to the particular needs of young mothers who reenter school.⁷³ Finally, teacher training colleges do not

teach education policies, leaving many educators unfamiliar with the Readmission Policy.

The MOEST lacks strong leaderships related to gender policy and a girls' education plan. Gender expertise is required to articulate and coordinate gender policy and programming in all education departments and at all levels (ministry, district, zone and school). Development of this gender expertise was an aspect of the GABLE program but the more recent push toward gender mainstreaming has actually led to less of a gender focus in the MOEST rather than more.

A weak monitoring and evaluation system has given rise to incomplete data on why girls withdraw, which district education managers should be responsible for collecting. Instead, these managers are often not aware of the Readmission Policy and they do not have mechanisms for following up with girls. Similarly, a mechanism does not exist for tracking girls within the education system if they change schools and in their transition from primary to secondary school. The lack of proper monitoring and data collection also make it difficult to know how teenage mothers who are readmitted to school fare upon their return and to what level they are able to complete their studies.

THE NEED FOR RESOURCES TO SUPPORT POLICY

At the household level, the financial burdens associated with pregnancy and parenting are a formidable barrier to girls' education and unfortunately these burdens are not addressed by the Readmission Policy. In Malawi, 50.7 percent of the population lives in poverty.⁷⁴ Gender and age play significant roles in determining decisions about investments in a child's education and access to household resources.⁷⁵ The indirect and direct costs of schooling for households—such as clothing, food at home and at school, and increased demand for girls' labor—are major contributors to girls' dropping out.⁷⁶ The majority of parents and guardians do not undertake income generating activities, apart from peasant farming, and they are generally more willing to invest in their sons' education than their daughters'.⁷⁷ For these reasons, many girls who become pregnant while in school are forced to marry and forgo their education, as the financial burden increases with her baby.⁷⁸ The Readmission Policy, however, was not implemented with any provisions to address the financial burden that hinders so many girls from returning to school.

Financial and human resource constraints at the district and school levels in Malawi limit effective policy implementation. Each school receives \$1,600 annually as direct support to the school and school level improvement plans to address the National Education Sector Plan goals. This is a positive move toward decentralization but is still vastly insufficient. These limited resources are insufficient to meet basic infrastructure demands, much less provide the training to crit-

ical groups on the readmission of school age mothers. Except for funding from Canada's Department for Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development, there has been no budget allocated to orienting district education officers and primary education advisers on the Readmission Policy's procedures.

Limited resources in schools also means that counseling and psychosocial support are almost nonexistent, although the guidelines to the Readmission Policy state that this support should be made available to student parents. At present, there are few female teachers or trained female counselors in rural schools who can competently counsel teen mothers. Similarly, no link exists between schools and health centers or health surveillance assistants that can support school-age mothers' health needs. The need for fuller support and connections among social services for marginalized children have been discussed, often in relation to orphans and vulnerable children,⁷⁹ but such approaches require additional resources to be instituted.

This analysis of the Readmission Policy has served as a lens into the barriers to girls' education in Malawi more generally. It has highlighted the need to address harmful attitudes and cultural practices that impede girls' inclusion in school and to better align resources in support of policy implementation. In this regard, policymakers should consider the important role of civil society organizations in addressing ritually transmitted definitions of masculinity and femininity through culturally relevant, participatory methodologies and capacity building that promotes community led dialogue. This is at the heart of the proposal that follows.

A NEW WAY FORWARD: THE MALAWI ADOLESCENT GIRLS' LEARNING PARTNERSHIP (AGL)

Malawi benefits from a positive policy framework for addressing girls' education as well as a legacy of promoting gender equality through comprehensive programming. The GABLE program succeeded in increasing girls' rates of enrollment in Malawi by addressing multiple barriers to girls' education and initiating important work in mobilizing communities in support of this aim. A valuable opportunity exists to build on this legacy and chart a new way forward to expand adolescent girls' access to and quality of education in Malawi. This paper proposes the launch of a new program, the Malawi Adolescent Girls' Learning Partnership (AGL), with the objective of addressing cultural constraints to girls' education as a central organizing strategy of work on girls' education.

Communities themselves can and should be activated to promote girls' education, as they have the potential to both shape cultural practices and to support and empower girls and boys. Although cultural practices and harmful gender norms are not the only barriers to girls' education and learning, they are important and must be addressed along with other interventions that are known to be critical for all children. This work requires strong and sustained commitment from the government, funding partners and civil society.

The AGL program would include the following features:

1. Community based solutions to change harmful cultural practices that result in adolescent girls' exclusion from school.

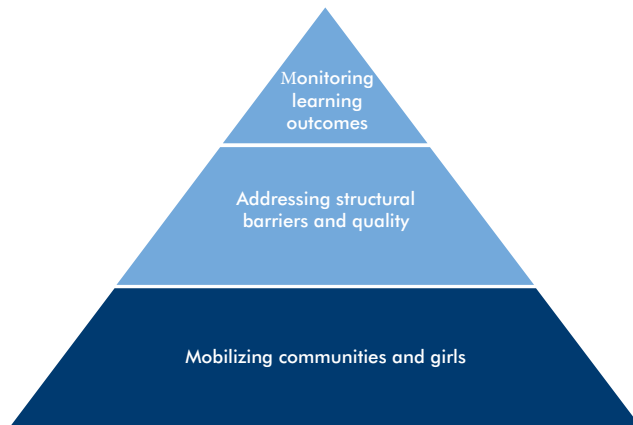
2. Engagement with traditional authorities to enact changes in support of girls' education.
3. Empowerment of girls and women through support networks, mentoring programs and opportunities to develop competencies key to enhancing individual agency and collective action.
4. Implementation of participatory monitoring and evaluation frameworks that also track cultural practices and empowerment indicators to better inform educational policies and programs.
5. Long term commitment of resources by the government and donors and the building of local economic capacity in support of girls' education.
6. Going beyond access to address factors that affect girls' learning through greater community involvement.

The rationale behind the program is to activate communities as partners to promote girls' education and learning, while also empowering girls as agents of change within communities, which will provide a critical force and platform to support other critical interventions for girls. The importance of squarely addressing cultural practices at the community level has thus far been inadequately attended to, given the impact on girls' education, and given the potential for change. Figure 2 shows how a focus at community level supports other reforms and the ultimate goal of girls' learning.

Addressing communities and girls as agents of change will promote a platform for other critical education policies and programs, ranging from bursaries for girls at secondary school level to

building more secondary schools, curriculum reviews and gender-sensitive teacher education. While the implementation focus of AGL is on community engagement to address cultural constraints, this paper also recognizes the need to address economic, political and environmental barriers to girls' education and to support and coordinate with a cross-sector approach to girls' education.

FIGURE 2: MOBILIZING CHANGE AT COMMUNITY LEVEL



AGL PRIORITY ACTIONS

For each of the lessons highlighted in the analysis of the Readmission Policy, a priority action for AGL is suggested (table 3). These priority actions build on the experiences of GABLE, CRECCOM and other actors working on girls' education at the community level. A key principle of this work is that communities themselves can be activated to be effective partners in this work, thereby offering a sustainable mechanism to promote girls' education and learning.

Priority Action #1: Introduction of Village Change Agents and Village Forums in Every Village throughout the Country

This priority action addresses two gaps in the implementation of the Readmission Policy and

in girls' education policies more generally: (1) the need to build local capacity to critically examine cultural practices and values that impede girls' access to education and learning; and (2) the need to develop community based solutions and ownership.

If measures like the Readmission Policy are to have substantial and sustained reach, parents, guardians and community members must be mobilized in support of the policy and of girls' education overall. Engaging parents and guardians in questioning gender norms and the dominant societal constructions of masculinity and femininity is vital to influencing household decision making and gendered patterns of socialization. In the few communities where civil society groups have introduced village forums and change agents, they have proven to be an effective means to ensure sustainable local agency and leadership at the village level (see box 8 for an example).⁸⁰

Village change agents are individuals selected by the residents of their locality to facilitate community led dialogues on a regular basis through the establishment of village forums. Village forums provide an opportunity for community members to examine their cultural values and practices through a process of problem identification, reflection and analysis, and to find solutions to longstanding educational challenges without external direction. This is also a means by which to reach the household level. These forums also allow for information about existing policies and resources to be shared and discussed in relation to the local context.

Village change agents are trained to work in collaboration with adults and youth in the

TABLE 3. AGL PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Lesson Learned	Recommendation
<i>Main lesson: There is a need to address the cultural practices and beliefs that impede girls from accessing school and improving learning.</i>	
Need to build community ownership and local capacity to critically examine cultural practices	Village change agents and village forums
Need to engage informal institutions and the traditional authorities	Linking village forums with local governance structures and schools
Need to empower girls	Girls' empowerment programs that support development of personal and social competencies, as well as self-efficacy and other noncognitive skills, through such initiatives as girls' clubs, role modeling and mentoring
Need for monitoring and evaluation	Participatory, gender sensitive, monitoring and evaluation that include indicators of girls' empowerment
Need for resource allocation	Long term commitment of resources, more effective linkages to existing resources, and building of local economic capacity with particular attention to the economic empowerment of women

BOX 8. COMMUNITY ACTIVITY IN HARMONIZING THE CULTURE AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS: THE ELIMINATION OF THE *CHIPUTU* INITIATION RITE FOR GIRLS IN SUB-TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY KHWETHEMULE, THYOLO DISTRICT

Since 2008, CRECCOM has supported 120 communities in five traditional authorities in Thyolo District working toward gender equality. The program aims at transforming attitudes toward women's and girls' sexual and reproductive, education and economic rights. As a result of CRECCOM's efforts, there is now momentum in these communities to address harmful sociocultural factors, by modifying and in some cases eliminating such factors.

Village change agents and village forums are the hub of community led systemic change, which has resulted in the elimination of the *chiputu* girls' initiation rite in the Khwethemule area in Malawi's southern region. *Chiputu* is an initiation rite in which girls are encouraged at a very young age (8 to 12 years) to engage in sex. Mary, whose story was introduced at the beginning of this paper, is from the Khwethemule area.

The steps that led to the elimination of *chiputu* went as follows. Regular meetings targeting women, men

and youth, including initiation counselors, were conducted with the support of the village head. After reviewing the initiation rites being practiced in their area, village forums in Khwethemule agreed to eliminate the *chiputu* rite for preadolescent girls (8 to 12 year olds), as it was considered greatly detrimental to a girl's life. Village change agents approached the traditional authority, who called all village heads in the area to a meeting and who agreed to act on the community's request to eliminate the practice. The elimination of *chiputu* has saved thousands of girls in the area from HIV, unwanted pregnancies and dropping out of school.

While the bylaws prohibiting the practice of *chiputu* came too late for Mary, the village change agents' efforts have resulted in a promising future for her and some of her peers. Eighteen of the 23 girls in her initiation group are now in school, after being encouraged to return by village change agents. Aside from encouraging the girls, village change agents have also asked parents and relatives to support the girls' education and to take care of their children when the young mothers are in school. Mary is now back in school, and a relative cares for her child during school hours. She is in standard 8. The village change agents continue to monitor Mary's progress.

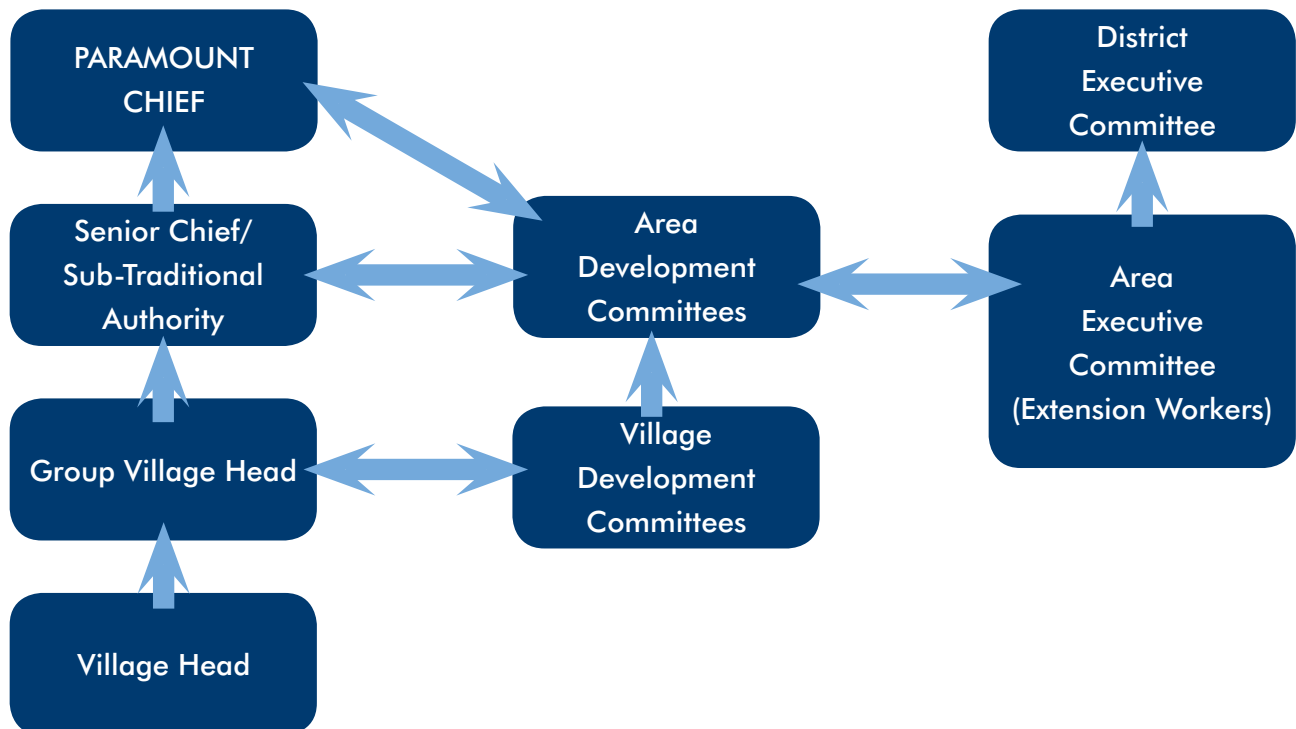
community, as well as village heads, chiefs and other cultural duty bearers and government officers. The process of community deliberation and dialogue in village forums is an empowering one, as villagers are free to raise issues, debate them and influence their own change. The forums also serve to support linkages with the government and other service providers and to aid in developing economic empowerment activities that incentivize participation, and they can be structured to include internal progress review and follow-up mechanisms that ensure the implementation of action points. The village forum and change agents approach facilitates the infiltration of the value of girls' education into the cultural system and community structures such as chieftaincy, initiation institutions, and household gender dynamics through community deliberations. Forums at the community level also increase the possibility of commitment to carry out plans.

Priority Action #2: Partnership with Village Forums: Traditional Authorities, Government, and Schools

Traditional leaders' responsiveness to community demands should be enhanced by strengthening the link between village forums and the traditional authorities (village heads and chiefs). This is an important means by which to engage these institutions and exert pressure on them to pass bylaws that are in harmony with the national education laws and policies. And in this way, the accountability of traditional leaders is also strengthened.

Linkages with local government are equally important for village forums to meet their full potential as catalysts for cultural change and effective policy implementation. Strong relationships between village forums and grassroots level government extension services and district executive committees allow for the provision of the technical support (e.g. information about existing

FIGURE 3: LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN MALAWI



policies and guidelines, assistance with linking to other services such as health services) needed by villagers in their quest to adjust cultural practices. The involvement of an existing government structure at the grassroots level—extension workers—also offers an immediate tie between the community and the government, and enhances buy-in from the traditional authorities in addressing harmful sociocultural factors (figure 3). Therefore, accountability and incentives systems must be developed in order to enable sustainable commitment from government structures.

Village forums and change agents also serve to strengthen relationships between communities and schools, and to enhance two-way communication on policy and practice. Education policy discussions in village forums can be linked to schools through school management committees (SMC), parent teacher associations, and mother group members who are participants of the forums. While teachers generally do not participate in village forums (as they are often not local residents of the village), they are able to provide technical knowledge about policy guidelines and school practice. Village forums and change agents play a crucial role in policy debate and feedback, and ensure greater participation in the development of policies from the start. Village forums also support policy implementation, for example, by following up on girls who may be at risk of dropping out, counseling pregnant girls and parents, and ensuring that girls receive the support to return to school from their relatives. Village forums' active communication with parents and teachers also help to monitor and address gender based violence experienced by girls at school and at home, as well as help ensure that the practical needs of teen mothers are met.

Priority Action #3: Facilitating Girls' Empowerment and Channeling Women's Agency

Girls should be active participants of their own change. This is key to achieving gender equality in education, because girls themselves must confront harmful gender scripting and challenge traditional practices in their lives. Cultivating girls' agency also encourages their involvement in decision making on issues that affect their lives and society. This is possible when relevant and empowering approaches are deployed that intrinsically motivate girls toward education, and when learning includes the development of cognitive and noncognitive competencies needed to advance gender equality and improve life outcomes for girls (box 9).

BOX 9. GIRLS' LEARNING AND EMPOWERMENT

Murphy-Graham defines empowerment as a process of recognition, capacity building and action that allows individuals to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings and their ability to contribute to personal and social betterment. Through empowerment individuals, "develop the capacity to critically examine their lives and broader society and take action toward personal and social transformation."⁸¹ Lloyd builds on this conceptual framework and provides a typology that includes core educational, social, personal and economic competencies.⁸²

Establishing girls' education networks and forums at the grassroots level, both within and outside of schools, is one strategy for harnessing girls' agency. Also, adult women can be strong and effective supporters, advocates and mentors for girls. Hence, the government and its partners should give adequate capacity to the school mother group initiatives in order to strengthen their functioning. Mother groups influence girls and other parents with respect to

regular school attendance, retention and readmission. At the school level, mother groups advocate for sanitary facilities, gender based violence reporting, and the provision of child care. Mentoring relationships (for example, inside the school between girls of different age groups and between female teachers/mother groups and girls) that increase access to information, skills and resources (such as sexual and reproductive health education and career guidance) and that enable girls to make strategic choices should be enhanced in schools to empower girls.

Priority Action #4: The Development of a Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

There is a need for a robust gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation framework that standardizes evidence based on comprehensive indicators, involves community members, and uses the data collected to inform and provide feedback to improve education policy and programs. Participatory monitoring and evaluation guarantees a feedback loop between community members and educators, and promotes policy ownership by implementers at the grassroots level. Evaluating policy outcomes and impact in both the short and long terms that translate into girls' well being implies the use of indicators that measure girls' empowerment and empowered choices. Such indicators may include how a girl has used her education during schooling and upon school completion, the extent to which girls' agency and choices were improved, and the extent to which broad cultural norms were transformed. Such a framework goes beyond simply measuring education access to evaluate the learning and empowerment that result from education. It also requires using that data to develop better policies and programs and to improve those that exist. It may also

consider the use of innovative data collection methods, such as the SMS Dashboard.⁸³ Government and funder supported programs, projects and routine work would then reflect this monitoring and evaluation framework as a standard for transformative girls' education policy implementation.

Priority Action #5: Establishing Long Term Vision and Investment of Resources

Acknowledging that cultural change does not come about overnight, the government and funders should allocate adequate resources to sustain, maintain, and scale up community mobilization. Such resources would adequately build the capacity of girls themselves and local leaders (e.g., village change agents, progressive traditional leaders, school management committees, and mother groups). The GABLE program was an example of how resources can be effectively channeled toward this goal. The GABLE social mobilization campaign facilitated community action planning that enabled community leaders to identify constraints and find solutions. The program also enhanced linkage between communities and schools as well as Primary Education Advisors. Despite its limitations, the program pushed the frontiers of girls' education programs in Malawi. However, when its funding ended it became very difficult to build on the lessons that were learned and to sustain the change it initiated.

There is also a need to reduce reliance on external funding and build resource capacity locally to support girls' education. One means of addressing this challenge is the institution of village savings and loans programs, which could be integrated with village forums and mother groups. Also necessary are increased livelihood options so that initiation counselors, for example, have other

means to generate income. In addition, existing resources need to be more effectively utilized by strengthening links across sectors, such as between youth friendly health services and schools, in order to sustainably and holistically address the needs of adolescent girls. Meanwhile, external support continues to be important in critical areas, including scholarships that include the costs of schooling and a robust mentoring program to support secondary education for poor girls.

Priority Action #6: Improving Girls' Learning Outcomes through Enhancing Community Involvement

It is vitally important for the government of Malawi to ensure that girls are not only accessing and staying in school but are also learning well. Poor learning exacerbates dropping out as girls and parents lose faith in the purpose of getting an education when it brings no immediate meaningful change in their lives. Unfortunately once girls drop out, they are at even greater risk of early marriage and pregnancy.⁸⁴

Ensuring progress on education quality and learning outcomes is particularly urgent in Malawi, as nearly 65 percent of its annual education budget is wasted each year due to high rates of grade repetition and dropout.⁸⁵ While MOEST has taken positive steps by incorporating continuous assessment in the primary school curriculum, and in the secondary school curriculum through a review that is under way, the Malawi government also recognizes that more needs to be done to support learning for girls and boys.

Although the need to improve learning outcomes is well understood, the role of communities in promoting learning for all children is less recognized. In fact, communities can support learning

and promote accountability in the government systems that are responsible for delivering education. Initiatives in Malawi and in other parts of Africa provide potential models for enhancing such community participation. Traditional structures in Malawi, such as traditional authorities including village chiefs and village heads, can be activated to promote and monitor learning and education quality. This can be done in several ways, including the following:

- **Mobilize Communities In Support of Learning:** The Read Malawi program is one example of an approach that has shown promise as a model for positively affecting learning outcomes at the village level through community involvement. The reading centers—which are managed by volunteers—are housed in an array of locations, ranging from informal spaces, such as family homes, to formal spaces and institutions, such as churches, mosques and constructed shelters. Volunteers are trained in both basic literacy instruction and methods to incentivize learners. Village heads have been instrumental in supporting reading centers by encouraging parents to send their children, by organizing literacy fairs, by issuing chalkboards to reading centers, and by their mere presence at the centers. Schools and communities likewise work together to supply scarce supplementary readers to the centers. One of the communities participating in the program specifically sought to improve girls' literacy, which appears to have influenced the outcomes of standard 3 girls' measures of achievement in Chichewa and English.⁸⁶ According to an analysis of the program conducted by the prime contractor, the University of Texas at San Antonio, "findings indicate

that mobilizing communities around holistic literacy reform efforts do have an effect on the literacy achievement of young readers and writers and should be considered an integral part of any holistic literacy reform effort in Malawi."⁸⁷

- **Mobilize Communities with Assessment Data and Create Accountability:** Lack of information about learning outcomes hinders community mobilization and the ability of community members to hold schools accountable for school quality. Despite the evidence that learning outcomes are low in comparison to neighboring countries, and that girls are behind their male counterparts, communities are not yet mobilized. The experience of ASER in India, UWEZO in Kenya, and the larger family of citizen led assessments in Pakistan, Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal, and Mali covering over one million children in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, shows that when communities have information about their children's learning levels, they are inspired to action. In Malawi, this kind of model could include programming to mobilize communities to enroll children who are out of school and to include discussion and action forums in communities around schools where learning levels are low.⁸⁸ These tools can be used to promote change agents within communities, and also to open forums about the value placed on education for girls and for boys.

- **Engage Traditional Leaders, Girls and Other Education Stakeholders in Policy Discussions about Learning:** Malawi has the opportunity to set an example in the region in terms of democratic, consultative engagement around education policy issues, and in so doing, will also serve to mobilize communities around learning. For instance, the MOEST may work with the Learning Metrics Task Force to pilot recommendations on learning in Malawi (box 10). This work could begin with the formation of a community of practice to determine the agenda for improving learning outcomes. In this case, there is a great opportunity to build in a consultative framework that is responsive to input from girls as well as many other stakeholders relevant to education, including boys, parents, teachers, head teachers, education administrators, and traditional authorities.

BOX 10. THE LEARNING METRICS TASK FORCE

The Learning Metrics Task Force is a global consultative process that has met over a period of 18 months in order to make recommendations on how learning can be defined and measured, and how these measures can be implemented. The recommendations of the task force were recently launched at the one year anniversary of the United Nations Secretary-General's Global Education First Initiative. The task force is now planning to pilot work in a number of priority countries to improve assessment and learning practices by addressing institutional, political and technical spheres that affect learning. This work may start with the fostering of a community of practice that develops the priorities for how to improve learning, and may include work to improve assessment practices at the national level or work to address other national priorities related to learning.

CONCLUSION

Gender disparities in education in Malawi persist, particularly for adolescent girls, despite progress in girls' enrollment. By examining the implementation of the Readmission Policy, it is evident that inadequate attention to the cultural dimensions of gender inequality has limited the potential impact of this policy in reducing adolescent girls' exclusion from school. It is also evident that cultural constraints rooted in patriarchal attitudes, norms and practices at the community, school and household levels pose a barrier to girls' education in Malawi more

generally. While the analysis here highlights certain practices and attitudes harmful to girls, this paper has also argued that culture is a powerful force that can be channeled toward the promotion of girls' education through the mobilization of community support and change agents at grassroots level. The Malawi Adolescent Girls Learning Partnership (AGL) proposed in this paper can serve as a program to address the cultural practices and patriarchal norms impeding girls' retention and learning in school, and also to mobilize communities to promote girls' participation and learning.

ENDNOTES

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4. Bradley Levinson and Margaret Sutton, eds., *Policy as Practice: A Sociocultural Approach to the Study of Educational Policy* (Westport, CT: Ablex Press, 2001), 4.
5. Annette Braun et al., "Taking Context Seriously: Towards Explaining Policy Enactment in Secondary School," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32, no. 4 (October 2011), 585-96.
6. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), UNICEF and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are major funders supporting education in Malawi. In the 1990s, USAID mounted the big nationwide Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education Program, which had a holistic approach. In 2013, DFID launched the Keeping Girls in School Program, which is providing cash transfers, training mother group institution and addressing gender based violence. UNICEF, with its Child Friendly School model, has been a longtime partner in addressing community involvement, school related gender based violence, water and sanitation provision, building girls' self efficacy and agency, and teacher training. JICA has contributed to the improvement of school infrastructure by constructing classrooms.
7. Olivia Mchaju Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy: The Case of Malawi (Final Report)* (Lilongwe: Forum for African Women Educationalists- Malawi [FAWEMA], 2012), 7, 9.
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9. Ibid.
10. National Statistical Office (NSO) and ICF Macro, *Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2010* (Zomba and Calverton, Md.: NSO and ICF Macro, 2011), 13-15.
11. Calculated from MOEST, *Education Statistics 2012*, "Table 19: Age Distribution by Form for Both Sexes, 2011/2012," 61.
12. World Bank, *The Education System in Malawi*, World Bank Working Paper 182 (Washington: World Bank, 2010), "Figure 5.1: Access to and Completion of the Different Levels by Gender," 104.
13. The coverage of Community Day Secondary Schools is limited and girls travel long distances. Travelling long distances affects girls more than boys as girls are vulnerable to sexual advances that can lead to pregnancy, early marriage and even rape when girls stay in rented houses within communities.
14. World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, "Rural Population (% of Total Population): 2012," <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS/countries>.
15. National Statistics Office, *Integrated Household Survey 2010-2011: Household Socio-Economic Characteristics Report* (Zomba: National Statistics Office, September 2012), 204.
16. "In School, but Learning?" *This Is Africa: A Global Perspective Special Report—Access +: Towards a Post-MDG Development Agenda on Education* (London: Financial Times, 2012), 14.
17. MOEST, *Education Statistics 2012*, "Table 1.12 – Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations 2008 – 2012," 19.
18. "Basic competence in literacy": the percentage of pupils who achieved Level 4 reading competence and higher on the SAQMEQ examination. Pupils were grouped in eight level categories according to their examination score: Level 1 (Pre-Reading) through Level 8 (Critical Reading). Pupils who achieved Level 4 reading competence achieved the following minimum criteria: "Reads on or reads back in order to link and interpret information located in various parts of the text." (Njora Hungi et al., *SAQMEQ III Project Results: Pupil Achievement Levels in Reading and Mathematics*, Working Document Number 1 (SAQMEQ, 2010), Table: "Reading Achievement Levels by Subgroups," 6-7 and 19).
19. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*, 11.
20. Elaine Unterhalter, "Connecting the Private and the Public: Pregnancy, Exclusion, and the Expansion of Schooling in Africa," *Gender and Education* 25, no. 1 (2013).

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22. Calculated from MOEST, *Education Statistics 2012*, "Table 7.1: Number of Dropouts by Reasons, Standard and Sex – National, 2011/12," 30.
23. Calculated from *ibid.*, "Table 23: Number of Drop Outs by Reason, Division, Form and Sex 2011/2012," 70.
24. Unterhalter, "Connecting the Private and the Public," 75; citing Cynthia B. Lloyd and Barbara S. Mensch, "Marriage and Childbirth as Factors in Dropping Out from School: An Analysis of DHS Data from Sub-Saharan Africa," *Population Studies* 62, no. 1 (March 2008), 3.
25. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*, 20.
26. The Northern Region which is heavily patrilineal has the highest number of girls dropping out due to marriage while the matrilineal Central and Southern Regions have more girls dropping out due to pregnancies (MOEST, *Education Statistics 2012*, "Table 7.2: Number of Dropouts by Reasons, Standard and Sex-Division/Districts 2011/2012," 30-39, and "Table 23: Number of Dropouts by Reason, Division, Form and Sex 2011/2012," 70-73).
27. Madalo Samati, "Beyond Access Is an Attitude: A Case Study of AGSP," (master's thesis, Brandeis University, 2010).
28. Nahid Mazloun, *Readmission/Pregnancy Policy Status Report* (Malawi: UNICEF, 2000), 16.
29. Chimombo, *A Comparative Study on Universal Primary Education Policy*.
30. Centre for Education Research and Training (CERT) and Devtech Systems, *The Safe Schools Program: A Qualitative Study to Examine School-Related Gender Based Violence in Malawi* (Washington: USAID, 2008); K. A. L. Hyde and E. C. Kadzamira, *GABLE: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice Pilot Survey* (Zomba: Centre for Social Research, 1994).
31. Joseph Patrick Goodson Chimombo, "Implementing Educational Innovations: A Study of Free Primary Education in Malawi" (PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1999), 258; Creative Center for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM); "AGSP Annual Reports," 2008 and 2009, unpublished.
32. Mazloun, *Readmission*; Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*.
33. Mazloun, *Readmission*, 16.
34. Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC), *Cultural Practices and their Impact on the Enjoyment of Human Rights, Particularly the Rights of Women and Children in Malawi* (Lilongwe: MHRC, 2005). In tribes that practice "sexual cleansing," a sexual encounter is arranged between a widow and her deceased husband's male relative in order to clear her home of the bad omen of death. "Wife inheritance" and "levirate marriage" refer to the practice in which a widow is obligated to marry her deceased husband's male relative (wife inheritance) or, more specifically, his brother (levirate marriage).
35. CERT and Devtech Systems, *Safe Schools Program*; Thomas Bisika, Pierson Ntata, and Sidon Konyani, "Gender-Violence and Education in Malawi: A Study of Violence Against Girls as an Obstruction to Universal Primary School Education," *Journal of Gender Studies* 18, no. 3 (September 2009).
36. Chimombo, *A Comparative Study on Universal Primary Education Policy*.
37. CERT and Devtech Systems, *Safe Schools Program*, 55.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Gender and Development Index 2011* (Lilongwe and Zomba: Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development and the National Statistical Office, June 2012), 16-17.
40. A mother group is a formal institution at every school comprising 10 women selected from a school's catchment area. Mother groups act as advocates for girls, particularly adolescent girls, in school by enhancing linkages between girls, school administrators, school management committees, parents and other service providers.
41. UNICEF, *Mother Group Database* (2012).
42. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*.
43. Mazloun, *Readmission*, 13.
44. *Ibid.*, 14.
45. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*, 20 and 23.
46. It is more likely in matrilineal families that a girls' pregnancy may be viewed as a blessing, whereas in patrilineal families it is the children of male members of the family that are considered heirs and the pregnancy of unmarried daughters received more harshly.
47. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*, 25-26.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Quoted by Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*, 25.
50. Hyde and Kadzamira, "GABLE."
51. Samati, "Beyond Access."
52. Mazloun, *Readmission*, 18.
53. Data from the 2010 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey indicates a high prevalence of sexual violence in Malawi and early initiation to sexual activity. A range of 18 to 36 percent of 15-49 year old females from Malawian districts are reported to have experienced physical and sexual violence. 14 percent of females and 22

- percent of males had first sexual intercourse before 15 years; the figure is higher in rural areas for girls at 17.6 percent. 20 percent of teen girls are married, many of them by force, compared to 2 percent of teen boys (cited in: *MDG Acceleration Framework Action Plan for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Malawi: A Background Paper* [Lilongwe: Government of Malawi, 2012], 14).
54. MHRC, *Cultural Practices*; Creative Center for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM), "Eliminating Pre-Adolescent Initiation: To Delay Sex and Promote Girls Education," retrieved from <http://www.creccom.org/project.php?project=28>.
 55. Hyde and Kadzamira, "GABLE."
 56. Uzma Anzar, Sharon Harpring, Joseph Cohen, and Elizabeth Leu, *Retrospective Pilot Study of USAID-Funded Education Projects in Malawi*, EQUIP1 Cross-National Synthesis of Education Quality (Washington: Education Quality Improvement Program, USAID, 2004), 12.
 57. Activities of MIE are yet to be incorporated in teacher training colleges.
 58. Paul Herbert, William Millsap, and Nagat El-Sanabary, *Summative Evaluation of USAID/Malawi's Girl's Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE)* (Lilongwe: USAID, May, 30, 2002), 4.
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 62. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*, 13.
 63. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*.
 64. Mazloum, *Readmission*.
 65. Government of Malawi and UNDP, *MDG Acceleration Framework*, 47.
 66. Earnest Pemba, "Impact of HIV/AIDS Project Interventions on the Conduct of Yao Initiations" (master's thesis, University of Malawi, January 2010), 37.
 67. American Institutes for Research, Creative Center for Community Mobilization, Malawi Institute of Education, and Miske Witt & Associates, *Primary School Support Program: A School Fees Pilot (PSSP: SFP): Annual Report, January-December, 2006* (Washington: USAID, 2007).
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 69. Liwewe, *Re-Entry Policy*.
 70. MHRC and ActionAid Malawi, "The Existence and Implementation of Laws, Policies, and Regulations in Education and How They Affect the Girl-Child in Malawi" (Lilongwe: MHRC and ActionAid Malawi, 2005).
 71. The privatization of the post office in 2006 and measures toward decentralization have made assuring consistent communication with schools from the central ministry even more complex.
 72. Chimombo, *Implementing Educational Innovations*, 147.
 73. A positive step in this direction is the development of by the MOEST of a Teachers' Code of Conduct, currently underway, to address school-related gender based violence.
 74. National Statistical Office, *Integrated Household Survey 2010-2011*, 204 .
 75. J. Chimombo, N. Kendall, N. Tembo, G. Chimsanya, M. Mlia, and N. Njanji, *Situation Analysis Study Report for Marginalized Girls in Kasungu District, Malawi* (Lilongwe: CARE International Malawi and Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative, 2008).
 76. Nancy Kendall and Chloe O'Gara, "Vulnerable Children, Communities and Schools: Lessons from Three HIV/AIDS-Affected Areas," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 37, no. 1 (January 2007).
 77. Chimombo, *A Comparative Study on Universal Primary Education Policy*, 53.
 78. Chances of orphaned girls' school reentry are even slimmer. An estimated 12.6 percent of the school-age children (6 to 17 years) are orphans, mainly due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Extended families and communities struggle to cope with raising orphaned children, often leaving them to fend for themselves or live with elderly grandparents. Orphanhood, which impoverishes children in more than just material terms, renders them twice as likely to drop out. Orphaned girls are more likely to drop out than boys, are more likely to take up the responsibility for caring for younger siblings, and hold a vulnerable place in society, often making them more prone to sexual abuse and reliance on "sugar daddies" (Manohar P. Sharma, "Orphanhood and Schooling Outcomes in Malawi," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 88, no. 5 [2006], 1273-1278; Esme Chipso Kadzamira, Dixie Maluwa-Banda, Augustin Kamlongera, and Nicola Swainson, "The Impact of HIV/AIDS on Primary

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79. Kendall and O'Gara, "Vulnerable Children."
 80. An example of such forums in Malawi are STAR Circles, which have been implemented by CREC-COM, WORLEC, and Action Aid. See, for example: CRECCOM, "Star Circles," <http://www.creccom.org/methods.php>; Women's Legal Resource Centre (WOLREC), "Improving Women's Empowerment through Reduction of Harmful Socio-Cultural Factors in Balaka District," <http://wolrec.org/index.php/what-we-do>.
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 83. SMS Dashboard is automated cell phone text messaging sent to clients through a partnership between development organizations and a cell phone company. In Malawi it has been used to provide technical messages and timely feedback to subsistence farmers through the Farmers Voice Radio Project, which utilizes information and communication technologies (ICT)—such as mobile phones and SMS—to enhance communication and feedback with farmers (Tango International, *Final Evaluation of the Farmer Voice Radio Project* [Tucson, AZ: August 21, 2012], 18).
 84. Cynthia B. Lloyd with Juliet Young, *The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls: A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls* (Washington: Population Council, 2009).
 85. World Bank, xxxi.
 86. M. Sailors, J. V. Hoffman, P. D. Pearson, N. McClung, and J. Shin, *Measuring Growth Over Time in Years 1 and 2 of Malawi Reads* (San Antonio: University of Texas at San Antonio, 2012).
 87. "Community-Based Support for Implementation of a Complementary Reading Program," Read Malawi: Reports, <http://www.utsa.edu/readmalawi/reports/>.
 88. ASER and other citizen led assessments are generally conducted annually at the household level from a representative sample of children at the subnational and national levels. The surveys measure basic literacy and numeracy at the second grade of primary school, and are conducted in local and regional languages by volunteer citizens. The tools are designed to be simple enough for parents, teachers, schools, and communities to conduct the assessments and understand the findings. Tools are calibrated to learning levels that match the second grade of primary school, and are conducted in local and regional languages by volunteer citizens. The tools are designed to be simple enough for parents, teachers, schools, and communities to conduct the assessments and understand the findings. (Pratham USA, "Citizen-Led Basic Learning Assessments: An Innovative Approach," November 2012, <http://www.prathamusa.org/news/asers-citizen-led-basic-learning-assessments>).

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Improving Learning Opportunities and Outcomes for Girls in Africa

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