Providing Out-of-School Adolescent Girls with Skills: Situation Analysis for Malawi

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This policy brief analyzes the current skill set and employment status of adolescent girls in Malawi. On the basis of available data and literature, it describes labor market trends for adolescent girls and labor market demand and supply.¹

Why Skills for Girls?
A growing adolescent population with low levels of skills and/or educational attainment poses challenges to Malawi’s economic development and growth. The country’s population is projected to increase from 17.2 million in 2015 to 26.5 million by 2030, and to 43.2 million in 2050 (United Nations 2015). An estimated 5.2 million youth 18–24 years old are expected to enter the labor market in 2040 (at current fertility rates) (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development 2014).

Adolescent girls in Malawi are of particular concern—over three-fourths of girls ages 15 to 19 in rural areas are out of school and are unlikely to return.²

The tough decisions regarding youth transitions during adolescence are embedded in multiple economic and sociocultural determinants and are disproportionately risky for girls, greatly affecting their healthy development. Choices made by girls and their families will influence girls’ economic opportunities, health outcomes, and skill sets attained later in life and have a significant impact on the country’s demographics, economic development, and poverty alleviation. Malawi’s population and labor force is young and growing fast. The country’s adolescent population (ages 15–19) is estimated to increase from about 1.9 million in 2015 to 2.9 million in 2030 and 4.2 million by 2050 (United Nations 2015).

Promoting relevant technical and life skills is one option to empower adolescent girls by increasing their capacity to generate income and enhancing their “bargaining power” within the household. These girls and their families are unlikely to be able to bear the costs (or opportunity costs) of schooling or skills formation needed to generate sufficient income, posing a high risk of early marriage or pregnancy. For girls who have dropped out of school, skills development can offer a positive alternative to early family formation and put them on a path toward a healthy future. Two sets of skills contribute to success in the labor market: life skills and income generation skills. Life skills, or “soft skills,” are “a comprehensive set of universal cognitive and noncognitive skills and abilities, connecting behavior, attitudes, and knowledge” (International Youth Foundation 2014). Income generation skills include the technical and business skills needed to earn a living. For the purposes of this brief, skills refers to both life and income-generating skills.

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¹ References to “youth” refers to the 15–24 age cohort, while “adolescent” refers to the 15–19 age cohort (labor data for the 10–14 age range are typically not collected). Where data on adolescents are unavailable, statistics have been presented on the youth cohort.

² On the basis of calculations from the 2013 Integrated Household Survey. In comparison, 68 percent of males in the same age cohort in rural areas are out of school.
Labor Market Trends

Labor force participation rates are relatively lower for adolescents in Malawi compared with the national average: 64 percent in Malawi (National Statistical Office 2014) and 88 percent for the national average (Mussa 2013). The participation rate for female adolescents is similar to that for males, regardless of urban/rural location, and a higher proportion of rural adolescents participate in the labor force. This figure is probably due to the fact that rural adolescents are more likely to be poor and out of school.

Adolescent unemployment is more prevalent in urban areas (a trend common to the Sub-Saharan Africa region) (figure 1). In urban Malawi, female adolescents are more likely to be unemployed than are male adolescents. It is interesting that the gender differential in unemployment widens in both rural and urban locations as adolescents grow into adulthood.³

Educational attainment and skills acquisition through formal training are low in Malawi, especially for females. Only 11 percent and 6 percent of males and females, respectively, ages 15 to 49, have completed secondary education (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development 2014), and the share of Malawian youth participating in vocational education or training is only 0.2 percent (Mussa 2013). Youth with no educational attainment have the lowest unemployment rate; however, among those with some education, those with tertiary education are the least likely to be unemployed. In fact, insufficient levels of education/training received is perceived as a major impediment to finding work among more than half of unemployed youth (Mussa 2013).⁴

The majority of adolescents, both male and female, work in the informal sector (98 percent in 2013). As is typical in African countries, especially in its lower income countries, adolescents in Malawi are engaged in the agriculture sector (77 percent female, 82 percent male), followed by the wholesale and retail sector (11 percent) (figure 2). The highest proportion of working adolescents is classified as skilled agricultural, forestry, or fishery workers, followed by elementary occupations, and service and sales workers (National Statistical Office 2014). Overall, only 13 percent of employment is wage employment, as is typical in other African agrarian economies.

In general, female youth earn less than do male youth in Malawi, but there are significant variations by education levels and type of employment (wage/salaried versus self-employed). The widest gender differentials in earnings exist among salaried workers.

³ Female unemployment is significantly higher for the 20–24 and 25–29 year age cohorts. This is based on calculations from National Statistical Office (2014).

⁴ Youth surveyed as part of the International Labor Organization’s School-to-Work Transition Survey.
For example, salaried young females with no education earn more than two times less than do their male counterparts, although the wage differential narrows slightly as educational attainment increases. For the self-employed/employers, the main earnings differential can be seen for those with no education, where young males earn up to 40 percent more than do their female counterparts (Mussa 2013).

Overall, the quality of employment is found to be low. Most Malawian youth earn less than average weekly wages, feel that they are under- or overqualified for their jobs, and almost one-third are dissatisfied with their employment. Formal job search methods are not typically used by youth, and are often not successful—most employed (and unemployed) youth search for jobs through asking friends, relatives, and acquaintances (Mussa 2013).

Regardless of the type of employment, employers in Malawi value candidates with education and training. A Labor Demand Enterprise Survey (conducted as part of Mussa 2013) reveals that after work experience, education and training are the second most important factor that employers consider when hiring persons to fill professional/managerial or production/elementary positions. It is interesting that three out of every four employers surveyed rated the quality of technical, oral communication, and writing skills of recruited youth as adequate or better. In addition, labor-related issues (quality, shortages, or costs) are not seen by employers as a major challenge.

Existing data and literature present only a glimpse into the linkages between trends in education/training and employment of female adolescents and trends in child marriage or teenage pregnancies. First, female adolescents report marriage, pregnancy, or family responsibilities as constraints when making decisions about investments in education and training, or seeking work. Eighteen percent of girls who drop out of secondary school do so because of marriage or pregnancy (Ministry of Education Science and Technology 2014), and Cho et al. (2013) find that family obligations and marriage constitute the main reasons why women drop out of vocational training. These reasons continue to play a part in employment decisions—more than one-third of economically inactive female adolescents do not seek work for the same reasons (National Statistical Office 2014). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from sub-Saharan countries suggests that the experience or threat of gender-based violence in the workplace can further affect women’s employment decisions, both for self- and wage employment.

Second, the impact of vocational training on girls in Malawi has only begun to be explored recently. A 2013 impact evaluation examining the gender differences in the effects of vocational training in Malawi found that one positive effect of the assessed vocational training program on women is that they are significantly less likely to have given birth in the past year (Cho et al. 2013). It also brought to light the relatively high cost of training for women (versus men). In addition, trained women’s earnings were lower and they were
less likely to have started a business. The results of this impact evaluation suggest that women in this sample were markedly more constrained in their decision making and that this presented obstacles to skill acquisition.

Last, the most recent Malawi Demographic and Health Survey (2010) shows that young married women have the least access to resources and decision-making power when compared to older married women. Among married women who receive cash earnings for employment, husbands of adolescents (15–19 years) and young women (20–24 years) were more likely to be the main decision maker about spending women’s earnings. In addition, married adolescent girls are the least likely of all age groups to make decisions about their own health care, household purchases, and visiting family or relatives (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development 2014).

Skills Training Supply

Malawi’s skills training provision system is highly fragmented, with multiple private and public providers. The core of the public sector training system consists mainly of programs run by the Technical, Entrepreneurial, and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA) in seven technical colleges, which provide four-year pre-employment apprenticeship training for those with secondary schooling. Skills training programs are also run by other ministries (including sector-specific training institutions), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), church-run schools, and at firms/enterprises. In addition, traditional apprenticeship is a common form of on-the-job training in the informal sector. Private training institutions form the largest training provider type, but the exact numbers of institutions and enrollment are unknown (World Bank 2010). The current formal technical, entrepreneurial, and vocational education and training (TEVET) system in Malawi is concentrated on those with middle or secondary schooling. School dropouts generally have to find training opportunities in other nonformal programs run by NGOs, TEVETA, other line ministries, or in the private training market, which can involve high costs (World Bank 2010).

Enrollment numbers in the skills training system are unknown. Limited information is available on the TEVETA-run technical colleges. The technical colleges enrolled almost 1,300 apprentices in 2014, out of which 30 percent were female. In addition, TEVETA and its partners (mainly NGOs) enrolled almost 1,000 students (27 percent female) in its informal outreach programs in 2014.

TEVETA courses that enrolled the highest numbers of girls included administrative studies, tailoring and design, automobile mechanics, bricklaying, and electrical installation. One possible reason for female participation in core technical trades, which are traditionally “male” occupations, is the systematic affirmative action policy employed by TEVETA over the years in the recruitment of apprentices. While enrollment data in programs run by other types of training providers are not available, it is presumed that female participation is higher than in programs run at the technical colleges, as there is a wider range of trades and occupational fields which are traditional for female students (World Bank 2010).

To a limited extent, industry provides on-the-job training. The Labor Demand Enterprise Survey reveals that only 11 percent of employers offered some level of training to their employees. Most training was job-related (90 percent) (Mussa 2013). However, the private sector does contribute to skills sector funding by mandatory contributions to the TEVET Levy Fund, which channels funds through TEVETA for formal and nonformal training.

The lack of skills training programs specifically targeted at adolescent girls and young women is noticeable. Malawi’s TEVET Policy does identify improving equitable access to skills training by girls, and vulnerable and marginalized groups as one of its priorities, and does include plans which are specifically related to issues faced by adolescent girls. However, policy implementation has been weak. Female participation in skills training is low, recruiting female instructors is difficult, and there are insufficient levels of funding for the training sector as a whole.

Examples of skills programs for adolescent girls in Malawi include the Girls Empowerment Network Malawi, which has set up village savings and loan associations which lend money to adolescent girls and young women to start their own businesses. In addition, several development partners support the Government of Malawi in the area of skills development, including the African Development Bank,

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5 There are 56 private training providers registered with TEVETA and more than 100 recorded, but as yet unregistered, private training providers.

6 The Ministry of Labor in Malawi is responsible for the TEVET system and is the responsible agency for implementation of the TEVET Policy.

7 http://www.genetmalawi.org.

Conclusion
A strong case can be made for examining in more depth the trends in female adolescent employment and the links between employment and child marriage and early pregnancies. Female adolescents are as active in the labor market as their male counterparts, but are more likely to be unemployed and earn less. Given the large proportion of agriculture workers, a case can be made for exploring skills programs which focus on adolescents in rural areas, and enable them to enter non-farm self-employment, thereby diversifying their income generating activities. Furthermore, girls report marriage, pregnancy, or family responsibilities as constraints when making decisions about investments in education and training, or seeking work. In addition, reliable information on the skills training supply system must be collected and analyzed. Analysis of these trends and the skills training system as a whole could facilitate the development of policy options designed to create potential for a demographic dividend in Malawi.

References

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