

# Policy Brief: Malawi

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## Keeping Girls in School: Situation Analysis for Malawi

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This policy brief analyzes current trends in the education of adolescent girls in Malawi, describing trends in the education sector and in education coverage for adolescent girls and suggesting opportunities for further policy development in this area.

### Why Keep Girls in School?

**International evidence indicates that keeping girls in school positively affects their life trajectory and benefits the well-being of the next generation.** When girls are exposed to quality education, they build numeracy, literacy, cognitive, and social skills, leaving them better prepared to participate in the labor market and gain an income. Girls' attendance in school during adolescence is also correlated with delayed sexual initiation, later marriage and childbearing, lower rates of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), lower risk of domestic violence, and fewer hours of domestic work (World Bank 2014). As adolescent girls transition from childhood to motherhood, educated women are more likely to invest in the education and health of their children. Educated mothers are more likely to value schooling, to be aware of the returns to schooling, and ultimately to ensure that their children receive an education. Their children have higher immunization rates and better nutrition, increasing enrollment and improving school performance for the next generation (World Bank 2014).

**The quickly growing adolescent population in Malawi will require close attention and higher investments to ensure that girls stay**

**in school and receive a quality education.**

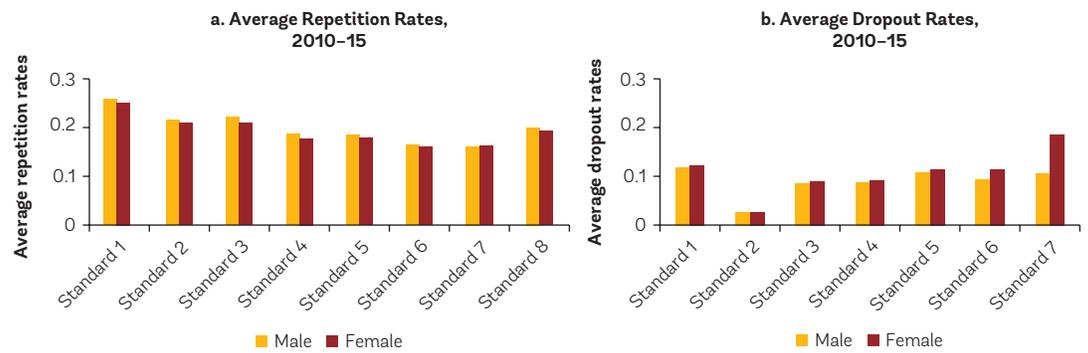
Malawi has one of the fastest-growing populations in the world, with a projected 8.8 million adolescents by 2050. Providing critical education and basic skills to this growing adolescent population will require well-planned investment in the education sector to reach those who are most vulnerable to dropping out of school.

### Education Sector Trends

**With the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994, Malawi's primary school enrollment has increased from 1.8 million students in 1994 to 3.2 million in 2004 to approaching 4.7 million students in 2014.** Overall school enrollment has been rising for both boys and girls, with gender parity achieved in lower grades of primary school and a gender parity index of 97.6 percent in upper primary. Girls and boys continue to share relatively equal levels of participation until Standard 8, when females constitute only 46 percent of overall enrollment (EMIS 2015).

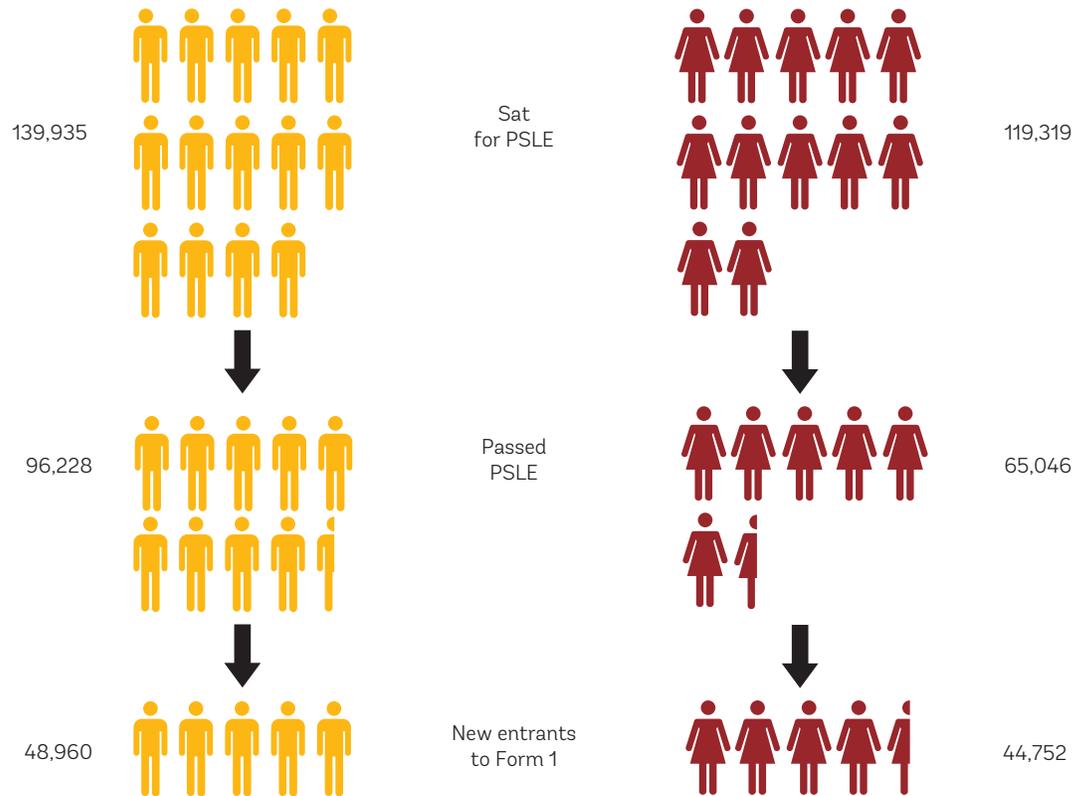
**For students attending primary school, challenges exist in obtaining a quality education.** Malawian pupils are among the lowest performers in the region, according to the 2007 Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), which tests students in grade 6 in 14 Southern and Eastern African countries. In 2007, Malawi performed last in reading and only better than one country, Zambia, in mathematics. Looking specifically at gender, boys slightly outperformed girls overall in both reading and math skills. In a 2008 national assessment of Standard 2 and

**Figure 1.** Average Primary School Repetition and Dropout Rates, 2010–2015



Source: Author's calculations based on EMIS data.

**Figure 2.** PSLE performance and Form 1 Enrollment by Gender



Source: EMIS 2015.

Note: 1 figure = 10,000 people.

Standard 5, results across gender were similar except that Standard 2 boys outperformed girls in English (MIE).<sup>1</sup> In 2009 results, boys outperformed girls in both Standard 3 and Standard 7 mathematics (MIE).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While the means for Chichewa, English, and Mathematics were all higher for boys, the difference between genders was only statistically significant for English. In English, boys had a mean score of 11.3 percent (SD 13.7) and girls had a mean of 7.6 percent (SD 11.8).

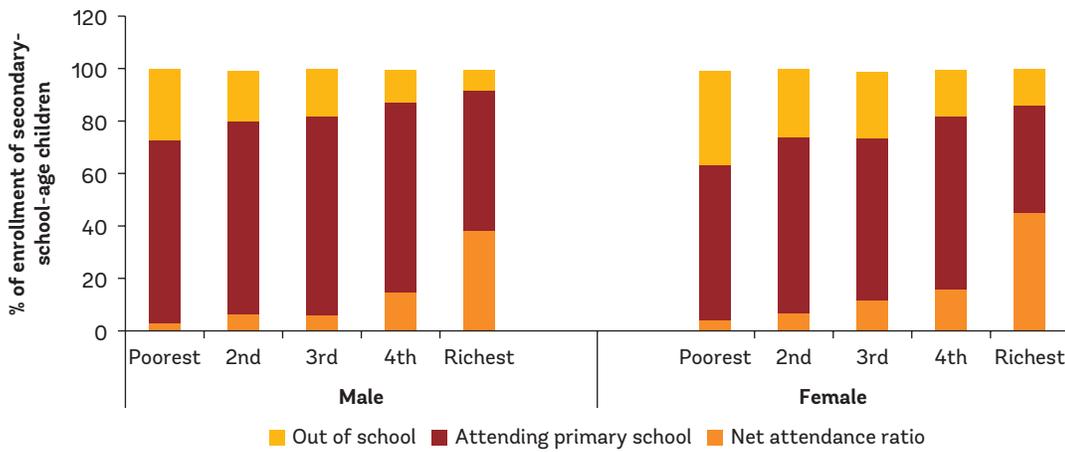
<sup>2</sup> While means for Standard 3 girls were higher in English, Chichewa, and Lifeskills and means for Standard 7 girls were higher in Chichewa, the difference between genders

**High rates of repetition and dropout also plague Malawian primary schools.**

Over the past five years, repetition rates averaged between 15 and 25 percent, with similar rates for males and females (figure 1a). Dropout rates remain similar by gender until upper primary (figure 1b). By Standard 7, the

was only statistically significant for Mathematics. In Mathematics, Standard 3 boys had a mean of 26.7 percent (SD 14.9) and girls had a mean of 22.8 (SD 14.0). Standard 7 boys had a mean of 16.0 percent (SD 11.5) and girls had a mean of 13.6 percent (SD 10.1).

**Figure 3.** Enrollment status of secondary school aged children by economic status, 2014



Source: MICS 2014.

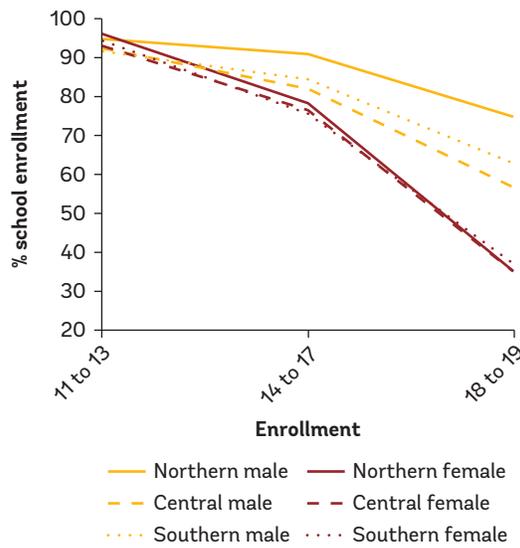
dropout rate for Standard 7 females was, on average, 19.5 percent over the past five years, in comparison to 11.2 percent for males.

**Transitioning from primary to secondary school is difficult in Malawi, with spots available for just over half of students who pass the Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE).** PSLE pass rates vary greatly by region with the lowest overall rates in the Northern division (45 percent for girls and 57 percent for boys). The Shire Highlands division, with the highest overall pass rates, also has the largest gender discrepancy with 18 percent more males passing than females.

**Once admitted to secondary school, fees can be unbearable for poor families, as secondary school fees can range from MK 18,000 for community day schools to MK 90,000 for national boarding schools.** Not surprisingly, the net enrollment rate for secondary school students is below 5 percent for the lowest economic quintile (2014 MICS). Secondary-school-age adolescents follow similar enrollment patterns by economic status, regardless of gender, with very few poor adolescents enrolled in secondary school, the majority still in primary grades, and many out of school in contrast with students from richer quintiles (figure 3). In comparison with males of their same economic status, more adolescent girls are out of school (2014 MICS).<sup>3</sup>

**As a result of late entry and high repetition, older adolescents continue to fall behind their age-appropriate grade levels and making it harder for girls in particular to stay in school.** As seen in figure 4, nearly all 11–13 year olds are enrolled in school, regardless of gender. Regardless of geography, female enrollment uniformly starts to drop for 14–17 year olds and less than one-third of 18–19 year old girls are still in school (2011 Welfare Monitoring Survey). According to EMIS data, 70 percent of enrolled 15 year olds of both genders are still in primary school, and one-quarter are in Grade 6 or below.<sup>4</sup> While adolescent males and females follow similar grade-level patterns, the proportion of

**Figure 4.** School enrollment rate by age group and region, 2011



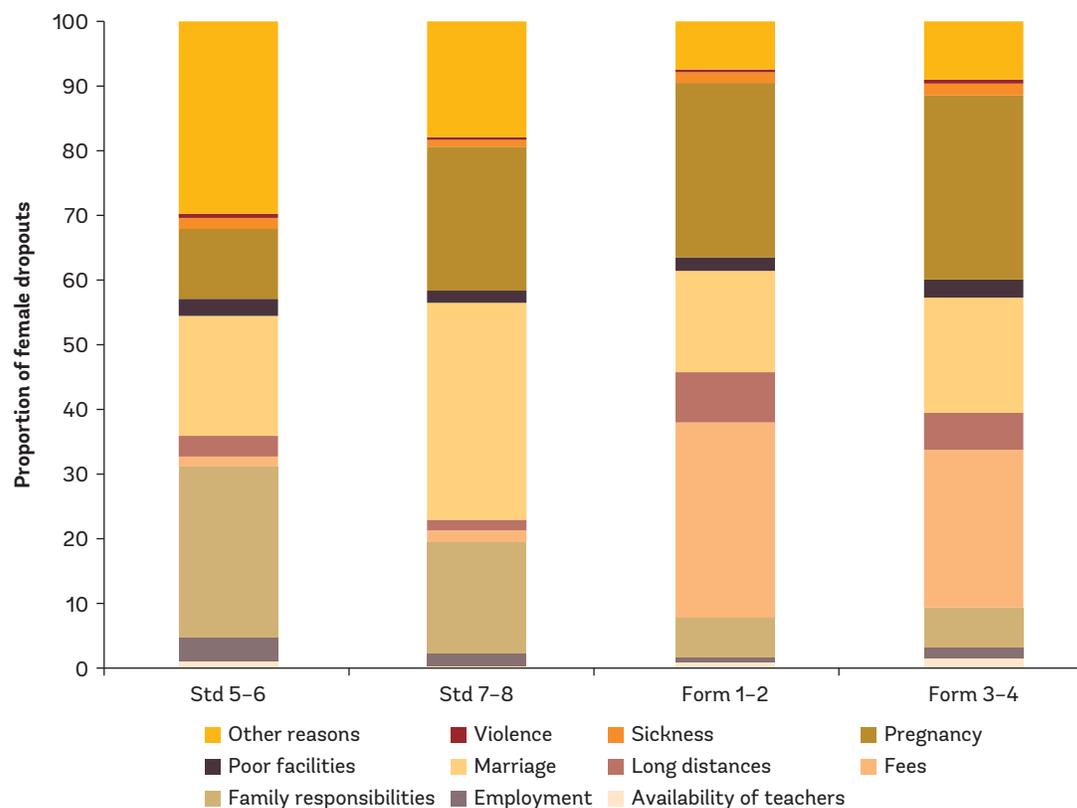
Source: 2011 Welfare Monitoring Survey.

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<sup>3</sup> Of secondary-school-age adolescents: Girls: 35.7 percent in the poorest quintile; 25.9 percent in the 2nd poorest; 25.2 percent in the 3rd poorest; 17.5 percent in 4th poorest; 13.9 percent in richest quintile. Boys: 27.1 percent in poorest quintile; 19 percent in 2nd poorest; 18 percent in 3rd poorest; 12.3 percent in 4th poorest; 7.8 percent in richest quintile.

<sup>4</sup> Nearly 60 percent of 13 year olds are in Standard 6 or below, at least 2 years behind schedule.

**Figure 5.** Female Dropouts, by Reason



Source: EMIS 2015.

enrolled females to males in their age group declines sharply starting at age 15. Only 41 of enrolled 17 year olds and 39 percent of enrolled 18 year olds are female. Secondary school girls may have few role models as female teachers comprise less than one-third of secondary teachers nationwide (EMIS 2015).

**More research may be needed to better understand the causes of dropouts.** Looking at EMIS reports from the 2014–15 school year, the demand-side factors of pregnancy, economic hardship, and marriage are the main reasons that girls drop out of school; however, the proportions change as grade levels increase (figure 5). In 2014–15, 6 percent of female primary school dropouts were attributed to pregnancy, although that figure jumps to 28 percent in secondary school (EMIS). Similarly, 9 percent of female primary school dropouts were due to early marriage, compared with 16 percent of girls dropping out of secondary school (EMIS 2015). Marriage and pregnancy disproportionately affect different regions of the country. In Shire Highlands, for example, nearly half of all female secondary school dropouts were reportedly due to pregnancy.<sup>5</sup> The Northern division has the highest number of students leaving

<sup>5</sup> Nationwide, 28 percent of all secondary female dropouts in 2014–2015 were due to pregnancy.

school due to marriage.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for male and female dropouts become noticeably different in secondary school according to administrative data. In primary school, “other” reasons given for dropping out for over 60 percent of boys and girls. By secondary school, nearly half of boys are dropping out due to an inability to pay school fees, while the top reason for girls was tied between school fees and pregnancy, both 28 percent (EMIS 2015).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, self-reported administrative data on dropouts can be misleading as many of the causes are interrelated; further investigations are needed to best understand the prevalence of dropouts due to early pregnancy and marriage in Malawi.

### Issues for Policy Development

**Reducing gender disparities in educational attainment for adolescents in Malawi requires addressing both the supply of and**

<sup>6</sup> This total included 370 primary boys, 2199 primary school girls, 145 secondary school boys, and 463 secondary school girls (EMIS 2015).

<sup>7</sup> In secondary school, the top reasons for boys dropping out were fees (45.6 percent), followed by “other” reasons (14.3 percent) and marriage (8.9 percent). For girls, the main reasons were fees (27.7 percent) and pregnancy (27.6 percent), followed by marriage (16.6 percent).

**demand for quality education;** increasing the demand for education for adolescent girls requires providing services to meet their specific needs. While Malawi has a reentry policy for girls to return to school after giving birth, it remains unclear how well the policy is enforced for males and females, and ultimately how many students return to school after becoming parents. The re-entry policy faces further obstacles as some religious leaders and head teachers oppose the policy, and it lacks a monitoring and evaluation plan as well as an implementation plan to translate the policy into action. For the teenage mothers that do return to school, additional services, such as childcare support, lower schooling fees, cash transfers, access to relevant sexual and reproductive health services, and mentorship, may be needed to ensure that these girls are able to complete their education.

**Several ongoing large initiatives are helping to keep Malawian girls in school.** The ongoing £37.5 million DfID-sponsored Keeping Girls in School (KGIS) project plans to deliver cash transfers to 100,000 primary school girls, bursaries to 15,000 secondary school girls, and improved sanitation and hygiene facilities in 200 community day secondary schools by July 2016. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) also currently supports over 6,000 needy girls and 8,000 boys with secondary school bursaries, two-thirds of whom also receive a cash transfer. At national level, the MoEST has a strong National Girls Education Strategy to align activities in this area between 2013 and 2018, and the uptake of bylaws by chiefs is helping to change traditional views on adolescent girls at the local level. One of the key challenges in Malawi will be to both focus on girls before they reach puberty and to ensure that they get the financial, educational, and emotional support needed to complete primary school and to transition successfully to secondary school. Meanwhile, adolescent boys will also need support and guidance to invest in their own education and to value the education of their female peers as a way to build stronger families and communities and to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty.

**Long-term changes in educational attainment may require additional interventions in Malawi.** Demand-side interventions such as

bursaries, cash transfers, and re-entry policies can have limited impact if the quality of education provided remains poor. In addition to reducing the costs of schooling for students, Malawi's current and future adolescents can greatly benefit from interventions that also focus on the improvement on the quality of education and providing opportunities for skilled employment.

## Conclusion

While Malawi has made progress in increasing overall enrollment, more effort is needed to ensure that adolescent girls stay in school and complete a quality education. Starting in upper grades of primary school, adolescent girls are more likely to drop out of school than their male counterparts, with pregnancy, early marriage, and school fees frequently cited as the main reasons. Further research is needed to better understand the causes of dropouts. The MoEST will need to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of its policy and programs, including those by partners, to scale and consolidate accordingly to avoid a scattered approach that benefits only at-risk adolescents in certain schools or parts of the country.

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